

## Historical Practice of Chinization of Christian Arts

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**Abstract:** In recent years, religious studies in China have begun to embark on the cause of the Chinization of religions vigorously, and the Chinization of Christianity is one of its important branches. The process of Chinization of Christianity started from the very first time when it was introduced in the Tang Dynasty by Olopen, a Nestorian, in A.D.635. After another two times of its reintroduction in the Yuan Dynasty and the Ming Dynasty, Christianity in China has been demonstrated for a distinctly Chinese characteristic. This Chinese feature helps Chinese Christendom to understand Christianity and express their own religious devotions better, and it also enlarges the content and meaning of Christianity as a whole community worldwide. This article focuses on the brief history of the three introductions of Christianity into China and how it looks like today from an artistic standpoint, so as to enumerate the splendid legacy left behind in the field of the Christian art of its Chinization.

**Keywords:** Chinization of Christianity; art; music; missionaries

### 1. Introduction

Under the guidance of the third plenary session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Religious Work, the Chinese Government has embarked on the practice of Chinization of religions, including Christianity, Catholicism, Islam, and Buddhism, which are the mainstream religions that have been introduced into China. However, when we talk about the Chinization of Christian art, we are basically talking about the Chinization of Christian fine art, for most of the scholarly studies which were published publicly are mainly about this area. The most recent one is the “Christian Classic Narratives in an Eastern Expression: Selected Chinized Christian Artworks from Shanghai Song’en Church” [1]. All the paintings selected in this paper were created by a Chinese artist named Jiade, as the description for these paintings said: “These works weave traditional Chinese fine art techniques and the aesthetics of artistic conception into the fabric of Christian narrative, translating biblical stories into a Chinese cultural context. In doing so, they vividly articulate the spiritual essence of Scripture, reveal a profound synthesis of Christian thought and Chinese sensibility, and offer viewers a distinctive artistic lens through which to grasp the Chinization of Christianity—serving as a living testament to its deepening and maturation” [1]. Also, many scholars have studied the artists who devoted themselves to adapting Christian fine art into the Chinese context, like “Exploring the ‘Chinization’ of Christian Art: An Analysis of Yu Jiade’s Paintings” [2] and “Praising the Lord’s Love with Painting and Calligraphy—An Interview with Li Weisan, An Accomplished Artist” [3]. On the other hand, we can also find papers on case studies of Chinized Christian fine art works at different times, like “A Study on the Chinization of Christian Artistic Imagery during the Republic of China Period” [4] and “Christian Art under the ‘Chinization’ Strategy of Missionaries in Modern China” [5]. But we can barely see any paper on the Chinization of

Christian music; thus, this article reviews not only the Chinization process of Christian fine art but also Christian music more, so that we can see the historical achievements of its Chinization in the past and present.

## 2. First Meet: Christianity in Tang (618–907 AD) and Yuan(1271–1368AD) Dynasties

Around A.D.635, in the 9th year of Emperor Tang Taizong’s reign, Olopen, a Syrian, brought a branch of Christianity called Nestorianism to Chang’an, the capital of the Tang dynasty, via Persia and obtained permission from the authorities to build a temple and preach the religion. In the third year of the Tianqi era (1623, or the fifth year of the Tianqi era, 1625), the *Daqin Nestorianism Stele* was unearthed on the outskirts of Xi’an city. It is a stele with dragons, tortoises, Buddhist lotuses, Taoist clouds, and Greek crosses [6]. In 1908, in Gansu, a manuscript of a Nestorian hymn from the Tang dynasty was discovered, titled *Sanwei Mundu Zan*, written in seven rhyming verses and composed in seven lines of text. There is no doubt that the unearthing of the stele and the hymn manuscript has given us a review of Christianity in the Tang Dynasty.

In the 13th century, when the Mongol Yuan rulers adopted a policy of religious tolerance, Christianity, which had disappeared for collateral damage from Emperor Tang Wuzong’s campaign to exterminate Buddhism (854 AD), returned to China and became known as the “Yelikovin” religion. “Yelikovin” was the collective name for the followers of Catholicism and Nestorianism in the Mongol Empire. According to a letter written to the Pope by the Yuan Dynasty Franciscan missionary John Montecorvino (1247–1328), ancient Western hymns were sung in the churches of the Yuan capital, Beijing. In addition, a large number of Nestorian stone carvings from the Yuan Dynasty have been found in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, including three crosses, angel carvings, temple carvings, etc. Among them, “the angel carvings found in 1975 are typical Chinese works: the angels in the stone carvings hold a lotus flower in both hands, with a three-pointed crown on their heads, two ears hanging down over their shoulders, and are clad in wide-sleeved robes and sleeves that flutter in the wind. The angel has two pairs of wings spread out behind his shoulders, and there is a floating belt behind their wings. If the feathers and the cross are removed, this angel statue is very similar to the seated statue of the Bodhisattva in the Yuan Dynasty in Quanzhou” [7], which shows the efforts made by “Yelikovin” to localise Christianity in the Mongol Yuan Dynasty.

## 3. Flourishing: The Reintroduction of Christianity in Ming (1368–1644 AD) and Qing (1644–1911AD) Dynasties

In the late Ming Dynasty of the 16th century, the imperial authorities cancelled the ban on the sea, and during the same period, influenced by the geographical discoveries of the West and the spiritual movement, missionaries carried out evangelisation worldwide vigorously. Catholicism was once again introduced to the Kingdom. Several Catholic orders (such as the Dominicans, the Franciscans, etc.) arrived in China during the Late Ming period, but the most notable influences on Chinese music and fine art come from the Jesuits, like Matteo Ricci (Italian, arrived in Macau in 1582), Jean da Rocha (Portuguese, arrived in Macau in 1589), Giulio Aleni (Italian, arrived in Macau in 1611) and Thomas Pereira (Portuguese, arrived in Macao in 1672).

Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), a Spaniard, founded the Society of Jesus in 1540, and his missionary policy was “not that they must be like us, but on the contrary” [8]. According to Loyola’s missionary strategy, the Jesuits also implemented different localisation initiatives for different audiences. Matteo Ricci, who started the history of the Church in China, not only learnt Chinese himself and created the Romanised Pinyin system but also translated the Chinese Confucian classics into Latin and brought them back to the West; thus, he became the “Father of Sinology” in the Western world. With his profound literary skills, Matteo Ricci composed eight lyrics for Chinese musicians who were learning to play the ancient piano while working in Beijing and collected them into a collection called *Xiqin Quyi (Western Piano Songs)*. The collection is with “eight moral themes” [9], which are *Wuyuan Zaishang (My Heart Belongs to the Highest)*, *Mutong Youshan (A Shepherd in the Mountains)*, *Shanji Shouxiu (Expanding Life by Good Deeds)*, *Dezhi Yongqiao (Virtue of Courage)*, *Huilao Wude (Repentance of Ageing and Ignorance)*, *Xiongzhong Yongping (Be at Ease)*, *Jianfu Shuangnang (Be Easy at People, Be Strict at Self)*, *Dingming Sida (Be Easy on the Transiency)*, which demonstrates a common exhortation to morality of both Confucianism and Christianity.

As for fine art, Jean da Rocha (in Chinese, Luo Ruwang) and Giulio Aleni (in Chinese, Ai Rulue) incorporated traditional Chinese portraits into their paintings. Jean da Rocha’s work *Nianzhu Guicheng (Rituals*

for the Recitation) is accompanied by fifteen illustrations, “which represent the first examples of Chinese Christian art” [8] and “the first introduction of Catholic art into China” [8], while *Giulio Aleni’s Tianzhu Jiangsheng Chuxiang Tujie (Illustrations of the Nativity of the Lord)* contains a large number of Chinese style pictorial images, “All these figures (including Jesus, Mary and the Apostles) have Chinese features in their faces, decorations and costumes” [8].

In the early years of the Qing Dynasty, the Portuguese Jesuit Thomas Pereira (in Chinese, Xu Risheng) arrived in China and travelled north from Macao to Beijing, where he served at the Qintian Jian (a supervisory commission in the Qing government) and as a teacher of music at court. During his tenure, he was not only responsible for teaching Western music, expanding Xuanwumen Church (the South Church) and introducing a larger organ, but also for writing the *Lvlu Zuanyao (Compendium of Chinese Musical Tuning System)*, which introduced the West to the Chinese system of musical laws.

Also, in the early years of the Qing Dynasty, with the completion of the Western Reformation, protestant missionaries entered China one after another. Among them, the English missionaries Robert Morrison (arrived in Guangzhou in 1807), Timothy Richard (arrived in Shanghai in 1870), and the German missionary Ernst Faber (arrived in Hong Kong in 1865) were the most prominent representatives, making outstanding contributions to the Chinization of Christian music and the globalisation of Chinese music.

In 1808, shortly after his arrival in Guangzhou, Morrison published *Yangxin Shenshi (The Hymns of the Nourished Heart)*, a Chinese hymnal collection containing 30 hymns, which pioneered the writing of Chinese hymns, and on the basis of this, new hymns were continued to be written and were published again. In 1839, in honour of Morrison, Samuel Robbins Brown, a pastor from the United States, and his wife founded the Morrison Memorial School in Macao, which was the first church school in China and the first to have music lessons.

When the English Baptist minister Timothy Richard and his wife Mary Martin were preaching in Shandong and Shanxi provinces, they not only used scales and tunes familiar to the local people to arrange hymns, for example, the six tunes published in the *Church Affairs* magazine included Buddhist songs, Confucius ritual tunes, and Chinese melodies, but also published a music theory and sight singing tutorial called *Xiao Shipu (Tune-book in Chinese Notation)*, which was written on a combination of Western and Eastern music scales and notation system. In addition, Mary also encouraged members of the congregation who knew how to use musical instruments to use native instruments in their ceremonies, such as *flutes and drums* [10]. It is worth mentioning that William C. Burns, a British Presbyterian who arrived in China a little earlier, also worked on hymns written in local dialects and scripts, such as the *Chaoqiang Divine Hymns (Hymns in Chaozhou Dialect)* published in 1861 and the *Rongqiang Divine Hymns (Hymns in Rongzhou Dialect)* published in 1862.

The German missionary Ernst Faber (in Chinese, Hua Zhi’an), on the other hand, introduced Chinese music theory and works to the West, his *Concepts of Chinese Music* is one of the representative English-language writings of the 19th-century, which is particularly notable for the introduction of the ‘one-third plus/minus method’ as well as the Gong, Shang, Jiao, Zhi, and Yu ‘five-tone musical scales’.

During the Qing Dynasty, in addition to the efforts of foreign missionaries, the Chinese themselves were also absorbing nutrients from foreign countries, of which the early Qing painter Wu Li (1632–1718) was an outstanding representative. As one of ‘the most outstanding six persons of the Qing Dynasty’, Wu Li’s paintings are based on landscapes, which are timeless and natural, and his works are now in circulation, such as *Xingfu’an Scroll* in the collection of the National Palace Museum, and *Shanzhong Kuyu Scroll (Bitter Rains Scroll)* in the collection of the Shanghai Museum, etc. Wu Li was baptised as a Jesuit priest in Macao in 1682, and in the rest of his life, he travelled around the Jiangsu and Zhejiang areas. He spent the next twenty years of his life travelling and preaching around there and later died in Shanghai. The *Tianyue Zhengyinpu* is a collection of masses and hymns composed by Wu Li, including nine sets of northern and southern Chinese tunes and twenty songs of ancient Chinese music, making it the earliest known collection of Christian music composed by a Chinese. In addition, Xu Shengmo (1835–1896) of Linfen, Shanxi Province, based on his own experience of quitting drug addiction with the help of Christian missionaries, wrote more than 170 poems promoting Christianity and quitting smoking in the form of local folk song adaptations [11].

#### 4. Reborn: Christianity in Modern China

In modern times, under the promotion from the government, in 1936, the Joint Hymn Editing Committee of the Six Christian Churches published *Putian Songzan (Praise to the Heavenly Hosts)*, which used Chinese and Western tunes; in 1954, Ma Geshun directed a choir formed by churches in Shanghai to stage the oratorio *Shougao Zhe (The Anointed One)*, which was composed by himself; and in 1991, *Hymns (New Editions)* was published under the promotion of the China Christian Council. In modern times, a group of outstanding scholars, represented by Mr. YANG Minkang of the Central Conservatory of Music, Mr. TIAN Qing, Director of the Music Research Institute of the Chinese National Academy of Arts, and Ms. SUN Chenhui, Associate Researcher of the Music Research Institute of the Chinese National Academy of Arts, are constantly improving and practising the theory of the Chinization of Christian music.

On 16 October 2021, the academic concert *Chinese Sacred Music since the Tang Dynasty*, directed and hosted by Ms. SUN Chenhui, was held in Xishiku Church, Beijing. The concert revived and performed the ancient works mentioned above, such as the *Sanwei Mengdu Zan*, *Xiqin Quyī—Wuyuan Zaishang*, and *Tianyue Zhengyinpu -Yizhi Hua (A Flower)*, as well as many Western tunes.

The earliest known Chinese Christian hymn, the *Sanwei Mengdu Zan*, was brought to France by the French sinologist Paul Pelliot (1878 – 1945) and is now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Since no score survived, Professor CHEN Yingshi from Shanghai Conservatory of Music, translated and transplanted it into a Pipa score, which was performed at the concert.

Only the lyrics of the eight seven-verse poems in the *Xiquan Quyī* have survived as well; thus, an American ancient pianist, John Thompson, based on the ancient scores of *Mozi Beige (Lamentation for Mozi)* and *Boya Xinfā (The Heart of Boya)*, arranged the first poem, *Wuyuan Zaishang (My Heart Belongs to the Highest)* of the *Xiqin Quyī* and was performed in the concert. The song is a male chorus accompanied only by the Sheng. The lyrics are sung with sheng accompaniment for the first time, then change to a two-part polyphonic with counterpoint for the second repetition and return to unison singing in a mode similar to that of the ninth-century Western Organon.

Kunqu musician LIU Youheng scored the first song of Wu Li's *Tianyue Zhengyinpu -Yizhi Hua (A Flower)*. The concert was accompanied by Kunqu's common orchestration of sanxian (three strings), er'hu (two-stringed hu), pipa, sheng, flute and drums, and the singers sang in the Kunshan accent with the spirit and style of a strong classical Chinese opera.

Church musician Fr LI Zhenbang is a pioneer in promoting the development of Chinese Catholic music in modern times. He founded the Music Department of Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan and is the author of *Xinli Misa Hechang Quji (A New Collection of Choral Pieces for Mass, 1971)*, *Zhongwen Jianyi Misaqu (Simple Mass Tunes in Chinese, 1974)*, and *Zhongguo Yuwen de Yinyue Chuli (Musical Treatments of the Chinese Language, 1978)*, among others. The concert featured Fr LI Zhenbang's Tessie Ricci in honour of Matteo Ricci. The song is short and natural, with a peaceful and beautiful tune reflecting the influence of the Gregorian Chant.

Modern Chinese composer JIANG Wen-ye was born in Taiwan and studied in Japan. After his return to China, he was a professor of composition and harmony at the Music Department of Beijing Normal University and a professor at the Composition Department of the Central Conservatory of Music. JIANG Wen-ye's compositional style was influenced by modern Western music, but his music still results from ancient Chinese rituals. His masterpieces include *Tianwan Wuqu (Taiwan Dance)*, *Kongmiao Dasheng Yuezhang (Confucius Temple Music)* and *Beijing Diandian (Beijing's Pictures)*. In addition, JIANG Wen-ye also composed many Catholic hymns in Chinese tunes. Four collections of hymns have survived, namely *Shengyong Zuoquji Diyijuan (The Collection of Hymn Compositions, Volume 1)*, *Diyi Misaqu (The First Mass)*, *Er'tong Shengyongji (The Collection of Children's Hymns)*, and *Shengyong Zuoquji Dierjuan (The Collection of Hymn Compositions, Volume 2)*. For this concert, the song *Shengmu Jing (Hail Mary)* from *The Collection of Hymn Compositions, Volume 1* has been selected. This piece was composed by an antique song, *Xijiang Yue (Moon on the River)*, and is in the Chinese pentatonic mode. The female chorus, accompanied by the organ, praises the gentle and loving image of the Virgin Mary.

## 5. Conclusions

We have seen many examples above, like the angel statue of Nestorian stone carvings in Quanzhou, which is a blend of Christianity and Buddhism; *Xiqin Quyi*, which was composed by Matteo Ricci, is a collection of poetries mixed with Christianity and Confucianism conceptions; and *Tianyue Zhengyinpu*, is a combination of Christianity and Chinese folk songs. It is obvious that all these great artworks are products of religious and cultural exchanges. They are proof of adapting Christianity into Chinese context. We can find more examples of interreligious and intercultural exchanges and combinations from the process of Chinization of Christianity. As postmodern theologians have said, interreligious differences are more valuable, as they enrich the meaning and pathway to the everlasting truth. So, on the basis of mutual respect and demarcation of boundaries, means of arts like paintings, music, sculpture, etc., can transcend races, countries, and regions, to express a common quest for the contemplation of life, nature, to the divine and ultimate reality at last.

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## Conflicts of Interest

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