A Reappraisal of the Byzantine Iconoclasm: Image Conflicts and Reconciliation Strategies in the Inculturation of Catholicism in East Asia

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The emergence of the Byzantine Iconoclasm was underpinned by profound historical and cultural factors. Its impact on "icon veneration" serves as a paradigmatic case of religious image conflicts. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, as Catholicism expanded eastward into East Asia, deep-seated conflicts arising from "icon veneration" occurred. These conflicts involved the ancestral worship system in China, the taboos of Shinto in Japan, and the ritual codes in Korea influenced by Confucian culture. A comparative study of these conflicts with the Byzantine Iconoclasm is thus warranted. The conflicts between Catholicism and traditional cultures in East Asia are, in essence, manifestations of the cognitive disparities between the "sacredness" of icons and the "de-iconization" traditions within East Asian cultures. In contrast to the forceful destruction of icons in Byzantium, East Asian responses predominantly took the form of informal communal negotiations. For example, in Quanzhou, China, angel statues were placed within the niches of the Earth God, while in Japan, the Virgin Mary statue was adapted to resemble the Avalokitesvara statue. The key to resolving the conflicts regarding "icon veneration" lies in dissociating the political power connotations of icons and transforming them into "visual media" for cultural dialogue and "spiritual carriers" of a religious nature. The "East Asian experience" thus reveals a harmonization paradigm for religious inculturation during the dissemination of Catholicism, which holds significant implications for the contemporary spread and stability of Catholicism.

Keywords: Catholicism, Iconoclasm, East Asia, folklore, inculturation

About This Article

From 726 AD to 843 AD, the Byzantine Empire endured a protracted period of upheaval as a consequence of the Iconoclasm movement. This incident is widely recognized as one of the most profound confrontations between religious belief and political power. Scholars have carried out in-depth research on the theological controversies underlying this movement. Proponents of icons held the view that icons provided a means of accessing the divine. On the contrary, opponents criticized such veneration as a transgression of the Mosaic Law (Exodus 20:4-5), categorizing it as an act of idolatry. In addition, research has also brought to light the underlying socio-economic factors. Notably, during the Arab siege of Constantinople, Emperor Leo III adopted a policy of confiscating monastery properties to bolster the establishment of the thematic military system. It should be noted

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that the Iconoclasm movement was not an exclusive phenomenon in the Byzantine Empire. In 1566, Calvinist insurgents in the Netherlands under Habsburg rule destroyed altars as a form of resistance against the occupation, while Islamic aniconism pressured Byzantine borderlands, fueling theological resistance to figural representation (Elsner, 2002).

However, existing research has placed an excessive emphasis on Europe and the Mediterranean world, while overlooking another region: East Asia. When Catholicism was introduced to this region, it came into contact with civilizations distinct from its native cultural-ecological milieu. In Chinese philosophy, the "Tao", regarded as the supreme law, is formless and cannot be represented through icons. In Japan, the "Honji Suijaku" theory posits that the highest fundamental entities, "Buddhas and Bodhisattvas", possess diverse manifestations (that is, they have no fixed form). In the Korean Peninsula, Confucianism adopted a vigilant stance towards the "icon" heresy of foreign origin. The conflicts that ensued (such as the Catholic "Rites Controversy" in China and the "Fumie" policy implemented by the Tokugawa Shogunate in Japan) merit in-depth academic study and interpretation.

This article attempts to illustrate that the conflicts caused by the veneration of Catholic icons in East Asia are not derivatives of the Byzantine or European models, but rather unique cultural characteristics, by comparing the different models of Byzantium and East Asia. The trigger of the Byzantine Iconoclasm was the conflict between "theological orthodoxy" and "imperial authority", and ultimately the "proskynesis" at the Second Council of Nicaea (787) established that the veneration of icons must transcend the icons themselves and reach the theological height behind them. In contrast, the conflict between Catholicism and traditional culture in East Asia lies in a kind of "symbolic misplacement" in culture. In China, when the missionary Matteo Ricci adapted the "Virgin of the Immaculate Conception", Qing government officials accused him of "gathering a crowd with heretical images" (Xiexiangjuzhong), and it reflects the anxiety of Confucianism over the illegal collective worship that disrupts social order (Mungello, 1994). In Japan, the "Kakure Kirishitans" in Nagasaki used images of Guanyin to replace the image of the Virgin Mary, attempting to embed the imagery of Catholic saints into the visual grammar system of Buddhism (Whelan, 1996). Such symbolic dislocation in religious imagery appears to be unique to East Asian contexts, absent in both Byzantium and Europe.

Most current studies on the indigenization of Catholic religious images show a fragmented tendency. When conducting research from an artistic perspective, scholars tend to focus excessively on the aesthetic connotations of the religious images themselves while overlooking their theological implications. When approaching the topic from the perspective of missionary history, there is a propensity to rely heavily on texts and downplay the material cultural elements in the material reality. Moreover, current anthropological analyses predominantly emphasize indigenization practices without paying due attention to cross-regional and cross-cultural comparisons. Consequently, there is a lack of a unified framework for understanding the disputes regarding "the veneration of religious images" in East Asia. Such a framework is essential for explaining the conflict generation mechanisms, the effectiveness of reconciliation strategies, and the operational logic of the indigenization of religions globally. This article will attempt to connect the three together.

This article will accomplish the following three tasks. Firstly, it will explain the recontextualization of material: the integration of Catholic icons with local cultural contexts, such as the embedding of angel statues into the land god shrines in the Catholic church in Quanzhou, China, to create a fusion ritual space that accommodates both local deities and elevated piety. For example, a Christian in Quanzhou invented a new

ritual sequence for funerals to "maintain the flavor of the [Christian] Way and the feeling of filial piety" as well (Menegon, 2010, p. 270). Secondly, exploring the transformation of icons: the reorganization and symbolic adaptation of the theological significance behind the Catholic veneration of icons. Japanese ukiyo-e masters depicted the Holy Family dressed in kimonos and sitting on a tatami mat among cherry blossoms, transforming the narrative into a familiar aesthetic language (Screech, 2002). Finally, this paper will examine the narrative reconstruction: the employment of local philosophical language to expound upon Catholic doctrines. In the Korean Peninsula region, the advocate Yi Baek (Lee Beok) composed *Illustrated Account of Holy Images*. Drawing on Zhu Xi's epistemology of "gewu" (investigating things), Yi Baek argued that holy images are conducive to thoroughly investigating the principles of the universe. By exploring these three dimensions, we can delve more deeply into the problems encountered during the inculturation of Catholicism in East Asia.

The Historical Logic and Theological Controversies of Byzantine Iconoclasm

Behind the Iconoclasm movement in Byzantium lay intricate and profound historical logics and theological controversies. Among these, the political and geopolitical context of the time and the controversies regarding the theological connotations of religious icons were issues that could not be bypassed. The debates about religious icons in Byzantium exerted a far-reaching influence on the world, particularly in the dissemination of Catholicism in the East Asian region.

The Byzantine Iconoclasm movement mainly occurred between 726 and 843 AD. It was mainly divided into two phases: the first phase began when the Byzantine Emperor Leo III issued a ban on the veneration of icons. Although his policy had been justified in the name of theology, it was still influenced by military defeats, natural disasters, and the Islamic world, which strongly opposed specific icons (Brubaker & Haldon, 2011).

By analyzing Leo III's crackdown on icon veneration, we can find that his main purpose was to strengthen the imperial power and weaken the ecclesiastical power. By attacking icons, the emperor attempted to take control of the theological discourse behind the icons, to break the church's monopoly on theology, and to try to shape a pure image of "Jesus Christ" (which is actually the same as the mainstream "iconoclasm tradition" in the Islamic world). It can be said that this was an early form of political manipulation through "visual purification".

Moreover, the economic contradictions within the empire also contributed to the development of the Iconoclasm movement. Many churches and monasteries accumulated vast wealth through the large donations brought by icon pilgrimages, thus, in reality, it broke away from the empire's economic control. The imperial bureaucracy had long been dissatisfied with the monasteries' excessive accumulation of wealth. Therefore, Iconoclast emperors, represented by Constantine V, destroyed icons in the name of "reforming the church" and used this as an excuse to confiscate church property. From this, it can be seen that in the Byzantine Empire, the Iconoclastic Movement was not merely a purification of theological concepts, but more so an assertion of imperial power over ecclesiastical authority.

The fundamental divergence that emerged during the Iconoclastic Movement lay in Christology orthodoxy and the way the sacred image of Christ was represented. The iconoclasts invoked the commandment in Exodus that "you shall not make for yourself a carved image," arguing that any concrete depiction of Christ and the saints carried the risk of materializing the divine, which would lead to idolatry, because during the early spread of Christianity, there was no such term as "icon": "The earliest Christian images appeared somewhere about the year 200. This means that during roughly a century and a half the Christians did without any figurative

representations of a religious character" (Grabar, 1968, p. 7). It is a practice strictly prohibited by the Bible. They insisted that only the Eucharist could be the true presence of Christ, as it was established by Jesus Christ himself and offered no visual misguidance. Icons, on the other hand, could never serve as the presence of Christ. This view was deeply influenced by the Chalcedonian Creed's assertion that the divinity and humanity of Christ cannot be confused. People like Bishop Constantine of Naucratis believed that once one began to depict Christ's humanity, it would inevitably harm His divinity, which is essentially indescribable (see Exodus).

However, supporters of icon veneration, represented by Saint John of Damascus, argued that since Jesus truly became human, his image could be depicted, as humans have form and can be represented. Saint John of Damascus wrote: "I do not worship matter, but I worship the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake" (John of Damascus, ca. 730, p. 23). For icon worshippers, icons are not the divine Creator Himself, but rather a simple "entrance" to the divine, merely objects of "veneration" rather than "worship".

The theological periodization regarding the veneration of icons was ultimately resolved at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. The council reaffirmed the legitimate status of icons and clearly distinguished between "worship of God" and "veneration of the saints", emphasizing the important role of icons in education (It is more about the educational role for the illiterate):

> That the illiterate need images as a form of education was a useful argument, and one that had become standard in support of images in churches, but it did not help the iconophile claim that the veneration of images was incumbent on everyone. (Price, 2022, p. 550)

However, the resolution of the theological disputes within the Church regarding the veneration of icons did not completely dispel the anxiety over the "iconic connotations" of theology. This anxiety played an undeniable role in subsequent missionary history, especially in the spread of Catholicism in East Asia.

Looking back at the Iconoclasm in Byzantium, it is not difficult to find that its influence mainly focused on the reflection of the visual expression form of faith. As the Catholic faith expanded beyond the European-Mediterranean world, especially to the East Asia (China, the Korean Peninsula, and Japan), a region rich in religious and cultural symbols but opposed to "concretization", the author believes that this ancient debate can be endowed with new significance.

The traditional culture of East Asia is complex. Take Chinese culture as an example. On the one hand, Confucian aesthetics emphasizes symbol and morality rather than the external manifestation of image. On the other hand, Buddhist thought wavers between "abstraction" and "concretization". A group of Jesuit missionaries represented by Matteo Ricci keenly perceived the conflict within this cultural diversity and attempted to defend the rationality of images with the icon-supporting theological tradition. The "Rites Controversy" that occurred in China in the 17th century can also be regarded as an extension of the issue of icons. Regarding whether the Confucian ancestral tablets and the sacrificial activities in the Confucian temple conflicted with the Catholic tradition of "prohibiting idolatry", some people argued that such rituals and images were cultural customs rather than idolatry, but others insisted that they had "idolatrous" nature and should be prohibited (Rule, 1986).

In contemporary society, with the convening of the Second Vatican Council, Catholic believers in East Asia have creatively developed new icon styles based on their local artistic traditions. Take the Xishiku Church (North Church) in Beijing as an example. The "Chinese Madonna" (the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus dressed in traditional Qing Dynasty Chinese attire) enshrined there is a typical manifestation of the integration of local Chinese culture and Catholic icons. These contemporary changes demonstrate that the icon controversy is not

merely an event of the Byzantine Empire but a "theological practice of images" that is constantly being reinterpreted in the context of global evangelization.

Image Conflicts in the Spread of Catholicism in East Asia

The spread of Catholicism in East Asia has been marked by a tension between visual culture and theology, especially the conflicts and adaptations of Catholic images within the cultural contexts of China and Japan. By drawing a historical parallel with the Byzantine Iconoclasm, this paper will explore how missionaries reconciled religious images in the sensitive areas of local cultures and developed a set of adaptation and integration strategies.

When Catholic icons were first introduced to East Asian societies, they faced much opposition and misunderstanding, mainly due to cultural differences between the East and the West and different interpretations of the emotions towards "icons" in religions. In China, Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit missionary, recognized the importance of integrating Catholic doctrines with Confucianism. Some research indicates that Ricci's change in attire had a profound impact on the icons of Chinese Catholicism: "His adoption of Confucian attire, a seemingly superficial change, had a profound impact on the subsequent indigenization methods of the Catholic school of painting" (Zhang, 2024, p. 19). He combined traditional Chinese clothing with the doctrines of Catholicism and received approval from the upper echelons of society at that time (a typical representative being Guangqi Xu). However, there has always been controversy over the use of Catholic images.

The Chinese people have a deeply rooted tradition of paying homage to their ancestors (such as deceased parents and grandparents) and Confucius. This can be traced back to ancient Chinese classics, such as *Jiyi in Liji (The Book of Rites: The Meaning of Sacrifice)*, which states: "It is only the sage who can sacrifice to God, and (only) the filial son who can sacrifice to his parents." (Liji, n.d.). Another example is the veneration of Confucius, which stems from his esteemed status in the hearts of the Chinese people as a paragon of virtue. As recorded in *Kongzi Shijia in Shiji (The Records of the Grand Historian: The Life of Confucius)*, "Confucius' teachings were nothing more than loyalty and forgiveness. His character was gentle yet strict, dignified yet not fierce, and courteous yet at ease" (Sima Qian, ca. 94 BCE). This reflects the cultural core of "valuing filial piety" and "respecting Confucius" in Chinese tradition. The external manifestation of this—the act of sacrifice—was precisely what the Catholic Church had always opposed in the past. The Catholic Church's "opposition" was regarded by the Chinese as a resistance to "filial piety" and "benevolence". This long-standing divergence between Chinese traditional culture and Catholic theology eventually erupted in the 17th and 18th centuries: the Rites Controversy. It had a long-term and far-reaching impact on the relationship between the Vatican and Chinese Catholics (even continuing to this day).

When Catholicism spread to Japan, missionaries also faced the misinterpretation of image worship under different cultural backgrounds. In Japan, Theravada Buddhism was popular, and there was a widespread veneration of traditional sacred images (such as various Buddha statues and Guanyin statues). To make it easier for the local people to accept the Catholic veneration of sacred images and facilitate the spread of Catholicism, missionaries combined Catholic sacred images with the images of local Japanese figures. For instance, the Virgin Mary was often depicted in the form of "Guanyin", a practice known as "Maria Kannon". Clearly, this fusion promoted the spread of Catholicism in Japan. However, it also blurred the theological boundaries between Catholicism and Theravada Buddhism, causing missionaries to worry whether this would weaken the purity of the Catholic faith.

In order to spread the Catholic faith in East Asia, missionaries developed various strategies to combine Catholic visual images with local folk cultures in the region. Here, we still take China and Japan as examples. In China, Jesuit missionaries collaborated with Chinese painters to adapt and create many religious works using techniques such as brushwork and perspective in traditional Chinese painting, such as Lu Hongnian's "Madonna and Child" and "The Annunciation", and Chen Yuandu's "The Nativity" and "The Adoration of the Magi". They depicted biblical scenes with traditional Chinese clothing, architectural styles, and brushwork, making the local Chinese audience feel culturally close to Catholic culture. Furthermore, in order to ease the conflict between Catholic culture and the native Chinese culture that reveres Confucius and filial piety, missionaries like Giulio Aleni compared the sacrifice of Jesus being crucified to the actions of historical Chinese figures such as using "the story of the king Cheng Tang who had sacrificed himself to Heaven in order to save his people from a severe drought around 1530 B.C." (Chu, 2016, p. 3). In Japan, Catholic art was more integrated into the "Nanban Art" of the Azuchi-Momoyama period. These works were created by local Japanese painters, combining Western and ukiyo-e painting techniques, and a considerable number of them depicted Catholic religious themes. These works played a positive role in the spread of religion during the "tolerant period" before the persecution of Catholics in Japan. After the ban on Christianity in Japan, the most famous example was the "Maria Kannon" statue, which enabled Japanese Catholics to secretly pay homage to the Virgin Mary under the guise of a Buddhist image. Such image strategies not only demonstrated the creativity of local believers but also highlighted the crucial role of images in the survival of religion.

The Jesuits' image adaptation strategy in East Asia demonstrated a delicate balance between cultural sensitivity and theological rigor. While these image adjustments facilitated the spread of Catholicism, they also sparked theological debates about "popularization" and "alienation", with concerns that the core of faith might be diluted. Such a situation occurred in Japan: "Those who went underground probably were not able to distinguish clearly between Buddhism and Christianity." (Whelan, 1996, p. 11) However, in the long run, this reconciliatory effort laid the foundation for local expressions of faith, indicating that religious art can not only convey doctrine but also serve as a bridge for cross-cultural communication and the intersection of sacred experiences, just as scholars have pointed out regarding the practices of the Jesuits in East Asia: "The Jesuits used art extensively in their catechism, a tool for educating converts and deepening the faith of existing believers." (Wu, 2024, p. 682).

The Practice of Strategies for Image Harmonization

In the previous section, we discussed the conflicts between Catholicism and local traditional cultures in East Asia and the strategies for resolving these conflicts. Next, the author will analyze the current situation through the practical implementation of the strategies for resolving conflicts that have emerged in reality.

Here we take the structure of the church as an example to study how believers in East Asia have transformed churches through the principle of "cultural embedding" to reconcile the conflict between Catholic doctrine and local traditional culture. In Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China, the statues of angels were placed in the shrines of the Tudi Gong (Earth Deity) in the Quanzhou Catholic Church, which constructed a new cultural order: the upper part of the shrine enshrines angels, symbolizing the authority of heaven, while the lower part accommodates the Earth Deity, in line with the Confucian cosmology. The church building adopted the traditional local materials such as red bricks from southern Fujian and swallowtail spines, and at the same time, a "wrought iron cross" was set on the top of the church—this avoided the ban on "western-style buildings (Yizhi Jianzhu)" in the Qing

Dynasty. During the Edo period in Japan, when Christianity was banned, Japanese Catholics faced such a realistic predicament. They adopted the method of "secret churches (Kakure Kirishitan)", hiding the altar in the warehouse, storing the containers for the Eucharist and the chalice in the Buddha niche under the removable tatami mats, and pasting washi paper on the windows instead of the painted crosses in Western churches, and instead using the composite light and shadow of the Japanese "chrysanthemum cross".

The theological narrative of Catholicism has undergone symbolic transformation through localized iconography, embedding Catholic symbols within the familiar aesthetic framework of the original East Asian civilization, thereby bridging the cultural gap caused by differences. Take the "Maria Kannon" in Japan as an example. It integrates the iconographic rules of Theravada Buddhism: the Virgin Mary adopts the "game sitting" posture of Kannon (with the right knee bent), and a cross is embedded in the halo behind her head, while the prayer beads she holds are changed to rosary beads. In the Edo painting "Maria Kannon" (around 1700), a poem is inscribed: "Merciful boat saves all beings from suffering, the light of the cross illuminates the vast universe", using the "intertextuality" technique in poetry to circumvent the strict censorship at that time (Screech, 2002). In the Korean Peninsula, the ink-wash painting "Flight into Egypt" (circa 1786) from North Korea depicts the Holy Family (Joseph, Mary, and Jesus) fleeing in the attire of local gentry, passing through a forest of pine, bamboo, and plum trees. In the painting, Joseph's carpenter tools have been replaced with traditional East Asian farming implements to align with the local cultural context. In Fuzhou, China, the making of religious icons combines the techniques of inlaid gold and lacquer painting. The Virgin Mary's dress is adorned with phoenix feather patterns, and the halo behind her head is made of pearl powder mixed with gold foil. From the above examples, we can see that in East Asia, different cultures have all adopted similar methods to translate Catholic symbols: that is, to represent the stories of the Bible through the distinctive local cultural techniques, or adopt the "mandarin image": "Ricci discarded his Buddhist robes in favor of dressing after the fashion of the mandarins" (Brockey, 2007, p. 43). The purpose of this could either be to bring Catholicism closer to the people for the sake of proselytizing or to avoid censorship (At that time, the reputation of Buddhist monks in China had sunk to rock bottom.). In any case, a unique "East Asian Catholic" cultural circle has been formed either intentionally or coincidentally.

Catholicism has many unique sacred objects, namely liturgical instruments. During its spread in East Asia, the forms of these sacred objects changed along with cultural integration. Chinese Christians transformed the feng shui compass, incorporating the cross at its center, the "Heaven Pool", and inscribed the names of the twelve apostles on the twenty-four directions of the compass. This turned the originally feng shui measuring tool into a new instrument to verify the Christian "cosmic center theory". The "Kakure Kirishitans" in Japan transformed Buddhist prayer beads into Catholic rosaries: they kept the cross on the original rosary but increased the number of beads to 108 (corresponding to the 108 kinds of Buddhist afflictions). Since they couldn't use images of the Virgin Mary, they inserted copper carvings of chrysanthemum patterns between every ten beads to count the "Hail Mary" (Cieslik, 1974). In the Korean Peninsula, the "sacred offering box (Sanggong)" is used to separate the compartments for the Eucharist and the ancestral tablets (sinju). This "dual-chamber design" enables the Eucharist of Catholicism to be conducted in the same container as the ancestral worship of Confucian culture. The inculturation of sacred objects reflects the inculturation of Catholic liturgy. Although the "inculturation of liturgy" was not officially encouraged by the Vatican before the Second Vatican Council, in order to better adapt Catholicism to East Asia, East Asian Catholics still adopted this approach.

A Comparative Reappraisal: Logics of Conflict and Reconciliation
Between East and West

Now, let's turn our attention back to the Iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire and connect it with the conflicts between sacred images and traditional culture in East Asia. By comparing the icon conflicts in Byzantium and East Asia from several dimensions, we will attempt to explore the universal principles behind the harmonization mechanisms in East Asia.

First, let's compare from the dimension of "nature of conflict". As mentioned earlier, the Iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire was originally a theological debate, but it evolved into a struggle between the imperial and ecclesiastical powers due to complex historical, natural, and cultural reasons. In East Asia, however, there was no such struggle between the imperial and ecclesiastical powers—or it was insignificant (a manifestation of the supremacy of imperial power in the region). Instead, it was more about conflicts between different cultural symbol systems. This also leads to the difference in the second dimension: "dominant actors". The main actors in the Byzantine conflict were the emperor, military nobles, and church monks, representing the imperial and ecclesiastical powers respectively. In East Asia, it was the collision and integration between gentry, officials, and missionaries who were defenders of traditional culture. From this dimension, we can further deduce the third dimension: "solution paths". Because the Iconoclasm in Byzantium evolved into a political conflict, it ultimately had to be resolved through an official form, the Second Council of Nicaea (787), by establishing doctrine. In East Asia, however, it was more through informal communal negotiations, that is, mutual compromises among gentry, believers, and missionaries to achieve harmony. These different solution paths led to the fourth dimension, that is, different religious art consequences: after the Second Council of Nicaea, icons were stylized—that is, how to create icons and what they should look like were strictly regulated (though the stylization had a more profound impact on the Eastern Orthodox Church, which is not discussed here), while East Asian icons were innovated through different techniques and media: such as the lacquer-painted Virgin Mary that combined local characteristics, etc. These four dimensions are progressive, ultimately pointing to one topic: the icon conflicts in Byzantium and East Asia led to different art forms, which were most prominently reflected in the completely different images of icons (different degrees of inculturation and acceptance). Unlike the top-down reform in Byzantium, the fundamental reason why East Asia could "assimilate" Catholic icons from the bottom up lies in the harmonizing logic of the region.

Next, based on the four dimensions of differences mentioned above, the author will analyze the universal principles behind the harmonization of local culture and Catholic icons in East Asia. The first is political accommodation. Take China as an example. Resource exchanges occurred within the local power network (such as the Quanzhou Pu family funding multi-religious buildings). Local gentry began to support religious development, and the spread of Catholicism initially began among the gentry and nobility. It can be seen that local political forces in China adopted a cautious acceptance rather than rejection of Catholicism, and this accommodation promoted the spread of Catholicism in China. The second is aesthetic accommodation. East Asia used local cultural symbols to translate Catholic language (such as using Buddhist lotus flowers to support the cross). The same harmony is also reflected in the funerals of some Chinese Catholics: the Catholic priest performed only the "rituals of the Holy Teaching"; the laypersons performed "rituals of the Holy Teaching", such as chanting Christian prayers, but also "non-superstitious rituals" such as bowing and kowtowing; the members of the family shared in the latter but also performed other "non-superstitious rituals" such as offering of food (Standaert, 2008, p. 227). This cultural integration and accommodation also enabled Catholicism, as a foreign

religion distinct from local culture, to gradually gain acceptance in East Asia. From these two accommodations, the author believes that the universal principles are embedded within them: the first is political acceptance. Catholicism must be in line with local political forces (or at least not be rejected) to have room for spread (unlike the Byzantine Empire period when it posed a threat to the imperial power). The second is cultural integration. It is precisely because the people of East Asia and missionaries creatively integrated local culture with Catholic images that Catholicism was able to survive through repeated waves of religious prohibitions and continue to take root and grow in East Asia. These two principles are both driving forces for the powerful spread of religion.

Contemporary Revelation: Theoretical Reconstruction in the Inculturation of Catholic Imagery in East Asia

The interaction between Catholic missionaries and the cultural traditions of East Asia reveals a key point: in regions with a rich cultural heritage, successful missionary work is not only dependent on the inculcation of theological doctrines but also requires negotiation at the level of visual symbols. During the 16th to 18th centuries, successful missionaries such as Matteo Ricci and Alessandro Valignano developed a "contextualization" strategy specific to the cultural environment, transforming Western religious images into symbolic languages native to East Asia, as some scholars have pointed out, "Ricci's accommodation method may be aptly described as 'intellectually flavored Christianity'." (Mungello, 1989, p. 73). Under this strategy, the Virgin Mary and Jesus were depicted in the local images of East Asia, incorporating the aesthetic standards of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, in order to reduce the cultural resistance of the people to Catholicism. This visual blend is not merely a simple aesthetic approach, but rather a dialogue between theology and culture, aiming to build a bridge between Catholic faith and the cosmology of East Asia.

Paradigm Shifts in Religious Art Studies: From Iconoclasm to Inculturation

In recent years, research on the Byzantine Iconoclasm has begun to shift from the study of "iconoclasm" to a broader perspective of "visual image negotiation": earlier scholars generally regarded the Iconoclasm as a simple theological debate and political conflict, but now we can say that it was influenced by complex cultural and identity factors.

This transformation offers a fresh perspective for understanding the inculturation of Catholic icons in East Asia. The suppression of Catholic images in Japan during the Edo period (the ban on Christianity), the disputes over images during the Chinese Rites Controversy, and the conflicts between images and ancestral worship as well as Confucian temple worship are not merely doctrinal and religious emotional differences, but also involve the tensions and conflicts between two different cultural symbol systems: the conflict between Western realism and East Asian abstraction, the conflict between individual saint images and the collectivity of ancestor worship, and the conflict between the theology of the Incarnation and the Confucian ritual order (Brockey, 2007). To gain a deeper understanding of these conflicts, we must introduce a research paradigm that incorporates the indigenous cultures of the East Asian region.

The rise of "material religion" has further deepened this analytical perspective. This research direction emphasizes the active role of religious images (such as portraits and sculptures) in actual faith life (that is, people can actively recall the sacred connotations behind the icons through them), rather than just being appendages to doctrines (Plate, 2014).

Visual Politics and Intercivilizational Dialogue in East Asia

In contemporary East Asia, with the "religious rise" in China, the vigorous development of Catholic visual culture in South Korea, and the existence of small Catholic groups in Japan, the issue of the legitimacy of Catholic

icons has once again come to the fore: What form of icon is "legitimate"? What kind of icon has the potential to be harmonious?

Here, we still take China as an example: The "Blessed Virgin Mary of China" in the Xishiku Cathedral in Beijing is a typical case. In the image, the Virgin Mary is dressed in the traditional Manchu flag dress, sitting on a dragon bed, and holding the Christ child, who is also dressed in the flag dress, symbolizing blessings. This unique Chinese visual language combines the theology of Mary with the image of a Chinese mother. This ingenious artistic strategy not only upholds the universality of faith, redemption, and mercy in Catholic doctrine, but also respects the dignity and identity of Chinese culture.

However, this kind of harmonization of icons and culture in the East Asian style is not without controversy. Some critics argue that this kind of harmonization weakens the expression of orthodox doctrine, but some scholars point out that it is a sign of the maturity of the church's inculturation. We must find a middle way between the two. As Peter Phan (2005) said, true inculturation is not random fusion, but rather requires an interpretive foundation rooted in Catholic theology to promote mutual learning and exchange among different cultures.

More importantly, the visual harmonization experience of Catholic icons in East Asia provides theoretical resources for global Catholicism. In today's era of frequent cross-border religious exchanges, image conflicts are not "legacies of the past", but rather a continuous "theological trajectory". Through artistic responses and the integration of images, we may be able to open up a "new visual theological path" for the development of the Church in a multicultural context.

Conclusion

Whether in the ancient Byzantine Empire or in East Asia, the iconoclasm conflict has never been about the legality of icons, but rather an ontological issue of how the divine presence is manifested through material forms such as icons. When we face icons, we can't help but wonder: What exactly are we worshipping? The core of this conflict lies in the dispute between the "transcendence" of the divine presence and the "immanence" of icons, and the collision between universal authority and local symbols. Some scholars have pointed out that "iconoclasm was a complex of factors" (Brubaker & Haldon, 2011, p. 5). This observation also holds true in the context of East Asian symbolic systems: the introduction of Western icons often conflicts with the deeply rooted ancestral worship, Confucian filial piety, and Buddhist iconographic traditions in East Asian social structures. Such conflicts are not isolated incidents but rather reveal the tension between theological universality and the particularity of civilizations at the visual level.

Against this backdrop of tension, the Catholic conciliatory inculturation strategy became a crucial turning point. This strategy did not forcibly replace the cultural traditions of East Asia with the template of Western icons through violence, but rather adopted a model of dialogue between the two civilizations to negotiate with the image symbol system of East Asia. In East Asia, the transmission of Catholic faith was not merely the dissemination of doctrines, but also a "visual" negotiation and reconciliation. This reconciliation was manifested in the fact that the images of the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and others wore clothes with East Asian characteristics and had East Asian facial features. This undoubtedly greatly reduced the distance between East Asian believers and their faith.

This artistic strategy should not be simply regarded as a compromise but understood from the perspective of contextual theology. True inculturation is not syncretism, but an urging "to move beyond the dialogue of

'theological exchange' to undertake the other forms of dialogue of 'life', 'action', and 'religious experience'." (Phan, 2005, p. 100). In this perspective, visual art becomes an experimental field for theology, preserving the core of doctrine while engaging in co-creation with the local cultural context. From the Chinese Madonna to the Japanese "Kannon Mary", the image strategies in East Asia reflect a dual path of maintaining the universality of faith and cultural dignity. Although these strategies are often accompanied by controversy, it is precisely this visual friction that constitutes their dual significance in theology and society.

In today's religious communication environment, the "East Asian experience" offers valuable reference significance. The modern Catholic Church faces increasingly complex challenges in visual expression: in a multicultural context, images are not only aesthetic objects but also battlefields where power, identity, and meaning collide. The experience of East Asian Catholicism—advancing through suppression, reshaping, and negotiation—provides concrete ways to avoid visual colonization and achieve mutual cultural learning. Theories such as "glocal Christianity" and "polycentric church" further echo this trend: the cross-cultural communication of religious images should pay more attention to local theological contexts and visual logics (Sanneh, 2008; Walls, 2002).

The history of conflicts and reconciliations of Catholic images in East Asia not only helps us understand the tensions of the past but also provides a positive imaginative space for the future. The history of religious images is not merely a history of conflicts, but also a testimony to the visual resilience, adaptability, and creativity of the Church. In images, faith is no longer a fixed symbol, but becomes a visual arena for intercivilizational dialogue.

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