



BRILL

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ASIAN CHRISTIANITY

1 (2018) 117-133



brill.com/ijac

Dialogue through the Image

Asian Christian Art and Interreligious Discourses in Historical and Contemporary Asia

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the transmission of religion (specifically Christianity) and not texts but visual images, in this instance as embodied in Christian art. The paper is not an exercise in art history as such but an attempt to build a model of the multiple effects of the reception of a new visual culture on a range of cultural dimensions, and in particular the ways in which the new visual discourse transforms ideas about the self, the body, nature, and a wide range of other significant elements of culture. The paper explores the ways in which Christian art transformed subjectivities across wide areas of Asia and contributed in a major way to the establishment of what has become known as modernity. It argues that processes of religious conversion are not only cognitive but also involve the internalization of new forms of representation, ritual, clothing, and other forms of material culture. Studies of the transmission of Buddhism in Asia have suggested that this artistic and material dimension is critical, and the paper raises the question as to what extent the same can be said about the transmission and reception of Christianity. The paper also makes methodological suggestions about fresh ways of linking art history to the analysis of cultural change, especially as it relates to questions of religious transformation.

Keywords

Christian art – conversion – imaginaries – subjectivity – modernity

The study of Asian Christian art raises many intriguing issues including those of art history, the production of art objects of Christian theme or intended for use in Christian liturgical or devotional contexts by non-Christians

(for example, in the Mughal courts of north India, or the production of ivory carvings in China), the uses of Christianity to resist Japanese colonialism in Korea, and many others. This essay however takes a fresh, and hopefully innovative, approach to the nature and role of Christian art in Asia, understood here as art works produced by missionary institutions at 'home' in the sending countries, work locally produced by Christian converts, and also, and interestingly, art produced for Christian consumption by non-Christian craftspeople. It is not a study of art history as such, but an attempt to delineate and build a more theoretical model, which is not merely about the conventional issues of the impact of western Christian art on emerging local styles of Christian art in those large areas of South, Southeast and East Asia. Rather, it relates to the subtle but deeply significant inter-weavings of largely western art and its 'negotiations' with indigenous ideas of self, body, sacrifice, death, martyrdom and other levels of the culture of those societies whose visual cultures were radically challenged by new styles and techniques. In other words, we will deal in this article on the effects of a new set of visual conventions on the subjectivities and ways of seeing in those cultures, suddenly confronted with radically new possibilities of representation and the assumptions about the human person, nature, and the supernatural embodied in those initially alien forms.

Such an approach, I will argue, allows a fresh perspective on at least four major questions confronting Christian scholarship on Asia. The first is the question of the relationship between Christianity and modernity in Asia, a large question of which only the outlines can be sketched here. The second is that of the mechanisms and processes of both religious conversion at the individual level and of the transmission of new religious ideas at the collective level (and in particular the question of whether these are transmitted primarily through texts or through images). The third is that of the relationship of a new visual culture to changes in a wide range of subjectivities such as images of the body, the self, and the other. And finally, questions of comparative religion, and whether similar mechanisms of transmission and acceptance apply in the case of different religions. For example, emerging scholarship has suggested that in the expansion of Buddhism (from China to Japan for instance), it was the material culture that was the 'carrier' of the religious ideas and not texts, since these were largely impenetrable to the majority of the recipient population as those texts were in Chinese, a language only accessible to a tiny educated elite,¹ and the philosophical context was largely alien to

1 Cynthia J. Bogel, 'Situating Moving Objects: A Sino-Japanese Catalogue of Imported Items, 800 CE to the Present', in Jan Mrazek and Morgan Pitelka, eds, *What's the Use of Art? Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), pp. 142–76.

the recipient societies. The framing question is perhaps that of modernity, the source of a vast amount of scholarship arguing that modernity not only produces modernization but also the modern subject—a new type of individual oriented in radically fresh ways to the world, to the self, and to others. Alan Chong has argued that ‘For better or worse, Christianity has helped produce modern Asia.’² Here I take this to mean not only the appearance of schools, hospitals, and the other material manifestations of western missions and colonialism but also the creation of new understandings and possibilities of the self, the body, social organization, and nature, and, as I will attempt to unpack in this essay, a range of ‘religious’ themes stemming from this broader notion of modernity and including such questions as new ideas of sacrifice, physical appearance (including notions of beauty), illness and its causes, the representation of the feminine, sexuality, and of course the visual itself as embodied in artistic expression.

If for a moment one does return to the subject of art history, a historical process reveals itself which can be formulated as a working model of artistic contact as a very significant aspect of broader cultural contact. Such a model contains in broad terms the following elements. Firstly, interesting forms of hybridization occurred in which new visual motifs were blended with indigenous ones, including those derived from yet-early forms of religious influence. For example, pillars have been found in Louyang (China) bearing images that combine the lotus and the cross, the former clearly Buddhist in inspiration and the latter evidently Christian since accompanying texts talk of the nature of *jingjiao* or the ‘luminous religion’ as Christianity was initially called in China. Secondly, new conventions of portraiture were assimilated as images of Christian saints and significant religious figures became known as icons, which, however, followed Indian or Chinese models in terms of physical appearance, dress, and posture (for many excellent Indian examples, see Amaladass and Löwner discussed in the Appendix). This process of assimilation can also be seen in emerging models of church architecture, and are in part dependent on the discovery of not only new possibilities of visual representation (and the symbolic system that underpinned them) but also of the equally exciting discovery of new materials and techniques—stained glass, candles, oil paints and canvas for example. A related instance was the introduction of perspective into Chinese art by Jesuit missionaries, many of whom had very developed aesthetic tastes, in the period beginning in 1698. The third stage, and in many ways the most interesting, was at the point when such new techniques and visual

2 Alan Chong, ed, ‘Introduction: Christian Art in Asia’, *Christianity in Asia: Sacred Art and Visual Splendor* (Singapore: Asian Civilizations Museum), pp. 9–13 at p. 11.

possibilities began to fundamentally influence world-views, whether or not this led to conversion. In this stage, views of the self and body began to change in ways that I will shortly attempt to identify. Changes in the deep grammar of culture are rarely traced to art, but I will argue here that this is in fact a highly significant and much overlooked dimension. I am not alone in this. As early as 1579, the Italian Catholic missionary to Japan, Alessandro Valignano, argued for the cultivation of the arts as a vital way of conveying the new world view of Christianity to the Japanese and set about creating what today would be considered an art school to train Japanese artisans in the iconography and techniques of Christian art (understood as based on largely western models at that time) as a major part of that missionary endeavour.

The Body in the Production of Modernity

Christianity is very much a 'religion of the book', and many studies of conversion to Christianity assume that it is through hearing that the missionary message is primarily conveyed.³ But an approach through art suggests that this is only partially true. As suggested above in the case of Buddhism, the circulation of images has proved to be a highly significant form of cultural, religious, and artistic translation, quite apart from or supplementing the circulation of texts. And it is often forgotten that religious texts are usually replete with visual imagery, the Bible itself being an exemplar. The conveying of religious messages through a largely visual 'vocabulary', particularly to a nonliterate or very young audience (as any Sunday School teacher would know), is actually quite common (the Buddhist Jataka tales for example, often presented in the form of murals on temple walls). But the issue here is not this 'visual methodology' of missionary or educational activity, but what those visual images contain and communicate, not just at the level of the 'message', but at much more subliminal levels, particularly when they are reinterpreted in terms of both local belief systems and local visual cultures. What might these subliminal levels be? 'Another' (that is nonfamiliar art form) is likely to contain, in various mixtures, at least some of the following: differing canons of beauty; alternative ways of depicting femininity (contrast for example more conventional Catholic depictions of the Virgin Mary with the Indian depictions of the pantheon of Hindu goddesses or mythological figures or the figure of the 'goddess of mercy', Guan Yin in Chinese and *Kannon* in Japanese); local depictions using familiar Indian

3 Christopher Lamb and Darrol Bryant, eds, *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999).

or Chinese iconography; new ways of depicting the body; new symbols, many totally unfamiliar (the cross for example); new objects that play instrumental roles in new and unfamiliar forms of ritual; and new visual geographies, with unknown and culturally unfamiliar parts of the world becoming suddenly projected to the forefront of a new sacred history and geography. Here I will focus on just one of these as the primary example—notably depictions of the body.

Changing depictions of the body imply changing conceptions of the body, and such conceptions are at the heart of religious representations. William LaFleur, a scholar of the Japanese religion, speaks of this issue as ‘specifying the gap between conceptualizing religious duty as acceptance of the received body and what we have called here the practice of religious re-design of the body’.⁴ The ‘redesign’ of the human body is an important aspect of modernity: diets, concepts of beauty, fitness and fashion, and the awkward reality of death and ageing in a culture where the youthful body is the ideal; this is reflected at many levels in religious discourses. Consider some of the bodily issues of concern to Christianity and many other religions and consequently depicted in religious art: medical technologies and images of the body (the heart as the seat of emotions for example) and various forms of bodily ‘discipline’ or mutilation related to this, such as flagellation, scarification, circumcision, mortifications of various kinds, including of course fasting. Meditation, yoga, and a concern with ‘correct’ appropriate postures (including during prayer) represent another category. Sacrifice, martyrdom, the acceptance of pain and vulnerability, and the practice of ascetic deprivations and methods of self-chastisement, leading in extreme cases to what Rudolph Bell calls ‘holy anorexia’ provide yet further instances. As Caroline Walker Bynum points out in her excellent historical study of such issues, these aspects of bodily culture are very much tied up with gender (it is usually women who become anorexic) and concerns with sexuality that, while not unique to Christianity, are very much an aspect of its teaching and relationship to society and the wider world.⁵ At the same time, she points out that in medieval women’s mysticism (as opposed to the formal patriarchal church teachings), body and soul are not opposed to each other, and a great deal of bodily and even erotic symbolism appears in the writings and poetry of female mystics, both then and in subsequent eras.

4 William R. LaFleur, ‘Body’, in Mark C. Taylor, ed, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 36–45 at p. 36.

5 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

In his introduction to a book on religion and the body, the late Ioan P. Culianu⁶ notes that different metaphors have structured approaches to the body during the history of Christianity, circulating around tropes of sexuality (and notions of danger, fear, and mistrust), nutrition (notions of plenty as defining the Promised Land or the Kingdom of God contrasting with concerns with fasting, deprivation, and mortification), symbols and representations of the body (often the suffering or crucified one) and what he calls 'biology' or the location of the human body in relation to nature and other animals. The immediate connection of all this to the pursuit of modernity is through what the cultural historian Norbert Elias called the 'civilizing process'—the means through which 'higher' levels of civilization are progressively achieved, in large part through changes in eating habits as well as through more 'refined' forms of fashion and art. The great German sociologist Max Weber famously saw the process of modernization as one of the progressive rationalization and disenchantment of the world. But while some studies of conversion to Christianity have seen it in terms of promoting modernity through integration into global political and economic configurations,⁷ another perspective is to see religion itself as a major form of 're-enchantment' and religious art, with its ability to depict alternative scenarios, as one of the principal means of achieving that re-enchantment. One is tempted to construct a typology of religions in terms of an art or enchantment spectrum with Hinduism at one end (elaborate visual culture, high levels of enchantment) and with Islam and many forms of Protestant Christianity at the other (rationalized, word or /text oriented, and with few examples of exuberant religious art; calligraphy and architecture being the main forms of Islamic artistic expression and some forms of more fundamentalist Christianity having virtually none, and being indeed in many cases actively antiart).

Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling in their book on the relationship between religion, community, and modernity,⁸ while referring primarily to western expressions of religion, identify a range of issues. One significant issue is the transformation of what they characterize as the 'volatility, sensuousness and

6 Ioan P. Culianu, 'Introduction: The Body Examined', in Jane Marie Law, ed, *Religious Reflections on the Human Body* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 1–18.

7 Peter Van der Veer, ed, *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

8 Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling, *Reforming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity* (London: Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage, 1997).

dynamic religious potentialities of medieval bodies'⁹ to the 'Protestant modern body' with its contrasting emphasis on bodily control, modest dress, frugal diets, regimented lifestyles, and fear of or preoccupation with sexuality, the ambiguous position of women and their exclusion from religious offices, the emergence of the idea of the sinful body, and stress on the word rather than on the image as the main means of religious communication. The exploration of such themes in the context of Asian religions, and specifically of the expansion of Christianity poses a profoundly interesting comparative project, in which as Mellor and Shilling note, art, or what they prefer to refer to as the image, plays a vital role in the creation of new bodily regimes.

The subject of conversion is itself an excellent way to explore the relationship between a new aesthetic and deep individual and cultural changes. Current studies of (Christian) conversion have rightly noted that such conversion is not only 'cerebral' but also involves integration into a global community, a global economic and political context (hence the idea that Christianity is one of the earliest forms of globalization). Of great significance in relation to the argument of this paper is the fact that conversion features assimilation to new forms of 'enchantment', new ways of visualizing faith, since the practice of the new belief system will involve participation in rituals with appropriate vestments, ritual objects, music, and forms of body language. It will also entail accommodation of a new set of symbols and images and the acceptance of a new narrative of salvation, quite apart from the possibility of adopting new diets (or abandoning old ones), dress codes, and art with which to adorn one's home. This can take rather negative forms too. I have personally been in the home of a Singaporean Chinese convert to Christianity who had destroyed all the Chinese-style paintings that had previously hung on the walls of his house, on the grounds that they could harbour demons. Many other former adherents of Buddhism and Chinese 'folk' religions showed similar extreme reactions to not only the visual representations of their former religion but even many aspects of its visual culture in general. This is perhaps not totally surprising, since much popular art in China and India does indeed depict gods, demons, and mythological figures, the three categories often being more or less indistinguishable in practice.

The case of Buddhism is instructive in this context. As Morgan Pitelka notes, visuality and materiality were vital components in the transmission of Buddhism, which should not be thought of as a fixed body of religious teachings, but as 'a set of practices anchored to a transportable body of material culture.

9 Mellor, *Reforming the Body*, p. 41.

Even texts become art works with a particularly powerful materiality'.¹⁰ Although the same idea has not been applied systematically to the transmission of Christianity in Asia, my argument here is that the situation is essentially the same, the main difference being that Christianity, drawing on the western roots of its missionary communities, favoured painting (a major European art form), whereas Buddhism inclined to sculpture and ritual implements, even though painting, and particularly the mural form and the *mandala*, does indeed exist in that tradition. It is here too that we see different modes of embodiment represented—the sitting Buddha or the crucified Christ, the hand gestures of the Buddha represented in almost all Buddhist sculpture as opposed to the prayer positions represented in much Christian art, and so forth. Conversion is the learning of a new bodily 'language' as well as a new set of beliefs, and the information about the 'correct' postures and gestures are largely conveyed through the medium of artistic representations and performances, the latter often in the form of ritual.

Art as Cultural or Religious Translation

Art in the situation of the transmission of religion can thus be seen as a form of 'translation', since the visual imagery of an initially 'alien' art tradition has to be understood not cognitively but as a (sometimes radical) shift in perspective (as indeed happened when perspective in the literal sense was discovered and applied in western and later in Chinese painting). Historian of Asian art John Clark has argued that artists have been not marginal to the process of the emergence of modernity in Asia but central to its formulation, transmission, and assimilation. As he suggests, 'Thus in one sense the artist becomes a kind of technical specialist who carries knowledge of a local visual discourse into that of an "other", and then back into the new virtual, imagined space of a synthetic visual discourse outside the original one, or actually back into the original and more specifically art discourse from which he or she had emerged'.¹¹ But he rightly goes on to caution that while it is commonplace to talk about

10 Morgan Pitelka, 'Wrapping and Unwrapping Art', in Jan Mrazek and Morgan Pitelka, eds, *What's the Use of Art? Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), pp. 1–18 at p. 14.

11 John Clark, 'Asian Artists as Long-distance Cultural Specialists in the Formation of Modernities', in Fuyubi Nakamura, Morgan Perkins, and Olivier Krischer, eds, *Asia through Art and Anthropology: Cultural Translation Across Borders* (London and New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 19–32.

art as a 'language', it is not in the same sense as actual (verbal and written) language since 'art is not like language in that its meanings, for a given universe of discourse, cannot, without iconographic or ideological filtering, be subject to check or exercised toward semantic transparency. Part of the semiotic usefulness of art as a medium is that it can remain ambiguous, or it can have areas of ambiguity for different sets of belief at the same time. These allow for the generation of different sets of meanings from the same work; meaning under conditions of translation is transacted or negotiated'.¹²

In the context of Asian Christian art, this can mean several things. These include wholesale copying of the new imported styles without in any way understanding or accepting their inner meaning; generating hybrid styles where the new visual conventions are assimilated up to a point but combined with aspects of the old or indigenous visual culture which the artist is unwilling to relinquish; accepting the new visual style as a necessary component of conversion to the new religion; modifying the new iconography in subtle local ways while retaining the formal correspondence to the western prototypes; or, as happened in Korea, using an indigenous form of the art of Christianity to reflect the suffering of the Koreans under authoritarian Japanese colonialism, paradoxically at the same time as the Japanese were busy assimilating western modernist art. In the missionary encounter, many would see the introduction of western art as itself a form of spiritual colonialism. However, artistic encounters between nations have also had profound healing effects, as in the dialogues between Japanese and North American artists after the end of the Pacific War—a series of encounters that led to artistic influences flowing both ways between the two former belligerents.

The concept of artistic 'translation' then necessarily differs from that of linguistic translation, in large part because of the differences between art forms and language pointed out by Clark. While there are certainly parallels, as is evident in literary translation (and especially of poetry), art (and here again we are speaking primarily of the visual arts) has its own special features. These include its ability to create new imaginary spaces which are inhabited through the slightly mysterious psychological process of entering into a world suggested by a visual image. When those new spaces have to be quite literally imagined since their geography, botany, and symbolic content are alien to the observer, then the process of the symbolic construction of new spaces and concepts of time is initiated. The connection of this to religion is immediate. As Pnina Werbner and Mattia Fumanti point out in their study of what they

12 Clark, 'Asian Artists', in Nakamura, Perkins, and Krischer, eds, *Asia through Art and Anthropology: Cultural Translation Across Borders*, p. 23.

term the ‘aesthetics of diaspora’,¹³ this process involves a new form of ‘being-in-the-world’ in which a remaking of subjectivities and imaginaries is initiated and a new relationship created between what they call the sensuous and the ontological,¹⁴ or in other words, between a visual and sensory culture (which can include such elements as music, incense, vestments, lights) and a new way of being—a new existential relationship to what was once a familiar world and is now displaced by the discovery of an ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic alternative. Art objects, whether created from purely aesthetic motives or as ritual or magical ones, mediate between humanity and the phenomenological world, and as such provide a means by which we come to ‘know’ the world as well as construct ideas of what constitutes the self. The assimilation of art involves a new vocabulary of the senses—of ways of seeing light, of imagining new forms of beings (angels, demons, gods) and the means of representing them, of hearing (new music and forms of vocal practice), and even of smell, taste, and touch—subjects that have only recently begun to be taken seriously in wider anthropologies of the sensory. All of these require a reframing of the relationship between the body and its environment, the basic ontological relationship that has to be (re)learnt as an outcome of conversion.

It is perhaps significant that many manifestations of Christian practice until recently and except for some Pentecostal groups, have tended to shy away from dance, theatre, and nonliturgical music as art forms, since these are implicated in a different way from the visual arts in what Werbner and Fumanti call ‘the totality of human sensuous production and appreciation’ and are less manageable in their effects in a ‘religious’ context.¹⁵ The creation of a ‘sensory anthropology’ that Werbner and Fumanti call for has evidently many levels when seen as a frame with which to capture the ontological consequences of the spread of Christian art. These include displacement of vernacular aesthetics by a new set of visual and performative conventions as well as sociological ones such as the place of the Christian artist in what may remain a largely non-Christian social milieu, or indeed of the non-Christian producer of Christian artefacts in such a society. Further consequences include the complex psychological and spiritual outcomes of what we might term the mixing of imaginaries, as quite different

13 Pnina Werbner and Mattia Fumanti, ‘The Aesthetics of Diaspora: Sensual Milieus and Literary Worlds’, in Raminder Kaur and Parul Dave-Mukherji, eds, *Art and Aesthetics in a Globalizing World*. (London and Delhi: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 153–68.

14 Werbner, ‘Aesthetics of Diaspora’, in Kaur and Dave-Mukherji, eds, *Art and Aesthetics in a Globalizing World*, p. 156.

15 Werbner, ‘Aesthetics of Diaspora’, in Kaur and Dave-Mukherji, eds, *Art and Aesthetics in a Globalizing World*, p. 158.

visual systems interact with each other (a dynamic process, not a one-time contact) and the attraction of the other and its artefacts, the distant but clearly powerful culture of the alien.

Migration of the Image/Transformation of the Self and Body

But copying is not the only issue. Let me restate the thesis of this paper in a very clear way. A visual culture brought into contact with another such culture has immense effects not only on art itself but also on the sense of self, body, and the relationship of the self to others. It has effects also on the approach to nature, death, femininity, illness and its causes and meaning, martyrdom, and sacred and secular geography. The visual then is not a mere epiphenomenon of society: it shapes it; it reflects deep cultural levels that may not be accessible by other means. Art is in a sense the 'psychoanalysis of society' and is in many ways more so than is religion. For, art rarely directly or consciously aims at uncovering or changing deep emotions and attitudes. But precisely because of its less obvious relationship to such deep cultural levels, it is actually more spontaneous in its power to reveal. Although students of social movements rarely consider either their artistic dimensions (although most express themselves through such means as posters, music, and theatre) or consider art movements to be social movements in their own right, investigation suggests that most social movements are also cultural ones and could have never succeeded without their profoundly cultural dimension. Emotions and radical action are rarely stimulated by propaganda but by much deeper levels of motivation that may be far from rational in origin. While this is true of political movements, it is even more so in the case of religious ones.

Some significant issues arise from this debate. I will attempt to outline the main theoretical challenges that the study of Christian art in Asia poses—and suggest that these are spread across art history, geopolitics, the characterization of modernity, conversion studies, the sociology of the body, theology, and cultural studies. Space does not allow a detailed examination of all of these, but I will sketch the contours of a model that relates them in hopefully creative ways. In the field of what used to be called area studies, much debate has centred on the definition and formation of the areas demarcated—'the Middle East', 'Southeast Asia', and so forth, and on the political (usually colonial) processes that brought such academically defined areas into existence. Some would argue that even the concept of whole continents is a myth. One way to approach this question is of course to examine the discourses through which such areas, in this case Asia, came into being. These prove to be political,

mercantile, artistic, and religious. In the latter case, the thesis has been advanced that not only whole geographical areas but also whole religions were, in a sense, brought into being through colonial and missionary categorization, a good example being Hinduism, originally a diffused set of local practices and beliefs given coherence (and a name) not through its own internal evolution but because of Western missionary formulations that required something distinct against which Christianity could be contrasted.¹⁶

Christian art represents a wonderful case study of such processes of diffusion and reception of visual cultures, of images as the bearers of ideas, and of resulting social, cultural, spiritual, and psychological transformations. These processes, of course, were not confined to Christian art: the spread of Buddhism from its homeland to Southeast and East Asia was carried out by similar means, as was its intra-Asian spread (from China and Korea to Japan for example, as analyzed by Cynthia Bogel), and a similar process can be seen in the 'Hinduization' of Southeast Asia.¹⁷ So much so that the historian of Southeast Asian art H.G. Quaritch-Wales has argued that the art history of the region is the best (and in the absence of written documents, the only) way to study comparative religion and the spread of religious influences.¹⁸ Yet clearly the new imaginary represented by Christianity was not easily accepted: Christianity remains very much a minority religion in all of Asia except the Philippines and the partial exception of Korea. In the former case (a society approximately 93% Christian), there had been little prior impact of the great Asian religious traditions (in particular Buddhism and Hinduism). Spanish colonization was accompanied by aggressive evangelization supported by church-building, the creation of the *encomienda* system whereby large estates were granted to influential converts, and the existing visual culture was largely tribal in origin and nature. In the latter case, Christianity was in a sense a religion of resistance and precisely to Japanese colonialism with its own complex dynamics: a "Western" religion being deployed by Asians against the cultural and political encroachments of an Asian neighbour, while Korean artists (some of them Christians) were being trained in Japanese art schools where they were learning the latest western art trends and techniques.

16 S.N. Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in His Blindness ... Asia, the West and the Dynamics of Religion* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994).

17 Bogel, 'Situating Moving Objects'; O.W. Wolters, 'History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives' (Ithaca: Cornell, Southeast Asia Program, *Studies on Southeast Asia*, No. 26 and Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies).

18 H.G. Quaritch-Wales, *The Making of Greater India* (London: B. Quaritch, 1961).

We are dealing then with a phenomenon much more complex than that of so-called ‘rice Christians’—if not exactly ‘art Christians’ then at least individuals and communities who found that they could relate in new ways to a powerful and expanding modernity, and through it, at the expense of radically changing their imaginaries, to new occupations, forms of architecture, dress, diet, understandings of nature, death, the afterlife, and many other dimensions of being and embodiment. But such cultural shifts also brought the risk of cultural displacement and social exclusion from the ongoing indigenous life of their communities of origin. Much of this debate has most recently been encapsulated in the concepts of identity and identity politics. This is a complex issue. As I am suggesting here, visual culture also enters deeply into such definitions of identity (externalized precisely through the arts and architecture, as well as diet, dress, and language). The relationship between all these elements is perpetually fluid and dynamic. In the case of Japan, a curious dialogue has emerged between western orientalist images and “self-Orientalizing” by Japan which has paradoxically fallen back on such a process in resisting orientalist images. Furthermore, Christian art objects, like those of any religious system, are not simply contemplative: they do things, in ritual contexts for example. The assimilation of a new ritual process involves the learning of new bodily techniques, postures, gestures, movements, use of strange furniture or clothing, times of silence or speech, and the appropriate manipulation of the ritual objects—in fact a whole choreography, usually at variance with the familiar former forms. This is equally true as we have suggested throughout the visual arts. As Cynthia Bogel neatly puts it in her study of the diffusion of Buddhism:

Visual culture offers a concrete veracity that ideas and philosophies cannot convey. Paintings, statues, and other objects may be copied or generate visually related representations that refer to the “original” in ways that ideas and doctrines cannot. Unlike the questioning and occasional skepticism that greeted Kukai’s teachings or the messages of the imported Mikkyo texts, the objects themselves were accepted more readily. The reasons for this have to do with the different ways in which visual culture is received from texts. Texts reify doctrine and philosophy, which have relatively little visual or functional embellishment.¹⁹

This is all true, but it should be pointed out that there are also significant differences in the case of Christian art. China is close to Japan, its language was

19 Bogel, ‘Situating Moving Objects’, in Mrazek and Pitelka, eds, *What’s the Use of Art? Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context*, p. 150.

known to the educated elite, and it had no political ambitions to colonize its smaller neighbour, except perhaps in a cultural sense. But in the case of Christianity, none of these conditions applied: its sources were far away, its languages unknown, its commercial and political ambitions suspicious, the ethnicity and appearance of its representatives quite alien, and the ideas of its religion quite at variance with most local forms of belief. The assimilation of its visual culture with its different modes of representation provided an existential challenge somewhat beyond those of the acceptance of Buddhist or Hindu forms of culture and world view. In one real sense then, whether or not Christianity formed modern Asia, it certainly paved the way for the appearance of modernity in Asia—the rise of new economic relationships, new forms of bureaucracy, and the virtual hegemony of western science, and certainly new ways of presenting, dressing, and comporting the body.

Christian art, as it pervaded many levels of Asian society historically, and continues to do so, has had profound transformative effects. Art historians have traced the stylistic dimensions of this (for example, the emergence of *Namban* art, or Japanese art depicting foreigners and foreign themes, and the influence of the Jesuit school of painting). My concern here has been rather different: to model those transformative effects not on art forms themselves but on imaginaries, and to argue that the profound changes in those imaginaries of Asian visual artists had multiple effects on conceptions of the self, the body and its depiction, and a large range of other dimensions of culture, across notions of death and illness to ideas of costume and posture. It is important methodologically to grasp that this is not (just) a question of ‘impact’, or of what an older school of anthropology used to term ‘culture contact’. In reality it represents a complex dance of mutual influences, with Asian Christian art modifying artistic ideas in the west and with a constant negotiation of techniques, the vocabulary of images and the subtle influences on modes of representation and self-representation. This can be seen in empirical studies of individual artists, Christian and otherwise, both encountering new modes of visual culture and, in some cases, migrating to new sources (places) of artistic inspiration.²⁰ The anthropologist Eric Schwimmer has called such subtle mutual influences (thinking in his case of the Maori culture of New Zealand in its interpenetration with the intrusive culture of European migrants and settlers) as ‘semiospheres’ in which radically different ontologies are forced to confront

20 John Clammer, “Migrating Art/Migrating Artists: Intra-Asian Movement, New Asian Arts and New Sociologies of Artistic Consumption and Education”. In *Mori Art Museum: Global Art and Diasporic Art in Japan and Asia*. MAM Documents 002: (Tokyo: Mori Art Museum, 216), pp. 246–256.

one another, and in many cases to rethink their own cultural and spiritual identities through exactly the complex process of negotiation that has been the subject of this paper.²¹

These negotiations the painter and art critic Bracha Lichtenberg Etinger has very succinctly summarized in one of her own works:

Artists continually introduce into culture all kinds of Trojan horses from the margins of their consciousness; in that way the limits of the Symbolic are transgressed all the time by art. It is quite possible that many work-products carry subjective traces of their creators, but the specificity of works of art is that their materiality cannot be detached from ideas, perceptions, emotions, consciousness, cultural meaning and that being interpreted and reinterpreted is their cultural destiny. This is one of the reasons why works of art are symbiogenic.²²

Today discourse and methodology in the social sciences faced with the phenomenon of globalization have increasingly moved towards a model less of regions and borders than of 'transcultures'—transborder imaginaries, routes, flows, multiple forms of modernity achieved or emergent, deterritorialization, and constant redefinition of identities, political, social, and cultural.²³ It may well be that 'Asia' has always been such an area of negotiation, and that an important aspect of that negotiation has been the contact between visual cultures and the world views, ontologies and sets of practice that they reflect. Among the forces at work in this arena has been Christian art, not only as a stylistic innovator but also as a deep transformer of imaginaries and the subjectivities that they shape. This paper then represents an experiment: a modest attempt to give name and shape to a vast field (historically and geographically) and to point towards a model that might lead to a rethinking of the role of the visual in the transmission and reception of religion, and its impact on the subsequent religious life of those societies that have, at least in part, accepted Christianity as part of their complex and evolving cultural identities.

21 Eric Schwimmer, 'Making a World: The Maori of Aotearoa/New Zealand', in John Clammer, Sylvie Poirier, and Eric Schwimmer, eds, *Figured Worlds: Ontological Obstacles in Intercultural Relations* (Toronto and London: Toronto University Press, 2004), pp. 243–74.

22 Bracha Lichtenberg Etinger, 'Matrix and Metamorphosis', *Difference*, 4: 2 (1992), pp. 176–96 at 196.

23 Joseph M. Chan and Eric Ma, (2002) "Transculturating Modernity: A Reinterpretation of Cultural Globalization". In Joseph M. Chan and Bruce McIntyre (eds.) *In Search of Boundaries: Communication, Nation-States and Cultural Identities* (Westport, CN and London: Ablex Publishing, 2002), pp. 3–18.

Appendix

For examples of illustrative art works from historical periods, the interested reader is invited to consult the magnificent compendium edited by Alan Chong with examples that specifically illustrate the argument of this paper related to vestments (pp. 18 and 23), copies by Asian artists of classical western paintings (pp. 25, 61, and 87), adaptation of western models to Asian expectations (pp. 83, 85, 88, 95, and 98).²⁴ Examples of furniture may be located at pp. 130, 185, and 226, and distinctly Asian representations of posture and costume on pp. 143, 159, and 194. Extensive visual presentation of Indian examples can be found in Anand Amaladass and Gudrun Löwner.²⁵ For examples of contemporary Asian Christian art, see Masao Takenaka, Ron O'Grady and T.K. Thomas.²⁶ For extensive discussion of both historical and contemporary Christian art in India, see George Plathottam SBD.²⁷

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- 25 Anand S.J. Amaladass and Gudrun Löwner, *Christian Themes in Indian Art* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2012).
- 26 Masao Takenaka, Ron O'Grady, and T.K. Thomas, *Your Kingdom Come* (Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia in cooperation with the Asian Christian Art association, 1980).
- 27 George Plathottam SBD, ed, *Christian Art and Indian Cultural Patterns* (Shillong: Don Bosco Publications, 2016).

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