

Research on Chinese Biblical-themed Paintings—A Case Study of Zhang Daqian and Daozi

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Abstract: *This research focuses on the biblical-themed paintings of Zhang Daqian and Dao Zi, investigating how modern Chinese painting finds innovation and breakthroughs amidst the fusion of Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist traditional culture and Western religious thought. Zhang Daqian, employing a flexible blend of Eastern and Western painting techniques, successfully reinterprets the allegorical and universal aspects of Biblical stories through the language of Chinese painting. Dao Zi, on the other hand, incorporates Christian spirituality into contemporary ink painting through his unique concept of "Holy Ink," thus unveiling and reviving the inherent spirituality of ink art. The creative works of both artists not only demonstrate the potential for innovation in contemporary Chinese art within a global context, but also underscore the vital role of the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures in driving the development of cultural diversity.*

Keywords: *Bible painting; Painting; Artistic Fusion*

1. The origin of Chinese painting on the theme of the Bible

The Bible, as a classic religious document, holds an extremely important position worldwide. This work is not only the core of Western society's faith, but also one of the cornerstones of Western culture. The political, cultural, economic, social, and religious elements contained within it form a rich and diverse cultural matrix, providing a unique perspective for our understanding and exploration of Western cultural history.

Art and religion often intertwine throughout history, forming a unique symbiotic relationship. Religion, by providing artistic inspiration and expression mediums, gives art profound connotations and unlimited creative space. In turn, art, through its unique visual language and emotional expression, becomes a powerful tool for the propagation and development of religion. This interaction and fusion are particularly evident in religious paintings with Biblical themes.

Since the mid-19th century, with the introduction of Western religious culture, Catholic painting has left a profound imprint in the field of Chinese art. In this process, many Chinese painters began to attempt to merge Catholic painting with traditional Chinese painting, exploring a new art form, that is, Catholic painting with Chinese characteristics. These painters include Chen Yuandu, Lu Hongnian, Wang Suda, Li Mingyuan, and Xu Jihua. Their works not only conform to the aesthetic concept of traditional Chinese painting but also enrich the field of Chinese religious art, demonstrating the infinite possibilities of Chinese painting under new themes and forms^[1].

Moving into the modern era, we can see a deeper exploration and unique expression of Biblical themes in the works of painters Zhang Daqian and Daozi. These two artists were born in different eras and have different artistic styles, yet their works have achieved a high degree of fusion between the spirit of Chinese ink painting and Biblical themes. With keen insight, they captured the subtle connection between Biblical themes and Chinese ink painting and skillfully manifested this connection in their works. In their pieces, we can see how foreign religious themes are ingeniously integrated into Chinese artistic traditions, thus shaping a new form of art that aligns with Chinese aesthetic habits while embodying Western religious connotations.

The creative practices of Zhang Daqian and Daozi provide new directions and insights for the development of Chinese art. Their works are not only successful examples of the Sinicization of Biblical themes, but also important records of Chinese artists' exploration and practice of Biblical themes in different periods. The ingenious concepts and profound skills displayed in their works are not just a demonstration of their individual artistic talents, but a vivid portrayal of how Chinese artists

respond to challenges and innovate in the face of global cultural exchanges.

Their works fully demonstrate how Chinese art maintains its own characteristics in the process of absorbing foreign cultures, how it finds a balance between tradition and innovation, and how it integrates foreign elements with local traditions. These are all issues that we must face and contemplate in today's globalized world.

Through in-depth study and understanding of the works of these two artists, we can better understand the development dynamics of Chinese art in the era of globalization, and how Chinese artists innovate and seek new ways of self-expression while preserving tradition. This is not only of great value for us to understand the history of Chinese art, but also has profound implications for our consideration of the future direction of Chinese art, and how to find our own position and role in global cultural exchanges.

2. Zhang Daqian and "Song of Songs: Fragrant Herbs, Good Fruits and Fine Woods Album"

Zhang Daqian, a world-renowned Chinese painting master, is also a practitioner with a deep understanding of Catholic art. His mother was a Catholic believer, so Zhang Daqian grew up in a Catholic environment. His childhood and adolescence were spent in the Catholic Evangelical Church in Neijiang, Sichuan. Western religious cultural thought profoundly influenced his life and artistic direction, and this influence enabled him to incorporate stories and themes from the Bible into his later artistic creations^[2]. His series of works, such as the "Song of Songs: Fragrant Herbs, Good Fruits, and Fine Woods Album" completed in 1977, are not only rich in Catholic doctrine but also display a unique artistic aesthetic^[3].

The "Song of Songs: Fragrant Herbs, Good Fruits, and Fine Woods Album" was created in response to an invitation from Zhang Qun, a senior leader of the Kuomintang and a devout Christian, for the Christian missionary institution "Cosmic Light" to create a calendar album. Zhang Daqian selected verses about fragrant herbs, good fruits, and fine woods from the Songs of Solomon in the Bible and used them as themes for twelve landscape and flower paintings with his unique brush and ink skills. These works include daffodils, grass, agarwood, lilies, irises, grapes, pomegranates, cassia, frankincense, apples, pine trees, and cedars. Each one comes with a Bible verse and an extracted verse from the Songs of Solomon as a title, creating an album full of Chinese-style romanticism.

The Song of Songs in the Bible gets its name from the first line in the book: "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's". This book shares many similarities with China's Book of Songs. It contains only 117 verses, focusing on the joy and pain of love between men and women. However, at a deeper level, it serves as a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and the Church. In Zhang Daqian's "Song of Songs: Fragrant Herbs, Good Fruits, and Fine Woods Album", each of the twelve plants carries significant symbolic meaning. Zhang Daqian provides a new interpretation of them with his delicate brushwork and Chinese-style patterns, imbuing them with religious symbolism.

For example, in Zhang Daqian's paintings, agarwood is one of the three gifts given by the Eastern Magi before Jesus' birth, symbolizing honor and preciousness. In the "Song of Songs: Fragrant Herbs, Good Fruits, and Fine Woods Album", Zhang Daqian uses elegant brushwork and vivid images to represent the characteristics of agarwood.

Lilies, considered noble in ancient Israel, often grow in desolate outskirts but symbolize purity and nobility. By depicting the lilies' growth in the wilderness, Zhang Daqian conveys the spirit of Christians maintaining purity and dignity in adversity. Similarly, the iris symbolizes the anointment of Christians in the Bible and is regarded alongside orchids, chrysanthemums, and daffodils as one of the "Four Elegant Plants" in Chinese culture. Zhang Daqian's iris painting exhibits the refined temperament of Chinese literati while metaphorically representing the baptism of God's spirit on the anointed in the Bible.

Grapes, frequently mentioned in the New Testament, represent the intimate relationship between Jesus and his disciples. Zhang Daqian's depiction of grapes is lively and colorful, conjuring up images of the close relationship between Jesus and his disciples. The flowers of the cassia tree represent the Virgin Mary, symbolizing purity and innocence. In Zhang Daqian's cassia flower painting, the flowers are flourishing and varied in shape, full of vitality, reflecting the noble qualities of the Virgin Mary. Evergreen pine trees represent eternal life. Zhang Daqian's depiction of the pine tree stands tall and straight, with a sturdy trunk and branches extending upwards, demonstrating Christians' yearning for and expectation of eternal life. Cedars, symbolizing power and greatness because they grow tall and

high, appear stately and solemn in Zhang Daqian's painting, implying the testimony of Jesus in the flesh^[4].

The "Song of Songs: Fragrant Herbs, Good Fruits, and Fine Woods Album" showcases the aesthetic ambiance of traditional Chinese painting and is a classic work representing the localization of biblical themes in China. This work integrates unique Chinese charm and national style, providing a new perspective and innovative approach to Chinese Catholic painting art. It has profoundly influenced the development of biblical-themed painting in China.

In summary, Zhang Daqian's "Song of Songs: Fragrant Herbs, Good Fruits, and Fine Woods Album" is not only an extension and development of traditional Chinese painting art but also an understanding and reshaping of Western religious art. His work ingeniously blends Chinese artistic aesthetics with Catholic religious beliefs, exhibiting an artistic charm that transcends cultures and religions.

3. Daozi and the "Bitter Bamboo" Series

In recent years, the modern painter Daozi has become one of the significant figures representing biblical painting themes. His paintings on biblical themes are vastly different from Zhang Daqian's traditional Chinese visual symbols, although both are heavily imbued with the style of Chinese ink paintings. However, Daozi builds on the basis of Zhang Daqian's traditional Chinese visual symbols and infuses them with new elements of modernity, experimentalism, and innovation, offering a new understanding and interpretation of biblical painting themes.

Ink painting, an art form rooted in Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist philosophy, exhibits visual symbols of traditional Chinese culture. Yet in the mid-1980s, impacted by Western modernist art concepts, Chinese painters began to transition ink painting towards modernity, giving rise to innovative artistic vocabulary such as "experimental ink", "modern ink", "new ink", "abstract ink", and "conceptual ink". As a painter, Daozi infuses the spirit of Christianity into contemporary ink painting. He attempts to revive the essence of ink painting as spiritual art, proposing the innovative artistic concept of "turning blood into ink, transforming charm into light". He is also the first to propose a new concept for ink painting—"Sacred Ink".

As a devoted Christian, Daozi uses the Bible as a primary source of inspiration for his artistic creations. Endowed with the spiritual strength of faith, he expresses transcendent introspection and ultimate love and care through the art forms of poetry, calligraphy, and painting, manifesting a strong and touching spiritual power.

"Bitter Bamboo" is the first of Daozi's series "Chinese Ink Painting and Christian Faith". It is considered the pioneering experimental work of his exploration of "Sacred Ink" art. Traditionally, bamboo is ranked alongside plum blossoms, orchids, and chrysanthemums, collectively known as the "Four Gentlemen", due to its sanctity, unyielding spirit, upright nature, and toughness—qualities deeply respected by traditional scholars. Past painters usually depicted the elegant side of bamboo with clear ink. In contrast, Daozi employs painful and bitter strokes to sculpt the bamboo into the image of the cross. "This is the cross of suffering, the cross of ascension, and the cross where original sin and redemption are grafted together."^[5]

Bamboo symbolizes the personification of a "scholar" in Confucianism. In "Bitter Bamboo", Daozi assigns the gentlemanly character represented by bamboo a sacred status. Bamboo appears in the form of the cross, symbolizing Jesus nailed to the cross, bearing human suffering, hinting at God's grace to the Chinese people, and becoming a universal symbol of grace in China. In the Bible, Jesus comforts his disciples, saying, "In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) Like the budding sprouts on the cross in "Bitter Bamboo", it signifies that all suffering will eventually become a thing of the past in the kingdom of rebirth.

Daozi's artistic creation is like a pilgrimage seeking spiritual truth, and the "Bitter Bamboo" series opens his path to exploring spiritual ink painting. He seeks vertical inquiries into the origin of the world in faith, striving to construct a localized religious expression and continuously advancing towards the sacred direction. His work displays profound artistic techniques, reflecting his free switching between faith and art, expressing his insights into ultimate love and care through unique art forms. This faith-based, art-expressed creative method has paved a new path for China's modern ink painting.

In the process, Daozi fuses traditional Chinese symbolic elements, like bamboo, with Christian

symbols, like the cross, forming a unique artistic language. This fusion not only reflects his profound understanding of Chinese traditional culture but also expresses his deep reverence for Christian faith. This in-depth understanding and unique interpretation of the two cultures lend his work a strong personal characteristic and far-reaching artistic influence^[6].

In summary, Daozi's "Bitter Bamboo" series not only pioneered a new artistic form but also provided us with a new perspective, enabling us to understand and perceive Chinese traditional culture and Christian faith from different angles. This profound cultural understanding and artistic exploration make Daozi's work a dazzling gem in the realm of Chinese modern ink painting.

4. Conclusion—The Exchange and Integration of Chinese and Western Cultures

The exchange and integration of Biblical art and Chinese local art embody the mutual acceptance and influence between cultures, infusing rich material into Chinese painting and creating a profound emotional foundation for artists. This collision and fusion of art not only enrich the forms of artistic expression but also inspire the innovative thinking of artists^[7].

Whether it is Zhang Daqian's artistic transformation or Daozi's unique creation, they all adopt an open and inclusive attitude, integrating another culture and another thought into the spirit of Chinese brush and ink, allowing the two different cultures to integrate and complement each other, breaking geographical and ethnic boundaries. This undoubtedly provides a novel innovation and thought for the development of contemporary Chinese art.

In this process, Chinese painters not only draw on the themes in the Bible, endowing their works with more profound implications, but also use traditional Chinese painting techniques to present characters and stories in the Bible, blending Western religious themes with Chinese cultural traditions to form a new form of art.

This open and inclusive cultural attitude not only promotes the development of contemporary Chinese art but also provides us with a new perspective for understanding and accepting different cultures. This is significant for us to understand different cultures, promote cultural exchange and fusion under the backdrop of globalization.

At the same time, we should recognize that this cultural exchange and integration are not unilateral acceptance or imitation, but genuine communication and fusion based on understanding and respecting the characteristics of each culture. Only in this way can we retain our own cultural characteristics while absorbing the essence of other cultures, making our artistic creations more diverse.

Also, we should see that this cultural exchange and fusion have opened a new horizon for the development of contemporary Chinese art, providing a broader space for our artistic creation. In this process, Chinese painters, with an open and inclusive attitude, have accepted other cultures while also endowing their works with more profound connotations.

In conclusion, the artistic practices of both Zhang Daqian and Daozi undoubtedly open up a new perspective for us. Their creations show us how the themes of the Bible and Chinese brush and ink art cleverly combine in their hands, echoing each other to create unique and thought-provoking works of art.

Their unique perspectives and open attitudes provide us with a unique example, showing how cultural blending and innovation can be realized in artistic creation, how to express our ideas and emotions in new ways, thus promoting the progress and development of art.

At the same time, their works also demonstrate to some extent how contemporary Chinese art finds its direction when facing the challenges and opportunities of global cultural exchanges, and how to maintain and promote its own cultural characteristics while absorbing foreign cultures, thereby creating art works that have both Chinese characteristics and an international vision.

However, although the works of Zhang Daqian and Daozi have both achieved a fusion of Chinese painting and biblical themes to some extent, their respective artistic expressions and concepts are still different. Zhang Daqian's works tend to incorporate biblical story elements into traditional Chinese painting, while Daozi explores the integration of Christian spirit and Chinese culture within the framework of modern ink painting.

These artistic practices are of great reference significance for our understanding of the development of contemporary Chinese art and cultural exchanges in the context of globalization. We hope that in the

future, more artists can continue on the path of exploration initiated by Zhang Daqian and Daozi, opening up new paths for our artistic creation and injecting new vitality into the development of contemporary Chinese art.

For us ordinary art enthusiasts, from their works, we can not only appreciate the unique artistic charm but also see the endless possibilities brought about by the exchange and fusion of different cultures. This not only helps us understand and appreciate these works more deeply but also stimulates our new thoughts and understanding of art, culture, and life.

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