

International Symposium on Wu Li: Painter, Poet and Jesuit in the Early Qing

Gianni Criveller

The Macau Ricci Institute has established a tradition of excellent research and symposiums on various aspects of interaction between Christianity and China. From November 26-29, 2003, the Ricci Institute gathered more than 60 scholars from various countries, including many from China, Macau and Hong Kong to participate in an international symposium entitled "Culture, Art, Religion: Wu Li and His Inner Journey."



Wu Li (1632-1718) was an outstanding 17th century Chinese painter, poet and calligrapher from Jiangsu. Following seven years of training at Saint Paul's College in Macau, he was ordained a Jesuit priest at the age of 57. This outstanding man of culture, art and religion then spent the remaining 30 years of his life as a devoted country priest serving in rural villages.

Presentations at the symposium included research on the cultural, spiritual and historical turmoil of Wu Li's time. Speakers spoke of the dramatic decline and fall of the Ming Dynasty, and the rise of the Manchu Qing Dynasty. They illustrated how the crisis occasioned by this event affected a number of intellectuals who then looked for new directions for themselves and for the country. Research revealed how intellectuals found the teaching of the learned Jesuit missionaries especially appealing. Several *literati*, originally steeped in Confucianism and Buddhism, sought to widen their religious horizons by accepting "Western teaching." Conversion to Christianity was for them the point of arrival in a

spiritual and personal itinerary toward religious fulfillment. The converts saw in Christian teaching a chance to revitalize, morally and scientifically, a country in crisis.

Some speakers spoke of Wu Li, known also as Wu Yushan, as a famous painter, one of the “Six Great Masters of Early Qing.” Others emphasized his work as a poet, whose artistic achievements reached the heights of excellence.

At the age of 50, Wu Li’s life took a dramatic turn. His wife died. Obeying an internal desire for spiritual excellence, and fascinated by Jesuit art and architecture, Wu Li joined the Jesuits in Macau in pursuit of “heavenly learning.” There he diligently searched for “the Western lantern,” struggling to learn a new language (Latin), and as a son of Saint Ignatius of Loyola to acquire a new religious dimension on the lines of the “Spiritual Exercises.” Wu Li chose for himself a path of self-denial and total dedication to his newfound faith and to his new ministry. Often disguised as peasant or fisherman, he traveled for 30 years from one village to the next to evangelize. Wu Li could have become a rich and famous court painter, as his friend Wang Hui had done. Instead, he chose obscurity in the Jiangsu countryside serving as an itinerant missionary and pastor, struggling against tremendous difficulties and with poor results. He was truly a good shepherd, in imitation of Christ, and totally devoted to the spiritual welfare of peasants. The poems that he wrote as a priest illustrate his tireless dedication, his faith, his joys and his moments of frustration.

Wu Li in no way rejected his Chinese identity. This is clear from the fact that his paintings maintained an autochthonous style. The extent of Western influence in his figurative art, if any, was one of the major issues scholars discussed at the international symposium. A clear consensus was not reached.

A general consensus, however, was reached on the exceptionally important value of Wu Li’s personal experience, and as a man of rare qualities: a fine Chinese intellectual, a remarkable artist, a Jesuit, a missionary and a priest totally devoted to his flock.

The presence of so many qualified scholars and artists was also the occasion for the inauguration of an important exhibition by seven contemporary artists (two of them from Mainland China).

This symposium under the inspired direction of Fr. Luís Sequeira provided the academic world and the Church alike with a

wonderful opportunity to promote and to develop research studies on Wu Li. I am sure that more in-depth studies on this remarkable Jesuit priest will be undertaken in the future in Greater China and in universities around the world.



Participants at the International Symposium “Culture, Art, Religion: Wu Li and His Inner Journey” organized by the Macau Ricci Institute in November 2003.