A Look at Christianity in China as Portrayed through Wu Li’s Poems on the Seven Deadly Sins

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Abstract

This paper analyzes a series of seven poems entitled 《七克》, “Seven Sins”, by Wu Li (1632 – 1718). Although known primarily for his landscape paintings and position as one of the six major Chinese painters of the Qing Dynasty, Wu Li also deserves a significant place in history for his major contribution to literature as one of the first major Chinese Christian poets. Wu Li’s creativity and talent that produced inspirational paintings also produced inspirational poetry. Matched with a fervent Christian faith and desire to save souls that dominated the latter half of his life, his poetry helped to encourage conversion to Christianity at a time when missionaries were focused on China. Wu Li’s poems provide readers insight into how Jesuits portrayed Christianity to the Chinese, as well as into the Chinese own take on Christianity.

Many generations of writers and theologians around the world have written about and modified the primary vices faced by individuals endeavoring to live virtuous lives. Wu Li used his knowledge of traditional Chinese poetry to make Christianity and the Bible seem familiar and to thereby capture the attention and arouse the emotions of Chinese willing to embrace Christianity. “Poetry was, in fact, a foundation stone of Chinese culture, and the Jesuit missionaries came to be fully aware of this fact.”¹ The Jesuits were the first Sinologists and their knowledge was exceptional. Wu Li had the talent, language ability, and knowledge of Chinese culture to communicate complex images, feelings, and knowledge to inspire individuals to accept the religion, including the concept of the Seven Deadly Sins. Wu Li’s poems provide readers insight into how Christianity was portrayed by the Jesuits to the Chinese, as well as the Chinese own take on Christianity.