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# THE FAÇADE OF ST PAUL'S IN MACAO REFLECTS CHRISTIAN, CONFUCIAN AND BUDDHIST SPIRITUALITY

## 澳门大三巴牌坊所反映的 基督教、儒学和佛教的精神内涵

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### ABSTRACT

The 17th century Portuguese church of St. Paul's in Macao has long been destroyed except for its façade. Once, it was part of a large complex that comprised a college which has been displaced by urban development. The preserved and recently renovated ruins of St. Paul's façade however have been added to the list of the UNESCO world heritage sites.

The façade's exposed location above Macao's old city centre made it an ideal canvas for the encounter of Asian and Western spiritualities, for an encounter of trade, cultures, and people and for an encounter of Macao's colonial past with Macao's present status as favoured special trading area of China. It is in this façade where Christian, Confucian and Buddhist spiritualities interact and where they have left a monument that illustrates an harmonious and mutual enrichment among these cultures.

### THE MAIN STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ST PAUL'S FAÇADE

**B**efore reaching the almost 70 square feet large façade of the 17th century Portuguese church of St. Paul's in Macao a visitor will have to climb 130 steps on a staircase that resembles those used for important imperial administrative buildings. The façade has been funded by local Macanese citizens as the inscription at the base

RELIGION 宗教

of St. Paul's façade attests: "VIRGINI MAGNAE MATRI CIVITAS MACAENSIS LIBENS POSVIT AN. 1602" Great Virgin Mother placed gladly by the city of the Macanese. Year 1602.

Granite has been used as the main construction material for the façade. Coordinated by Jesuits, craftsmen from Japan as well as neighbouring Chinese provinces were recruited to decorate the façade with carvings while local foundrymen contributed the numerous statues that are placed in the façade's bays. The façade is

human and divine. Thus, whereas the Holy Spirit depicted in the pediment above Jesus belongs purely to the transcendent and divine sphere, it is Mary who represents human life on earth and whose statue is situated in the third storey below Jesus. The façade thus visually represents Christian spirituality where Jesus is paradoxically and mysteriously both human and divine.

The façade has some resemblance to a triumphal arch while at the same time it is also a main architectural feature of the former church

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composed of four storeys that are supported by columns as well as a pediment which in turn is topped by a large iron cross. Dedicated to the Holy Virgin Mary whose statue is in the centre bay of the third storey, the façade's balustrades are decorated with obelisks next to which stone lions are placed that are carved in the style of Buddhist temple lions.

#### THE FAÇADE ILLUSTRATES CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY IN AN ASIAN STYLE

Christian spirituality is especially manifest in the façade's main statues which are arranged according to the religious hierarchy from the second storey over the fourth and up to the pediment. Thus, Jesuit saints on the second storey are not only below the statue of the Holy Virgin Mary, but their statues are also smaller than her's, signifying the larger devotion to the Mother of God to whom the former church had been dedicated. In the fourth storey the infant Jesus as the *Salvator Mundi*, is overshadowed by the dove that represents the Holy Spirit in the pediment on the very top of the structure. This arrangement is a reminder of the incarnation of Jesus who, according to Christian belief, is both

that once connected the outside of the church with its interior. As the façade mirrors the arrangement of the saints that has been reported for the inside of St. Paul's church, the entirety of the façade resembles a retable, i.e. a projection to the outside of the environment around the altar inside of the church. Similar to this hybrid functionality the façade's statues display characteristics of a hybrid style that comprises Chinese as well as European features. This means that it is not only their overall appearance that resembles Chinese art work but also more concretely their clothing that appears to be swinging to a windy breeze or resembling scroll painting, which illustrates Chinese influence in executing the representation of these Christian and Western religious missionaries. Both these marks indicate that the artists have responded in a Chinese way to the instructions of the Jesuit architects for decorating the façade. Or, in other words, the Christian spirituality of Catholic faith has been transposed due to the craftsmen's own Chinese and Japanese spiritualities thus forming these hybrid style statues.

The statues were not only cast of bronze but, unusually, they have been additionally gilded to even further enhance the statues' appearance, the faces and even the hands of the statues of

the saints are thought to have been painted. The result is that the overall appearance of the façade becomes further enhanced as the façade's orientation to the East results in the dawn sun being reflected from these gilded statues.

THE GOLDEN FAÇADE AS AN  
INVITATION TO MEDITATION OR A  
DEMONSTRATION OF WEALTH

The golden reflection of the façade's statues already at sunrise can appear as an invitation to the Buddhist's meditation on *The Sutra on Contemplation of Amitāyus* (Inagaki & Stewart, 2006, pp. 68–79). There, it is the sunset on which the devout Buddhist focuses the mind in order to enter through a series of prescribed steps to different levels and intricacies of the pure land. Once perfected this Buddhist meditation will lead to enlightenment. The golden appearance of the façade is not only an impressive sight but also a reminder for Buddhists

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of access to enlightenment along the rays of the sun. In this way the façade's appearance not only offers Christians an indication to an entrance of a splendid church but also offers to Buddhists a reminder of their meditation methods to arrive at enlightenment. The façade, from this perspective, is a canvas upon which both spiritualities can find their expression.

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the old city centre, the façade not only reflects spiritual confluence but also quite literally and materially Macao's Golden Age in which its prosperous inhabitants could afford financing such an elaborate artwork in which international craftsmen complemented the work of local artisans.

Indeed, in a recent publication on the façade by the local government it is noted carefully that "these bronze statues placed in the niches were cast in Macao by Manuel Tavares Bocarro in the cannon and bell foundry which he had in this city (Couceiro, 1990, p.20). Even though this governmental publication does not give further details about the origin of this knowledge, there had already been an earlier Western publication dating from 1948 which referred to the skills of the local craftsmen who produced the statues in Macao<sup>1</sup>.

In other words, like the founder stone's testament to the Macanese builders, the local population does not consider the façade and its statues being delivered to the Portuguese colonialists as if they as citizens of Macao had been contributors or contractors, but rather, this statement indicates that the façade is considered as belonging to the Macanese. The mind of the local Confucian and Buddhist cultures arrived at subsuming the initially Christian design without having to demolish or alter it, but by simply expressing the proposed artistic concepts into their own context.

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY COMPATIBLE  
WITH CONFUCIAN THOUGHT REFLECTED IN  
ASIAN CRAFTSMANSHIP

A possibility for the appropriation of the Western Jesuit-led design of the façade into the Confucian context may be illustrated in the hierarchical structuring of the architectural features of the façade. The emphasis on vertical and central components of the façade's European design also resonates with Confucian thoughts

<sup>1</sup> "While we can say nothing about the bronze statues of the Jesuits saints except that they are Baroque in style, and were cast at the local foundry of Manuel Tavares Bocarro..." John E. McCall, "Early Jesuit Art in the Far East IV: In China and Macao before 1635," *Artibus Asiae* 11, no. 1/2 (1948), 65.

about well-order which is, for example, present in the centralised Chinese administration during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). As Chinese administration is founded on highly trained officials who are steeped in Confucianism, recognising the highly-structured façade may have helped to make it more acceptable to the local Chinese administration.

More precisely, it is the successive arrangement of the complexity of the architectural styles of the columns which becomes more and more elaborate in the direction from bottom to top: Ionic for the first, Corinthian for the second, and a Composite style for both the third and fourth stories. Even the arrangement of the doors echoes order and it emphasises the central door in having the centre door's flanking columns arranged such that they form a strict

different spiritualities as well as diverse ideas from design, artistic representation and practical craftsmanship.

There are, for example, the Cypress and fountain, which surround the Holy Virgin Mary, representing longevity as well as mourning (Cypress) and the fountain of life, respectively. Thus, these two carvings enhance the theological depiction of Mary as the Virgin who bore Jesus and who suffered Jesus' loss even though her assumption into heaven transferred longevity to her. Like all other carvings, the fountain and the cypress are not exact copies of Western tradition but they also resemble an amalgamation of styles and are thus bearing witness to their multicultural background as well as to the possibility of expressing Christian spirituality in an Asian context.

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rhythm of 2-2, 1-1, 2-2. This rhythm is thus not only illustrating an emphasis on the centre but in maintaining a symmetrical balance it also resonates with the Confucian sense of harmony.

The façade is not only a Christian reference towards the transcendent, i.e. towards God, but the hierarchical and structural organisation of the façade may also resonate with the Confucian understanding of a well-structured state. The Christian representation of the divinely endowed hierarchy may also be interpreted and appropriated within the Confucian context as an illustration of the natural order within society.

Further expanding the artistic representation of Christian spirituality are the sculptural artefacts that surround the statues, which serve as anchors for this Christian hierarchy. The serene depiction of Jesus as *Salvator Mundi* surrounded by the instruments of his torturous crucifixion is flanked by carvings which are peculiarly indicative of the intermingling of

There are also depictions of a monster that represents the Beast of the Apocalypse which is situated to the right and immediately next to the Cypress tree on the third storey. The Holy Virgin is trampling on the head of this Beast of the Apocalypse as well as on a demon or devil. The style of these beasts bars any exact classification or description: the Apocalyptic Beast seems to comprise a head that is made up of Asian bearded monster heads, and a Western devil head, while tail, body and claws of that Beast all appear to come from different cultures' depictions of the evil and the wicked. Similarly, the devilish demon carved on the façade to the very left of the third storey, is an impressive collection of infernal and wicked body parts of which a whipping tail is opposed to some sneering teeth-filled muzzle. When Chinese, Buddhist and Christian thoughts about monsters converge, their graphical expression has been well accomplished on the façade. Even in representing evil, the façade

manages to accumulate characteristics of different cultures.

#### BUDDHIST SPIRITUALITY IN CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM

The façade of St. Paul's also reflects more explicitly Buddhist spirituality. One of these Buddhist influenced architectural features are the angels that surround Mary in the centre piece of the façade. Similarly, the bronze statues, these angels have been rendered by the façade's craftsmen in a hybrid character. As a matter of fact, they also resemble *apsaras* which are flying figures of Buddhist mythology (O'Malley, Bailey, and Sale, 2005 p. 332). This amalgamation of Christian and Buddhist spirituality is also displayed in the flowers that can be found throughout the basis of the columns of the third storey. While the government sponsored description of these flowers compares the flowers to chrysanthemum, the national flower of Japan, it is the Western scholar Guillen-Nuñez who identifies them as roses (Guillen-Nuñez, 2009, p.

It is the façade's multivalent artwork which renders the façade appealing to a vast number of spectators.

5). Thus, for some spectators these flowers may represent the influence of anonymous Japanese workers who had been hired to help the Chinese masons, while for other spectators these flowers might be associated with the theological theme of the façade such as the Assumption of Mary.

Buddhist symbolism that is readily identified is found in the "Chinese temple lions" (O'Malley et al, 2005), which are adjacent to the obelisks that crown the balustrades of the storeys. Like their counterparts on European churches, these gargoyles funnelled rainwater away from the structure. The Chinese temple lions do not show indications of structural hybridity such as the statues, angels or the flowers of the façade.

Rather, these gargoyles in the form of Chinese temple lions allow for different interpretations depending on the spiritual frame of reference. In Western understanding it is implied that gargoyles portray evil and thus any kind of animal or even grotesque structure could be sculpted by the craftsman to serve as gargoyles of the façade. In the Chinese mind however, these lions are a reminder of their role as protectors of important families and their buildings and thus also represent a symbol for status and wealth. Lions are also considered by Buddhists as protectors of dharma but these Chinese lions on the façade's balustrade invoke different meanings according to the spirituality of reference. However, common to all these meanings is their association with an important or even holy place that is guarded or adorned by such lions. In this way, even this detail of the façade's ornamentation offers insight into how a common physical sculpture offers more spiritual meaning than is immediately visible in its mere functionality: the façade shows a spiritual surplus of meanings beyond artistic beauty and functional convenience.

This ambivalence of the façade's artistry is not limited to such specific details as the lions, angels or flowers mentioned above. When looking at the façade in its entirety, the large number of carvings "recalls the great Buddhist cave temples of Yungang (fifth century) and Luoyang (seventh century), and their forceful carved images of Buddhist saints and guardian kings" (O'Malley et al, 2005). To an observer steeped in Buddhist spirituality the ornamentation of the façade recalls the Buddhist temples and thus the façade will signal to a Buddhist that the passage through this façade will give access to a sacred and holy place. On the other hand, from a Christian perspective, this retable façade is a reminder of the sanctuary surrounding of the former church. This association with a retable façade is further stimulated by the presence of a carving of candelabra on the third storey to the left of the angels that surround the Holy Virgin Mary. This candelabra alludes to the presence of the tabernacle which is inside the church where consecrated hosts are preserved. Together with the arrangement of Jesuit saints on the second

storey such that their positions correspond to those that had been found behind the main altar in the inside of the church, the Christian understanding of the façade marking a holy place is readily stimulated.

#### PRAGMATISM MERGES WITH SPIRITUALITY FOR THE NAVIGATORS

But it is not only spirituality that is represented on the façade of St. Paul's.

More particularly, it is the carving of a Portuguese caravel, which is on the third storey two niches to the left of the central image of Mary. The caravel combines diverse cultural aspects that merge worldly concerns with religious symbolism: while the carving of the ship indicates the importance of trade for Macao, the ship probably also refers to the " navigators", who were a group of seafaring merchants who met at the church of St. Paul's to ask for protection on their journeys

is integrating local Chinese artistic customs with European images which further helps to illustrate the hybridity of the artwork. It is the façade's multivalent artwork which renders the façade appealing to a vast number of spectators.

#### KANJI-LIKE CHARACTERS ON THE FAÇADE PASS ON CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY TO CHINESE AND BUDDHISTS

The façade is covered with sculptures that have been commissioned by Jesuits to represent Christian spirituality. Like the statues, the resulting artworks have taken on a hybrid nature that combines Asian and Western spirituality or borrows Buddhist art to express Christian spirituality such as the gargoyles in the form of lions. Beyond such an implicit melange of spiritualities and craftsmanship, the inscriptions on the façade tell even more explicitly of the encounter of Western and Asian spirituality.

The façade has become a monument to a harmonious interaction and a mutual enrichment of Christian, Buddhist and Confucian spirituality: a façade for all.

and to give thanks for those journeys which had been accomplished successfully (Couceiro, 1990, p. 19). Their patron, St. Francis Xavier, is also depicted on the façade of St. Paul's which thus connects the navigators visually to the façade by the depiction of Mary as the centre of their devotion (whose representation is repeated in the upper left corner of this niche), the depiction of their trade by the caravel and by the statue of their protector St. Francis Xavier.

Furthermore, the caravel is sailing on waves that resemble stylised Chinese clouds and within this representation of the ocean that is traversed by the caravel, there are Chinese carps<sup>2</sup>. Hence, the representation of the caravel

In the 17th century Latin was a universal scholarly language in the Western hemisphere. It is not only the Jesuit missionaries who chose Latin to indicate the name of the church over the portal of the façade's central gate. The Macanese merchants also chose Latin to commemorate the construction date and sponsorship of the façade. In this way the Macanese as well as the Jesuits, seem to have been able to rely on a common means of communication. On the other hand, the characters on the façade closely resemble Kanji characters, that is Chinese characters which have been adopted and integrated into the Japanese writing system. This is a strong indication that they have not been written by Chinese artists, but even so, the messages that they convey are properly translated Christian messages. While each of the characters is clearly recognisable, they vary occasionally between styles such as clerical script and regular scripts, even within one sentence. At

2 "Some of these features, such as the stylized treatment of the waves, the Chinese carp...are clear echoes of patterns found on Chinese ceramics and in other decorative arts." Gauvin Alexander Bailey, "With Much Gallantry and Ornamentation: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1561-1773," in *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542-1773* (University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2001), 86.

times their spatial arrangement is also unequal and thus interferes with a balanced caption that is characteristic for regular Chinese writing. It is therefore likely that the Christian missionaries employed Asian artists but not Chinese calligraphers to convey Christian spirituality. It is also appears that these Jesuits put great effort in transferring Christian insights into characters that were accessible to the literati, such as the Confucian administrators of the Ming dynasty. Their's and their craftsmen's efforts bear witness to the way in which Christian and Buddhist thinking can converge in Confucian representation. Or, in other words, how Confucian ways of thought

influence the way in which Christian spirituality is represented through craftsmen who were trained in a Buddhist environment.

Taken together, these characteristics epitomise the façade's canvas-like characteristic that shows Christian spirituality expressed through Asian art and the influence of Asian art on the representation of Christianity. The ultimate result is that the façade has become a monument to a harmonious interaction and a mutual enrichment of Christian, Buddhist and Confucian spirituality: a façade for all and as such, a monument towards the future of a harmonious culture.

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