

Marian Demotion: An Engraving of the Virgin and Child in Early Modern China and Problems of Cross-Cultural Translation

Images, the Jesuits believed, had a special power to communicate Christianity to potential converts unhindered by the obstacles of language or cultural difference. This fantasy of images as, in the words of Counter-Reformation thinker, Gabriele Paleotti, a ‘universal language’ able to move the unlettered or those who did not speak one’s language to piety motivated the Jesuits’ extensive use of visual material in their missionary activities.¹ A print in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, however, points to anxiety around, rather than confidence in, images used in missionary endeavours.² It provides evidence of when Alessandro Valignano’s (1539–1606) famous ideas about adapting Christianity to local cultures reached their limits and of how prints might be deployed to correct misapprehensions caused by parallels too easily drawn between different religions.³

The print in question is a small engraving by Rafael Sadeler II (1584–1632) of the Virgin and Child with inscriptions in Chinese characters naming Jesus and Mary that are set in two cartouches in the form of the crown of thorns and a rosary respectively. The print appears to be a rarity, as Hollstein does not list it in his catalogue of Dutch prints and I have yet to find further copies.⁴ Although the precise context for the creation of the engraving remains unclear, Sadeler had produced a range of images for the Jesuits while working in Munich in the early seventeenth century, including, most relevantly, for Nicolas Trigault’s (1577–1628) 1623 account of the Society’s mission in Japan (*De Christianis apud Iaponios triumphis*). Trigault had ventured to Munich in 1616 as Procurator seeking support from Maximilian I, Duke of Bavaria, for the Chinese mission. It was a successful fundraising expedition and the Duke furnished Trigault with gifts to help secure the favour of the Chinese emperor. Some of the Sadeler family’s prints were also likely the source for illustrations in the lavish book, *Jincheng shuxiang*, that was created in China but based on a book that travelled back to Asia with Trigault.⁵ Sadeler was also working for the Duke during this period, producing engravings for the *Bavaria Sancta* series (compiled between 1615–1627 by the Jesuit, Matthaus Rader) that celebrated the saints that came from the region in Southern Germany. Sadeler, then, collaborated quite extensively with the Jesuits during these years and it is possible that the Ashmolean image may have

even gone to China with Trigault. Indeed, it was likely Trigault who supplied Sadeler with the Chinese text, given that Maximillian Van der Sandt attributes the phrase *secunda gemma pretiosa* ('second most precious stone') to Trigault in a marginal note to the introduction of his 1631 *Maria Gemma Mystica*; a volume that also features an illustration with the same Chinese characters and Latin glosses as the Sadeler print.⁶

The Chinese characters in the image are accompanied both by a phonetic transcription and by a gloss of their semantic meaning. The translations operate, then, on two levels: *Maliya* (瑪利亞) and *Iesu* (耶穌) are loanwords that adapt the Latin *Iesu* and *Maria* to Chinese phonology, but given that the Chinese characters have meanings in and of themselves, this phonetic transfer generates additional semantic resonances through the specific characters selected. The results are words that approximate the sound of *Maria* and *Iesu* in Chinese and also capture something of these figures' significance within the Christian faith.

The characters that appear in the print were only one set of those available to the Jesuits. Indeed, Michele Ruggieri's translation of the *Ave Maria* from 1584 used different characters (媽利呀) for the same sounds (if not the same tones) for Mary.⁷ The first character in Ruggieri's rendition (媽, *ma*, mother) emphasizes Mary's role as a mother. By comparison, the rendition presented in the Ashmolean engraving—and which became standard from Matteo Ricci's (1552–1610) time in China onwards—might strike the reader as odd: 'second most precious stone' (*secunda gemma pretiosa*) does not immediately conjure the grandeur of the Queen of Heaven, Mother of God, or any other of Mary's many early modern *antonomasia*. The reason behind the new and seemingly peculiar translation can be attributed to a broader problem faced by the Jesuits with the reception of Mary in China during this period. And this problem provides the key to understanding the purpose of the Sadeler engraving.

As has been well documented, images of the Virgin Mary were especially popular in the Chinese mission. Similarities between both the iconography and the role of Mary and those of the Buddhist Bodhisattva, Guanyin, meant that images of Mary resonated with potential converts.⁸ For

instance, the iconography of Guanyin also figured her as a mother and as an intercessor for sailors, just as Mary was known as the *stella maris*. The problem was that the line between the Virgin and Guanyin became blurred and adoration of the figure of Mary by the Chinese came with the unfortunate corollary that Jesus was neglected. In accepting the Mother of God, the Chinese tended to forget about the Son of God, who should have been the more prominent figure. An anecdote in Ricci's diaries about a Madonna image placed on an altar in Zhaoqing serves as a case in point:

everyone [...] paid reverence to the Madonna in her picture above the altar, with the customary bows and kneeling and touching of the forehead to the floor. All of this was done with an air of real religious sentiment. They never ceased to admire the beauty and the elegance of this painting; the coloring, the very natural lines and the lifelike posture of the figure. Before long it became evident, and for several reasons, that it would be better to remove the picture of the Virgin Mother from above the altar and replace it with one of Christ the Saviour. First, so that they would not believe, as rumor had already announced, that we adored a woman as our God; and secondly, that they might more easily be taught the doctrine of the Word made Flesh.⁹

Cognizant of this confusion, Ricci's retranslation of the names Mary and Jesus begins to make more sense: Jesus, Light of the World, rises like the sun; Mary wanes, she is cast as a secondary, if still precious, figure. The corrective impulse, which underlies Ricci's retranslation, informs the whole composition of the Sadeler engraving, suggesting that it was intended as a didactic, if not remedial, tool in the mission: word and image reinforce the hierarchy between Virgin and Child, rectifying the theological error that resulted from the assumed commensurability between Guanyin and Mary.

Most noticeably, Sadeler transposes the imagery latent in the chosen Chinese characters (and echoed in the Latin glosses) to the upper half of the image: a sun and moon hang over Mary and Jesus' heads. When we compare this engraving with an earlier, very similar, print by Rafael Sadeler's uncle, Jan (1550–1600), it becomes clear that these celestial bodies were added to evoke visually the new Chinese and Latin inscriptions (fig. 2).

The engraving by Jan Sadeler is itself based on the Madonna di Reggio by Lelio Orsi. Orsi's votive fresco became famous in 1596 when a man born deaf and mute miraculously gained the powers of speech and hearing while praying at this image of the Madonna. The Sadeler brothers, Jan and Rafael I, had a workshop in Venice at the time and produced another engraving with an accompanying inscription dated 1596 (Fig. 3). Fig. 2 likely dates from around the same time. It, rather than the dated engraving, appears to be the direct source for the Jesuit image, given that it also features a lily by the Virgin Mary's head and is closer in style to Rafael Sadeler II's reworked image for the China mission.

The sun and moon are not the only changes made to the Madonna di Reggio engraving, however. To highlight Jesus's pre-eminence over Mary, Christ's aureole has been extended to his whole upper body and its lumen count greatly increased. The rays that emanate from the holy figure replicate the glow of the sun above his head. Mary's halo and the moon above her have none of this radiance. In spatial terms, Mary has shifted noticeably lower in relation to Jesus so that she no longer looks down on Christ, as she does in Fig. 2, but instead casts her gaze humbly to the ground at Christ's feet: she is much less mother, much more adorer here. The inscription (*quem genuit adoravit*, 'she who gives birth, adores') taken from Orsi's original image, then, required visual and textual reinforcement when it moved into this new cultural context, as though image and inscription might not obviously match up in the eyes of a Chinese audience reading the image of Mary and Jesus through the iconography of Guanyin.

The reason Sadeler modified an earlier engraving was likely practical, in that it would be easier for him to rework an image for which he already had a plate in his possession. Yet, by retaining the inscription from Lelio Orsi's original, the connection to the miracle image persists, even as the composition moves away from Orsi's design. Indeed, the Jesuits did have a penchant for reproducing images with supernatural associations, so reusing such an image chimes with their broader belief in what images might be able to achieve in their missionary activities.¹⁰ Moreover, the miracle itself—a man spontaneously coming to voice in prayer in front of a devotional image—fits with the purpose of the image among would-be Christian converts. Sadeler's image too brings the viewer to speech: it teaches the Chinese to utter the names of Mary and Jesus and to understand the significance of these

figures within the Christian faith. They might through the image cease to be deaf to the word of the Christian God.

Overall, the image underlines what needs to change as both images and texts move from one context to another. Here, the names *Maria* and *Iesu* are calqued into the Chinese phonological system, but this calque does not only head in one linguistic direction: it returns to roman script so that a European might be able to utter the sounds denoted by the Chinese characters and the Latin glosses explicate the semantic resonance of those characters for the benefit of missionaries. For it to work as a missionary tool, both convert and converter must understand what the text/image hybrid seeks to underscore. The textual glosses run in parallel to the changes made to Jan Sadeler's *Madonna di Reggio* engraving too, as though the image functions itself as a gloss to an earlier composition that might be misunderstood. Rather than investing in any fantasy of a universal language or in the efficacy of Jesuit cultural accommodation, then, this print offers instead a vision of translation between cultures as something of an unpredictable ricochet between contexts, media, and languages.

¹ Gabriele Paleotti, "Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane," in *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento*, vol. 2, ed. Paola Barocchi (Bari: Gius. Laterza e figli, 1961), 140.

² The image is not included in Hollstein's catalogue of Dutch engravings.

³ See Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1999), 60–71.

⁴ F. W. H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish etchings, engravings, and woodcuts, ca. 1450–1700*, vols. 21–2 (Amsterdam: Van Gendt, 1980). Hollstein's original set of catalogues is known to contain lacunae but the revised editions have not yet covered the Sadeler family.

⁵ See Nicholas Standaert, "Chinese Prints and their European Prototypes: Schall's *Jincheng shuxiang*," *Print Quarterly*, 23, no. 3 (2006): 231–53, esp. 243–7.

⁶ Maximillian Van der Sandt, *Maria Gemma Mystica* (Munich: Johann Theobald Schönwetter, 1631), n. p.

⁷ See Song Gang, "The Many Faces of Our Lady: Chinese Encounters with the Virgin Mary between 7th and 17th Centuries," *Monumenta Serica: Journal of Oriental Studies*, 66, no. 2 (2018): 303–56, at 325.

⁸ See Song Gang, “Between Bodhisattva and Christian Deity: Guanyin and the Virgin Mary in Late Ming China,” in *The Constant and Changing Faces of the Goddess: Goddess Traditions of Asia*, ed. Deepak Shimkhada and Phyllis K. Herman (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 101–20.

⁹ Louis J. Gallagher, trans., *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, 1583–1610* (New York: Random House, 1953), 154–5.

¹⁰ Bailey, *Art of the Jesuit Missions*, 8–9.

Fig. 1. Rafael Sadeler II (1584–1632). The Virgin and Child with Chinese characters. Munich, early seventeenth century. Engraving on paper; 8 x 5.4 cm. Image: © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Fig. 2. Jan Sadeler I (1550–1600), after Lelio Orsi (1511–1587). Madonna di Reggio. Venice, c. 1596. Engraving on paper; 14.7 x 10.7 cm. Image: © Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 3. Jan Sadeler I (1550–1600), after Lelio Orsi (1511–1587). Madonna di reggio. Venice, 1596. Engraving on paper; 21.8 x 24.0cm. Image: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Public Domain.