

# The Sacred-Secular Space: The *Ma Kok* Temple of Macau in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Western Paintings

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## Abstract

*The essay attempts to explore the intertextual relationship between religion and community from a socio-cultural perspective in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century Western artistic representations of a Chinese Daoist Temple, the Ma Kok Temple, in Macau.*

*The Ma Kok Temple (The A-Ma Temple) is part of the Historic Center of Macau inscribed into the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list in 2005 for its historicity, religiosity and sociality. It was not only a place for worshipping, but also a site of the Portuguese' first landing on the fishing village in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Being situated off the southern coast of China it had been a prosperous place of East-West trading, cultural exchange and living interaction. In those 19<sup>th</sup> century paintings cited for discussion, ordinary folk's daily lives nearby and inside the Temple were depicted, which presented realistic scenes of the "sacred" juxtaposing/blending with the "secular".*

*The essay discusses, with illustration of seven paintings by those Western artists lingering then in Macau, in what ways their Ma Kok Temple paintings reveal a unique relationship between religion and community -- that of "sacred space" juxtaposing/blending with "secular" space.*

**Key Words:** Macau, Ma Kok Temple, sacred, secular, Western painting

## 1. Preface

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, art works recording the landscape of Macau had already gone beyond the level of cartographic art of Marine navigation. When foreign merchants ships arrived at Macau, their first impression of Macau would be that of the *Ma Kok* Temple.<sup>1</sup> Macau was not only named after the

place where the temple was as the Portuguese called it (Amacao),<sup>2</sup> but also represented by the Temple on the canvas of many Western artists, such as George Chinnery (1774-1852), William Princep (1794-1874), Auguste Borget (1808-1877), Amiral Theodore- Auguste Fisquet (1813-1890), Edward Hildebrandt (1818-1869), etc. What worth our attention about those paintings is that most of them depicted the front place and the courtyard of the *Ma Kok* Temple rather than its inside views. The phenomenon can perhaps be understood as to 19<sup>th</sup> century Western artists the Temple as a representative religious place of the Southern Coast of China gave them fresh impressions and mystic feelings that triggered their creative impulses. With regard to what is so intriguing and unique about the Temple that it got visualized again and again on the paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western artists, it is perhaps because of its appeal as a center of local human activities — worship, work, leisure, etc., which is characteristic of a traditional Chinese temple and as a harmonious sacred-secular space. Therefore, this essay attempts to discuss, from the perspective of visual culture, the Western paintings with reference to the *Ma Kok* Temple's particularity and distinctiveness in relation to Chinese religious culture.

## 2. The *Ma Kok* Temple of Macau in Western Paintings

The major deity enshrined in the *Ma Kok* Temple is *Mazu*, originally a fisher-girl named Lin Mo who was born in *Meizhou* (Fujian Province, China) into an official-turned-fisherman's family in 960 and died in 987. After her premature death, she was deified as a sea goddess carrying the imperial titles of *Ling Hui Fei* (Bright Intelligence Concubine in Song Dynasty, 1156), *Tian Fei* (Celestial Concubine in Yuan Dynasty, 1278) and subsequently *Tian Hou* (Celestial Empress in Early Qing Dynasty, 1684) and got incorporated into the official Chinese pantheon for her power and act of protecting/saving seafaring people's lives (fisherfolk in particular) from sea perils. (see Li 1995, Xu 2008, and Zhang 1995)

According to the studies of some researchers (e.g., Cheng 1999, Xu 2008, Li 1995), *Mazu* worship in Macau started in mid 15<sup>th</sup> century. There are five different versions (see Teixeira 1979) of the same legend about *Mazu*'s arrival at Macau, which show

A certain degree of uniformity concerning the migration of a poor Fujianese maiden [Lin Mo] who begged to be taken on a dangerous sea journey to Macau. Eventually, she supposedly overcame a violent storm on a poor junk and safely landed on the spot where the Temple was built. This episode implicitly suggests that *Tian Hou* in Macau is the 'manifestation' of *Tian Hou* in Fujian. (Cheng 1999: 104)

The Portuguese arrived at the southern coast of China around 1506-1521 to trade with the Chinese people. When they reached this peninsula of South China for the first time, they knew that there was a temple. When they asked about the name of the place, the local Fukjianese answered that it was called *A-Ma Gau*<sup>3</sup>; it was later adopted by the Portuguese as “Amacao” which eventually evolved to “Macau”.

From the visual perspective, what appears to impress most the foreign merchants and adventurers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century when they arrived at Macau was probably the bustling scene of the front place of the Temple with all sorts of merchandize in display and people hurrying to and fro. (see Figure 1)



**Figure 1 Entrance to the Ma Kok Temple, Macau 1838**

Auguste Borget 1808-1877 (HK Museum of Art 1985: 77, pl. 32)

Figure 1 is Auguste Borget's depiction of the entrance to the *Ma Kok* Temple of Macau. When Auguste Borget<sup>4</sup> arrived at Macau during his voyage around the world in 1838, the *Ma Kok* Temple at the southwest end of Macau became one of his daily lingering places for half a year. In his 1839 diary, he described the *Ma Kok* Temple of Macau as

The greatest marvel I have yet seen ... almost daily I visit this temple either in the morning when all is shadow or in the evening when every stone and tree and roof reflects the sun, or at mid-day when the extreme heat obliges me to seek its grateful shade. .... (Hong Kong Museum of Art 1985: 76)<sup>5</sup>

In the middle of the painting, there is the main entrance of the Temple, which takes fourteen stairs to enter. At the bottom of the stairs, there stand two stone lions. A tall tree is seen in the Temple, with its foliage shading the architecture of the Temple. On the right side of the painting, leisure people are gambling and a fisherwoman with a child is walking toward the main entrance. On the left is a vending stall where some people are chatting while eating. The scene depicted here perhaps gives an idea why the *Ma Kok* Temple became then a favorite subject for European artists visiting Macau--the flourishing and thriving scenes, the hustle bustle of people, the exquisite temple architecture as well as the primitive plainness of trees depicted in Borget's "Entrance to the *Ma Kok* Temple" display the lively views of the Temple of the past.



**Figure 2 The A-Ma Temple 1838**

Amiral Theodore-Auguste Pisquet 1813-1890

Inscribed: "Pagoda at Macao – from nature"

HK Museum of Art 1985: 91, pl. 39

The scene in Amiral Theodore-Auguste Pisquet's<sup>6</sup>"The A-Ma Temple" (1838) is the side view of the *Ma Kok* Temple (Figure 2), which depicts foreign merchant ships sailing into the harbor, local fishing boats mooring by the harbor-side, fisher-folk busy unloading their catches of the day.

What both paintings visualize is a scene of local people's daily life in harmony with foreign merchant ships, giving the impression of the front place of the Temple being an important meeting point of Eastern and Western cultures as well as a site of East-West trading. Harbor trading activities and fisherfolk's daily life activities in a way constitute the unique local religious color of

Macau. Such scenes of religious worship juxtaposed with business trading highlight the unique visual culture of the Temple.

And farther away is the place where all other boats and ships moored. Two or three fisher-girls are seen in small boats and on shore, a scene which comes up quite frequently in George Chinnery's<sup>7</sup> paintings (Figure 3 & 4).



**Figure 3 A Rocky Headland by the side of A-Ma Temple**

George Chinnery 1774-1852 (Museum de Macau 2012: 145, pl. 95)



**Figure 4 Lateral View of Ma Kok Temple, Macau**

George Chinnery 1774-1852

(Galeria do MuseoLuís de Camões, 1985: 17)

The shorelines of Macau being foreign traders' only sea route and fisher-girl as a concrete symbol of fishing life in Macau are of close relationship with *Mazu* as a protector of fisherfolks and seafarers from storms and sea perils. From the shore, the front place to the *Ma Kok* Temple formed during the colonial times the central arena for culture exchange and trading in Macau. And the *Ma Kok* Temple itself is an embodiment of Daoism<sup>8</sup> and Buddhism. Cheng Miu Bing in her *Macau: a Cultural Janus* related to the Daoist immortal belief of the Temple as such:

The *Ma Kok* Temple announces religious toleration of disparate beliefs and attracts people from different social strata. Through religious activities the Temple plays an articulate role in manifesting the cohesive force and collective identity of the Chinese people and shows the polytheistic tradition of the Chinese belief systems. (Cheng, 1999, p. 116)

From this passage, we can see that Chinese belief is a polytheistic system. The *Ma Kok* Temple as a coalition place of folk beliefs blends together Daoism, Buddhism and other folk religions. Florentine Francesco Carletti (1573?-1636)<sup>9</sup> in his travel book mentioned the Temple (1964 [1598]):

During important festivals, people eat together around temples, which I saw happen at the Amacao (*Ma Kok* Temple) ... that festival befalls in March, as an important festival, it is celebrated throughout China. (Xia 1992, 10: 82)

It is a typical sixteenth-century European faced with the task of describing the non-European world to those who have never seen it, and it is safe to assume that the things that interest him are also likely to be the things that interest them. It appears that he is fascinated by the social and sexual mores of the inhabitants of Asia. The festival Carletti referred to here is the Celestial Empress' (*Mazu*) Birthday, during which fisher-folk flock together and pray for common blessings—peace and safety on sea and bountiful catches. The *Ma Kok* Temple becomes an important place for religious and social activities and its front place an activity place of folk living, exhibiting the cohesive force of the Macanese in social life. We can therefore say, the *Ma Kok* Temple is a sacred-secular space where religious worship and folk life blend together.

### 3. The *Ma Kok* Temple as a Sacred-Secular Space

The *Ma Kok* Temple as a sacred-secular place was in a way the city center of Macau. In the sacred space, the city center's drift is of great importance. A country, a city, a sacred place — all constitute the image of the center. (Wang 1990: 72) Emperor *Kangxi*'s conferment of imperial titles on *Mazu* in 1680's officially deified her, through court rituals, a Daoist deity as well as the most important sea deity of South China. From then on, she entered into the main stream of Chinese culture. The myth of the Celestial Empress (or *Mazu*) was finally converted to an orthodox cult of *Mazu*. The apotheosis of *Mazu* endorsed by Emperor *Kangxi* served not only to enable the court better control and monitoring of folk belief practices, but also to foster the relationship among Court (Emperor), Temple (Daoist disciples), Heaven (Celestial Emperor) and *Mazu* (primordial mother) with the latter as the mediator. Generally speaking, as Daoism is the native religion of China, even before its inception as a religion, all Chinese are in a sense born natural Daoists—for them, worshipping is integral with daily living.

After the *Mazu* worship moved from the court center to local government administrative center, folk belief activities were organized under more canonical control and national norm. The *Ma Kok* Temple as a symbol of Macau's city center turned into a sacred-secular place. When worship rituals enter the secular space from the sacred space (the Temple itself), the Temple and its front place becomes a sacred space—a place for religious rituals. The Celestial Empress' Birthday is one of Macau's most important traditional festival — people gather together and eat in the vicinity of the Temple, hold celebration activities and rituals, pray for peacefulness and blessings—especially for the *Mazu*'s protection of their lives on sea. Such religious rituals in a way become secularized and more part of people's living life.

Auguste Borget mentioned in his diary that the *Ma Kok* Temple was his most frequented place in Macau. (Borget 1842) Other than his "Entrance to the *Ma Kok* Temple" (1838) painting which depicts the front place of the Temple, his hand-colored lithograph "Interior View of the Grand Temple of Macau" (1842) (Figure 5) reveals the courtyard inside the Temple, which features a woman kneeling on ground burning incense before the censer; another woman kneeling in front of the altar piously praying; a hawker sitting on the step-floor; two or three clusters of people chatting. In the upper corner is a Western artist painting -- probably Borget himself is in the painting, with some bystanders watching.



**Figure 5 Interior View of the Grand Temple of Macau**

August Borget 1808-1877 (Cuthbertson 1986: 61)

Through a wooden door at the central part of the painting, we can see that there is a group of three to five people playing chess or chatting. When people enter a temple space from a daily living space, they pray for blessings and afterwards they return to the daily living space just by taking one step outside the Temple. Foreign merchant ships, hawkers, fishing boats drifting by the shore at sunset, fisher-folk flock together in small groups chatting or playing chess after a day's toil -- that's one of the most unique impressions the Temple gives.

In William Prinsep's<sup>10</sup> painting "The *Ma Kok* Temple" (1838) (Figure 6) the dark trees on upper left of the painting create a *chiascuro* effect with the *Ma Kok* Temple which appears brightened, inter-shining with the distant sky and we can also see that people carrying on their activities in front of the Temple, forming a natural blend of the sacred and the secular.



**Figure 6 The Ma Kok Temple, Macau, circa 1838**

William Prinsep 1794-1874 (HK Museum of Art 1985: 121, pl. 4)



Mircea Eliade in his *The Sacred and the Profane* stated:

The threshold that separates the two spaces also indicates the distance between two modes of being, the profane and the religious. The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible. (Eliade 1987, p. 25)

From this we can infer that threshold has the function of separating the sacred space from the secular space. In Prinsep's painting as well as in Borget's "Outside the A-Ma Temple," (Figure 7) we can see that such separation between the sacred space and the secular space of the *Ma Kok* Temple takes the form of a few stairs to cross a threshold. But during the Celestial Empress' Birthday festival, the front place of the Temple becomes a sacred space as well.



**Figure 7 Outside the A-Ma Temple**

August Borget 1808-1877

Museum de Macao 2012: 187, pl. 146

#### 4. Conclusion

The most unique aspect about the *Ma Kok* Temple in the seven paintings is a sacred-secular space visualized, with the two spaces overlapping and interweaving with each other. Unlike other religious places, the Temple is not represented by visible space—we can see that in the vicinity of

the Temple, people appear to carry on their daily activities as usual. There is not any concrete presence of a “door” for separation; the sacredness of the Temple is preserved by the invisible spiritual space, which is very important and most unique. Moreover, the uniqueness of the *Ma Kok* Temple is further manifest by the important role of colonial Macau in commercial, cultural and religious exchanges. It is in this sense that the *Ma Kok* Temple as a sacred-secular place is the city center of Macau.

The seven *Ma Kok* Temple paintings by 19<sup>th</sup> century Western artists, which are usually regarded as representative Macau topographical paintings (Mo 2003 and 2004) can be more appropriately regarded as “humanistic topographical paintings” which are not only accurate, objective, realistic rendition of a portion of a city or town, showing primarily its manmade features, but also aesthetic representations of the visual culture of the place—in this case, Daoism visualized in the context of Chinese religious tradition.<sup>11</sup>The seven paintings visualize the past life of the *Ma Kok* Temple which has been undergoing several dramatic environmental changes since its erection in 1488, with buildings by its sides and reclaimed land in front of its front place – that is, merchant ships and fishing boats are no longer moored by its seaward side. However, despite the fact that no outgoing fishing boats pass through its front praying for *Mazu*’s blessings any more, the worship of *Mazu* still flourishes in Macau to such an extent that a large temple complex with a tall statue of *Mazu* is established on top of a mountain, forming a *Mazu* Village.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The *Ma Kok* Temple at that time was situated right at the shore of Macau with its front facing the sea, which is evident in the paintings of many artists (e.g. Auguste Borget) of that time. The Temple's chief deity A-Ma or Mazu is the sea deity who protects the fisher-folk from storms or sea disasters. That's why all Mazu temples in China are situated facing the sea.
- <sup>2</sup> As *Ma Gok (Ma Kok)* was what the Macau residents told the Portuguese when the latter asked what the place they landed was called. Macau was since referred to as *Ma Kok* and the Temple as *Ma Kok* or A-Ma Temple. Therefore, it can be said that the *Ma Kok* Temple was the image of Macau in the impression of the Portuguese.
- <sup>3</sup> A-Ma Gau is where the Portuguese landed for the first time, Lin Mo (later deified as Mazu) from Fujian on a junk drift-reached after a shipwreck and a small temple for A-Ma (Mazu) was first built on this very spot in 1488, which predated the whole temple complex.
- <sup>4</sup> Auguste Borget (1808-1877) was born in Paris, a French banker-turned-painter, best known for his drawings and prints of exotic places, in particular China.
- <sup>5</sup> It is cited from August Borget (1842) *Sketches of China and the Chinese from Drawings by Auguste Borget* (London: Tilt and Bogue); also in Xia Dexin (1992) Macau 1839: Borget's narrative and painting, *Review of Culture (Macau)* 10: 82.
- <sup>6</sup> Amiral Theodore-Auguste Fisquet (1813-1890) was born and died in Toulon. As a draughtsman and watercolorist he joined the world voyage (1836-1839) of the French ship *La Bonité*. He met Chinnery in 1837 where they sketched the *Ma Kok* Temple together. The watercolor is probably a later completion of the one painted on January 4<sup>th</sup> 1838 in the company of Chinnery. (Martyn Gregory Gallery, *Catalogue* 30, p. 45.)
- <sup>7</sup> George Chinnery (1774-1852), born in London and died in Macau, is acknowledged as one of the foremost European artists based in Asia in the first half of the nineteenth century. He studied at the Royal Academy Schools, left England at the age of 28 for the East and lived in India and

Macau for, respectively 23 and 27 years. He was a versatile artist, producing during the course of a long career a range of portraits, landscapes and street scenes in oil, watercolor and pencil.

<sup>8</sup> The *Ma Kok* Temple has its own immortal system which includes both Daoist and Buddhist immortals, such as Mazu, Guan Gong, Guanyin, Maitreya, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Francesco Carletti is a Florentine merchant who set out from Seville in 1594 on a short slave-trading expedition which turned into an eight-year round-the-world tour. He visited not only Mexico and Peru, but also exotic eastern regions on which few Europeans had set eyes – Japan, Macao, Malacca, and Goa.

<sup>10</sup> William Prinsep (1794-1874), a British watercolorist and drawer, took lessons in painting from George Chinnery in Calcutta. From the late 1830s, he worked in Macao (where Chinnery had settled) where he met Borget as well in 1838. He left many images of Indian family and social life, street scenes and landscapes and some of Macao landscapes.

<sup>11</sup> Daoism is not only a religion of tolerance but also a religion for all people, disciples or not..