

# ON THE “CHINESENESS” OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE CHRISTIAN ART: WITH A FOCUS ON DAOZI’S SAINTIST WASH-INK PAINTINGS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the “Chineseness” of contemporary Chinese Christian art with a focus on Daozi’s Saintism wash-ink paintings. The aim is to defend and define the “Chineseness” of Chinese Christian art against doubts from the “Sinocization of Christianity” movement that such art is an “expression of Chinese culture.” Chinese Christian art is of China, not only because of the Chineseness of their form or media, but also because the Chineseness redefined by the Christian spirit is still of China. Furthermore, such Chineseness in Chinese Christian art is actually universal—and whatever is universal must at the same time also be Chinese.

“Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God. Selah.” (Psalms: 87:3)

## Introduction: “What has Beijing to do with Jerusalem?”

The so-called “Sinocization of Christianity” movement, which started in 2012 has aroused increasing interest in the study of the “Chineseness” of local Christian art. Yet the premise for such a movement is the assumed absence of unity between Christianity in China and China itself. Small wonder then the movement’s central slogan is: “to accept Chinese politics, adapt to Chinese society, and express Chinese culture.” When “Chinese Christian art” and “Chineseness” are juxtaposed, what gets underlined is the effort to harmonize Christianity with China.

In this presupposed context, so long as the study of Chinese Christian art is conducted in the Chinese-speaking world, the primary focus is not yet the theory of artistic creation. Rather, it is the need to offer a response to the immediate situation, i.e., the “Sinocization of Christianity” movement. Such a response includes efforts to defend, clarify, and argue the history, theories, and practices of Chinese Christian art. In other words, the study of Chinese Christian art needs to solve the following questions before all others: What is the irreducible identity of Chinese Christian artist? Is Chineseness an integral part of Chinese Christian art? Or simply, what has Chinese Christian art to do with China? To borrow Tertullian’s words: “What has Beijing to do with Jerusalem?” Hence, this paper offers an analysis of the features of Daozi’s (1953-) Saintism ink-wash paintings, which are well-known in contemporary China, as an attempt to elucidate the relationship between Chinese Christian art and Chineseness, and to respond to questions about “the



expression of Chinese culture in Chinese Christianity” raised by the Sinocization of Christianity movement.

### **“The Three Little Culminations” and the unique Chineseness of Chinese Christian Art**

The very concept “Chinese Christian Art” in contemporary China implies a need to defend the Chineseness of such art born in China. In other words, for the Sinocization of Christianity movement, there is no incontestable or self-explanatory relationship between Chinese Christian Art and Chineseness. This points to a kind of “superficial heterogeneity” of Christianity, which is very likely behind the proposition to “Sinocize” Christianity. It is true that unlike Chinese Buddhist art, Chinese Christian art has never been absorbed as one more colorful thread in the tapestry of Chineseness. Consequently, Chinese Christian art has long found itself in the position of sojourner in its own birth land.

Nevertheless, ever since Nestorianism, Chinese Christian art has been shaping its own unique Chineseness. The inconsistent, unsystematic, and yet fully “Chinese” development of Christian art in China testifies to its own legitimacy or historicity, i.e., Chinese Christian art has expressed the spirit of Christianity, thereby putting on a kind of “Chineseness.” Meanwhile this Chineseness also puts on Christian spirituality, resulting in an interactive relationship between the two.

The development of Chinese Christian Art is similar to that of Chinese Christianity, with three so-called little culminations in history (Gu 2003). Before Nestorianism entered mainland China in the Tang Dynasty (635 AD), Christian art had already been developing for six centuries. From the late seventh century, works of Chinese Christian art started to appear. The most famous was “大秦景教流行中国碑” (Big Qin Stele of the Spreading of Nestorianism in China, see Figure 1),” bearing the earliest written testimony of the introduction of Christianity to China. On top of the stele, we see the image of auspicious flowers surrounding the cross standing above lotus flowers, a combination of elements from both traditional Buddhist and Christian art.

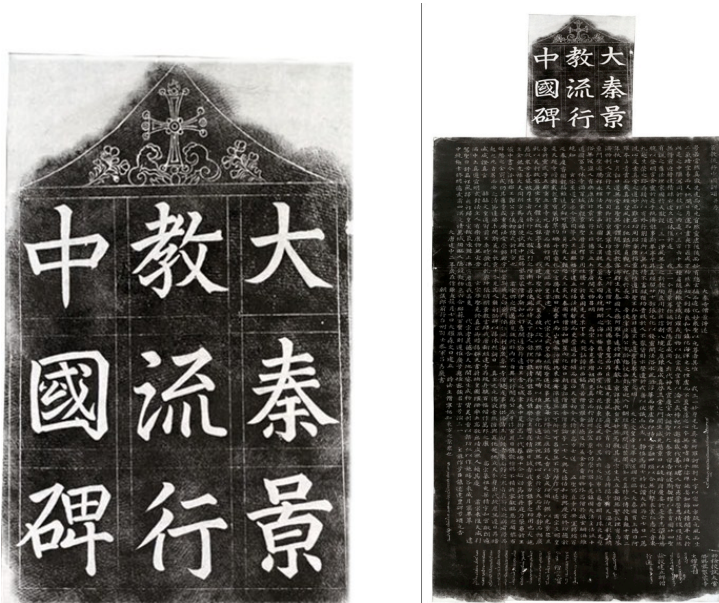


Figure 1: Big Qin Stele of the Spreading of Nestorianism in China

The first little culmination of Chinese Christian art occurred in the Ming and Qing dynasties (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries), with missionaries of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism as its main artists, and local Chinese Christians their apprentices or assistants. The most representative works are “大三巴牌坊 (Ruínas da Antiga Catedral de São Paulo)” and two collections of etchings by Joaoda Rocha (1565-1623) and Giulio Aleni (1582-1649). These works combine Confucianism and Christianity, dressing up the Christian spirit in clothes of Chinese culture. From the 1920s to 1940s, Chinese Christian art had a short period of flourishing, achieving conspicuous localization and thus forming the second little culmination. Celso Costantini (1876-1958) of Roman Catholicism, Zigao Shen (1895-1982) of Anglicanism, and Karl Reicheh (1877-1952) of the Lutheran Church were advocates and practitioners of the localization of Christian art. After half a century’s silence, Chinese Christian art enjoyed its third little culmination: from the 1980s to the present. The beginning of the twenty-first century in particular witnessed a flourishing of contemporary Chinese Christian paintings, with Daozi’s Saintism wash-ink paintings among some of the most acclaimed and representative works.

In spite of the “superficial heterogeneity” of Christianity, the very “Chineseness” of Chinese Christian art, implicitly questioned in the Sinocization of Christianity movement, had already taken shape in history. What is worth underlining is that it is a kind of Chineseness that “puts on” Christian spirituality. One marked feature of the 1,300-year history of Chinese Christian art is its “in-but-not-of-it” expression of Chinese culture, thus endowing Chineseness with a brand-new spirit, unprecedented in history. And this spirit living conducts what we might call gene-transforming work in Chinese culture, leading to the antithesis of the “in-but-not-of-it” expression, i.e., an “in-and-of-it” transformation of the human heart and social structure in this land.

### **Daozi’s Saintism Wash-ink Art and Holiness**

Daozi’s Saintism wash-ink art is a self-conscious extension of traditional Chinese Christian art. Yet in its immersion in and contemplation of the contemporary condition, Daozi’s art is also a reformation and criticism of its own tradition. To quote his own definition: “Saintism wash-ink as a proper term was coined to denote ink wash paintings created by myself, giving expression to my epiphany of God’s words” (Daozi 2015: 25). Furthermore:

On one hand, as a form of the Saintism Art, it is to be distinguished from the mysticism of pantheism, as well as mystified cultures of other religions in general. On the other, it is an art form that, in its implication of Christ’s blood turning into ink, points directly to the Christian Spirit. (Daozi 2015: 26)

Saintism, as one representation of the Christian spirit, is all about being holy, and being holy is having a full understanding of holiness and striving to live one’s life accordingly. The leitmotif of Daozi’s Saintism wash-ink paintings is Christ’s life, the encounter with which changed the artist’s life, a change now expressed through his art. Meanwhile the emphasis on “being holy” is the very spiritual core of Daozi’s work, which aims to awaken and inspire the soul of the average Chinese person, and even the entire society. This “Saintism” is also expressed in the paintings of Chinese Catholicism and Chinese Orthodoxy, and grows and matures inside the Chineseness of Chinese Christian art. It could perhaps be said that in displaying the exquisite beauty of Chinese culture, Christian Saintism has also acquired its own Chineseness, one that is integrated with holiness.

In the following section of this paper, via lengthy analyses of representative works by Daozi, I will first look at the underlying artistic features of his Saintism ink-wash art, and then move on to a discussion of the unique Chineseness reflected in his works.

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## Two Features of Saintism Wash-ink Paintings

In comparison to other works of Chinese Christian art, either historical or contemporary, Daozi's Saintism wash-ink paintings have two distinct artistic features that contribute to their success as Christian artworks and their popularity with a modern Chinese audience, Christians and non-Christians alike.

1. The highly abstract/expressionistic brushwork is antithetical to the life-like tradition of Christian paintings in China, as a result of which it adroitly evades the complicated issues of idolatry.<sup>1</sup> In a world where 3-D printing machines are manufacturing reproductions of the once most elaborate works of art and craft, such as the ivory miniature sculptures from the Qing Dynasty, it is almost inevitable that viewers are increasingly less likely to be impressed by realistic paintings, which might explain to some extent the success of Daozi's works with an average Chinese audience.

Below are three paintings with the theme of the Crucifixion (Figure 2). The first is *Icon of the Crucifixion*, anonymous, from the first half of the 14th century, collected by the Byzantine and Christian Museum<sup>2</sup>. The second, *Way of Sorrows*<sup>3</sup> is by a young contemporary Chinese artist Hu Chen (1982-), and the last is Daozi's *Treasured Blood* (2007).<sup>4</sup>



Figure 2: *Icon of the Crucifixion*      *Way of Sorrows*      *Treasured Blood*

In the first two paintings, we see the image of Jesus Christ delineated to the last detail, on a smooth-looking cross. *Icon of the Crucifixion* is a typical work of iconography, which were often set in a scene emptied of historical detail, thus forming the so-called non-historical art (Ouspensky and Lossky 1999). Meanwhile Chinese Christian paintings often replace the biblical history with a Chinese historical setting, just as in *Way of Sorrows*. Jesus in particular is likely to be represented as Chinese-looking, forming what we might call a kind of anti-historical art. This replacement has a certain aesthetic appeal for Chinese audiences, but not without the cost of historical truth and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

By contrast, Daozi's *Treasured Blood* presents a skeleton-under-X-ray-like Christ hung on a crude and uneven cross. The absence of realistic representation not only frees the work

<sup>1</sup> On the question of idolatry in Christian paintings, please see von Balthasar (2002). It is a collection of articles by Balthasar, and the book title was given by the editor.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/features/byzantine/icons.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The picture is provided by the artist himself.

<sup>4</sup> The paintings by Daozi are provided by the artist himself.

from any possible charge of idolatry, but also brings out an ahistoric rather than an historical Christ (Kähler 1964), i.e., a Christ believed in faith, the Son of God as understood and accepted by a person of faith. Moreover, the abstraction of the image also appeals more effectively to the imagination of a modern viewer. Confronted with the shocking though evasive image, one is all the more ready to feel a kind of muffled and unspeakable violence and sympathize with the pain and exhaustion suffered by the crucified Jesus, as much as the exertion of the imagination allows. What makes *Treasured Blood* truly special, however, is the extra cross covering Christ's face. It is much bolder, darker, more substantial and imposing than the "actual" cross behind Him. It is also shaped like a black bird, a highly ominous symbol in Chinese folk culture. Thus it easily reminds one of the momentary darkness of despair that clung to Jesus at that historical moment of His crucifixion by men. Yet since human beings have never really stopped sinning against God, this darkness still clings to humanity, and so in a way this cross image also vividly represents the sordidness of the sins of the present, blemishing the Lord's face. While it is not possible for any human being to actually reproduce or recapture the Crucifixion as a unique historical event, Daozi's wash-ink paintings, through a full liberation of imagination, succeed in allowing the audience to get ever closer to the divine significance of the Crucifixion through avoidance of realistic images that are susceptible to being either non-historical or anti-historical.

The vivid contrast between Hu Chen and Daozi's paintings of the same theme of the Last Supper is another good example. *The Building of the Holy Body and Communion* (Figure 3) strikes one more as an average Chinese dinner party than this significant historical Christian event<sup>5</sup>. In Daozi's *The Blue Dinner* (2011, Figure 4) we find thirteen figures in the likeness of the Chinese character “几” or the Greek letter “Ω.” The largest blue figure in the middle fringed in gold represents Jesus, while the smaller yellow ones with six on each side represent the disciples. The varying shapes point to the different mentalities of these men: hesitating, inquiring, doubting, grieving ... One feels almost enjoined to enter a kind of mystic communication with historical truth via these “likely” or “unlikely” images, as much as the imagination allows. If gold symbolizes holiness, and blue melancholy, then the completely holy Jesus must be filled with sadness over the sins of humankind. Any yet, above the ocean of seemingly endless blue, there is a light of hope in the very center of His heart, where if one only searches, God's eternal love for humankind can be found. It might therefore be said that the apparently casual lightness, not only of the media, i.e., ink wash, but also the representation, i.e., freehand brush strokes, of Daozi's paintings, paradoxically convey the very weightiness of Saintism/holiness, to be perceived by the heart with an awakening nostalgia.



Figure 3: *The Building of the Holy Body and Communion*

<sup>5</sup> The picture is provided by the artist himself.



Figure 4: *The Blue Dinner*

2. Unlike most of the Christian artworks before his time, Daozi's Saintism wash-ink doesn't stop at representing stories or themes from the Bible. Instead, his paintings strike one more as attempts to interpret the Bible, or Christianity, and thus almost a kind of apologetic work in ink wash.

In orthodox Christian theology, the Bible is a story about the covenant relationship between God and humanity, with a three-part theme of Creation, Recreation (or Salvation), and Apocalypse. Daozi's series work *Covenant* (2006) consists of three paintings, each containing one black cross, hence six brush strokes all together (see Figure 5). They are named respectively *Covenant: Creation*, *Covenant: Salvation*, and *Covenant: Apocalypse*. The three crosses differ mainly in the proportion of the two brush strokes and shades of color. The first cross has its horizontal pole near the top of the vertical one, and its color is uneven, or a bit hesitant-looking. Thus the picture conveys a feeling of still being a draft, though a completed one. One might say that from the very beginning (in times of Creation), God's plan concerning His Son, the Crucifixion, and Salvation has already been made, the blueprint (the cross) laid out in completion. In the second one, we see a bold, unequivocally assured cross, standing with utmost gravity and authority in the middle. Apparently it stands for the actual completion of salvation through Jesus Christ on the cross, the recreation of a new humanity in Jesus via the Holy Spirit. The last cross looks like the first one laid upside down, very likely implying the human condition on the last day, when, of course, it is too late to find out that you have chosen the wrong side. The fading color, as well as the reversed position of the cross, points to John's depiction of the Judgment Day in the *Book of Revelation*: how through his own will in repeated sinning, man has almost turned God's original plan upside down, bringing distortion to a world meant to be orderly, beautiful and loving. Therefore, the series paintings of *Covenant*, with just three slightly varied images of the same cross, give a full account of the most central theme of Christianity, standing as a silent reminder of the grave consequence for unrepentant souls, and perhaps also a persistent call for the sinner: It is high time thou repented. One can thus barely refrain from the urge to compare these paintings to some of the most classical contemporary apologetic works, such as those by C. S. Lewis.

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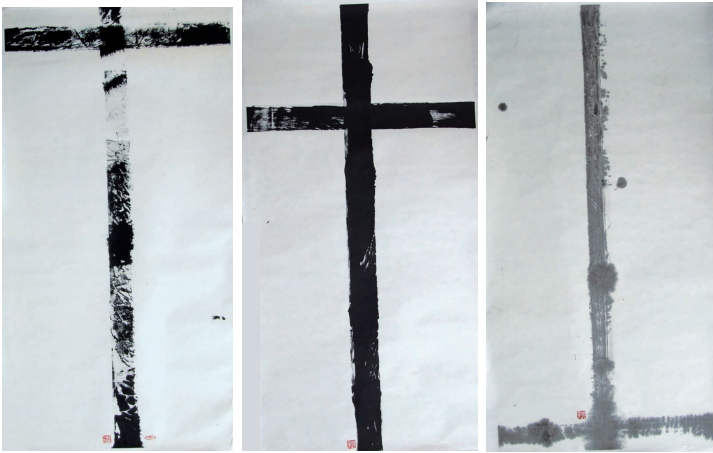


Figure 5: *Covenant: Creation*      *Covenant: Salvation*      *Covenant: Apocalypse*

To take another example, Daozi's *The Spirit of God Hitting the Face of the Waters* (2007, Figure 6), it is hardly debatable that representing the Spirit of God, even in art, is something challenging in the extreme. Actually, this painting is about the story of Creation, one of the chief biblical mysteries. An analysis of this work can perhaps help illustrate how Daozi's Saintism wash-ink art is a kind of interpretation, or exegesis, of the Bible, thus practically beneficial for the development of spirituality of Christian viewers. We see in the painting that God's Spirit in the shape of a lively “几” or “Ω” is like two huge wings hanging above the surging and still chaotic-looking waves. Yet to fully comprehend and appreciate the painting, one feels compelled to open the Bible again, and read: “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). Questions then arise: What does “move upon” mean? What is the relationship between the Spirit of God and the waters upon which He moved? Is the Spirit represented in this painting supposed to be touching the face of the waters or not? If God the creator is supposed to be outside the creation, why does the artist use the verb “hit” in the title? In fact, in the Chinese title, two characters are used to form the disyllabic verb that is rendered here as “hit”: 扑击, the first one meaning “throw oneself upon,” and the second “hit.” The first character being auxiliary in the term seems to be implying the power and dedication of God, while “hit” emphasizes force and action. A series of imminent actions are to be conducted by God, so significant that they mean the very beginning of all life in the entire universe. So in a sense, Daozi's Saintism wash-ink art does not imply the viewer should encounter it as an aesthetic experience. More importantly, it enjoins the viewer to enter an interaction, not only with the paintings, but also with the Bible. Knowledge of the Bible is almost a prerequisite for appreciating Daozi's paintings. At the same time, such appreciation leads the viewer back to the Bible: to relearn what one has already learned there, and to reflect on and even question what has so far been taken for granted. In this dynamic process, a person is very likely to gain fresh insights into the biblical truth as interpreted in the wash-ink images, thereby enriching and expanding one's own spiritual life to a new extent.

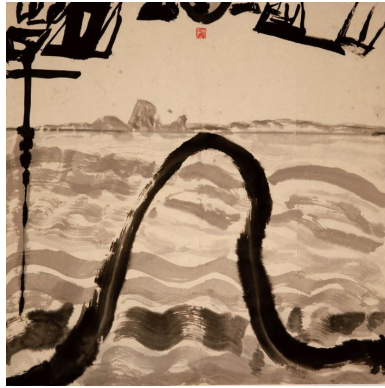


Figure 6: *The Spirit of God Hitting the Face of the Waters*

### The Chineseness of Saintism Wash-ink Art

Daozi's Saintism wash-ink art inherits a tradition of expressing the Christian concept of holiness through Chinese art. What is being expressed by no means jeopardizes any innate Chineseness in the way it is expressed. Rather, the expression grows within the Chineseness and also transforms it. In displaying the exquisite beauty of Chinese culture, the essentially Christian artwork acquires its own unique Chineseness. Below is an attempt to discuss how holiness is interpreted and expressed through the Chinese ink wash in Daozi's paintings, and how holiness and Chineseness become one as the artist pursues rejuvenation and enrichment of the already acquired and still growing spiritual life of the contemporary Chinese person.

1. The images in Saintism wash-ink formed of freehand brush strokes convey an unmistakable sense of Chineseness through the deliberate symbolism of their character-like shapes. In the above *Treasured Blood*, the image of the bird-like cross could well also be identified as the Chinese character “十 [shí],” meaning “ten,” the exact reason why “cross” is translated as “十字架”, “ten-character-frame.” And in *The Trinity* (2011, Figure 7), three images resembling the same Chinese character “几 [jǐ]”<sup>6</sup> (meaning “how many”), but varying in size, bring out vividly the intricate relationship among the three persons of God: their being identical and distinct, fully independent and united all at the same time. More significant is the fact that because “几” means “how many,” a Chinese mind is very likely to perceive it as a symbol for questioning. Thus with but a few brush-strokes, the artist offers an immediately pertinent representation of the almost impenetrable concept of the Trinity, and an innately Chinese-feeling representation at the same time. Indeed, both 十- and 几-shaped images appear repeatedly in Daozi's works, contributing to a consistent and strong sense of Chineseness in Saintism wash-ink.

In another work with the same theme of the Trinity, called *Eulogizing the Trinity* (2008, Figure 8), one sees three nail-like brush strokes. They also look like the Chinese character “丁 [dīng]”, which is a surname but also a homograph of “钉 [dīng],” meaning precisely “nail.” The left part of the “钉” is a radical representing “metal,” while in the painting the very black dots around the bottom of the three brush strokes readily remind one of metal rust falling from iron nails. It would thus be only natural for a Chinese speaker, but not a speaker of any other

<sup>6</sup> As above mentioned, this image could certainly also be likened to the Greek letter “Ω”. Nevertheless, for a Chinese-speaking viewer, the first intuitive response would still be the character “几” that s/he would have acquired from early childhood.



language, to associate these brush-strokes with nails, and from there to the Crucifixion, and the unimaginably excruciating pains inflicted on the flesh of Jesus, as the Son of Man. Therefore it might be said that Daozi's Saintism wash-ink contains so-called Chineseness even more implicitly and artfully than the Christian paintings in China's history, which represented biblical figures as Chinese-looking, such as in the *The Arrival of the Magi*, by Jihua Xu (created between 1912 and 1937), and *The Angel Brought the Good News to the Shepherds* (1948), by Yuandu Chen<sup>7</sup> (see Figures 9 and 10). For the Chineseness of the latter is apparent in a more superficial way: that it looks Chinese; while that of the former is of an intrinsic nature and imbedded in the Chinese cultural genes: it speaks to anyone who grows up sharing the same Chinese orthography, the Chinese character system that transcends and unites the various dialects throughout the spacious country.

Upon a closer look, we see that in *The Trinity*, the golden thread in its mysterious winding brings into shape the three “几”, mirroring perfectly the three persons of God sharing one endless breath of eternal life. The Father in the middle seems to be holding hands with the Son and the Spirit on each side, in perpetual communication with one another. And the bright goldenness of the thread speaks not only God's glory, but also the warmth and tenderness of Love born out of the perfectly harmonious relationship among the three. In *Eulogizing the Trinity* one feels compelled by the three shocking nail-like images to contemplate how the process of the Crucifixion, with its unspeakable suffering, is actually a simultaneous experience for the three persons of God, precisely because of the mystery of Trinity. No matter how abstruse, the transcendental nature of Trinity is amply grasped and given an exquisite expression through the occult feel of the inky backgrounds and the character shapes that both convey an unmistakable impression of the age-old Chinese culture.



Figure 7: *The Trinity*

<sup>7</sup> Both of these paintings are collected in *The Life of Christ by Chinese Artists* (1938).



Figure 8: *Eulogizing the Trinity*

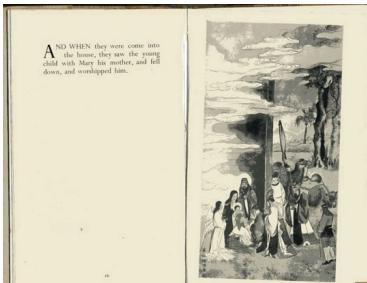


Figure 9: *The Arrival of the Magi*



Figure 10: *The Angel Brought the Good News to the Shepherds*

2. The Chineseness conveyed through familiar images from traditional Chinese paintings is to be appreciated as the bottle, rather than the wine within; the container rather than the contained. In other words, this container of Chineseness could be emptied of its old wine (what the image symbolizes in Chinese culture), and filled with the new wine of Christian messages. For instance, in traditional Chinese culture, bamboo is endowed with the personality of Junzi (君子), a real gentleman, and actually closer to a saintly man. It is not surprising that in his pursuit of holiness, Daozi should find inspiration from the image of the bamboo and has created a series of works of “bamboo crosses” (see Figure 11). It is very likely that in these paintings, we see for the first time in the history of Christian art crosses made out of two bamboos, and also for the first time in the history of Chinese ink-wash art bamboos shaped as crosses. While bamboo usually represents the courage to preserve integrity in face of evil and corruption, and to favor solitude over power and fame so as to remain truthful to one’s own self, the cross-bamboos or bamboo-crosses in Daozi’s paintings, speaking clearly of the Christian spirit, are by no means to be identified with the traditional Chinese associations between the bamboo image and the one striving to be righteous in this world on his own.

In the first painting of the series, *Bitter Bamboos* (2008) two strong bamboos forming a cross point to the mystery of death and life, a message from beyond this world. The spirit of forbearance emitting from the bamboos also reminds one of how Jesus Christ bore the unbearable on the cross for all of us. In the other two paintings, *Bitter Bamboos in Empty Mountain* (2008), and *Bitter Bamboos over Live Spring* (2015), we perceive a clear message of “the cost of discipleship”: to stand as the unbending bamboo in a space of wilderness, and to always turn to the cross for life-giving energy; to remain righteous and just; and to strive for holiness, only by and for what has already been achieved on the cross. The very small red cross image contained in the middle of the bamboo-cross in the last painting perhaps serves as the best illustration of the innate Chineseness of the distinctly Chinese images in Saintism wash-ink. It is a vessel, and if the vessel is impressive enough, what is held within might be better and more effectively appreciated.



Figure 11: *Bitter Bamboo*



*Bitter Bamboo in Empty Mountain*



*Bitter Bamboo over Live Spring*

Another example is *This Land-Other Land* (2014, Figure 12), where the inky patches and brush-strokes familiar to any Chinese viewer are endowed with divine messages significant only to the Christian eye. Though “this land” and “other land” are also familiar terms in Chinese Buddhism, the interpretations are in no way close. The solid black patch at the bottom stands for the darkness and desolation of this world. In contrast, what lies beyond is the Other World, where images of grasses and seeding branches and the crack of light signify life, beauty, joy and hope, yearned for by humanity as a whole. So in a sense, the Chineseness in the form of Daozi’s wash-ink paintings transcends or penetrates its own cultural connotations, and points to the universal, the eternally true in all times and all places within God’s creation.

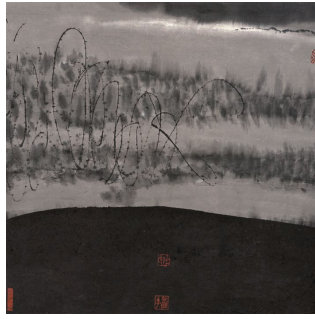


Figure 12: *This Land-Other Land*

3. Last but not least, in Daozi's treatment of realistic topics in modern China, we see the best illustration of holiness and Chineseness integrated into one. As a Christian artist, Daozi is deeply concerned with the most current and critical social problems in his home country and brave enough to paint even some taboo themes, in an attempt to infuse the grave realities of Chinese society with the universal salvation of the cross. Daozi's serial works of *Smog* are shocking for their pertinence to one of the gravest problems facing every contemporary Chinese man and woman. It is so ironic that the traditional Chinese ink wash now seems to be just perfect for representing the realistic pollution effect brought about by heavy smog. In the painting *Smog Tiananmen* (2013, Figure 13), the icon of China's five-thousand year civilization becomes a sordid, repellent, and eerie-looking object. Smog has apparently reduced this once undeniable spectacle into some unidentifiable specks. The history-making signpost turns into blurry anonymity: whatever had hung above the doors is now obliterated and where do those remaining dark doors lead? One cannot help asking. The painting's piercing honesty compels the viewer to examine the hopelessness of his/her immediate situation. So in a way, the artist laments through these paintings as a prophet to his generation, his own people.



Figure 13: *Smog Tiananmen* (2013)

Equally impressive is the painting *Mourning over Linzhao* (2014, Figure 14). Linzhao (1932-1968) was a Chinese Christian and is remembered for her martyrdom in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In the painting, the background seems to be a green road, signifying a way towards eternal life for both the mourners and the mourned, who have won salvation through their spiritual rebirth. The seven mourners are grieving over the martyred Linzhao now lying in the black coffin. The red cross on the coffin, and the spark-like golden patches around the cross, however, stand for hope through faith. Thus the willowy figures of the mourners look as if they are ready to dance at the right bidding, as the memorial service could

any minute turn into a ceremony for the second birth for true believers. In his pursuit of holiness, the artist has managed to recapture in the paintings an unusually high level of spirituality, a testament to the working of God's eternal grace in this so-called Secular Age.



Figure 14: *Mourning over Linzhao*

### The Universality of Chineseness in Chinese Christian Art

Having observed closely some of the finest Saintism wash-ink paintings by Daozi, I feel confident in defining the innate Chineseness of Chinese Christian art. To start with, it is necessary to differentiate between Chinese Christian art and other categories of art. In other words, we need ask ourselves if it is at all allowable for Chinese Christian art, with its imbedded Chineseness, to express its uniqueness via the media of Chinese art, to absorb Chineseness without being absorbed into it. The source of this defense and differentiation is nothing short of the Christian Bible and Christian spirituality. It is not difficult to see that Saintism wash-ink art demonstrates and points to God's word in the following two ways: 1) It uses biblical narrative as its source and theme, creating a rich spiritual world with dots, lines, and other simple geometrical images that are actually absent in the Chinese tradition. Meanwhile the picture is of an unquestionably Chinese style. 2) It deals with topics of suffering and injustice in contemporary China, infusing the pictures with the spirit of truth, justice and love. Immersed deep in water and ink, this universal Christian spirit is complementary also to the quest for personal freedom and independence in traditional Chinese culture. A definition of the Chineseness of Chinese Christian art is thus proposed as follows: Chinese Christian art is of China, and not only because such works are confined by the Chineseness of their form or media, but also because the Chineseness redefined by the Christian spirit is still that of China. Furthermore, such a Chineseness in Chinese Christian art is actually universal—and whatever is universal must at the same time also be Chinese.

Secondly, Saintism wash-ink as a form of Chinese Christian art is always in the state of absorbing Chineseness rather than being absorbed by it. It is, after all, Christianity that is being expressed through Chineseness. There is a permeating consciousness of apocalypse in Daozi's works, which marks their essential difference from Chinese wash-ink paintings in general, since ending/doomsday is always a taboo topic in traditional Chinese culture. The Chineseness in question is endowed with possibilities of transcendence and spirituality, enabling it to establish itself as a kind of "spermata (seed) of the Logos" in Justin Martyr's (100-165) words (McGrath 1998). On the other hand, apocalypse in the Christian sense is not just the end of the world or human history. Rather, it means the coming of a New World with no worldliness or history. This "unending" ending makes it possible to see both Chineseness and Chinese Christian art as open-ended, and opening itself up to the other. In other words, the two remain in a combative yet

communicating context till the end of history, and both are but the copy or reflection and consequently revelation of the Other World.

Thirdly, no matter whether we speak of the Chineseness in Chinese Christian art or Chinese Christian art possessing Chineseness, they are both pilgrims in abstraction. An inescapable sense of pilgrimage can be perceived in Daozi's paintings, best represented in *The Via Crucis – the Pilgrim's Progress* (2014, figure 15). The painting demonstrates not only the experience common to all pilgrims—that the journey of sufferings in this world is parallel to the journey leading to Heaven, but also perhaps the self-portrayal and expectations of Chinese Christian art and artists: this world is a place of sojourn for souls immortal, and the perceptible and changeable here always point and lead to the imperceptible and unchangeable beyond.



Figure 15: *The Via Crucis – the Pilgrim's Progress*

## Conclusion: “Putting On” Chineseness

Daozi's Saintism wash-ink art of twenty-first century China is a creation closer to melody than image: a wordless hymn singing praise to God's grace and salvation, a soundless lamentation on the condition of human beings in a world wrecked by sins. These paintings could be appreciated as a special exegesis of the Bible. Using Daozi's Saintism wash-ink art as an example, this paper explores the relationship between Chinese Christian art and Chineseness. It is proposed that there is neither a process of Christianization of Chinese art, nor that of Sinocization of Christian art. Setting the goal of filling Chinese Christian art with Chineseness would be like Don Quixote tilting at the windmills. Christian art developing within Chinese culture is not absorbed into it and will never be. Rather, Chinese Christian art has long since “put on” Chineseness, not as an adornment, but out of love and acceptance for the local culture. Meanwhile, the Christian DNA, by which Christian art of all sorts is defined, has been transferred into the Chineseness in question, making it essentially different from Chineseness in the general sense. Jerusalem has never forgotten Beijing, just as the right hand never forgets its skills.

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