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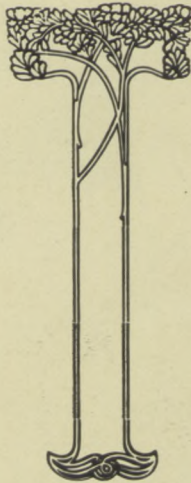
# A Chinese Madonna

By

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Field Museum, Chicago

*Chas. Mason*  
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A CHINESE MADONNA.

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*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

## THE CHINESE MADONNA IN THE FIELD MUSEUM.

BY BERTHOLD LAUFER.

WHEN I was traveling through China in search of relics of the past, I was always on the lookout for an opportunity to discover ancient remains of Christianity. In 1901, I had the good fortune in Peking to come upon two scrolls painted in watercolors originating from the Jesuit school of artists engaged in the court-studios of the emperors K'ang-hi and K'ien-lung during the eighteenth century. Both represent madonnas with a background of palace buildings in Italian Renaissance style. Both these pictures, with a number of others, are published in a paper by the present writer entitled "Christian Art in China" (*Mitteilungen des Seminars für orientalische Sprachen*, Berlin, 1910).

The beginnings of Christian painting in China coincide with the arrival of the great Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci, in 1583, who deeply impressed the minds of the Chinese with wood-engravings brought from his home in Italy. The Chinese art-historians themselves connect with his name the introduction of the European method of perspective drawing and date from his time the foreign influence exerted on indigenous art. We know that one famous artist at the close of the Ming period, and a contemporary of Ricci, Tung K'i-ch'ang or H'uan-Tsai (1555-1636), was indebted to the Jesuits for a number of European subjects which he copied with his brush and left to us in a remarkable album.

Early in 1910, I was surprised to find in the mansion of an official in Si-ngan fu a Christian madonna holding a child in her arms. It was painted in the Chinese style of watercolors on a large paper scroll (measuring 1.20×0.55 m.) and is reproduced

as the frontispiece of this issue. The most striking feature of this representation is that, while the Virgin evidently betrays her European origin, the child is conceived of as a Chinese boy with a small tuft of hair on his head, clad in a red coat with green collar and holding in his left hand a Chinese book with brown wrapper on which is pasted a paper slip for the title of the work. From this we may infer that the artist was not one of the foreign Jesuits, but some Chinese painter.

The madonna, exhibiting a Byzantine style, if I am not mistaken, is limned in a light-yellowish brown set off from the darker brown of the background, the nimbus and the bodice being darkened in color. Her pallium is flowing down in many elegant folds, without covering her feet. The face is somewhat schematic, but the hands are admirably treated. When I was shown this painting, my first impression was that it also had emanated from the school of the eighteenth century Jesuit painters headed by Joseph Castiglione and Jean-Denis Attiret. But several Chinese experts living in Si-ngan fu came forward to inform me that this picture could not come down from the K'ien-lung epoch (1736-1795), but could only be a production of the later Ming period (sixteenth century). Their verdict was judiciously based on a technical feature. Chinese scrolls are usually mounted on silk, two broad rectangular pieces framing the picture on the upper and lower borders, and two narrow oblong strips surrounding the lateral margins. The textures of these silks under the Ming and previous dynasties were distinctly different from those woven under the present Manchu dynasty, and an experienced connoisseur can make a clear distinction between the productions of the two periods. This diversity holds good also for the silks on which the paintings are made, so that a Ming picture on silk can always be told from one of a later date. However, it is customary to remount pictures because the ancient silk mountings decay rapidly. Thus the painting of the madonna had been mounted anew about a year before I received it; but the art-experts who rendered me this service assured me that they had seen it in its original state, that the silk on which it had been mounted was the characteristic product of the Ming period, and that accordingly the work itself belonged to that time. There was no reason to discountenance this judgment. The men whom I consulted were not concerned in the transaction and were old friends of mine of many years' standing who know that I am only a seeker for truth, without any inclination to make things older than they are. Nevertheless, I made a search for any scraps that might have been left of the

former silk mounting but—as any one familiar with Chinese conditions may anticipate—without success. Such remains wander into the waste-basket of oblivion, instead of being preserved as relics. Collectors of ancient scrolls may draw a lesson from this case. They should see to it that if any are remounted some samples of the old textile should be preserved which may eventually serve as important documentary evidence in making out the period of the picture in question.

I then took my madonna over to the mission of the Franciscans in Si-ngan fu of whose hospitality I retain the most pleasant remembrances. The bishop, Monseigneur Gabriel Maurice, a man of as noble and fine a character as of wide scholarship, expressed his admiration for this picture, saying that he had never seen a similar one during his lifelong residence in the city. He also summoned the Chinese fathers to view this singular discovery, and amazement and joy were reflected in their keen intelligent eyes. I asked them what they thought of it, without telling them of my experience reported above. They arrived at the conclusion that it was executed by a Chinese, not a European artist, in the Wan-li period (1573-1620) of the Ming dynasty. On inquiry whether it would not be possible to connect the work with the Jesuits of the eighteenth century, they raised a lively protest against such a theory, and asserted that the style and coloration of the painting would decidedly refer to the end of the Ming period, while the madonnas of the later Jesuit school bear an entirely different character. This judgment is deserving of due consideration, and is in fact justified by a comparison of the present madonna with those collected by me formerly which are attributed to the eighteenth century.

There now remained another mystery to be solved in this painting. In the left lower corner there is a white spot (it shows but faintly in our reproduction) containing two Chinese characters which read T'ang-yin. T'ang-yin or T'ang Po-hu is the name of an artist whom the Chinese regard as the foremost master of the Ming epoch. He was a contemporary of Raphael and lived from 1470 to 1523. As I succeeded in gathering five of his original works and more than a dozen copies made after his paintings, I am able to form an idea of his style and handwriting. His signature and mode of writing are so characteristic that on this evidence alone I should not hesitate for a moment to pronounce the verdict that the signature on this painting, which really attempts to imitate the artist's hand, is a downright forgery. Further inspection disclosed the fact that another signature or seal must have previously occu-

pied this place, but it was subsequently erased, as is plainly visible from the white spot, to give place to T'ang-yin's name.

To settle this question at the outset, it is manifest that T'ang-yin cannot have painted this or any similar Christian madonna, since in his time there was no trace of Christianity in that country. Otherwise we must have recourse to an artificially constructed theory that, for instance, the Franciscans of the Mongol or Yüan period under the distinguished Johannes de Monte Corvino (1247-1328) may have left behind a painting of the madonna which might have survived the ravages of time until the Ming dynasty and then have fallen by chance into the hands of T'ang-yin to serve as a model for the present work. There would be no convincing force, or but little, in such a hypothetical speculation, against which the forgery of the signature would seriously militate. Notwithstanding, there is a certain indefinable something in the chiaroscuro of this painting that reminds me of the color style of T'ang-yin, and this may have induced some one to introduce his name. This explanation of course is not sufficient to reveal the psychological motive prompting the act of forgery, but it only accounts to some degree for the forger's choice of T'ang-yin's name rather than another one.

I discussed these observations with my Chinese friends, and they perfectly concurred with me in the same opinion. I then consulted the official in whose family the picture had been kept. He agreed with me in looking upon the signature as of a later date, but was unable to furnish any explanation as to how it had been brought about. He assured me that it had been handed down in his family for at least five or six generations which would carry us back to the middle of the eighteenth century, and that the signature of T'ang-yin, according to his family traditions, had always been there, and must have been added at least before the time when it came into the possession of his family. He was not a Christian himself, but appreciated the picture merely for its artistic merits. How well tradition is preserved among the Chinese, is brought out by the fact that in Si-ngan fu all concerned were aware of the representation being the *T'ien-chu shêng mu*, "the Holy Mother of the Heavenly Lord." The latter term has been chosen by the Catholics as the Chinese designation of God. It is therefore out of the question to presume that the Chinese could have ever mistaken this subject for a native deity, say, e. g., the goddess of mercy, Kuan-yin. Moreover, this means that the perpetrator of the forgery had not had in his mind any expectation of material gain. He could not have made this picture a T'ang-yin in the hope of passing it off as such and realizing

on it the price due to a T'ang-yin, since nobody with ordinary common sense would have fallen a victim to such an error. Indeed the price which I was asked to give for it was so low that it would not even secure a tolerably good modern copy of a T'ang-yin, and the broker who had transacted the business between the official and myself, knew me too well to venture to insist for a moment on this dubious authenticity; in fact, he did not dare to speak of it nor to contradict me when I branded the signature as a counterfeit. I merely mention these facts to dispel the impression possibly conveyed to uncharitable critics of mine, that I had become the victim of a mystification and this fraud had been committed for my own benefit.

The net result of my investigation which I think it is fair to accept is that this makeshift was conceived long ago, and, as I presume, for reasons to be given presently, in the period of Yung-chêng (1723-1735), the successor of K'ang-hi. In searching for a plausible reason, we must exclude any personal selfish motives on the part of him who brought about the alteration of the signature. We must keep in mind that Christian pictures have suffered a curious fate in China, that most of them have been annihilated in Christian persecutions and anti-foreign uprisings, and that only a few have survived. In describing one of the madonnas of the eighteenth century, I called attention to the fact that portions of that painting had been cut out by a vandal hand and subsequently supplemented; thus, the head of that madonna with her Chinese features is inserted as a later addition. I am now inclined to think that this is not an act of vandalism, but was done intentionally by the owner as a measure of precaution to insure protection for his property. An infuriated anti-Christian vandal would have mercilessly destroyed the entire scroll and not taken the trouble to remove carefully only the head of the madonna. The original head was in all probability one of European design and was replaced by one with a Chinese countenance to save the picture from destruction or its Christian Chinese owner from detection or persecution, since he was then enabled to point out that the figure was merely intended for a Chinese woman.

I believe that the former owner of our madonna was piously actuated by a similar motive. The far-reaching persecution of the Catholic faith under the emperor Yung-chêng is well known. Let us suppose that the original legend under the picture would have referred to the subject, giving a title like "The Holy Mother" or "The Heavenly Lord," as Matteo Ricci had headed the wood-engraving of the madonna *Nuestra Señora de l'Antigua* in the cathe-

dral of Seville which I formerly published. Then the owner was justified at the time of the great anti-missionary movement in fearing lest this testimony plainly confessing Catholicism might betray him, or, if he was not baptized himself, might lead to an anathema of the picture which for some reason was dear to him. So he had recourse to this subterfuge, eradicated the suspicious title, and not unwittily substituted the magic name of T'ang-yin for whom all Chinese evince such a deep reverence that it acted sufficiently as a protecting talisman. And it is due to this wonder only that the painting has been preserved to the present day.

Perhaps the name of a painter living at the end of the sixteenth century was originally written there, but such a name was treacherous too, as the Wan-li period was too well known in the memories of all people as the time of the first Catholic propaganda. But T'ang-yin had lived far beyond that period and could not be suspected of being a Catholic or having indulged in the art of the foreigners. Thus his distinguished name was in every respect a charm and amulet which saved the life of this memorable painting. It is the only painted madonna extant of the early period of Christian art in China, and as a venerable relic of the past takes the foremost rank among the Christian works produced by the Chinese. It was presumably painted after the model of a picture brought to China by Matteo Ricci himself.