

# Did Christianity thrive in China?

*Digging for evidence in an ancient church*

BY BAY FANG

**L**OU GUAN TAI, CHINA—Martin Palmer was covered in bird droppings when he made the discovery of a lifetime. He clambered up a rickety ladder into the ancient pagoda, picked his way through broken tiles and wood beams, looked up—and was shocked by what he saw. Above him, shrouded in dust, was a 10-foot-high clay grotto. The top was classical Tang dynasty sculpture, but at the bottom were the remains of a figure, one leg cocked and wearing flowing robes. Palmer recognized it at once: “It was a depiction of the Virgin Mary, and I was looking at China’s first Nativity scene.”

Here, beneath fields of kiwi fruit bushes, lay what is likely the oldest surviving Christian site in all of China. Dating back to 638 A.D., the site provides the first evidence that Christianity thrived throughout China from the seventh to the ninth centuries as the imperially sanctioned “religion of light.” The excavation project was launched last week. “If they have found any Christian buildings, it would be an earthshaking discovery,” says Jason Sun, associate curator of Asian art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Palmer, who heads the Britain-based Alliance of Religions and Conservation, became interested in the site while translating ancient Christian scrolls that describe it. His research turned up a map, made by Japanese spies posing as archaeologists, who had charted the area before Japan’s invasion of China in 1937. The map showed only religious sites (and, if soaked in lemon juice, every military post in the county). Palmer followed it to an area 50 miles southwest of the ancient Chinese capital of Xi’an, where there stood a leaning pagoda called Da Qin, meaning “To the West.”

**Nun’s tale.** Palmer’s first clue to the significance of the site came when he climbed a hill overlooking it. Looking down, he realized that the site was laid out not on a

north-south axis, as Chinese temples are, but instead pointing toward the east like a proper Christian church. Palmer ran excitedly down the hill and was immediately confronted by an old Buddhist nun, who demanded to know why he was shouting. When Palmer told her he thought the site was Christian, she surprised him by snapping, “Of course it was! This was the most famous Christian site in all of China!”



Martin Palmer believes he has uncovered fragments of a Nativity scene in the grotto of this ancient pagoda. ● “It was a depiction of the Virgin Mary . . .”

Previously, all that scholars knew about the earliest Christians in China came from the Nestorian Stone, a tablet discovered in the 17th century that describes the arrival of Christian missionaries in 635 A.D. Led by a Bishop Alopen, they came from modern-day Afghanistan and did not recognize the pope. But in the absence of other documentation, they had long been considered a marginal group that never penetrated Chinese culture. But Palmer’s discovery shows how important these first Christians really were: Their church sits squarely in the middle of what was an imperial compound for the study of Taoism, the official religion of the Tang dynasty.

standing of Christ that was more egalitarian, compassionate, and all-encompassing than the one in the West.”

The excavated site is expected to become a major tourist attraction. Excavation of the sealed underground rooms, beginning this summer, could turn up liturgical vessels, scripts, and statues of saints. Palmer is working with Chinese officials on plans for a museum to house the artifacts. But sometimes he thinks back on the moment of discovery: “We all stopped suddenly in front of the Nativity scene and realized we would tell the world, and this was the last time it would be our secret. Then we all bowed and went out.” ●

The finding demonstrates the religion’s powerful influence on Chinese culture. For example, the goddess of mercy, Guanyin, is the most popular Chinese deity and for centuries was depicted as male. It was not until the eighth century, when Christianity was at its height in China, that Guanyin began appearing as a female, wearing robes and carrying a baby—just like the Virgin Mary. “Here we see a Christian figure passing into Chinese folk religion,” says Palmer.

The discovery also introduces a uniquely Chinese brand of Christianity. This version, mixed with Taoism and Buddhism, differed from the Roman church by discarding the idea of original sin and preaching against slavery and for gender equality and vegetarianism. “At the time Rome was trying to convert Anglo-Saxons to Christianity,” says Palmer, “the church in China had developed another under-

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