

## Evangelization through Art in China: A Protestant Perspective

*Isabel Hess-Friemann*

Chinese Christian artists regard their work as a medium to spread the Gospel. Their purpose is to bring the good news of God closer to their own people who often still look at Christianity as a foreign religion. I would like to show you some examples of contemporary Christian art and, rather than giving too many explanations, let the pieces of art themselves speak to you.



“Visitation 玛利亚访问伊丽莎白,” Oil painting, He Qi 何琦, before 1995. Foto: [www.heqiart.com](http://www.heqiart.com).

The first picture shows two Chinese women in a traditional Chinese village. It is a decorative, naive painting with some typical elements of folk art, placing Mary and Elisabeth in their own cultural background. And yet it is different, shiny, modern and mysterious. It is an example of inculturation, easily recognizable as a work of art made by one of the most well-known Chinese Christian artists, He Qi.

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Isabel Hess-Friemann is Chairwoman of the German Ecumenical China Working Group. This text is her contribution to the 9th European Catholic China Colloquium “Challenges of Evangelisation – China and Europe,” Konstancin/Warsaw, September 10–13, 2015.



"Mary 玛利亚," Woodprint, Qian Zhusheng 钱筑生 (1951–2006), 1999.

A woman in peaceful contemplation. She sits upright in a building which could be her home or a church, her arms mirroring the arms of the angels. She opens up her body and soul, becomes filled with the Holy Spirit and radiates from within.



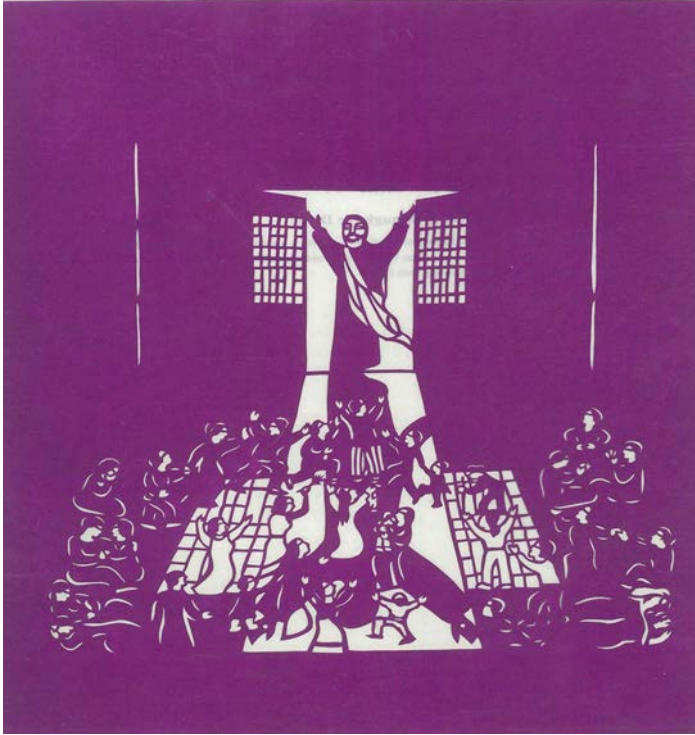
“Holy Wall 圣城,” Installation – Photography, He Xuming 何虚鸣, 2009.

The Great Wall – monument of China’s magnificence and permanence – fading in the background against the luminous power of the Gospel, running through the country like a red banner, held together by Bibles which symbolize its watchtowers.



“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. 我就是道路, 真理, 生命,” John 14, 6, Papercut, Fan Pu 范朴, 2010.

The colour red stands for life and happiness, a circle is an expression of harmony, the form resembles a seal, underlining the validity of the message. The scandal of the cross, bulky and inappropriate to the Chinese culture and values, is turned into a purely positive symbol, interpretable as God’s invitation through Christ.



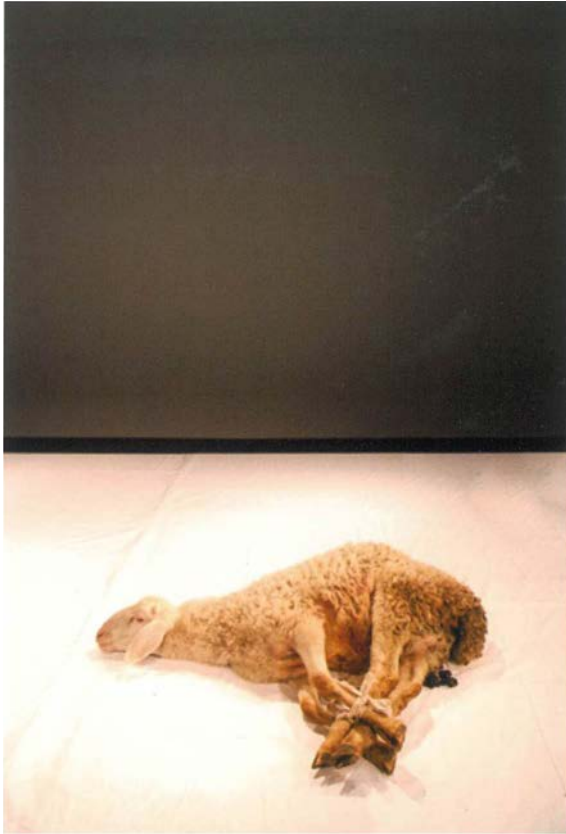
“Entering through the door 进入,”  
Papercut, Fan Pu 范朴, 2002.

Another translation of the cross, this time explicitly into the Chinese context as shown by the traditional wooden windows. The resurrected Jesus and his bright shadow on earth are opening up the closed society, calling its people to rise, to leave their darkness behind and to follow him into life.



“Righteousness 義,” Oil and acrylic painting,  
Wei Lin 卫林, 2009.

This kind of sacred vessel is normally seen in Buddhist or Daoist temples with incense offerings placed in it. The inscription on the vessel reads “God loves the people of the earth”; the character for earth displays the three crosses standing at Golgotha. Here it represents China, receiving the grace of the Lamb’s sacrifice from above, filled to overflowing and spreading it all over the world.



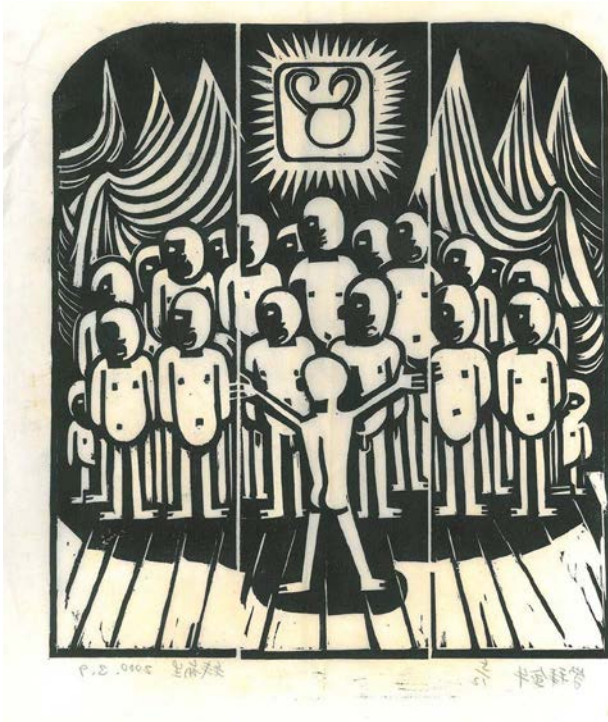
“Lost lamb 迷途的羔羊,” Installation, Zhu Jiuyang 朱久洋, 2010.

Another aspect of the lamb as a symbol for Jesus Christ is illustrated in this installation. The lamb is exposed, vulnerable, frightened and devout. The observer can almost experience the feelings of the lamb itself from his close and direct witness.



“Holy Nails 圣钉,” Ink on paper, Dao Zi 岛子, 2008.

These three nails are both abstract and grippingly realistic at the same time; they remind us of Jesus’ suffering. The materials and techniques used are traditionally Chinese, almost resembling an old calligraphy, but the content only reveals itself to a person with a basic understanding of Christianity.



“Worship of the Golden Calf 崇拜金牛,”  
Woodprint, Qian Zhusheng 钱筑生, 2000.

Flags are draped around the emblem in the background; a naked crowd without hands is standing in a military order, singing the song of their conductor. The woodprint is a sharp, ironic criticism of the prevailing attitude in the artist’s society and its political atheism.



“The Truth shall make you free 得自由,”  
Colored papercut, Fan Pu 范朴, 2005.

Fishes in a fish bowl are set next to fish swimming in a river. The Chinese Christians who assemble in registered churches are compared to those who gather in house churches.



“The church of Dawangji village and its preachers 大王集村教堂和她的传教人,” Colored photographs, Cao Yuanming 曹原铭, 2008.

Dawangji is a village in Jiangsu, near the city of Xuzhou. These lay preachers give personal testimony. They stand for their church, which has been demolished, and their eagerness to evangelize goes on.



“Thankfulness 感恩,” Oil painting, (Wu) Yingde (吴) 英德, 2012.

The church in China is the bride of Jesus Christ. She is dressed in pure white, standing in a stony, inhospitable environment. She is receiving the dove of the Holy Spirit with open arms.



“God and gold 上帝与黄金,” Water color on paper, Dao Zi 岛子, 2014.

Dao Zi is a professor for western art history at Qinghua University, a high profile personality in Chinese society. Traditional paper, colors and techniques form the background of his artwork, capturing the grey monotony of the old Chinese society and the ongoing flow of everyday life. God’s presence is breaking through to the observer in a new dimension. The color gold is introduced as a completely different aspect of reality, as God, who is unknown to the old China. The picture is an invitation to discover Him and His Holiness, a challenge for mankind of the unpredictable and uncomfortable kind.