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## Comparing Western Perspectives and Eastern Axonometries in Jesuit Missions in China between 16th and 18th Century

At the end of the 16th century, the Renaissance western perspective at the height of its technical conventionality arrived in China through the Jesuit missions, as the founding tool of Christian iconography. In addition to the *reducciones* in Latin America, from 1582 to 1773, the Jesuits engaged in the difficult task of evangelizing China. Among these, Alessandro Valignano was the first who theorized a model of acculturation based on Christian principles that would adapt to the culture of the civilizations that had to be converted, and he released his integration guidelines in Asia with his *Cerimoniale per i Missionari del Giappone* (1581). Considered the creators of sinology, the Jesuit missionaries gave life to a fruitful cultural exchange, bringing Chinese culture closer to the knowledge of Europe (and vice versa), introducing to Far East different western sciences and techniques: together with lenses, hydraulic machines and astronomical theories, painting had a primary role in the precise

Jesuit strategy. However, while the Chinese accepted European astronomy for practical reasons as a better method of ordering the rites that related heaven, emperor and his subjects, the same did not happen with the figurative arts, especially with painting and perspective representation. This contribution focuses on some Jesuit fathers, such as Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), Giulio Aleni (1582-1649) and Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), engaged in the complex work of religious and scientific dissemination in China, where representation played a singular role. The local figuration conquered the colonizers themselves who, due to the failure of the western perspective, adopted the Chinese way of drawing. In fact, Christian scenes were illustrated according to the graphic rules of the cavalier axonometry, as can be seen from the tables of the *Method of the rosary (Song nian zhu gui cheng)* by João da Rocha (c. 1620).

Keywords:  
Axonometry; Perspective; Representation; Jesuit missions; Chinese landscape painting.

## DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE CHINESE PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION

To understand the difficulties faced by Jesuit missionaries engaged in the transmission of the evangelical language and in an attempt to demonstrate the supremacy of western culture – not only in the scientific field, but also in the graphic representation – it is necessary to introduce some basic aspects of the Chinese pictorial tradition.

As we know, the Jesuit fathers were among the main actors and spreaders of the evangelical creed and in the commitment of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The use of images for the Society of Jesus was the main aid for teaching and praying, as it was the most effective tool for conquering the faithful by exploiting the amazement generated by the use of daring perspectives – often illusionistic one – with strong chiaroscuro effects.

Even in China, painting was an art regulated by precise graphic procedures, consolidated in the method of parallel oblique projections and handed down during the history of the Chinese people. The reality depicted was deprived of any primacy of the gaze and unauthorized by depths marked by convergences that required the existence of own projection centers on which to weave the narrative plot of perspective. As described in the *Garden Manual as large as a mustard seed* (*Jieziyuan Huazhuan*) illustrated by the Wang brothers in 1679, Chinese painting favored the representation of landscape scenes which, in turn, were composed of natural elements that followed clear and precise graphic-compositional rules (fig. 1).

The millennial tradition of Chinese painting lived the presence of multiple imperial dynasties that remained in power with variable duration: in these historical phases, the Chinese artists consolidated and deepened specific themes, techniques and meanings. From its origins, the didactic and ethical functions of painting were central, seen as a means of educating and developing values that regulate human relationships.

In China, the methods and techniques of representation were very different from the western ones. The act of painting itself and the tools



Fig. 1 - Wang Gai (1645–1710) during Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Leaf from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (*Jieziyuan huazhuan*) probably 1878 edition. Woodblock print; ink and color on paper, 24.4 x 30 cm.

used were full of spiritual meanings: in fact, there were many forms in which the functional unity and complementarity of the principles of Yin and Yang could be manifested.

The use of ink on paper is another determining factor in the originality of Chinese calligraphic painting. The typically European oil painting al-

lowed second thoughts, corrections and additions. This was not conceived in Chinese painting: the forms to be transferred to the sheet had to be already clear and complete in the artist's mind. The high concentration required had to free heart and mind from any type of emotion that could affect the objectivity of the representation.

The painting was supposed to deal mainly with ten themes, cataloged in 1120: Taoists and Buddhists, human affairs, architecture, peoples, fish and dragons, landscapes, animals, flowers and birds, bamboo, vegetables and fruits. The catalog can be further summarized in four basic macro-themes: *Shan shui* (mountains and waters, representation of landscapes), *renwu* (characters, human figures in general), *huaniao* (flowers and birds, small animal and plant subjects that concerned living nature), *lingmao* (birds and animals).

The differences between Chinese and Western painting were not limited to themes, materials, techniques and ways of setting up the drawings: other characteristics concerned the different cultural backgrounds and graphic principles that determined the perception of the artwork.

The absence of defined drawings and perspective contrasted the presence of emptiness as the protagonist of the illustrations. The void was a disturbing element in the perceptive and aesthetic conception of the western observer, who favored *horror vacui*. In China, instead, the presence of emptiness played an important role in painting and its meaning was very close to Taoism. It was not associated with “nothing”, but was identified as the condition by which all possible phenomena and events could come to life, according to the complementarity of the elements. The white background in the representation of *Shan Shui* landscapes contains not only forms and signs, but rather acts as a generator. In fact, one of the purposes of Chinese painting was to represent life rather than the form of reality.

It is evident that the oriental culture considered superfluous and unsuitable the drawing technique aimed at producing defined and outlined contours. Hence the need to give up the precision of the contours in a drawing, to the advantage of representations that seem unfinished but that actually want to express the emptiness and vital energy *qi*.

While in Europe the linear perspective was improving after the 15th century as a graphic method indicated for make likely the three-dimensionality, the use of “Chinese perspective” [*dengjiao toushi* which means “equal-angle see-through”]



Fig. 2 - *Qingming Shanghe Tu (Along the River during the Qingming Festival)*, the 12th-century original by the Song dynasty painter Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145). Handscroll, ink and color on silk, 25.5 cm × 525 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Fig. 3 - 12th century *Along the River during Qingming Festival* by Zhang Zeduan. Detail of the handscroll from a colourful 18th Century remake.



was quite particular and completely different [1]. This way of representing volume and depth finds its reasons in parchment painting. These were paintings about 40 centimeters high which developed over several meters in length, the reading of which took place by unrolling the sheet from right to left on a table, in segments about 60 centimeters wide (figs. 2-3). These very long paintings constituted a narrative art form that developed almost dynamically over time, unlike what happened for the contemporary European artworks, which showed a single scene – almost like a single frame – rather than a sequence. These long horizontal paintings allow us to understand the reasons why Chinese painters did not need to define explicit vanishing points to create this kind of “panoramic” images, whose scenes were observed from time to time by unfolding the painted scroll; each scene had to be perceived in its individuality, according to the principles of



Fig. 4 - *Peach Festival of the Queen Mother of the West*, (early 17th century), by an anonymous painter of the Ming dynasty. Detail of the handscroll (56.6 x 638.1 cm), ink and color on silk. Freer Gallery of Art in the Smithsonian of Washington D.C.

parallel figuration. For the same reasons, the Chinese handscrolls were devoid of explicit light sources and projected shadows. The oblique projection [2] was symbolically rooted in Chinese thought: the definition of a single point of view, at the basis of any perspective projection, also contradicted the Taoist conception, which did not place man as a measure of all things but as a vehicle by which nature can express itself. Chinese painters solved the problem of handscroll painting by drawing parallel lines along the z-axis. The rays remained strictly parallel, unaffected by optical distortion. The dimensions and geometry of all man-made objects

remained constant, regardless of the observer's position (figs. 2-4). In the Chinese *Shan Shui* paintings, the so-called "angle of totality" generated the depth of the landscape, according to the representation from above in cavalier oblique axonometry, devoid of convergences and vanishing points on which to build a geometric grid to canalize all the elements of the painting. The aerial or atmospheric perspective – similar to that much studied and applied by Leonardo da Vinci – gave a sense of depth and was governed by the "Rule of the three sections" or "three distances" ["elevated" *Kao Yuan*, "deep" *Shen Yuan*, "flat" *P'ing Yuan*] codified by Guo Xi in the 10th

century during the Song dynasty era (960-1279 AD). The method involved the use of three depths that allowed the represented landscape to be seen as if it had three-horizons. The high distance *Kao Yuan* represented the landscape seen from below. The most widely used was the deep distance *Shen Yuan*, in which the landscape was seen from above: the main horizon was placed below the scene and the observer's sight is raised following the demotion of the mountain chains arranged on parallel overlapping planes. The form of representation closest to the frontal perspective was the flat distance *P'ing Yuan*. The landscape was set in front of about half the distance between the upper and lower limits of the field of view. The method made it possible to look at the representation both from near and far: placed just below the middle of the painting, the horizon induced the gaze to range from the first floor to infinity. This particular form of representation, in addition to giving a lot of dynamism to the pictorial composition, allowed the observer to move within the composition without forcing to focus on a single vanishing point and order all the elements painted within a rigid grid of straight lines.

The renunciation of one-point perspective involved neither confusion nor flatness: the objects had dimensions proportionate to the planes receding into the space, guaranteeing the sense of depth.

The use of colors was an element of distraction from the perception of the subtle dynamics of *qi* evoked by the painting. The black was the main pigment of the entire calligraphic pictorial tradition, but the Chinese painters used also different colors, limited to shades of green, blue, reddish brown.

After highlighting the role of emptiness and the absence of one-point perspective, there were further interesting differences between traditional Chinese and Western painting. In fact, the representations of indoor environments were very rare. If present, the rooms were surrounded by nature and had windows open onto gardens and parks. Sometimes, where the doors and windows were absent in the representation, the Chinese artists created "paintings in the painting", simulating the presence of *Shan Shui* landscapes in the

rooms (fig. 5). It is evident that nature in its multiple forms was the most represented subject, at the expense of the human form [3].

### JESUIT MISSIONS IN CHINA

After the foundation of the Company of Jesus by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in 1539, Francesco Saverio, one of its most talented members, left for the east traveling through the lands of India, South-east Asia, Japan, towards the Chinese empire. Although he never reached mainland China, the first Catholic diocese was established in Macau in 1575. Since then, the city on Chinese south coast became, as well as a vital Portuguese commercial colony, the entrance point of Catholic Christianity into China and the place from which the Jesuit mission took shape.

Initially, the Jesuits sent to Christianize the Chinese population took advantage of the disrupted local culture and the need of the people to convert to comply with European customs for trade. However, this approach did not get many converts, and it did not even allow missionaries to have access to the Chinese hinterland and its people.

In 1574, the situation changed when Alessandro Valignano named "Visitor to the mission of the Jesuit Order in the Far East", established a series of precepts for missionaries. Arriving in Macau in 1578, he immediately required that the Jesuits, in order to exercise their mission, had to learn the Chinese language and adapt to local culture where possible. The first to apply this theory of cultural approach was the Italian Michele Ruggeri who, arrived in Macau in 1580, learned the Chinese language, spent time in Canton and earned the esteem of the most cultured classes.

Among the first Jesuit missionaries in China, the figure of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) is certainly the most distinctive (fig. 6). He also arrived in Macau in 1582; he wanted to perfect the conversion approach proposed by Valignano. He understood that in a consolidated empire like the Chinese one, radicalized by the presence of the most aristocratic dynasties and classes, the main recipients of the conversion could not therefore be



Fig. 5 - *Appreciating Antiquities in the Bamboo Garden* by Qiu Ying (ca. 1494-1552), Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Album leaf, ink and colour on silk, 33.8 x 41.4 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

the members of the most humble classes, but the exponents of the cultured Chinese élite [4]. The approach therefore had to be different from that adopted in the contemporary Jesuit *reducciones* for indigenous people in South America.

Despite his limited proselytizing successes, which then resulted in the "question of the Rites" [5], Ricci was the first to initiate a significant contact with the Chinese institutional, social and political world of the Modern era and to set the translation of Christianity to interior of Chinese culture.

Ricci had also the credit of having provided Europe with a comprehensive description of China in his notes and writings reworked and subsequently published in 1615 by Nicolas Trigault in the *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Jesu*. Translated into different languages in the West, the treatise dealt with various issues concerning China: from the historical and geographical overview, to the description of the

Fig. 6 - Adam Schall and Matteo Ricci displaying a map of China below SS Francis Xavier and Ignatius Loyola venerating an IHS representing Jesus Christ surrounded by angels. Frontispiece for Athanasius Kircher's *China Illustrata*, Amsterdam 1667.



productive activities and the arts.

The Italian Jesuit learned to speak English fluently and lived with local clothes; he also studied Confucianism by reading specific books. In doing so, he was able to approach the upper classes of China, gain their trust and satisfy their curiosity regarding various scientific themes and European mechanical inventions: lenses, automata, hydraulic machines and astronomical, geometric and cartographic knowledge were among the most discussed and detailed topics and disciplines [6]. However, the same thing did not happen for the figurative arts, which in the 17th-18th centuries attracted the attention of the Jesuits in Europe as in China. Ricci expressed a negative opinion – unfairly – on Chinese art, underlining the fact that the Chinese representation, although familiar with painting, could not compete at the levels of

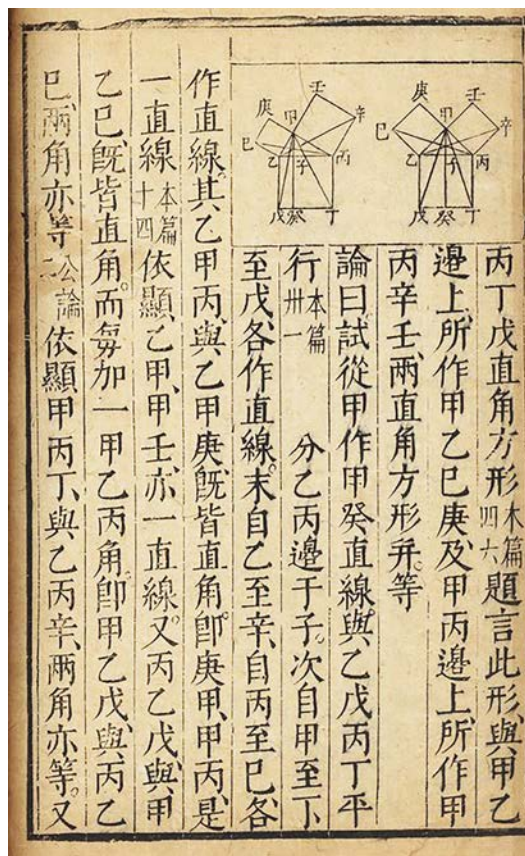


Fig. 8 – Euclid’s proof of the Pythagorean theorem. In *Ji he yuan ben* (1606), translation Euclid’s *Elements* by Matteo Ricci and Xu Guangqi. Proposition 47, vol. I.

Fig. 7 – Matteo Ricci and Paul Xu Guangqi. From Kircher’s *China Illustrata*, Amsterdam 1667, p. 201.

western one, also due to the lack of knowledge and closure towards other cultures, further adding that they created paintings without vividness and chiaroscuro and did not know oil painting. As Ricci wrote in his memories: “They don’t know how to paint with oil or give shadows to the things they paint, and so all their paintings are dull and without any liveliness. In the statues they are very unhappy, and I do not know if they have any other rule in the proportions and symmetry than that of the eyes, which, in large things, are very easily deceived, and also make very large figures of stone as well as bronze” [Ricci 2000, p. 22] [7].

To make the images more convincing and theologically efficient, the Chinese needed to know the rules. In the scientific acculturation program, Ricci introduced the translation into Chinese of the first six books of Euclid’s *Geometry*, a prerequisite for understanding perspective [Scolari 1984b, pp. 48-49]. Xu Guangqi, latinized Paolo Siu (1562-1633) – the vice minister of the Ministry of Rites and a grand secretary of the Wenyuange Imperial Library – also collaborated on this Chinese translation of *Ji he yuan ben* (*Elements* of Euclid – 1606). Ricci and Xu Guangqi (fig. 7) used as the basis for their work the 15-volume Latin-language edition of Euclid’s *Elements*, revised and supplemented by the Jesuit German mathematician and astronomer Christopher Clavius (1538-1612), of which they succeeded in translating the first six volumes. This work was very important because brought into China for the first time Euclid’s geometry, with its strict logical system and methodology of reasoning. From this translation, the Chinese words for geometry and geometrical terms such as point, line, parallel line, triangle, and square were adopted for first time and are still used today. This is an important work for Chinese scholars learning about the West during the Ming and Qing dynasties (fig. 8).

Ricci and other Jesuit missionaries had the opportunity to be also present to the Chinese court a new vision of pictorial realism, with the use of chiaroscuro. *Taixi Huafa* (Western painting) became very popular with the Chinese. Three portraits of *The Holy Father* [Almighty God] and *The Holy*

*Mother* [Virgin Mary] with the child's arms were presented to the Ming Dynasty Emperor Chongzhen, in Beijing twenty years later as a tribute. Realistic European paintings struck and troubled the imperial court. [Scolari 1984b, pp. 25-26] According to the testimony of Jiang Shaowen, writer of the late Ming dynasty and friend of Matteo Ricci, the features and clothes so well defined, vivid and realistic, that seemed to be reflected in the mirror. Including dignity and elegance that Chinese artists were unable to emulate. [Fuwei 1996, p. 278] Despite the commitment of the Jesuits, the Chinese understood neither the perspective nor the evangelical message of which it was the bearer. Although admirable, they perceived false and not artistic the reality represented through perspective: because a painting had to provide an objective image of reality, not altered by the perception distortion of the human eye.

However, attempts to make the Chinese known about perspective continued. In the 18th century, in response to the request of Emperor Kangxi to have a talented Italian painter at court, the young Italian Jesuit Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766) presented himself [8]. It was the premise for a dialogue lasting over fifty years, also serving the two successive emperors Yongzheng and Qianlong.

Castiglione had an incredible success at the Qing court: his artworks, made according to technical knowledge on the use of oil colors and the principles of geometric perspective, were in great demand. On behalf of the emperor, Castiglione instructed some Chinese students: in 1729, he translated them the famous treatise by Andrea Pozzo on perspective applied to architecture, the *Perspectiva Pictorum Architectorum* [Scolari 1984b, p. 49]. The Mandarin adaptation of the book, entitled *Shixue* (*The Study of Vision*), was published in collaboration with Nian Xiyao (1678-1738), assistant minister of the Ministry of Works during Yongzheng's reign. While Castiglione contributed to the dissemination of the principle of the western perspective, Nian Xiyao testifies how some Chinese graphic experts tried to integrate their knowledge with western scientific ideas (figs. 9-11). In particular, *Shixue* was the earliest treatise that systematically

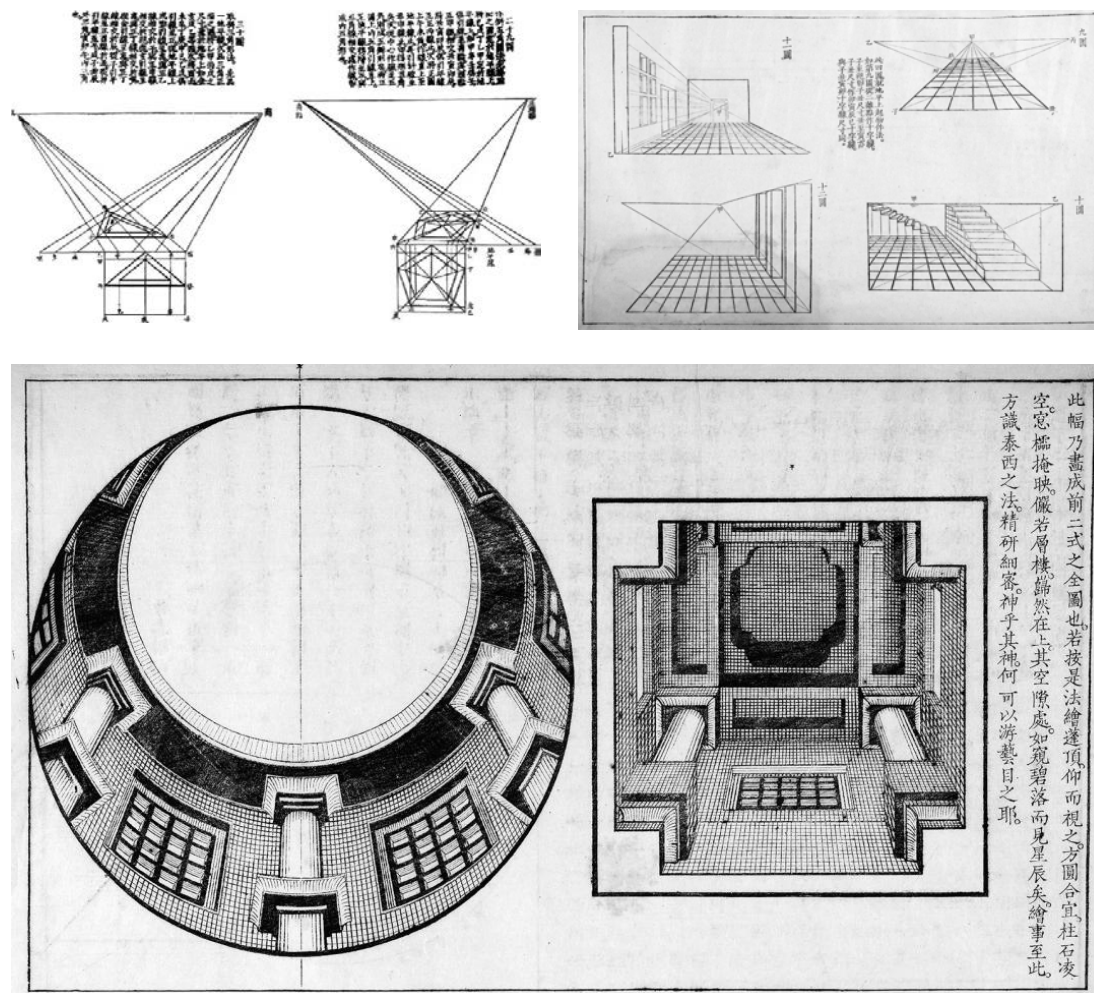


Fig. 9 - Principle of projection discussed in *Shixue* (1735) by Giuseppe Castiglione and Nian Xiyao. Plates XXIX, XXX.

Fig. 10 - Four rooms in perspective created using the distance-point method. From *Shixue* (*The Study of Vision*) by Giuseppe Castiglione and Nian Xiyao. The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Douce Chin. B.2, p. 20r.

Fig. 11 - Illusionistic ceiling paintings from *Shixue* (*The Study of Vision*) by Castiglione and Xiyao. The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Douce Chin. B.2, p. 52v.

elaborated the theory of graphics during the Qing dynasty. It was also the first written work to discuss geometric representation and to clarify the application of the “method of points of distance” in parallel and angular perspectives. It was the first to discuss the application of two side views of a geometrical solid and the intercept of sight lines in the coordinate axes of drawing perspectives. It was also the first to elaborate the method of the shadows of the light source at the center of an axonometric drawing [Liu 2014, pp.109-110]. The excellent illustrated work was the first of its kind in the history of graphics in China, the first formal dissemination of techniques and mechanisms used in Western art from a Western painter at the Qing court to the Chinese public. Unfortunately, it had only a limited print run and only a few copies of the book remain available. [Kobayashi 2006, p. 266].

Castiglione, known by the mandarin name Láng Shining, spent a large part of his life in China starting in 1715, the year he moved there when he was very young. During this long time, he was able to paint many typical themes of Chinese painting, including portraits, animals, flowers, birds, Chinese events and landscapes. He was one of the most famous representatives of imperial painting during the reign periods of Yongzheng and Qianlong and his style involved a real integration of western representation with eastern painting, realizing artworks in Chinese manner with European realism. Employed by the emperor, Giuseppe Castiglione followed and became passionate about rules, techniques and themes of traditional Chinese representation. Kangxi did not like oil painting, because over time it tended to blacken. Castiglione then began to paint on silk using special inks: a technique that did not allow any correction, and any hesitation or excess in the use of pigments could ruin the whole work. Another parameter required – especially in the portraiture – adapted by Castiglione was the two-dimensionality. The portraits had to be flat and shadow-free, considered figuratively flaws. However, after Kangxi’s death in 1722, the Jesuit painter managed to make Emperor Yongzheng and his court painters understand the technique of chiaroscuro. During the period of Yon-



Fig. 12 - *One Hundred Horses* by Giuseppe Castiglione, (1688-1766), Qing dynasty. Handscroll, ink and colours on silk, 94.5 x 776 cm, 1728.

gzheng’s reign, Castiglione created one of his masterpieces, the *One Hundred Horses* (1728) (fig. 12), demonstrating his western artistic style, but with fewer anatomical elements, which made him close to the Chinese aesthetic taste. The long depiction is preceded by a preparatory drawing (1723-1725) and is made in ink on a silk roll. A *shan shui* landscape populated by horses, at different observation points and the depth rendered by means of the atmospheric perspective degrading the definition and hue with the distance, is a clear adaptation of western painting to Chinese rules, also for the development on parchment handscroll.

#### CHRISTIAN THEMES ACCORDING TO ORIENTAL ICONOGRAPHY

Painting with its heavily shaded perspectives assumed a primary role in the delicate operation of the Jesuit strategy, according to the precepts of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the *Spiritual Exercises* (1548): in fact, the images was an indispensa-

ble tool to increase concentration and to lead the faithful to deep meanings of meditation, aspects that became central in Jesuit religiosity.

A singular use of sacred images as an aid to religious practice in China can be found in the 15 engravings collected in the book of the Portuguese Jesuit João da Rocha (1565-1623) *Song nianzhu gui cheng* “A Method for Reciting the Rosary” published by the Company of Jesus in Nanjing presumably between 1619 and 1623 [9]. The 15 images, flanked by short chapters in Chinese to help understand the catholic message and in the act of prayer, represented the mysteries of the life of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ [Demattè 2007, p. 33].

As previously treated, the Chinese painting technique was based on a centuries-old tradition strongly rooted in the ink technique, with simplified and decisive strokes in which it was possible to find either the absence of perspective depth in favor of axonometric representation, or the definition of multiple axonometries. To get closer to



Chinese culture, the engravings contained in the *Song nianzhu gui cheng* present the distinctive character of representing evangelical scenes according to the particularities of Chinese painting. The book derives from a precise model, consisting of the Spanish Jesuit Jeronimo Nadal (1507-1580) *Evangelicae historiae imagines* (Images of Gospel History), published in Antwerp by Martin Nutius in 1593, containing 153 large engravings by the brothers Antonius, Johannes and Hieronimus Wierix, made on drawings by Martin and Nicolas de Vos, and Bernardino Passeri [Reed 2011, p. 92]. The attempt of da Rocha's book was to adapt western images typical of Christian iconography to the oriental world through the modification of human figures, landscapes, buildings and ornaments to allow a simpler and immediate understanding and, at the same time, transmit the western artistic ability in engraving techniques. Explicit episodes of Christian iconography only sometimes maintain in the figuration European architecture or clothes: the scene is quite immerse in the Ming

tradition of book illustrations with hints of Buddhist hagiography [Demattè 2007, p. 36]. This representative conversion can also be seen in the later work by Giulio Aleni (1682-1649) *Tianzhu jiangsheng zhuxiang jingjie* "Illustrated history of the incarnation of the Lord of Heaven" published by the Church of Jinjiang in 1637. Aleni's Chinese volume is much more similar to that written by Nadal: in fact, he copies the graphic layout, 52 woodcut images with the same geometric-spatial setting even if simplified. At the same time, however, Chinese influence is also noted. The classic theme of the *Annunciation* provides a significant case. Da Rocha's scene is set within women's quarters of an upper class Ming household. The setting adopted is the same as in Nadal's book, but unlike this the drawing is much more simplified and deprived of excessive chiaroscuro. Virgin Mary kneels inside a traditional timber structure with lattice windows: the interior furnishings are typical of an elite Chinese house. In all the three images (figs. 13-15), the Holy Spirit

descending in the appearance of a dove and the archangel Gabriel presents himself to Mary with a lily in his hand. The definition of the swirling clouds recalls the calligraphic characters of Taoist and Buddhist painting. [Demattè 2007, p. 36]. The context is different for the three representations: while Giulio Aleni (fig. 15) follows the images of Nadal (fig. 13), da Rocha inserts behind the Virgin a screen painted with a bare landscape: this aspect refers once again to the Chinese pictorial tradition of making nature visible also in the interiors of the environments represented. Outside the main scene, behind the clouds of the Annunciation, it is represented a garden of rocks and a banana tree, replacing the Three Crosses on Calvary [fig. 14]. Still by way of example, to highlight the comparison between the western and oriental representative ideology, it is also interesting to examine the images relating to the *Visitation to St. Elizabeth* (figs.16-18). It is clear that in da Rocha's images the spatial depth of the setting – also in this case faithful to Chinese traditional architecture – is de-

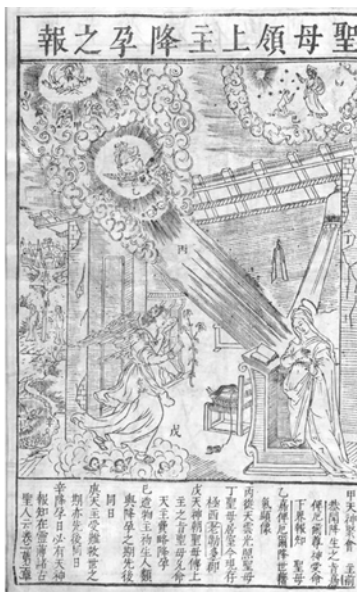


Fig. 13 - Jeronimo Nadal (1507-1580), *Anvnciatio (The Annunciation)*, from *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines (Images from the New Testament)*, page 1r, The Netherlands, 1593. Monochrome engraving, ink on paper; H. 29 cm. Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

Fig. 14 - João da Rocha (1565-1623), *Anruo Jiabi'er, Shengmu bao shuo Tianzhu xuan ta wei mu. The First Joyous Mystery: The Annunciation*, from *Prática de rezar o rosário/Song Nianzhu guicheng (Method of Saying the Rosary)*, page 3b, Nanjing (China), c.1620. Monochrome woodblock print, ink on paper.

Fig. 15 - Giulio Aleni (1582-1649), *Shengmu ling shangzhu jiangyun zhi bao (The Annunciation)*, from *Tianzhu jiangsheng zhuxiang jingjie (Illustrated Explanation of the Incarnation of the Lord of Heaven)*, page 6a, China, 1637. Monochrome woodblock print, ink on paper.



Fig. 16 - Geronimo Nadal (1507-1580), *The Visitation*, from *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines (Images from the New Testament)*. Hieronymus Wierix (1548-1624), Engraving after Bernardo Passeri. MH 1992. Plate 2. Antwerp: Martin Nuyts II, 1593.

Fig. 17 - João da Rocha, S.J. (1565-1623), *The First Joyous Mystery: The Annunciation* (c. 1620). Woodcut. First of fifteen woodblock illustrations to *Song Nianzhu Guicheng (Method of Reciting the Rosary)*, Nanjing (China).

Fig. 18 - Giulio Aleni (1582-1649), *The Visitation*, from *Tianzhu jiangsheng chuxiang jingjie (Illustrated Explanation of the Incarnation of the Lord of Heaven)*, illustration 3/56. Published at the Jing Jiao Tang press of Jinjiang, Quanzhou, China, in 1637. Monochrome woodblock print, ink on paper.

defined by oblique projections divide into three horizontal narrative levels (fig. 17). Much more faithful to the engravings of Nadal's book is Aleni's image: in fact, he does not choose to dress the characters of Christian iconography in the Chinese way, but prefers to outline their physiognomic aspect, also in this case adopting a simplified perspective and an almost two-dimensionality without chiaroscuro for the figurations (fig. 18).

## CONCLUSIONS

The difficult and delicate task of the Jesuit missionaries of conversion to the non-European Christian creed did not have the same result in all cultures. Despite the commitment and dedication of the confreres, in China they were mostly bearers of scientific knowledge. At the court of the various emperors, aristocrats and acculturates of China, there was an awareness of China's backwardness in various scientific fields. Curiosity and interest mainly concerned astronomical, mathematical

and cartographic discoveries and hydraulic machines, while the now consolidated linear perspective, widespread and widely used in various European pictorial illusionistic expedients and in view of *docere et delectare*, in the eyes of Chinese although admirable was believed to falsify reality and in contrast with local religious principles.

The Chinese pictorial tradition will therefore be impervious to western assumptions, such as to lead the Jesuits themselves to convert their way of representing in favour of oriental artistic taste. It is not always clear if for the Jesuit in China it was a condition of necessity to survive within a foreign empire, a personal choice or a desire to approach the Chinese through the help of images that could be closer and understandable to their view of the world view.

In any case, it is interesting and surprising this singular adaptability and graphic definition in representing an alternative configuration of three-dimensionality and Christian Catholic iconographic conversion towards the oriental representation.

NOTE

[1] The common definition of “Chinese perspective” is improper because the same method of representation also characterizes Japanese art and other eastern countries.

[2] Axonometric projection is a technical term for a class of perspectives to which the parallel Chinese perspective also belongs.

[3] Pasqualotto, G. (2008). Prefazione. In Shitao. *Sulla pittura*. M. Ghilardi, & G. Pasqualotto (a cura di) (pp. 7-19). Udine: Mimesis.

[4] From a religious point of view, they had to approach one of the local doctrines: excluding Taoism, initially they found points of continuity with the Buddhist creed for the similar monastic structure, social position and vocation, and then instead recognized that Confucianism was the religion of the classes Chinese elites and therefore the most suitable for their mission.

[5] The Jesuits wanted to reconcile Chinese and Catholic cultures by allowing new converts to still practice certain cults considered civil practices not in contrast with Catholic doctrine but present in the Confucian religious system. Aspects instead considered incompatible by Franciscans, Dominicans, Jansenists and by the Papal throne itself.

[6] In addition to Matteo Ricci, the Flemish Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688) was also among the main bearers of the European physical-astronomical and cartographic scientific language in China.

[7] Our translation from Ricci's text: “Non sanno pingere con olio né dar l'ombra alle cose che pingono, e così tutte le loro pitture sono smorte e senza nessuna vivezza. Nelle statue

sono infelicissimi, e non so se habino altra regola nelle proporzioni e simmetria che dell'occhi, i quali, in cose grandi, si ingannano molto facilmente, e fanno pure figure grandissime di pietra come di bronzo”.

[8] When Giuseppe Castiglione first met Emperor Kangxi, the sovereign was sixty-one years old, and opposed the missionaries' preaching. In fact, during the Qing dynasty the Jesuits did not have an easy acceptance in China. The Jesuits were not welcome for the desire to impose the Catholic creed, but they were an important source in science from which to learn mathematics and astronomy above all. However, Kangxi politely treated Castiglione on that occasion despite his religious faith. [Vossilla, Zheng-Ying 2015, pp. 138-139.]

[9] Da Rocha was also the author of the aniconic *Tianzhu shengjiao qimeng* (Instructions in the holy religion of the Lord of Heaven, Nanjing: Society of Jesus, ca. 1619-23), one of the first catechisms written in Chinese idiom and the first to be addressed to young people or to a poorly educated public for its simple language. For the catechism and introduction to Christianity adopted in China by the Jesuits, were published several books. Among them, there were *Tianzhu Shilu* (True relation of the Lord of Heaven, 1584) by Michele Ruggeri; *Tianzhu Shivi* (True meaning of the Lord of Heaven, 1603) by Matteo Ricci; the anonymous *Tiamzhu Jiaoyao* (Doctrine of the lord of heaven, 1604-1605); *Tianzhu Jiaoyao jielue* (Comprehensive Exposition of the Lord of Heaven, 1615) by Alfonso Vagnone. Except Vagnone, all the texts were written in Wanyan Chinese literature, a formal style of Chinese writing used by the educated classes [Reed, Dematté 2007, pp. 168-169].

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