In memoriam

Daozi 岛子 (1956–2025)

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Translated by Anna Clart

The Christian artist Daozi, who became known both at home and abroad as the creator of Chinese sacral ink painting (*sheng shui mo* 圣水墨), died on the first of September in Beijing at the age of 68. This professor of art history, poet, art critic, and painter was born on November 26, 1956 as Wang Min 王敏 (Samuel Wang in English) in Qingdao. He is better known under his artistic name Daozi 岛子 – "the son of Qingdao."

Daozi with Misereor, around 2015.
Photo: © Härtl/Misereor.

Over the course of his academic career, the professor of Beijing's renowned Tsinghua University dedicated intensive study to religious art from Western countries. He was particularly fascinated, as he himself stated, by pictures that were painted in devotion to and envisioning of the divine, and that invited their viewers to prayer and worship. Daozi's analytical and aesthetic artistic understanding had already been maturing for two decades before he converted to Christianity and had himself baptised in 1996. He very intentionally selected elements from various traditions and then combined them. Thus, as Daozi told the author, he integrated colours typical of iconographical painting into his own art for the following reason:

> *Gold is the only colour that shines from inside itself and does not require illumination by an external source of light to reveal its full effect – it is a symbol of the*

presence of God. Blue is the colour of heaven; dark red that of the precious blood of Christ.

At the same time, Daozi was concerned with transmitting his message of faith in a language of its own and in a genuinely Chinese way. Traditional ink painting is a technique that lies at the heart of the Chinese artistic tradition. This art form's language fundamentally characterises Chinese culture and thereby expresses something universal about it. Its classic materials and techniques offer boundless possibilities for contemporary expression. With his own modern, sacral ink painting, the artist wished to renew the traditional culture, to make God's workings as a new spirit in China visible through his artworks and to support Him in those workings. He valued drawing attention to the relationship between God and Man, as the deepest level of Being.

It is my personal experience that through baptism we enter from death into life. In this way the blood of Jesus Christ has infused me and the ink, has changed my life and the ink painting I practice, until the art form finally emerged

thus Daozi explained in a 2013 article (in K. Fiedler, *Es freuet sich die Engelschar* [The Host of Angels Rejoices], p. 30).

One example of this is found in the painting "Bitter Bamboo." Since the Northern Song dynasty (1018–1101 AD), the artist says, bamboo has served as a "symbol for constancy, humility, and integrity" (in K. Fiedler, *Es freuet sich die Engelschar*, pp. 30-31).

Daozi, "Bitter Bamboo," 2008.
Image taken from K. Fiedler, *Es freuet sich die Engelschar*, p. 31.

Daozi, "Mary with Child," 2013.
Image taken from K. Fiedler, *Es freuet sich die Engelschar*, p. 37.

> *Bamboo is therefore symbolic of a Confucian character that is upright, noble, steady and humble.* […]
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> […] *Salvation is the secret of the Word become flesh.* […] *There where mankind fails and is helpless, there precisely do the powers of the eternal prove themselves. Confucianism, Daoism, the tradition of Zhuang zi and Zen Buddhism – in none of these can I recognise this spiritual power* (transl. from his article in K. Fiedler, *Es freuet sich die Engelschar*, p. 31).

Daozi employs halos in his depictions of angels, Christ, and the Virgin Mary: sometimes, the abstract Greek letter omega stands in for the figure, as a symbol of the beginning and the end, as well as of the Holy transmitting, passing over from the presence of the Godly into time and space. Commenting on his Madonna picture of 2013, Daozi writes:

> *The most fundamental characteristic of the representation of the Mother of God is her mercy and her goodness, as the rosary meditation teaches us. This girl from Bethlehem, Mary, became holy because she carried the spirit of Christ within her;*

"God and Gold 上帝与黄金," Water color on paper, Dao Zi 岛子, 2014.

> *she was filled and guided by the Holy Spirit. Mary is polite and modest, her head always looks like a plant that has just broken through the soil, like a curved bean sprout. From this arc a sprout arises; from here a rich fruit will later grow* (transl. from his article in K. Fiedler, *Es freuet sich die Engelschar*, p. 36).

At the start of the new millennium, Daozi was not only creating his own artworks: in his function as a professor and well-known intellectual, including as a collaborator and curator on a series of Easter exhibitions in Beijing, he was also cultivating intensive exchange with other Chinese Christian artists and creating a public space for perceiving and engaging with the new movements. His paintings were also exhibited in Germany, France, Korea, and the USA. In 2013, he participated in the German Protestant Church Assembly in Hamburg; in 2015, he accepted Misereor's invitation to come to Aachen, where he designed a Lenten veil under the title "God and Gold: how much is enough?" (see photo above). The veil was greatly admired and hung up in thousands of churches.

In later years, Daozi's artworks offered more intensive criticism of his country's political course. He consequently lost the universal esteem he had previously enjoyed, and a number of former friends and admirers, especially members of the official Protestant Church, distanced themselves from him. The period of permitted Easter exhibitions, too, was over. Several Christian artists are now living outside of the People's Republic. In 2019, Daozi still publicly exhibited two abstract paintings in his studio in Beijing's 798 Art Zone, paintings whose content he explained as follows: "Here one sees the Red Sea, which is parting as

the People of Israel pass through. In the background the pharaoh with his chariots of war approaches – President Xi Jinping." "This triptych is called 'Sarcophagus.' In the centre is the empty grave, from which radiates the living light; on the sides the embalmed bodies of statesmen lie in repose – death is rendered homage here," Daozi explained in a personal talk with the author.

Daozi was an influential personality in China's Christian art scene. With his sacral ink painting, he made a unique and lasting contribution to the contextual proclamation of the Gospel. In his own words, his art has the following message and mission (transl. from his article in K. Fiedler, *Es freuet sich die Engelschar*, p. 44):

> *In today's China one finds the essence of the spirit of our time* […] *in a spiritual revolution, namely the sublime resurrection of the Gospel from the ruins, which is inspiration, beginning, salvation, and gift.* […] *Let us continue to pray for China.*

Sources: *Amity Christian Art*, December 2011, nos. 20-21; Katrin Fiedler, *Es freuet sich die Engelschar. Christliche chinesische Kunst und Musik der Gegenwart* [The Host of Angels Rejoices: Christian Chinese Art and Music of the Present], Hamburg 2014; the author's recollections of exhibitions and conversations 2010–2012, 2015, and 2019.