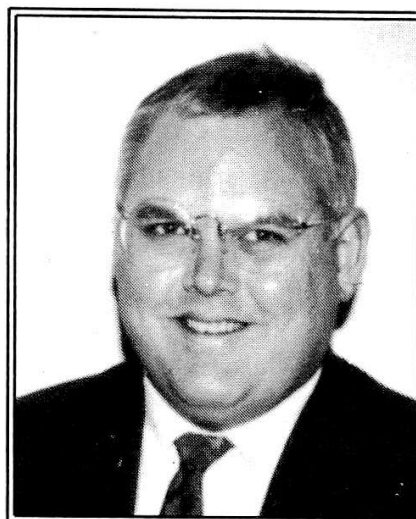


Pilgrims' Progress

By William McGurn

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If He Qi has anyone to thank for his becoming a Christian artist, it is the unlikely figure of Mao Zedong. Sent down to the Chinese countryside during the Cultural Revolution, the teenage He quickly found that by painting likenesses of the chairman he could escape the hard physical labour to which his companions were condemned.



One day he stumbled across a copy of Raphael's *Madonna and child* in the yellowed pages of an old magazine. "I was very moved by the softness of the Virgin's smile," he says, sitting in the sixth-floor walk-up that doubles as his studio. "Everywhere around me people claimed to be seeking truth but had their knives out." Secretly, He began making copies, in both pencil and oil, for friends. Behind makeshift easel, he fishes out a package wrapped in old newspaper: the copy of the Raphael that he gave his sister at the height of the turmoil. "By day I painted Mao," he smiles. "But at midnight I painted the Madonna."

Thus began He's life as an artist, as well as his first steps toward s Christianity, which he didn't embrace until much later. Today, He ranks as arguably China's most internationally sought after contemporary Christian artist, a Nanjing University art school graduate who is the first mainland Chinese to gain a doctorate in comparative religious art. But He would be the first to acknowledge that he is only one part of a small growing movement of Chinese

artists now realizing a goal that long eluded generations of Western missionaries: a body of art that is both genuinely Christian and fully Chinese.

China has witnessed many attempts at reconciling a 2,000-year-old Gospel with an even older Chinese civilization. What makes this effort different is that it is the first led, executed and inspired by Chinese themselves. In contrast to the familiar media reports focusing on issues such as the growing evangelical house church movement or relations between Beijing and the Vatican, this new generation of Chinese Christian artists appear decidedly apolitical. Nor does their stress on a Christ with Chinese characteristics stem from a narrow-minded rejection of anything not invented in China. On the contrary, these artists believe they are compelled by the Christian message to come up with uniquely Chinese ways to express a faith they nonetheless believe is universal.

“The universality of art is embedded in the particularities of people,” explains Fan Pu, a colleague of He’s who specializes in traditional papercuts. Christian artists such as herself, she says, “need to use art forms which are Chinese to give praise to God our Creator, and bear witness to God.”

For these artists, doing this well means far more than simply putting Chinese faces on a European work. When asked to explain, they say it means not only using traditional media--e.g. peasant style paintings, papercuts, calligraphy, --but also embedding that in a Chinese context that refers explicitly to Chinese life. Within that brief mandate there are any numbers of interpretations. Chinese Catholic art, generally more formal, has long shown no hesitation in borrowing from Buddhist traditions, to the point where the Virgin Mary is oft-mistaken for Kuan-yin, the Goddess of Mercy in the Chinese Buddhist tradition. Other Chinese artists look to calligraphy. Among them is Liu Bohan, whose works include a translation of the 23rd Psalm (“The Lord is My Shepherd”) in which the Chinese characters are arranged in the shape of a cross.

He’s interpretation is different. For him, the ethereal brush landscapes represent the influence of Zen Buddhism and the rejection of society in favour of nature. Though his technique is clearly influenced by Chagall, Picasso and even Tibetan Buddhist frescoes, his paintings are colourful and earthy, full of people living amid

signs of everyday Chinese life: Chinese homes, Chinese dress, Chinese furnishings. He argues, moreover, that Christ himself was no more European than Chinese, and that the European Christ owes itself to historical accident. "When Raphael was looking for his Madonna where did he find her?" he asks. "In the mothers of Florence."

Within China, the movement is spear-headed by the officially sanctioned Amity Christian Arts Centre in Nanjing, a quasi-governmental bridge organization between Chinese Protestants and their counterparts in the West. In Hong Kong, the Nanjing artists enjoy close ties with the Tao Fong Shan ("the mountain of the Christ Wind") Christian Arts Centre, built in 1930 on a hilltop in the style of a Chinese monastery.

Already the Amity group has put on two exhibitions covering more than 60 Chinese Christian artists, in 1993 in Hong Kong and 1996 in Nanjing. With Tao Fong Shan, the Amity artists are planning another Hong Kong show in October. Clearly, their work is gaining attention. Christians in Hong Kong and the West, they note, are not above violating the Seventh Commandment's injunction against theft when it comes to pinching mainlanders' Christian images for their own uses. "I don't mind the money but I would like to get the credit," says Fan Pu, who finds her Christian papercuts turning up on Christmas cards and newsletters all the time.

The need for an indigenous artistic interpretation of Christianity is glaringly apparent to anyone who has set foot inside a church in China: Not only is most sacred art European, it tends to be European at its most mediocre, mired in 19th century heaviness and sentimentality. Until recently this has meant a jumble of shop-worn Western images: Da Vinci's *Last Supper* Michaelangelo's *Pieta* Hoffman's *Jesus in Gesthemane*, Brown's *Jesus Washing the Feet of the Disciples*, etc. The lack of money and the paucity of good material, moreover, means that what does get reproduced often does so in vulgar ways: a 3-D face of Jesus; garishly coloured plaster-cast Virgin Marys; plastic stained-glass windows, etc.

The truth is that many ordinary Chinese Christians appear to like it that way. Though He and others have won prizes and acclaim from the academy, they concede that rank-and-file Christians generally continue to regard them as avant-garde. It may be one reason

why few of the new Chinese Christians' paintings have made it out of the galleries and into the churches.

Benoit Vermander, head of the Ricci Institute in Taipei and an artist who has himself exhibited in Beijing, says the preference of many Chinese Christians themselves for European imagery is a temporary hangover from history, with Chinese Christians reluctant to give up a link to the global church they cherished during decades of oppression by the Chinese authorities.

The difficulties in establishing an authentic Chinese Christian art parallel the oft-aborted efforts to establish an authentically Chinese Christianity. He divides the artistic effort into five stages. First was Nestorian Christianity, which established itself in China in the Tang Dynasty and whose distinctive cross has been uncovered on various burial steles. The second was the Jesuit effort of the Ming Dynasty, which began with Matteo Ricci's commissioning of local woodcutters to reproduce well-known European engravings in a form more suited to Chinese sensibilities. This was in turn followed by another Jesuit, Guiseppe Castiglione, better known by his Chinese name Lang Shining. Castiglione introduced perspective to Chinese art, but is ironically better known for the horses and battle scenes he had to do for the Qing emperor than for the religious works he would have preferred to do.

The fourth stage came with the arrival of Protestant missionaries in the 19th and 20th centuries. Unfortunately for the church in China, the entanglement of these missionaries in the Opium Wars and subsequent Western attempts to carve up China has left a decided taint in the Chinese mind about Christian intentions. In Nanjing the artists remind a foreign visitor that Chinese have not forgotten the saying "One more Christian, one less Chinese."

But they hasten to add that many of these same missionaries were committed to "self-propagation," and encouraged the construction of hundreds of Chinese Christian churches and illustrations. On the Catholic side, too, the new burst of Christian energy manifested itself in renewed efforts to create a more culturally sensitive religious art. Its was a mission championed by the archbishop delegate to Beijing at the time, Celso Costantini, who shunned the "protection" of the French state and promoted a generation of Catholic artists such as Magdalena Yen-bin Liu, who continues to paint today, or

Luke Chen, featured as far back as the 1930s in a *Life* magazine profile.

Had not a Japanese occupation and Communist victory intervened, the pieces were arguably in place for a flowering of Chinese Christian art. But then came civil war, followed by decades of Communist rule during which Chinese Christian art was suppressed and churches perceived as something alien. With the thaw that came with the Open Door policy of Deng Xiaoping, churches have been returned to their owners and Christian arts are cautiously using their new freedoms to express their faith in more indigenous forms.

This is He's "fifth stage" of Christian art, courtesy of a Communist revolution that proved what few thought possible when the missionaries were jailed or expelled in the 1950s: that Chinese Christianity could not only survive without foreigners, but grow. And the next stage? He pauses for a moment and takes a sip of tea. "The next stage is when we send Chinese Christian artists and missionaries to the West."■



Blessings from Heaven by Jiang Xin

福從天降 姜新作 27.2x39cm.