

Some Thoughts on the Present Situation of Chinese Christian Art

by He Qi

translated by Norman Walling, S.J.

Christian art has a history of approximately eighteen hundred years. It is equally certain that Chinese Christian art has a history of approximately thirteen hundred years. However, from there the two diverge.

After Constantine issued his Edict of Emancipation in 313, Christianity, that entered Europe from Western Asia, set upon an energetic church building program. And so, it made a grand entry into the main stream of the culture and the society.

The Nestorian Church entered China also from Western Asia. From the Tang until the Yuan dynasties (where it changed its name to Yeliwen) it barely existed on the fringes of Chinese culture. Towards the end of the Ming dynasty the Jesuit Matteo Ricci arrived in China and from the start made serious efforts to enter into Chinese society's cultural mainstream. However, for various reasons, he did not succeed.

The nineteenth century was the golden age of missionary activity in China. Under the cover of cannon smoke Christianity made large-scale incursions into China during the Opium Wars. There was a saying at the time, "One more Christian means one less Chinese." The tall and imposing Gothic-style churches that were built along China's southeastern seaboard were seen as symbols of an invading foreign culture. The efforts of the Boxers to destroy the "foreign religion," were lauded as patriotic. This must be understood against the background of those times.

During the days of the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guard occupied the Jinling Academy and Theologate in Nanjing and made it their headquarters. Many classic volumes from the library were tossed into roaring bonfires and burnt to ashes. On a long scroll hanging from the top of the building and written in large characters were the words of Chairman Mao: "One wonders where the 'Pestilence' is going as candles on paper boats light up the sky aflame with fire."

In the autumn of 1996 I gave a talk entitled, *Distinctive Characteristics of Chinese Christian Art: Its History and Present Situation*, at the first meeting of Chinese Christian artists I used a slide projector to show a chariot depicted in the ancient Roman Christian catacomb paintings. There were seven rays of light surrounding it, a painting of a handsome youth--representing Christ the Messiah that seemed to be an exact replica of the god Apollo. There was another painting of Our Lady sitting and breast feeding her Infant, again an exact replica of a painting depicting the goddess Isis, mother of all gods, that circulated along the Nile River during the first century. It was especially when I showed a painting of Our Lady of the Golden Hair from the Florentine Renaissance school of art and the full figured Virgin from the Venetian school along with various artistic sketches that served as prototypes for paintings that my audience were moved to say: "Well! What we thought were most orthodox Christian works of the Italian Renaissance were, after all, only products of Italian artists from their own local culture." Their reaction seemed to express a sense of having been deceived.

I once spent a long period of time going around Europe studying the art of the Middle Ages. What I came to realize was that Christian art of the Middle Ages, already in existence for a thousand years, was in reality a process enabling Christian art to become an integral part of European culture. During the Age of Discovery in the 15th century this Christianity was exported abroad causing peoples in colonial areas to think that Christianity was the religion of Europeans.

Last year I traveled to the States to see some modern churches at first hand. They gave me a great deal of food for thought. Some of these churches, at least from their exteriors, did not look like churches in the traditional sense. Their interior arrangements were also very different from European churches of the Middle Ages. I had a very interesting conversation with Mr. Sovik, an influential architect of modern style churches. He has written a book entitled *Architecture for Worship*. According to Mr. Sovik, Latin churches, designed in the shape of a cross, artificially divide churches--God's dwelling place--into unequal spaces. I told him: "In Europe I saw a Cistercian church built by St. Bernard in the Middle Ages whose interior design was one unit divided into two sections: the eastern sector belonged to the "saints", that is, the monks; the Western sector belonged to the ordinary faithful. A wall separated the two." This old

gentleman approaching 80 years of age became somewhat excited and said: "This is not a real Christian church at all! The church which is God's dwelling must bring out the concept that all are equal before God." He brought me to a church that he had designed. This "church"--which did not appear as such from the outside--fairly brimmed over with centripetal and compatible forces.

In Minneapolis there were several churches that did not look like churches. During the week the church interior was used for a basketball court, art exhibits, children's playground or a place where old people could come to chat. For Sunday services the churches were set up with a pulpit. The minister, in charge of the services, with microphone in hand led his people in singing modern hymns in martial style. All this led me to think of Jesus' saying to Peter: that He wanted to build his church on a solid rock, firmly rooted in society and not something rising on high, cold and detached that instilled awe into those that looked up at it.

After I returned to China some local Christians came with blueprints for a church to ask my advice. Their blueprints still could not avoid having the renewed Gothic style church of the 19th century. I asked them: "Couldn't we do away with these small Gothic pointed towers?" (I did not explain to them the origin of these Gothic towers: when the Crusades went to conquer the East they came into contact with Islamic mosques and were inspired by the four square towers from which the mullahs proclaimed the hours of worship.) "But if you do away with these towers," they said, "then believers won't recognize them as churches." It seems that in China there is only one style possible for church buildings: the Gothic style that foreign missionaries introduced in the 19th century.

A week ago two ministers from Jiangyin in Jiangsu Province came to see me. Jiangyin has experienced very rapid economic progress since the reopening. It is now quite wealthy, so these ministers wished to build a new church. They wanted me to make a wall painting for the vestibule of their church. I showed my drawing of "Jesus and his disciples" that I had painted for the 9th General Meeting of the Lutheran Church. I noticed that the two ministers did not look too pleased with my drawing. They said: "This drawing is too *Chinese*. The Christians prefer something like da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper." I realized that these two ministers, who work at the grassroots level had said nothing wrong. I also knew that da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper was world famous. Yet there are

many artists who can copy this style, and so there was no need for me to exert myself to paint works of that kind.

Life is very short. As a Chinese Christian artist I can only make use of the short time I have to accomplish one task: to strive to create a Chinese Christian art (My limitations are my only fears). I want to do something different from da Vinci and his times. I want to do something that belongs to my times. I think of what Lu Xun once said: "The true artist should be a leader that does not do what people want, but one who opens up new ways."

With the millennium just around the corner I want to face the future with greater zest, and not just blindly let things happen. I realize explorers always have rough going and he who walks the heights feels the cold. However, I still want to find my own Archimedes principle. I recall not long ago Bishop Ding Guangxun saying to me: "The reason I want you to remain here in Jinling Seminary to teach is because I want our graduates to be able to keep abreast of the times and enter into dialogue with them."

Fortunately, many students have elected to follow my course during the past few semesters even though it is limited to those in the second and third years. Each time there have been around 60 students who choose to take my course. The whole classroom is filled. This seems to indicate to me that my efforts are not without hope. The Jinling graduates are those who will exercise responsibility for the future of the church in the 21st century.■

