


## Article

# The Indigenization Strategies of Catholic Painting in Early 20th Century China

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**Abstract:** The spread of Christianity to China initiated a process of indigenization, particularly evident in Christian art. This study explores the indigenization of early 20th-century Chinese Christian paintings through literature reviews, case studies, and comparative research. The analysis covers four forms of primary research. First, it explores the indigenization of Christian concepts, tracing their development from the introduction of Nestorian Christianity in the Tang dynasty through the establishment of Fu Jen Catholic University in the Republican era. Matteo Ricci's implementation of the "Ricci Rule" during the late Ming dynasty, subsequently expanded by Celso Costantini, played a crucial role in the indigenous adaptation of Christian painting in China. The second facet focuses on the Beijing Catholic School of Painting, led by Chen Yuandu, a group that innovated Chinese Christian art by integrating local artistic expressions with traditional depictions of saints, assimilating symbols from Chinese literati painting, and preserving time-honored Chinese painting techniques. The third facet examines the strategy behind Christian painting methods. Fourth, this study discusses how the Fu Jen School faced varied reception and evaluations from domestic and international audiences under the complex social currents of the Republic of China and how the artists reflected the national spirit and artistic responsibility in their narrative paintings. Fundamentally, the practice of Christian painting at the early 20th-century Catholic School is not only an innovative artistic endeavor but also a significant case of cultural exchange between East and West and religious localization.

**Keywords:** Christian painting; indigenization; Chinese tradition; Fu Jen Catholic Painting School; cultural integration



**Citation:** Zhang, Xinyi. 2024. The Indigenization Strategies of Catholic Painting in Early 20th Century China. *Religions* 15: 681. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060681>

Academic Editor: José María Salvador-González

Received: 2 April 2024  
Revised: 17 May 2024  
Accepted: 26 May 2024  
Published: 30 May 2024



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## 1. Introduction

Since antiquity, art has been inextricably linked with Christianity, serving as a powerful tool for evangelism. Christian art, rooted in the rich artistic heritage of ancient Rome, reflects the diverse origins of European art. Similarly, evangelization efforts in the East spurred the emergence of unique artistic expressions deeply woven into local cultures.

The history of Christian religious art in China can be broadly divided into three stages. The first stage, during the Tang and Yuan dynasties, was characterized by the predominance of Nestorianism and Catholicism in stone carving art. The second stage, in the Ming and Qing dynasties, saw the rise of Catholic print art as the primary form of expression. The third stage, from the mid-19th century to 1949, witnessed the introduction of Protestantism to China, which, alongside Catholicism, contributed to the flourishing art of this period.

In 1912, the Roman Catholic missionaries Fathers Vincent Lebbe<sup>1</sup> (雷鳴遠, 1877–1940) and Antoine Cotta<sup>2</sup> (湯作霖, 1872–1957) advocated for the ordination of Chinese bishops and formulated strategies for missionary reform (Song 2005, p. 97). At the same time, Ying Lianzhi (英斂之, 1867–1926), a descendant of the Qing dynasty and founder of Fudan University, called for the establishment of Catholic universities to promote Catholic education. Despite the anti-church sentiment of the 1919 May Fourth Movement, Pope Benedict XV's encyclical "*Maximum Illud*" (夫至大) critiqued the adverse effects of European nationalism

on the Chinese Catholic Church, endorsing the principle of church indigenization. Vincent Lebbe's motto, "China for the Chinese, Chinese for Christ", resonated with this ethos (Liu 2014, pp. 267–78).

Celso Costantini (剛恆毅, 1876–1958), a key figure in the modern history of Chinese Catholicism and Sino-Western cultural exchange, arrived in China in 1922 as a papal delegate. Tasked with implementing the "*Maximum Illud*", he focused on indigenizing and reforming the spread of Catholicism in China (Gu 2008; Liu 2014). The establishment of Fu Jen Catholic University (輔仁大學) in Beijing in 1925 represented one of the few higher education institutions founded by foreign religious groups in China, a testament to the Church's collaborative efforts.

Costantini, endowed with a profound artistic background—especially his authorship of "*Art History*" in 1906 and the founding of "*Arte Cristiana*" magazine in Milan, viewed the future of missionary work from an artistic perspective (Bornemann 1950, pp. 10, 11; Costantini 1958, p. 7; Liu 2014, p. 267). He advocated for the adoption of painting techniques that refined the brilliance of Chinese art while remaining faithful to Christian traditions. This approach, which embraced forms that reflected Chinese artistic characteristics, aimed to ignite the zeal of Chinese Catholics and meet their psychological needs, thereby demonstrating the ingenuity of Chinese art in adapting its form while preserving its essence.

In 1926, Costantini met Chen Yuandu (陳緣督, 1902–1967), a talented young artist. During their conversations, Costantini introduced Chen to the masterpieces of Western religious art that flourished after the Renaissance and discussed Catholicism, the Virgin Mary, and the Bible, encouraging him to consider Italian religious art as a reference for creating paintings with Chinese national characteristics. After their meeting, Chen created "*The Nativity of Jesus*" (Schuller 1940, p. 10; Liu 2014, p. 286), an excellent piece of work that not only showed his exceptional skill but also freed Chinese Christian art from its European constraints, giving it a distinctive and dynamic flair. The artwork received the attention and praise of Western audiences and became an important milestone in the history of Chinese Catholic painting. Encouraged by Costantini, Chen set out to create Chinese paintings that would breathe new life into the Gospel stories, opening a new chapter in the convergence of Chinese art and biblical narrative.

Chen Yuandu was mentored by Kungpah T. King (or Jin Cheng金城, 1878–1926) (Liu 2014, p. 287), a leading figure in Beijing's traditional painting community during the early Republican era, and excelled in ink painting, bird and flower painting, and especially, figure painting. In 1920, he founded the Chinese Painting Research Association in the capital. After Jin Cheng's death in 1926, his students established the Hushe (湖社) Painting Association in Beijing to commemorate him. Chen Yuandu's creation of Catholic paintings, which fused traditional Chinese painting techniques with those of the Western Renaissance, brought a distinctive flair to the genre. In 1934, in his capacity as an instructor at Fu Jen Catholic University, Chen participated in the Third International Exhibition of Religious Art in Rome, where he received considerable acclaim and, with the arrival of Christmas, Chen, representing the faculty and students of Fu Jen Catholic University, organized a "Special Christmas Art Exhibition", displaying a collection of Christmas paintings with Chinese characteristics, marking a transition from experimental to formal artistic creation (Schuller 1940, pp. 11, 12). Additionally, Chen Yuandu, originally named Chen Xu (陳煦), later chose the name "Yuandu" for himself, which in Chinese signifies being "destined with Christ". He signed many of his works as Lucas Chen, in homage to Saint Luke, believed to be the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles (this name also resonates with the tradition of many European painters' guilds named after Saint Luke) (Xiao 2016).

From September 8 to 15, 1935, the first exhibition of Christian Chinese paintings was held during the Shanghai Catholic Congress, featuring 20 works by Chen Yuandu and 80 student works, providing a comprehensive view of the breadth and grandeur of this art form. The subsequent exhibition, held at Fu Jen Catholic University in Beijing from

December 6 to 8, 1936, displayed over 50 Chinese pieces, highlighting the promising development of Chen's painting class. The students of Chen, Xu Jihua (徐濟華, 1912–1937), Lu Hongnian (陸鴻年, 1919–1989), and Wang Suda (王肅達, 1910–1963) gained recognition and interest. Their works were included in an exhibition organized by the Art Department of Fu Jen Catholic University in Baoding, 100 km south of Beijing, from June 11 to 13, 1937. Another exhibition, held at Peking University on 12 March 1938, was enthusiastically received. Meanwhile, many individual works were displayed at various other events. In 1937, exemplary Christian Chinese paintings graced the Missionary Pavilion at the Paris World Exposition (Schuller 1940, p. 12), which led to the establishment of the Beijing Catholic Painting School, alternately referred to as the Christian Painting School or Fu Jen Painting School. It should be noted that these exhibitions are based on the study of German scholar Sepp Schüller, whose positive evaluations of the artworks probably reflect the perspective of the predominantly Western audience he represents. Domestic evaluations of their work, however, present a complex scenario. Nevertheless, the efforts of the Fu Jen School have advanced the indigenization of Catholic painting and contributed to the export of Chinese painting.

## 2. The Indigenization of Christian Concepts

### 2.1. *The Early Spread of Christianity in China*

Since its introduction into China, Christianity has undergone a dynamic process of both conflict and integration with Chinese culture, yet this process of fusion has been complex and protracted. The missionary Alopen, carrying Nestorian scriptures, arrived in Chang'an (now Xi'an) from Persia in 635, marking the initial surge of Christian influence in China<sup>3</sup> (Liu 2014, p. 6; Shen 2016, p. 15). Traveling along the Silk Road, Nestorianism developed a diverse and interfaith aesthetic, incorporating symbols such as the Greek cross, Taoist clouds of good fortune, Buddhist lotuses, and the traditional Chinese dragon holding a pearl (Liu 2014, p. 6). The erection of the "Stele of the Propagation in China of the Luminous Religion from Daqin" in 781 has profound religious and historical import, serving as evidence of the entwined essence of Eastern and Western cultural components.

However, Nestorianism failed to take deep root in the fabric of Chinese thought. Initially, while Buddhism was experiencing its zenith, Nestorianism borrowed heavily from its vocabulary. Subsequently, with the Tang royal family's growing favor toward Taoism, Nestorianism adapted by assimilating Taoist terms (Shen 2016, pp. 16–18). The amalgamation of Buddhist and Taoist vernacular potentially obfuscated the fundamental tenets of Christianity, leading to ambiguity. Although Nestorian Christianity established a foundational understanding of Christianity for later Chinese generations, it struggled to truly establish itself in China due to not finding the most suitable methods. This underscores the importance of integrating Christian dissemination with local religious practices in China.

In the third year of the Xuantong era (1911), Dr. Laufer, an American scholar, discovered a painting in Xi'an depicting the Virgin Mary holding Jesus, which he described as the "Madonna and Child" water-ink painting (Figure 1a). The artistic style of the painting suggests it dates back to the late Ming period, and it is signed by Tang Yin (famous calligrapher, painter, and poet of the Ming Dynasty), believed to be a pseudonym. However, the composition and narrative of this work bear a striking resemblance to the image of the Madonna found in the Roman Church of Santa Maria Maggiore. Matteo Ricci mentioned in his "Notes on China" that this painting was a gift from the Jesuit missionary Emmanuel Diaz (1574–1659). According to the speculation of the scholar Mo Xiaoye, the icon that Emmanuel Diaz gifted to Matteo Ricci was a replica of the one from the Roman Church of Santa Maria Maggiore (Figure 1b) (Mo 2002, pp. 56–57; Gu 2005, p. 117; Dong 2013; Liu 2014, p. 135). This early example of indigenous Catholic painting in China largely imitates the style of the original icon, but there is a clear transformation in the depiction of Jesus, who is depicted as a Chinese child holding a book in the traditional Chinese style of binding. The dress and ornaments of the Virgin Mary remain largely unchanged. The technique and painting style, however, adhere to Chinese traditions, vertical composition,

line drawing and coloring with brushstrokes, preserving the “spirit” of Chinese art. It stands out as a significant but solitary example of Christian art in China, implying that Christianity’s cultural assimilation remained limited.



**Figure 1.** (a) Chinese Madonna scroll, Courtesy of the Field Museum of Chicago. (b) Copy of the Madonna Image at Santa Maria Maggiore Cathedral, 16th–17th century, 120 × 80 cm, St. Andrew’s Church, Quirinale Street, Rome.

## 2.2. Matteo Ricci’s Western Confucian Strategy for Cultural Resonance in Late Ming and Early Qing

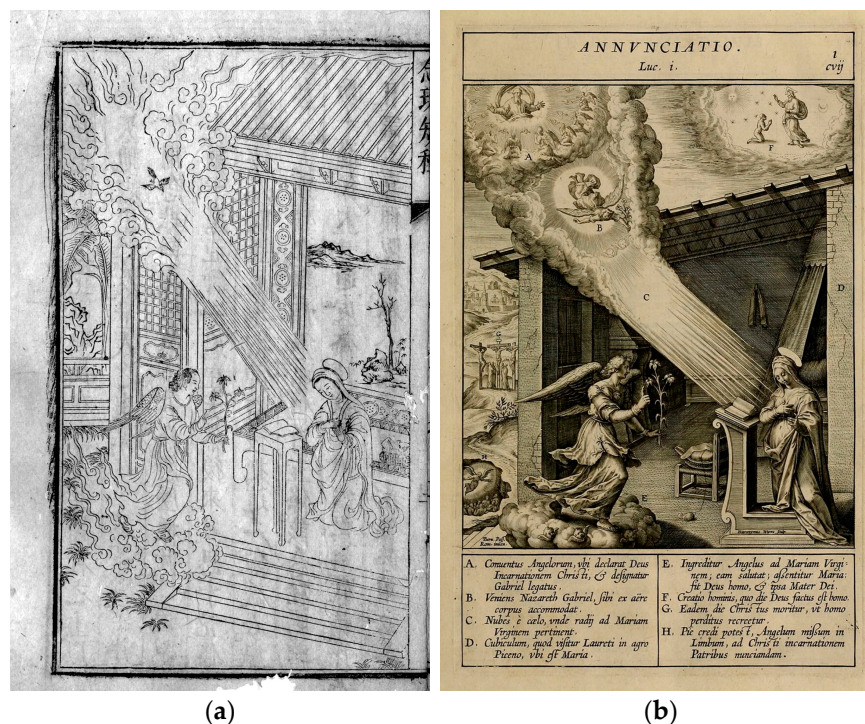
The spread of Christianity during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties in China faced serious obstacles. Matteo Ricci documented that within less than a year, from 9 March 1582, to 10 August 1583, Jesuit missionaries made three attempts to enter Chinese territories, all of which were unsuccessful, preventing them from establishing a presence in China (Ricci 2014, p. 87). By 1594, Ricci had observed the relatively low regard in which Chinese officials held monks, in sharp contrast to the high status of scholar-officials. Consequently, he advised them to dress as scholar-officials, a strategic choice aimed at aligning themselves with a more respected societal class. Moreover, Ricci’s infusion of Western philosophical and technological innovations earned him the moniker “Xi Ru 西儒 (Western Confucian)”, while Xu Guangqi perceived Catholicism as a doctrinal supplement to Confucianism, poised to supplant Buddhism known as “Bu ru yi fo 補儒易佛 (Supplement Confucianism, Refrom Buddhism)” (Li 2019; Shen 2019, pp. 218–23). This adaptation of methods to fit in with local customs, known as the “Ricci Rule”, provided future Jesuit missionaries with valuable insights into the art of religious contextualization in the Chinese context (Liu 2014, p. 140). From this perspective, although changing attire might seem superficial, it has a direct effect on public acceptance. Thus, it is not difficult to understand how the localization of Catholic painting in China can be effectively achieved through such transformations in clothing. This strategy makes the transition in depictions from the Virgin Mary to Guanyin smoother and more seamless.

Building upon Ricci's foundational efforts, Giulio Aleni (艾儒略, 1582–1649) next used two philosophical concepts from traditional Chinese culture—"repaying the roots" (Bao ben 報本) and "giving thanks" (Gan'en 感恩)—to explain the meaning of the Mass. He adeptly paralleled these notions with the Confucian ethos of "returning to the root" and filial piety, integral to Chinese sacrificial rites, thereby forging a conceptual bridge that facilitated a deeper comprehension and intrinsic acceptance of the Mass among Chinese converts. Aleni's exposition on the Mass, casting it as a conduit for daily virtue through the lens of gratitude, laid the groundwork for a nuanced spiritual interpretation that resonated deeply within the Chinese spiritual landscape (You and Ji 2023). The concepts of "repaying the roots" and "giving thanks" correspond to the traditional Chinese ethical values of "compassion" and "filial piety", encapsulated in the phrase "maternal benevolence and filial devotion".

On the one hand, the gentle and virtuous female image of the Madonna naturally resonates with people, readily invoking the sanctified likenesses of figures, such as Guanyin 觀音 (Bodhisattva associated with compassion) or Mazuma 媽祖 (sea goddess in Chinese folk religion), who hold esteemed positions in the hearts of the Chinese populace. Moreover, the depiction of the Madonna with the Christ Child in her arms harmonizes with the Chinese psyche, and thus, its prevalence among the devout is both understandable and expected. The fusion of Christian elements with local religious traditions was not unique to China. In regions influenced by Confucian culture, such as during Japan's Edo Period, the Buddhist figure of compassion was introduced into their devotional life as representations of the Virgin Mary, a method referred to as "Mary in Buddhist Guise" (Ken 1983; Reis-Habito 1993, 1996) This example also illustrates the deep-rooted and widely recognized legitimacy of the image of Guanyin in the East. Thus, appropriating the image of Guanyin to depict the Virgin Mary represents both a misinterpretation and a pragmatic strategy. In the realm of traditional Chinese ethics, "maternal kindness and filial devotion" offer an ideal basis for the cultural adaptation of the Madonna's portrayal. This concept persisted into the Republican era, as evidenced by the works of the Catholic painters from that period, which continued to reflect these enduring traditional values.

In the late Ming Dynasty, Cheng Dayue's (程大約) "*Chengshi moyuan* 程氏墨苑 (*Ink Garden of the Cheng Family*)" presented a unique integration of gospel-themed prints. This inclusion was less about evangelization and more a strategic engagement with the Chinese market's demand for novelty at that time. Chen Yuandu subsequently commented on this masterpiece, recognizing its pioneering fusion of religious and cultural motifs. He observed that "*Ink Garden*" comprised six categories: heaven, earth, figures, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, with the latter two combined into one, followed by Catholicism. The arrival of Ricci and his warm reception by the scholarly community mirrored an initial openness within society. Although Western paintings from that period were not entirely uncommon, their integration into the artifacts of Chinese scholars or publication within Chinese texts was rare, rendering their inclusion in "*Ink Garden*" particularly significant (Chen 1980, p. 8; Liu 2014, pp. 166–71). In (Figure 2) the depiction of the Virgin Mary retains her original image and is not portrayed as Guanyin. The painting style features chiaroscuro and three-dimensional effects, whereas other characters from traditional Chinese lore within the same album are rendered using line drawing techniques. This suggests that there was no definitive approach to indigenization at the time; instead, there was an effort to closely imitate and replicate original styles. Nevertheless, the Catholic woodcuts in this collection displayed Western influences from copperplate engraving and were a testament to Ricci's evangelical successes, providing an educational glimpse into Catholic teachings and leading the way in illustrating Chinese Catholic texts (Mo 2002, pp. 103, 109).





**Figure 3.** (a) “Annunciation”, from “Method of Praying the Rosary”, (ca. 1619), João da Rocha, Bibliothèque nationale de France. (b) “Annunciatio”, Evangelicae Historiae Imagines (Antwerp, 1593), Jerónimo Nadal Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

The narrative in painting is an inevitable manifestation of societal trends and consensus. In particular, Christian painting did not solely depend on the subjective artistic creation of the artists; rather, artists needed to consider the gap between what their work conveyed and what the public could accept. During Matteo Ricci’s time, the indigenization approach made it reasonable and justified for Bible stories to be integrated into the daily lives of ordinary people. This approach laid a foundation of consensus for the localization methods of Catholic painting during the Republican era.

### 2.3. Celso Costantini’s Mission: The Indigenization Reforms of Catholicism in the Early 20th Century

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Opium Wars and the resulting unequal treaties opened the gates of China. This allowed missionaries to spread their faith freely under the protection of powerful imperialist ships and artillery, regaining a legal status for proselytizing. However, this process was often accompanied by a disregard for local cultures and customs, which led to resistance to the church among the Chinese people. The New Culture Movement, which scrutinized religion through a rational and scientific perspective, along with subsequent anti-Christian campaigns, erected barriers to the proliferation of Catholicism by questioning its principles and placing it at odds with rising nationalist sentiment. During the “Anti-Christian Movement” from 1919 to 1925, some Christian scholars in the Republic of China era sought to mitigate their “Western” characteristics. They sought to transform Christianity into an indigenized theology and establish genuine local churches by facilitating communication and integration between Christian and Confucian thought. This approach sought not only to contextualize Christian teachings within the Chinese cultural and philosophical framework but also to promote both Christian and Confucian values that could mutually reinforce and refine each other, thereby fostering a more deeply rooted and culturally coherent expression of Christianity in China (Xu and Li 2018). This provided theoretical and methodological references for the development of the “Indigenization of Christianity” trend.

Upon arriving in China, Celso Costantini was determined to address the religious crisis and finalize the Catholic indigenization reforms. He often deeply contemplated Chinese society and expressed numerous opinions on the indigenization of Catholic art. In the article *“Universalité de l’Art Chrétien”* he pointed out that (1) The use of Western art in China constitutes a mistake; (2) preserving the character of foreign art only perpetuates the misconception that Catholicism is an imported commodity; (3) indeed, church tradition dictates that contemporary local art should be utilized; (4) not only is the adoption of Chinese art possible, but it also adds a rich and varied palette (Costantini 1958, p. 12).

Primarily, he underscored the critical importance of methodology and strategy, believing that there was no contradiction between church imagery and dissemination and artists’ expressive techniques. “As long as the core spirit of Catholicism is maintained, adherence to the completeness of doctrine and the constraints of church regulations is unnecessary. Any external form that might cause alienation or aversion among the Chinese requires flexibility and adaptation” (Gu 2010, p. 384). An example of adaptability is his observation that traditional Chinese offering tables share features with our altars: a statue, a table, a pair of candlesticks, and an incense burner. “Simply replacing the statue while retaining the other elements should be feasible. If the Apostles could adopt the culturally rich settings and methods of Rome, why couldn’t the same be done in China?” (Liu 2014, p. 279).

Furthermore, Costantini expressed deep appreciation for traditional Chinese painting, seeing it as “a visible poem” that could convey an artist’s spiritual essence and poetic imagination beyond mere representation. His admiration for Eastern art underscored his belief in art’s potential as a medium for spiritual expression and intercultural dialogue (Costantini 1958, p. 7). Lastly, he consistently referred to the maxim of the Apostle Paul, “To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people”<sup>4</sup>. In distinguishing religious faith from its modes of expression, Costantini demonstrated a move towards the approach pioneered by Matteo Ricci. This reflects a strategy of indigenization, where the core tenets of Christianity are maintained while the forms through which they are expressed are adapted to fit local cultural contexts.

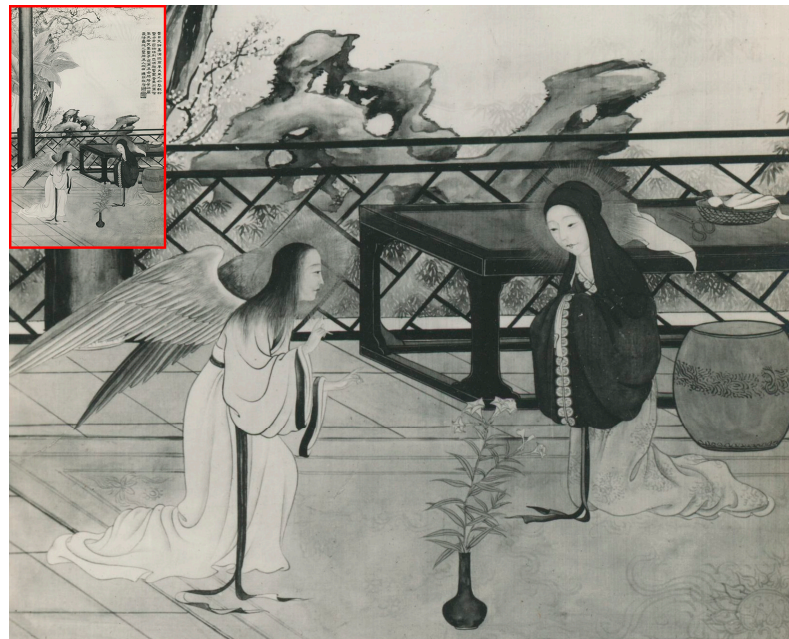
### 3. The Indigenization of Painting Style

#### 3.1. Reshaping Indigenous Chinese Sacred Figures

The Catholic art of Chen Yuandu is an illustrative expression of Celso Costantini’s missionary intentions and methods. Drawing primarily on Gospel stories, Chen concentrated on depictions of the Virgin and Child and Jesus’ miracles, deliberately choosing themes that could be harmonized with Confucian values and sensibilities and thus be more accessible to Chinese audiences. He steered clear of themes like “The Passion” and “The Mourning of Christ”, which might be less comprehensible or relatable to the Chinese. In his artwork, Chen Yuandu portrays most characters in a traditional Chinese style while meticulously retaining the Western characteristics of Jesus, such as detailed facial features and the delineation of hands and feet. This careful attention to detail reflects Chen’s dedicated effort to create a visual harmony that resonates with both Chinese and Western audiences (Zhang 2017).

As previously mentioned, the theme of the Madonna and Child is widely accepted in Chinese folk culture (drawing associations with Guanyin and Mazu) and intersects with the Confucian ethics of maternal filial piety. This fusion allowed Chen Yuandu to gain significant recognition from Western audiences, earning him the title of “Painter of the Madonna” and praise as “China’s Angelico”. Indeed, from an artistic perspective, a discernible link between these two artists is evident. European viewers, in particular, may note their avoidance of plasticity, the illusion of corporeality, and their emphasis on decorative overall harmony. There are also internal connections. In the early masterpiece *“The Annunciation”* (Figure 4) by Chen Yuandu, one discerns an Italian influence reminiscent of the spirit of Fra Angelico, but the Chinese master narrates in his own lexicon, forged from a deep religious experience (Schuller 1940, p. 19). In the painting, the even ink sat-

uration of traditional Chinese ink wash is evident, with minimal shading apart from the corridor and the artificial mountain in the background. Angelico's delicacy and serenity, on the other hand, portray the cascading skirt and realistic architectural space through contrasting light and shadow. The angel's serene demeanor suggests deep reflection on the divine message, with a subtle halo adding to the spiritual ambiance. The Italian archetype dissolves within an Eastern perspective, transforming the Madonna into a delicate Chinese maiden. The tender sensibilities of the Chinese people merge with the Christian faith, presenting a unique delicacy of Chinese silk painting and giving birth to a new genre of religious folk art creation.



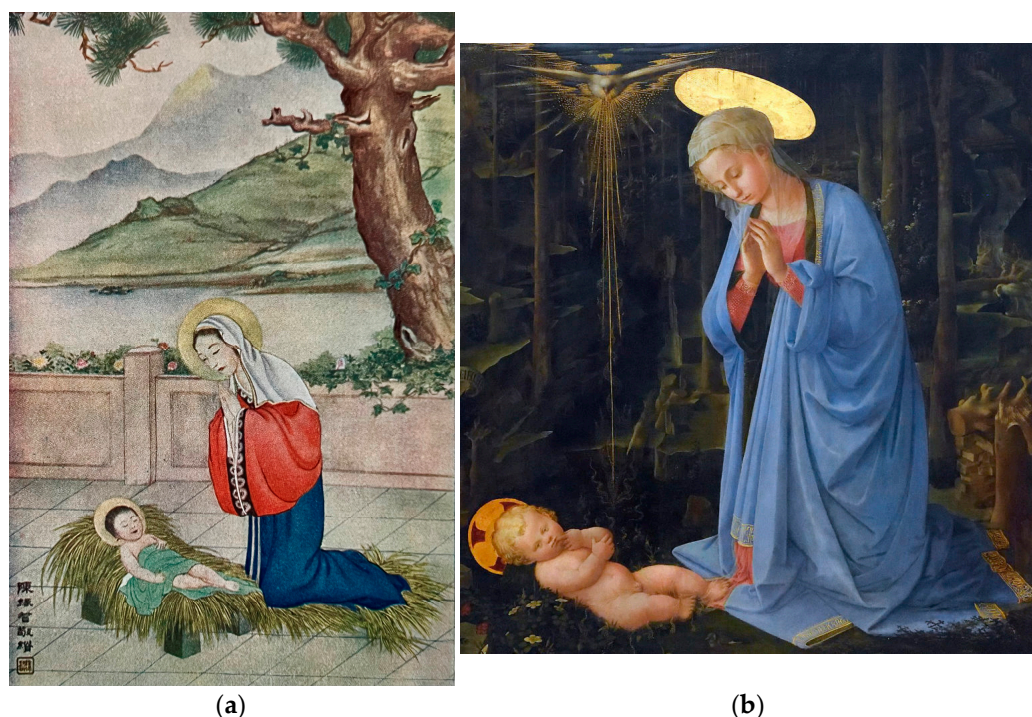
(a)



(b)

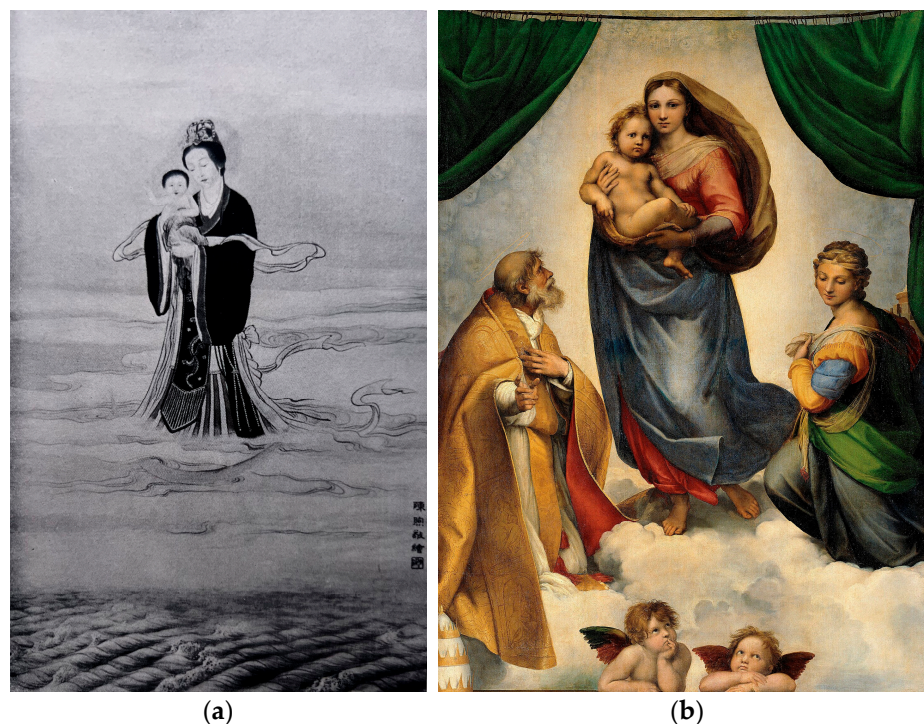
**Figure 4.** (a) Partial View of “*The Annunciation*” by Chen Yuandu, The inscription in the painting: The angel Gabriel was sent from God to Mary. He told her, “Blessed art thou among women and you shall bring forth a son who is the purest to save people in world”. Painted by Chen Xu. (b) “*The Annunciation*” by Fra Angelico, size in 154 × 194 cm, 1440–1445, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

In “*The Adoration*” (Figure 5a), the classical Western tradition of iconography is transformed through the lens of indigenous artistry. In terms of painting technique, the artwork uses fine lines for outlining and follows the principle of “*Sui Lei Fu Cai* 隨類賦彩 (assigning colors according to the nature of the subject)”, using light colors for depiction. The style is similar to the genre paintings of the late Qing Dynasty. Schuller compares this work to that of Filippo Lippi (Figure 5b), a 13th-century Italian Renaissance artist whose style is similar to that of Angelico. Here, the usually solid, heavy European altar is given new life as an airy, silken representation reminiscent of Oriental aesthetics. What were once the shadowy recesses of Italian woods now expand into the open, luminous expanses of a Chinese landscape. Chen masterfully captures the essence of Chinese painting with its poetic evocation of the natural world and uses his brush to explore the birth of Christ in this revered style. While the original might favor a palette dominated by yellow-green, with the Madonna’s face shrouded in white—a nod to Renaissance conventions—the lively reds of the women’s clothing stand out against the broad, subdued background, lending the piece an undeniable Eastern flair.<sup>5</sup> Compared to the secular joy depicted in Filippo Lippi’s paintings, there is a more sacred atmosphere akin to that of the “angelic” monk. Both artists embodied the principle, “Whoever wants to paint Christian subjects must live with Christ” (Schuller 1940, p. 14).



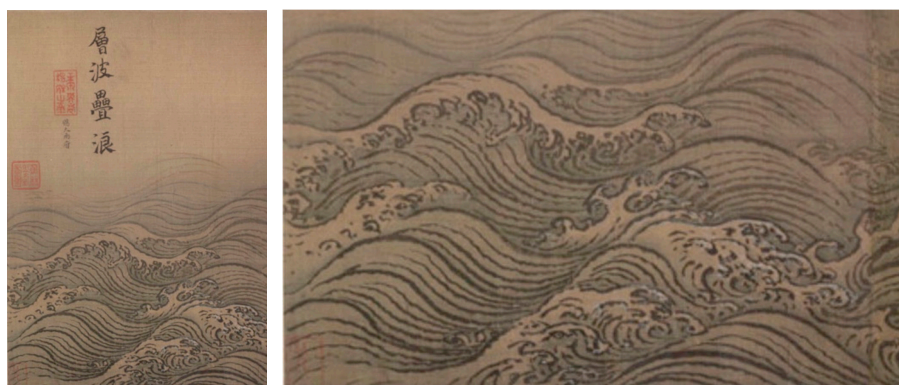
**Figure 5.** (a) “*The Adoration*” by Chen yuandu (Schuller 1940). (b) Partial View of “*Virgin Mary and Christ Child*”, by Filippo Lippi, *The Adoration in the Forest*, 1459, oil on poplar wood with gold leaf, 118.6 × 129.4 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

Similarly, on the day of his baptism, Chen expressed his deep gratitude towards Celso Costantini through a painting entitled “*Maria Stella*” (Figure 6a), which depicts the Virgin Mary cradling the infant Jesus as they descend upon the sea. The figure’s styling echoes the popular Ming and Qing depictions of “*Magu xian shou* 麻姑獻壽 (*Magu gives her birthday greetings*)” and “*Songzi Guanyin* 送子觀音 (*Child-Sending Guanyin*)”. In relation to Raphael’s “*Sistine Madonna* (Figure 6b)”, both paintings utilize a triangular composition with the Madonna and Child placed slightly above the center. Their postures and how the Madonna holds the child are remarkably similar. When scaled to the same size and overlaid, the images align almost in both proportion and placement.



**Figure 6.** (a) “*Maria Stella*” by Chen Yuandu (Schuller 1940). (b) “*Madonna Sixtina*” by Raffaello Santi, Gemäldegalerie Alter Meister, Dresden, 1513–1514, Oil on canvas.

Additionally, the treatment of the folds in the garments inherits the style of figures from Buddhist and Daoist traditions as depicted by Wu Daozi (吳道子, circa 685–758), a technique known as “*Wu Dai Dang Feng* 吳帶當風”. This term describes a brushwork style that is smooth and fluid, where the depicted figures’ sashes appear as if fluttering in the wind, conveying a sense of dynamic movement as though blown by a breeze. The texture of the waves seems to recall the Song Dynasty artist Ma Yuan’s (馬遠, 1140–1125) “*Water Scroll*” (Figure 7), which depicts the Virgin aloft in the endless ocean, surrounded by dense clouds and rolling waves—a vision splendidly encapsulated on a silk scroll. The viewer is immersed in a tableau that resonates with traditional Chinese art, steeped in a profound devotion that is emblematic of a faithful Christian.



**Figure 7.** Part of “*Water Scroll*” by Ma Yuan, Southern Song Dynasty of China. Courtesy of the Palace Museum Collection.

Lu Hongnian’s (陸鴻年) and Chen Yuandu’s contributions to the indigenization of Catholic art evoke a “heaven–human” harmony, showcasing varied interpretations of the Madonna. As noted by (Shen 2019), Chen accentuates the “heavenly Madonna”, imbuing his works with gravity and sanctity, while Lu captures the “earthly mother”, grounding

the Madonna in the natural and quotidian realm. Often set against pastoral scenes, the Madonna is dressed in the simple garb of rural women, living an everyday life with the Holy Child. These scenes use “secular content” to subtly refer to the Incarnation of the Divine Word, blending the sacred and the mundane.

### 3.2. The Use of Visual Symbols in Chinese Literati Painting

In the realm of Catholic iconography, the use of visual symbols demonstrates a strong adherence to the principles of indigenization. Artists such as Xu Jihua (徐濟華) have masterfully depicted the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ with distinctly Chinese features. These figures are often dressed in traditional Han Chinese attire, utilizing visual motifs like robes, sashes, and flowing ribbons to forge a recognizably Chinese persona within the narratives of Catholic iconography. The settings of these artworks frequently feature elements of traditional Chinese domestic or outdoor environments—from furniture, folding screens, and lanterns within interiors to pavilions, courtyards, and rockeries outside, often depicted with individuals seated on rattan chairs and backgrounds adorned with scenes like a sunrise over the sea—all of which anchor the narratives in the quotidian landscapes of Chinese folk life (Wang and Wang 2019). Furthermore, these paintings continue the aesthetic of traditional Chinese literati painting, using symbolic elements such as pines, bamboo, and peonies and focusing on the expression of ambiance. In “*The Madonna in the Bamboo Grove*”, Figure 8, the bamboo is an ancient symbol of resilience in Chinese culture. “Here, nature is not an ornamental form; as a living being, it is a symbol of the human spirit. Since time immemorial, bamboo has been a symbol of strength and stability due to its natural properties: the wind breaks leaves and branches, but the bamboo withstands the force of the elements with the strength of its flexible trunk. Why not use this ancient Chinese symbol as a basis for Christian ideas?” (Schuller 1940, p. 29).



**Figure 8.** *The Madonna in the Bamboo Grove* by Chen Yuandu, 1928.

Xu Jihua’s painting, known for its understated decorative quality and “national language”, demonstrates his capacity for simplicity and solemn expression. This “*The Last Supper*” (Figure 9), with its literary aura and the evocative use of a traditional Chinese hall setting, touches the heart by combining the sacred Christian narrative with the serene

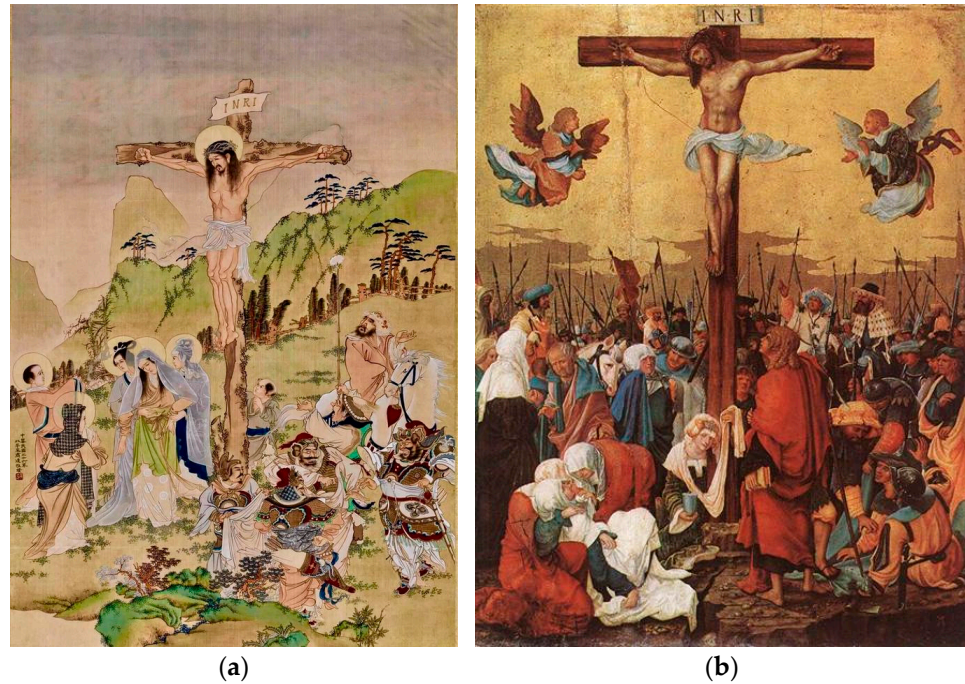
beauty of Chinese landscape painting. When Jesus breaks the bread and distributes it among his disciples, the expansive natural vista that floods through the narrow high windows evokes the ambiance of a traditional Chinese hall, with the distant bamboo grove casting subtle shadows, thereby cultivating a literati aura. The use of angels and the distinctive color palette further accentuate the solemnity and unity of the scene, imbuing it with a tension that resonates with the foreboding of a storm (Schuller 1940, p. 28).



**Figure 9.** “The Last Supper” by Xu Jihua (Schuller 1940).

In 1937, Wang Suda (王肅達) created “Jesus on the Cross” (Figure 10). He uses the brushwork techniques of traditional blue-green landscape painting to delineate space while capturing figures in the style of Buddhist and Taoist art. The lines are exquisitely fine, with neat and refined strokes, and the details are abundant. In the lower right corner, the soldier is vividly rendered as a Heavenly King warrior, an iconic figure commonly seen in traditional Chinese religious paintings. It should be noted that the date “The 26th Year of the Republic of China” is deliberately inscribed on the painting. This year marked the beginning of the Japanese invasion and the national crisis for China. This work depicts the religious doctrine of the Passion of Christ and also expresses an unspoken national sentiment. It is a plea for the Savior to descend once more and for the beleaguered Chinese nation to find salvation. Wang Suda includes himself among the saints who pay homage to the suffering Jesus, expressing a fervent prayer and intense desire. Compared to “Christ on the Cross” by Albrecht Altdorfer, which employs realistic painting techniques and exudes a serene and grandiose atmosphere, it seems to lack the sense of “unease” present in Wang’s works. In another work from the same year, the artist seems to have drawn inspiration from Katsushika Hokusai’s famous work from the Edo period of Japan, “The Great Wave off Kanagawa,” as seen in “Jesus Calms the Storm” (Figure 11). The painting uses the Gospel narrative of Jesus’ miracle as the motif to convey the roar of the sea waves, the

cries of the desperate, and the commanding presence of the Lord at the moment of life and death.<sup>6</sup> The meaning of the painting lies not in its outward lines and forms but rather in the deeper meanings they conceal, which speak volumes to the viewer. Here, Wang Suda employs a subtle, intricate interplay of visual and textual rhetoric to navigate his imagery from the divine to the national. He uses the ukiyo-e symbols of the invading nation as an allegory to express a prayer for the withdrawal of foreign invaders and the restoration of peace to the homeland (Zhang 2017).



**Figure 10.** (a) “Jesus on the Cross” by Wang Suda, 1937. (b) “Christ on the Cross” by Albrecht Altdorfer, 1520, Budapest Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, Hungary.



**Figure 11.** “Jesus Calms the Storm” by Wang Suda, 1937.

### 3.3. Maintaining and Integrating Traditional Chinese Painting Techniques

The emerging Catholic School of Painting skillfully blends the styles of traditional Chinese Buddhist and Taoist painting, court portraiture, and folk genre painting. The depiction of lines resonates with the “baimiao, 白描 (line drawing)” techniques used in figure drawing by masters such as Wu Daozi and Li Gonglin (李公麟, 1049–1106). Meanwhile, artists tend to prefer the precision of the “gongbi, 工筆 (elaborate-style)” method over the freer “xieyi, 写意 (freehand brush)” style, seeking for realism to maintain a certain objectivity in their depictions of religious themes. The artists chose raw silk as their primary painting medium, using fine color application techniques. Positioned between unprocessed and processed Xuan paper in water absorption, raw silk supports both narrative and expressive functions in art. This medium facilitates a blend of depth and contrast, subtly integrating Western painting principles with traditional Chinese techniques in composition and brushwork. For example, in female portraits, ancient silk-filament and iron-wire methods outline features and attire, followed by layered dyeing to enhance the depiction of skin, hair, and clothing.

The legacy of Western painting is evident in Chen Yuandu’s early works, a testament to the lasting influence of masters such as Giuseppe Castiglione (郎世寧, 1688–1766) and Zeng Jing (曾鯨, 1564–1647). Giuseppe Castiglione was an Italian Jesuit brother and missionary in China, where he served as an artist at the imperial court of three Qing emperors—the Kangxi (康熙, 1654–1722), Yongzheng (雍正, 1678–1735) and Qianlong (乾隆, 1711–1799) emperors. He painted in a style that is a fusion of European and Chinese traditions. Due to Castiglione’s work, the influence of Western art on Qing court paintings is particularly evident in the light, shade, and perspective, as well as the priority given to recording contemporary events.

However, this tradition does not seem to have been entirely introduced by Castiglione; as early as the Ming Dynasty, Zeng Jing’s paintings already showed a consideration of light and shadow in portraiture. Zeng Jing was known for his unique style that blended traditional Chinese powder coloring with Western techniques, emphasizing detailed shading and three-dimensionality. His vivid, lifelike portraits, especially focused on the eyes, earned him fame and led to the establishment of the Bochen (波臣) School. The fusion of these traditions is particularly evident in the nuanced use of ink to balance light and shade, especially in facial expressions against the bright backgrounds typical of Chinese scenes.

Chen Yuandu uses delicate and smooth lines, rather than the volumetric blocks typically used in Western art, to portray the emotional and sentimental facets of the characters. The compositions often adopt a panoramic or scattered layout, emphasizing the strategic use of negative space to give the works a poetic essence. Simple outlines convey a remarkable understanding of religious nuance and demonstrate mastery over the Chinese form. As Chen Yuandu himself eloquently put it in a lecture, the value of Chinese painters does not lie in the mere replication of forms but in the representation of the philosophies they embody. Traditional Chinese painting emphasizes spiritual expression and capturing the essence of a subject rather than its detailed physical form. The visual language of Chinese painting is, therefore, characterized by brush strokes that convey movement and emotion, minimalist yet expressive compositions, and the inclusion of poetic inscriptions, all of which work together to convey deeper meanings beyond mere decoration. Moreover, the meticulous integration of inscriptions and seals achieves a balance of solidity and void, ensuring coherence throughout the composition.

In Chen Yuandu’s “*Jesus and the Children*” (Figure 12), the method of handling light and shadow on the faces of the figures is revealed through continuous gradations of ink against the bright background of China, revealing the structure of the faces. The emotions and sentiments of the figures are conveyed through fine, smooth lines (rather than the volume of solid areas typically used in Western painting), using a layout common in Chinese painting that is “Shu ke zouma, mi bu toufeng 疏可走馬,密不透風 (sparse enough for horses to gallop through, yet dense enough to block the wind)”, which means that the marvel of calligraphy lies in the variations of the brushwork’s density and sparsity. Spar-

sity evokes the image of loftiness and distance, while density resembles the finely textured appearance.<sup>7</sup> Natural plants are rendered with delicate, raindrop-like brushstrokes, while attention is also paid to the use of negative space in the composition. A few bamboo trees, rendered with an indifferent gradation in the background, enhance the sense of space and fill the work with poetry. These simple contours convey a unique understanding of religious content as well as a mastery of Chinese painting.



**Figure 12.** “Jesus and the Children” by Chen Yuandu (Schuller 1940).

Lu Hongnian pursues a subtle visual balance in the structure of his paintings, as seen in his series themed “*The Flight into Egypt*” (Figure 13), which completely transposes the geographical settings and character images of the Gospel story into those of Chinese history and traditional Confucian figures. His works represent a clear development toward a truly indigenous form of Christian art. In the storm of “*The Flight into Egypt*”, menacing shadows can be seen under the trees, symbolizing King Herod’s pursuit to kill the child. Lu Hongnian used bold, heavy ink strokes to convey an atmosphere of storm and crisis, breaking away from traditional techniques to express his subjective feelings. This approach was highly unusual among Catholic painters of his time. The style of his representation bears similarities to early 20th-century Western expressionism and exhibits a strong sense of stylization and modernity. We understand the hurried footsteps of the refugees, the worried gaze of St. Joseph, and the anxious gesture of the mother holding the child under her cloak. The tension of the flight is more intense than the turbulent natural landscape. These paintings go beyond simple biblical narrative; they intend to convey deep internal feelings. Lu’s works, distinct from the magnificence of Chen’s or the inherent dynamism of Wang, resonate with the soul of a lyric poet. His poetic paintings leave ample space for the audience’s imagination, allowing them to infuse the tranquil life of the artwork with their own rich inner feelings.



**Figure 13.** “*The Flight into Egypt*” by Lu Hongnian, 1935 (Bornemann 1950).

#### 4. Challenges of the Fu Jen Painting School: Questioning and Acceptance

Despite the acclaim of Costantini and Western audiences and the high praise of Pope Pius XI, who said that the works of the Fu Jen Painting School had found the “true spirit of Catholicism” in Chinese religious art, the School made significant progress and rejected the imported Western style. However, the reception of these works within China was mixed. The works of the Fu Jen Painting School elicited two very different reactions: acclaim from foreign viewers contrasted with indifference or even rejection from domestic audiences (Shen 2020). Meanwhile, the lack of Chinese materials about this campaign also illustrates the problem. Chen Yuandu’s notes recorded the reactions of the domestic audience: “On the second day of the exhibition, visitors came in a steady stream. Many people were curious, and many took pictures. I felt discouraged and realized that our paintings were not interesting to people. At least, that was our perspective. Some people pointed out our mistakes, while many others praised and encouraged us lavishly. However, I clearly felt that many people were harshly criticizing us behind our backs... Among the observers, many just came to look. Others looked at the paintings as oddities, casually examining them without being touched or influenced by them. They did not understand these paintings or the art they embodied” (Chen 1936). Chen Yuandu attributed this disparity to a lack of artistic appreciation on the part of domestic believers. Although partially true, this reason did not address the core issue. The root cause of the difference between domestic and international perceptions lies in the difference between artists’ and audiences’ understanding of “indigenization”.

##### 4.1. Understanding Indigenization in a Chinese Society in Transition

Indigenization is a complex and lengthy process, especially in a transitional society like China. From the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China—a period spanning a century—Chinese society underwent dramatic changes from a feudal to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society. Scholar Chu Xiaobai notes that the May Fourth Movement, a Chinese

cultural and anti-imperialist political movement sparked by student protests in Beijing on 4 May 1919, led many Chinese intellectuals to lose faith in their traditional social, political, and cultural systems and to embrace the West as a symbol of modernity and progress (Chu 2024). Against this backdrop, the Chinese art world split into two factions. One faction fully embraced Western realism and sought objective and lifelike experiences. Particularly after the Renaissance, the realistic art style was favored by Chinese intellectuals, and European-style religious art became the mainstream form of Chinese Christian art. For example, the Tushanwan Painting Studio (土山灣畫館), established in Shanghai in 1872, was the earliest and most systematic institution in the city to engage in Western painting education, and it served as a representative of the Haipai (海派, Shanghai style) Christian art. In the Tushanwan *“Our Lady of China”* (Figure 14), the Virgin Mary is dressed in the attire of Empress Dowager Cixi (慈禧), prevalent at that time in China, but retains the visage of the Virgin Mary with three-dimensional features and intricate decorations, forming an artistic style distinct from the Fu Jen School. Another faction, led by Chen Shi-zeng (陳師曾, 1876–1923) and Jin Cheng (mentor of Chen Yuandu), upheld the traditions of Chinese literati painting and valued poetic, stylized, and spiritual expression. Within the wider context of the art world, Chen Yuandu, who adheres to the principle of “meticulously studying ancient methods and emulating nature”, stands as a “conservative”, going against the prevailing trends.



**Figure 14.** Partial View of *“Our Lady of China”*, Shanghai Tushanwan, 1924, Oil on Canvas, Vatican Museums.

However, Costantini, a Western missionary, perceived “indigenization” as rooted in the traditions of Ming and Qing Dynasty Chinese painting. This provided a turning point for Chen Yuandu, who was in a difficult position. Chen Yuandu once said, “Through Chinese Christian art, I can fully create a way for Europeans to enter into Chinese art: this promotion of Chinese culture is indeed praiseworthy”. On the other hand, “If I introduce the teachings of our Holy Church entirely in the Chinese way, I can bring the Chinese people before God through this familiar form” (Bornemann 1950, pp. 10, 11). Although the imitation of ancient styles was considered “outdated”, the introduction of Western Christian themes marked an evolution in Chinese society. This contradiction between questioning and acceptance was reflected throughout society during the Republican era, as nationalist sentiments intertwined with foreign colonial influences, causing society to oscillate between admiration and resistance to foreign goods.

#### 4.2. National Crisis and Artistic Response

With the outbreak of the Japanese invasion in 1931, Chinese social trends shifted to a unified front, nationalism intensified, and national salvation became a paramount concern. During this period, Chen Yuandu and Wang Suda boldly used the previously avoided themes of the Passion of Christ. Works such as *“Jesus on the Cross”* (Figure 10) and *“Jesus Calms the Storm”* (Figure 11) aptly combined the notion of Christ as Savior with national calamity, reflecting the artists’ national duty and further promoting public acceptance of Catholicism. In 1933, in his articles *“Christianity and Art”* and *“National Art”*, Chen explained the reasons for using indigenized artistic forms to depict Catholic themes, drawing parallels with the historical adaptation of Buddhist art to underscore the importance of indigenizing Catholic imagery. In the midst of heightened nationalist sentiment, Chen Yuandu emphasized in *“Fu Jen Art Monthly”* the artist’s duty to diligently study ancient methods, lead society, and enlighten national art. However, embedded within this was another layer of purpose: through the use of Chinese-style Catholic painting, Chen aimed to enhance Western understanding of Chinese art and incorporate it into the narrative of global art history (Chen 1933)—a mission deeply rooted in his role as an artist.

Chen Yuandu, possessing dual identities as both a painter and a believer, often experiences a conflictual tension between his strategies for national art identity and local evangelization. This tension influences his creation of Catholic art, as he must consider satisfying the visual resonance and expectations of Chinese viewers while avoiding overly nationalist interpretations that could provoke dissatisfaction and criticism from conservative elements within the Church.

#### 5. Conclusions

Since the beginning of the spread of Christianity in China, it has undergone a dynamic process of conflict and integration with Chinese culture. In particular, since Matteo Ricci’s arrival in Macau in 1582 with sacred images, oil painting began a dialogue between Western and Chinese artistic practices through the intervention of Christian art. Throughout this process, both Christianity itself and Western painting have undergone a complex and prolonged evolution in their methods of indigenization. Christian art, which serves as an ideal synthesis of the two, reveals many insights in its process of indigenization.

1. The indigenization of religious art is not an overnight reform; it first requires a transformation of religious concepts. Matteo Ricci adopted a strategy of “embracing Confucianism and avoiding Buddhism”, recognizing the similarities between Confucian doctrines and Christianity. His adoption of Confucian attire, a seemingly superficial change, had a profound impact on the subsequent indigenization methods of the Catholic school of painting. Giulio Aleni integrated the Confucian method of spiritual cultivation into Christian rituals, forming a framework of “repaying the roots” and “giving thanks” and using it as a way to cultivate everyday virtues. The concept of filial piety and the localized figure of Guanyin provided an ideal foundation for the cultural adaptation of the Madonna image, a concept that remained prevalent during the Republican era, with the works of Catholic painters continuing to reflect these enduring traditional values.
2. From woodblock prints such as *“Ink Garden of the Cheng Family”* and *“Method of Praying the Rosary”*, it is clear that the Catholic art of the Ming and Qing dynasties mainly imitated, translated, or transferred the Catholic painting style of the Western Renaissance. The artisans or artists of the time did not develop an effective method of indigenization. Celso Costantini, recognizing the repeated failures of Christian indigenization, proposed the adoption of traditional Chinese art forms with an inclusive attitude. His deep appreciation and understanding of Chinese art coincided with Chen Yuandu’s in-depth study of traditional painting techniques. In the complex environment after the May Fourth Movement, the Fu Jen School of painting, represented by Chen Yuandu, developed a unique style of indigenization. Its effective methods included transforming images of saints, incorporating concepts of Confucian dress

from the Ricci era, symbols of literati painting revered by Chinese intellectuals and the public, traditional moral concepts, and the gentleness and compassion of the Eastern maternal archetype. During the Republican era, Catholicism achieved an obvious indigenization, placing religious narratives entirely within the natural and social environment of China, creating a new school of Catholic art within the traditional Chinese painting framework, and presenting a naturally grown local artistic style.

3. The Catholic indigenization reform in China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was different from previous attempts. In a rapidly changing social environment, the Chinese people embraced the West while resisting imperialist hegemony. The different domestic and international assessments posed challenges to the Fu Jen School of Painting and also reflected the limitations of painting as a means of religious dissemination. As both a believer and an artist, Chen Yuandu faced scrutiny from both Chinese and foreign Christian communities, as well as criticism from his own art community. In such a dilemma, artists found their own ways to combine traditional painting, Christianity, and national salvation in times of national crisis, attempting to bridge the gap between nationalist sentiments and the strong cultural influx from the West.

The painting practices of the Fu Jen School undoubtedly represent a positive attempt at Christian indigenization, as well as an effective means of disseminating traditional Chinese painting internationally. However, the indigenization of Christianity in China is far from complete. As a significant case, the artistic practices of the Fu Jen School will continue to provide valuable experience for the integration of contemporary multiculturalism.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Vincent Lebbe, Father Frédéric-Vincent Lebbe (1877–1940) was a Roman Catholic missionary to China whose advocacy led Pope Pius XI to appoint the first native Chinese bishops.
- <sup>2</sup> Antoine Cotta, an Egyptian-born Austrian trained in France, that all charitable and social works were apostolic, were intended to vivify the Christian spirit in the public and were no more political than other examples of the same work in Europe. See Vincent Lebbe, *“Letter to Antoine Cotta (19.7.1916)”*, in *Lettres du Père Lebbe*, ed. Albert Sohier and Goffart Paul (Lebbe 1960), p. 109.
- <sup>3</sup> In 1994, the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church signed the *“Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church”*, which resolved the mutual suspicions between the two denominations. Nestorianism was confirmed as the pioneer of Christian faith introduced into China, marking the beginning of Catholic art in China.
- <sup>4</sup> To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. *“—1 Corinthians 9:22, New International Version (NIV)”*.
- <sup>5</sup> The Virgin Mary is depicted with a white veil over her head, a representation grounded in the biblical passage from 1 Corinthians 11: 5–6, which states, *“But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered”* (Studium Biblicum Version). In Chinese culture, influenced by Confucianism, there is a belief that one’s body and hair are inherited from one’s parents and must be protected. Hence, it is a common practice among men to wrap their hair with a cloth. Although this practice is more commonly associated with men, draping a white veil over the head of a Chinese-style Madonna does not conflict with the cultural concept of protecting one’s body and hair.
- <sup>6</sup> Matthew 8: 23–27: 8: 23 And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. 8:24 And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. 8:25 And they went and woke him, saying, *“Save us, Lord; we are perishing.”* 8:26 And he said to them, *“Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?”* Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. 8:27 And the men marveled, saying, *“What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?”*

- 7 This statement originates from the famous Song Dynasty calligrapher and theorist Deng Shiru's treatise on calligraphy, "On the Density and Sparsity in Calligraphy." The full sentence reads: "In the sparse areas, a horse can gallop through; in the dense areas, not even the wind can pass through." It elaborates on the variations in density and the technique of brushwork in calligraphy. This discussion appears on the fourth page of "On the Density and Sparsity in Calligraphy", with the original text stating: "The marvel of calligraphy lies in the variations of the brushwork's density and sparsity. Sparsity evokes the image of loftiness and distance, while density resembles the finely textured appearance. Where it is sparse, a horse can gallop through; where it is dense, not even wind can pass through. Seeming sparse yet dense, the transition between density and sparsity offers endless variations, epitomizing the exquisite brilliance of calligraphy."

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