

Book Chapter: On Chinese Religious Art*By Jiang Shuzhuo***Chapter One****Connotations of Religious Art and Its Aesthetic Values****The Definition of Religious Art**

The question of how to define “religious art” has long puzzled scholars in the academic world. Like religion itself, religious art has its own history of transformation since ancient times. As a Chinese scholar, I seek to explore the phenomenon from traditional Chinese cultural perspective, while drawing parallels with relevant Western discoveries. Primitive Chinese tribes sanctified everything they were unable to comprehend, and their activities were intermingled with primitive worship ceremonies, such as sorcery before a hunt, spring sowing, and harvest rituals. At a time when the mighty gods were considered ubiquitous, daily rituals of religious worship and sacred adoration were embellished with chanting, dancing, music, and painting. The desire to control the incomprehensible forces through these colorful rituals are reflected from ancient poetry, such as the “La Ci” in the “Special Livestock for Suburban Sacrifice” section of *The Book of Rites* –

We pray the soil stay in its place,
The waters keep in their valleys;
That pests refrain from breeding,
And weeds not encroach on crops.

These are the lyrics of sorcery ceremonies, chanted in hopes that witchcraft can command nature. Music was used in religious ceremonies to promote agricultural production. The verses were developed to systematically praise the supernatural hierarchy. Verses sung in the “Old Song” from *The Spring and Autumn Annals of Lü Buwei* are reflective of this style of poetry:

For the joy of Duke Ge Tian, there are three people holding a cow’s tail, dancing while singing in eight phases: praising nature, admiring totems, promoting plants, adoring the Almighty, extolling the Lord of Heaven, thanking the Lord of the Earth, wishing creatures to propagate.

Evidence of ceremonial music can also be found in *The Rites of Zhou*: “When drought is striking the land, sorcerers lead the dance.” This was a religious ritual praying for rain. Numerous similar references from ancient literature provide basis for an assumed relationship between religious art and religious ceremonies focused around key economic activities. In this sense, we can say that primordial art is predominantly religious art.

However, the phenomenon of religious art should not blur the line between actual material production and its underpinning concepts. In primitive times, economic conditions determined people’s ideology. Various forms of primordial rituals served the purpose of facilitating

production. Primordial men approached the world in their religious rituals in ways identical to their artistic expression, which was labelled by Marx as the “practice-spirit pattern.” People judged the world not so much by rationality as by instinctive feelings. Perceptions about the incomprehensible world were visualized in myths about the heaven, the earth, the mountains, the forests, and the waters. Cave paintings tell these tales to date manifesting a world in which everything was divine and interrelated; the distance was diminished not only between “truth” and perception, but also between reality and imagination, between satisfaction and wishes, and between reality and illusion. Merely by drawing an animal getting hit by an arrow, primitive man could envision better luck in the next hunt. People offered sacrifices to the heavens, earth, mountains, and forests in the hope of being reciprocally favored. We thus discover that primitive worship and primitive art, full of mysterious sentiments, were similar religious expression often combined in primitive religious activities. From this perspective, we can say that primitive art is indeed religious art.

Primitive people’s myths also fall into the category of religious art. Rooted in the same deified world outlook, primitive myths originated as sensory perception of a personalized natural world, as attempts to explain fearsome nature.

In the childhood of human beings, primitive religion was a kind of mythic religion, and primitive myths served as primitive theology and religious texts. Among their various explanations about the origin of man and the world were colorful visions and pantheism. These are faithful records and expressions of primitive religion, crystallizing their thought, knowledge, and view of nature. Some prominent Western scholars have similar views on these subjects; Jung wrote: “Myths ... have a vital meaning. Not merely do they represent, they are the psychic life of the primitive tribe, which immediately falls into pieces and decays when it loses its mythological heritage, like a man who has lost his soul.”

Among certain ethnic groups in China today, some myths are merged with religious ceremonies and appear in their languages. For example, the myth of “Pan Gua” among the She minority tells the story that in ancient times, there was a King called Gao Xin, who managed people’s daily lives. With the help of Pan Gua, a dragon-dog transformed from a worm, King Gao Xin suppressed a tribal riot. Then Pan Gua married the King’s third daughter, propagating descendants to form the She Minority, who now regard Pa Gua as their ancestor. They have entered him in their genealogy and compiled his story in several epics – the “Song of the King” (also called the “Song of King Pan”), the “Song of the Emperor”, and the “Song of Pan Gua”, all of which are popularly sung today. Every three years, the people of She nationality gather together to have a grand ceremony, commemorating their ancestor while dancing and singing. In some places, every clan preserves a cane engraved with a dragon head (or a dog head) called an “ancestor cane” that is enshrined and worshiped. Some have drawn pictures of the Pan Gua myth as an “ancestor portrait” for display during festivals.

Another example is the Zhuang nationality. They have religious performances based on a text called “King Lei Soup,” which narrates a story of creation, in which King Lei fought with the Grand White monster and was defeated and consequently locked up in a chicken coop. Just when he was nearly thirsting to death, he lured Fu Xi’s brother and sister to give him a bowl of soup. Then he regained his energy and by witchcraft flew back to the heavens. By manipulating huge thunderstorms and flooding the earth, he killed everyone except Fu Xi’s brother and sister. Later the two married and gave birth to the ethnic group. This myth of creation is sung in religious ceremonies led by ritual masters even today.

Similar myths of creation can also be found in many other ethnic groups in texts that serve for religious activities as well as for performing arts, including singing, painting, and sculpturing. All in all it is appropriate to consider the myths that originated in the early stage of human beings as religious art.

Certain artistic ceremonies in religious activities may also be seen as religious art. This kind of art was created initially for certain practical purposes and then was passed on from generation to generation as traditional culture. These inherited traditional ceremonies are particularly abundant and prominent during festival seasons in China's ethnic minority regions. Therefore, we may regard all kinds of art combined with religious activities or artistic expressions of religious ceremonies as the subject of our study of religious art.

As history evolves, once rational theology replaces primitive religion, art and religion start to separate. On the one hand, humans come out of the age of wild thinking and enter a rational stage, in which the world is no longer the world of myth, and conveying ideas of deities is no longer the sole purpose of art. Art is thus enlarged and extended in the secular world.

On the other hand, as the division of labor tends to be more specialized, professional artists and priests become possible. However, there are still inseparable bonds between art and religion. By its nature, religion always needs art for its dissemination. And in the history of human civilization, for a quite considerable period of time, religion was a dominant force for the development of art. This was the case not only in the West but also in China, as in the Buddhist art in the Wei Jin Northern and Southern Dynasties. If it was the case that the combination of primitive religion and art resulted in a macro-concept of religious art, then the separation of the two has put forth a micro-definition of religious art with more precise connotations.

Religious art in the age of rational theology may include subjects in the following areas:

First, mythologies and stories in literature in religious texts and scriptures, such as the "flood myth" and the "garden of Eden" in the Bible, or the "crown prince attaining Buddhahood" in Buddhism. Many of these stories, though collected from folklore, have been merged perfectly into religious texts and used to promulgate religious beliefs and doctrines, as do the "miscellaneous parables for illuminating the scriptures" and the "hundred schools' preaching of scriptures" in Buddhist sutras. These stories normally end in admonishments that reinforce the main point, advising people to abandon evil and do good, follow the Buddhist codes of conduct, disseminate the wisdom and intelligence of the Buddha, and so forth.

Second, novels, poems, paintings, and dramas have been used for propagating Buddhism doctrines. Examples are the prodigy novels of the Wei Jin and Northern and Southern dynasties era and the Tang dynasty. Within this category, two phenomena require particular attention: First, in judging religious art, it is the purpose, not the content that counts, since certain art works with religious titles going against religious beliefs and other, seemingly secular art works may actually propagate religious doctrines and reverence. Second, religious art is distinctively different from secular art in nature; some secular art may have been influenced by religious art, but those art works are not employed to promote religious belief. For instance, well-known poems by Bai Juyi, Su Shi, and others, despite being saturated with Buddhist thought, were not intended to serve Buddhism. Such art works should not be included in the realm of religious art. The well-known drama *The Lei Feng Buddhist Pagoda*, to cite another example, is imbued with a Buddhist religious flavor, but does not serve religious purposes and consequently should not be counted as religious art.

Third are buildings and structures that provide venues for religious ceremonies, music, painting, and sculptures, such as shrines, sacred altars, temples, churches, Buddhist pagodas. In addition, there is a special category of religious art, such as the Chinese Nuoxi masked dance, for fulfilling pledges to the Nuo gods, which features both elements of primitive religion and rational theology, mainly but not exclusively for religious purposes, since such art also has an entertainment function. Based on the above analyses, we may propose the following definition of religious art: Religious art is a kind of art that desires to express and propagate religious ideas and doctrines; it is closely associated with religious ceremonies or religious services; and it integrates religious concepts, ritual, and artistic expression.

Surely, there is no clear-cut differentiation between religious art and non-religious art; it requires concrete scientific analysis based on individual cases.

Aesthetic Values of Religious Art

Concerning the quality of religious art, the components of its religious meaning are far superior to that of its art. However, it is precisely due to these seemingly insignificant components that religious doctrines have emerged and vitalized religious art, making it more down to earth. Its aesthetic elements and values are thus manifested.

First, the aesthetic values of religious art can be seen in its awareness of life and its vitality. This sense of aesthetics originated a primitive awareness of life deeply rooted in human instinct. In primitive religious art, life and death are inherent in its burning desire for survival and the protection of life. Evidence of this can be found in the “Three Brothers’ cave rock painting” rock painting in Mount Ning Minghua of the Guangxi Autonomous Region and a rock painting in the Cangyuan region of Yunnan Province, with their simple, bold, and unconstrained grand scenes filled with action. Religious ceremonial singing, and dancing forms of religious art filled with charm, energy, and dynamism. These are embodied in the legendary figure Saman’s performance, when he wildly danced to the accompaniment of a drum, turning around so energetically that he completely lost himself to the divine spirit; it is hard to imagine an ordinary mortal shouldering such a divine mission. Human life was surely energized by this seemingly intoxicating and entrancing performance.

Just as in a scene depicted by Ernst Grosse in his popular book, *The Beginnings of Art* in which primitive men await the coming of a certain kind of animal, ritualists dance unceasingly for days until the animal finally appeared. The dancers’ endurance and staunchness are manifest in the artistic backdrops.

Genital worship is another prominent component of religious art. Artistic representations of sexual behavior and seeking of a mate reveal an ancient craving for propagation. In the art of Nuo Drama among Chinese people in the Guangxi Autonomous Region, various rites of enchanting and idolizing genitalia are still performed today, as in Scene VI of “Sorceress among Flowers,” in which dances of planting and presenting flowers imply genital admiration. After presenting a basket of flowers to his master’s bed, the dancer then performs a free-style dance, waving a “flower decorated stick” in his left hand and a triangular reed leaf in his right hand. Part of this action with the two props has sexual implications.

Religious art is in fact the amalgamation of art and religion and created to expound the meaning of life, presenting the spiritual outlook of humanity in terms of its awareness, desires, and understanding of life. Second, the realism and secularism of religious art assist religions to break down their barriers.

In general, religious art generates a sacred ambience that is illusory and supernatural but not unreal, since it is rooted in reality with a visible realistic trace, influencing people's minds. Religious art sometimes deliberately secularizes itself for the purpose of promoting religious doctrines. Due to these realistic elements, certain aesthetic content and ideals of religious art are conveyed that deviate from religious beliefs.

For example, the song "Seeking Flowers" of the Nan Sacrifice Ceremony of the Zhuang nationality, part of an oral literature, follows the mood of the seekers in pursuing posterity. It vents the grievances of the childless with compassion, comforting them in a way that beautifies reality artistically.

The words of the song roughly go like this:

A cloth decorating with seven stars
 Symbolizes the heavens where gods reside,
 All gods who descend here will be fine;
 Oh Goddess of Flowers sitting on your shrine, Listen to my suffering...

...

Picked flowers set out in a bowl,

Express my anxiety at being childless.
 A girl would be amiable, and a boy might become mandarin,
 Laughing, chuckling, my life will be filled of joy. (Wei, 1992)

Third, certain aesthetic creative and aesthetic values emerge from religious imagination and symbolism. Whenever artistic means are adopted to promote religious doctrines and tenets, adventurous artistic imagination results in aesthetic creativity and appreciation.

For example, a Daoist text describes Xuan Town is follows:

Xuan Town is located in Mount Yuliang about 80,000 zhang high. It is the most sacred place in the universe, ruled by the Da Dao Emperor in the highest celestial sphere. All saints, celestial beings, and true believers follow the doctrines practice vegetarianism, and uphold the reign of the highest ruler. On days of fasting, they fly to Xuan Yu on a dragon. During the assembly in Xuan Duo of Yu Jing, a natural air of sagacity is buoyant with celestial flowers scattering everywhere...

Xuan Town is a sacred place imagined by Daoism. To beautify the town, Daoist disciples have done their best to imagine it as a fairyland permeated by a mystic air.

Another example is the Nuo Dance called the "Qing Mu Goddess" of the Yao nationality in Dongshan, Guangxi Province. The goddess was imagined to be the Yao people's most beautiful goddess. The popular legend goes that when Pangu created heaven and earth, heaven was full of bumps and hollows, ugly enough to allure the goddess to throw out her colorful skirt to heaven. Heaven immediately became smooth as a mirror, its blue color decorated with streaks of sunlight. This imaginary scene created by the Yao ethnic group reflects aesthetic ideals transcending reality. Such transcendence in religious art entrusts to it a certain aesthetic value. It is not in contradiction with the realism and secularism of religious art, for both of them represent the complexity and variety of religious artistic values.

Fourth, religious art has from the beginning had decorative functions. The phenomenon can be visualized in religious totems, paintings, dances, and masks. Religious masks played a significant role in primitive religious activities, mingling religious consciousness with strong aesthetic sensibility.

From the age of Yao and Shun to the ancient Zhou dynasty, there were customs of wearing animal masks, as in the “animal faced-dance,” “Fang Xiang Shi exorcism” (with golden masks), and so forth. Their legacies have had lasting effects on many folkloric activities, including the “divine dance” and Nuo plays. Consequently, the decoration of masks evolved from the simple to the complex. In the Anshun and Qianzhong areas in Guizhou Province, masks in local plays are polished until they are shiny and bright. Special attention is paid to helmets and to earrings adorned traditionally with “twin dragons catching treasures,” “dual-phoenixes flying in sunshine,” some decorated with a little mirror in their helmets, and masks are tinted with plants and animals. These are valuable artistic works.

In Buddhist literature, Buddhist hymns and antithetical couplets exhibit artistic inspiration. In the Tang dynasty (618 – 907) *bianwen* (transformation text), the Vimalakirti Sutra, contains the following exaggerated description of the Buddha:

So elegant and dignified is his appearance, when he preaches, the wisdom light twinkles on his forehead that has enlightened the east and west; the magic figure is silhouetted across the north and south. The mountains are roaring and the earth is shaking. As blooming flowers scatter everywhere, the whole place becomes multicolored, making the universe full of divinity, the rivers and oceans auspicious...

The flowery language is very ornamental, in many ways analogical to the religious art of Christianity in the West. Magnificent frescos, golden candleholders, resplendent icons, and gorgeous costumes for the clergy gorgeous reveal aesthetic ends. As Christian art sets off the divinity of God, so Buddhist art in temples with carved beams and painted rafters glorify the image of the Buddha.

Fifth, religious art is infused with entertaining qualities. In nature, religious art serves the purpose of entreating gods for mercy; however, in the process of display or performance, a rich flavor of entertainment has been incorporated. Sorcery dances were both a sacrificing ceremony and the origin of dance and theatre. For example, in “To the God of Cloud” in the *Chu ci* (Elegies of the South).

With fleecy hair, oh! You slowly rise
To beautify, oh! the morning skies. ...
The dragon is, oh! your charioteer;
You waft and wander, oh far and near.

Relaxed and unfettered dancing postures and movements are vividly depicted in these verses. As the well-known art critic Wang Guowei (1877 – 1927) points out, “Did song and dance originate from ancient witch ceremonies?” ... Things concerning sorcery must be involved with dancing... In the region of Yan and Xiang, temples were built from beliefs in gods, and wherever temple songs and dances were performed, they were accompanied with music and drums to entertain the gods. Supple and graceful gestures evolved, which were the rudiments of later theatres. In fact, they had the dual function of propagating religious doctrines and artistic effects.

Among the Tujia ethnic group, in portraits of worshipping the gods, witches, yamen attendants, and soldiers danced to entertain both gods and the populace. In their thanksgiving ceremonies, the religious procedures were vivified and became interesting to believers as well as nonbelievers. In this way, religious activities were transformed into artistic performance infused with aesthetic meanings.

In temple fairs of Buddhism, religious ceremonies have contained acrobatics, singing, and dancing since the Wei-Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties. Among the Miao ethnic group, for example, there are gatherings of people playing reed-pipe wind instruments after the prayer meeting, singing and dancing to amuse themselves; the meetings have gradually evolved into entertainment activities. In Nuo plays, the performers often make impromptu comic gestures and remarks, together with amusing dances, which keep everyone laughing and regale the audience with aesthetic asides.

Biography

Jiang Shuzhuo (born 1955) is Professor of Chinese Literature at Jinan University, Guangdong Province, China, Director of Several research institutes in literary criticism and cultural studies, and chairman of Guangdong Writers' Association. Among the prizes and honors he has received are: the second prize for Chinese Universities Humanities Research, the 8th Lu Xun Literature and Art Award in Guangdong Province, and the Outstanding Winner at the 7th Literary Criticism Organized by China Literary Federation. His other works include: *The Translation of Buddhist Scriptures and Literary Trend in Middle Ancient Times of China*, *Buddhism and Chinese Literary Aesthetics*, *Landscape Beauty and Religion*, *Religious Art and Aesthetic Creativeness*, and *The Study on Ancient Chinese Literary Criticism in the 20th Century*.