

Α TRIP TO THE ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA



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It is my strong belief that Christianity, especially the Orthodox Church, is much closer to the Chinese culture than the western ones. This is why I am in Taiwan, trying to introduce the Orthodox theology, but never to proselytize anybody. But I must confess that as a priest I always feel sorry and shame also, because the Church did not approach China early, and as a Greek which means a Byzantine descendant, I feel more shame that my bishops, my emperors, my intellectual people, did not try to introduce Christianity to China. I write this only with pain and not to accuse anybody, finally, God and history judge us.

The difficulties of being alone here, did not allow me to do any research for Orthodox Chinese relations. But one day, being in the huge bookshop, in Taipei, -the most dangerous place for my poor money- a book blinked in front of my eyes: the Jesus sutras, by Martin Palmer. I bought in immediately and I absorbed it!



Palmer describes his extraordinary discovery of a church in china from 7th century, out of Si'an!!! Since then, it became to me an obsession to visit that place. Finally this year, I went with a Chinese friend.

Si' an is really the heart of Chinese civilization. The view of the city is magnificent. A city for emperors, poets, merchants, Chinese and foreigners. Museums and monuments everywhere. I think if I ever live in china I

will live here. But first we went to see the Stele museum. The Forest of Stone Steles in Xi'an is an art treasure-house with the oldest and richest collection of steles in China. It is not only one of the centers of ancient Chinese stone-engraving classics, but also the focus of the works of art of celebrated calligraphers of past dynasties. The numerous standing steles resemble a forest, hence the name "Forest of



Si An, the entrance of the stela museum

Steles". With a history of almost 900 years, it is an art gem renowned at home and abroad.



the christian stele

The first thing you see, entering to this place where the mystic beauty of Chinese culture flourishes, is the inscription of the Nestorian Christianity. It is called from the name on the top: ***Daqin Jingjiao***

"Daqin" is the name the ancient China called the Rome Empire, mainly the Byzantine Empire. Professor Kordosis in his article "China of T'ang Dynasty, Nestorians and the 'Heretical' Byzantium" argues that also that Fulin is the name for Constantinople.



the christian stele, detail, see the cross on the top

"Jingjiao" is the Chinese name for Christianity (Nestorianism) when it was introduced to China. Nestorianism is a sect, heretics from the Byzantine Empire. The name nestorianism originates from Nestorios, who was patriarch of Constantinople and he wrongly taught that Jesus is only God, not God and man, that Jesus has one nature, not two: divine and human. His teaching caused a problem in the Church and finally the third ecumenical council condemned his teaching. His followers were forced to leave the Byzantine empire, and spread to the east, to Syria, Persia etc. We have to point out here that the main reason of this misunderstandings is the poor knowledge of the Greek language from Assyrians and other eastern Christians. Using Greek language you can express very deep ideas and very sharp distinctions, you must be very exact and very careful, this is why Greek language is the language of philosophy, theology and science

and have more than 5.000.000 words. But it is very difficult to translate in other languages without mistakes. In English language more than 1000 words of everyday use are Greek. Anyhow, Nestorians are close to orthodox.

Nestorianism was introduced to China in the 9th year of Zhenguan (635 AD) under the reign of Taizong of the Tang Dynasty. This stele was erected in the 2nd year of Jianzhong (781 AD) under the reign of Emperor Dezong. The Story was narrated by the clergyman Jing Jing and written by Lu Xiuyan. It records the creed and rites of Nistorianism and its spread and activities during the 150 years in Tang Dynasty. Also engraved on the stele are records of events in ancient Syrian letters and quite clergymen's autographs. It provides value materials for the study of cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries in ancient times.

It was originally erected in the Nestorian Temple in the Tang Dynasty. In the third year of Tianqi (1623) of the Ming Dynasty, it was unearthed and placed in Jin Sheng Temple in the western suburb of Xi'an, arresting the attention of the world. In the 33rd year of Guang Xu (1907) of the Qing Dynasty, it was moved to the Forest of Steles.



the stele basis

As you can see, on the top of the stele is clearly seen a cross, indicating that we have a monument of Christian origins.



the stele (photo from museum)



a rubbing of the original stele

The text inscribed on the stele in Chinese as well as its English translation is available on <http://www.orthodox.com.tw>

At the museum I was also able to find this exact trace of the stele's surface. This is done quite easily with the use of paper and ink, whereby the edges and features of the surface are traced on the surface of the paper. On the internet there are various English translations of the text, and Palmer gives his own translation, of a poetic nature, in his book, even though in some points it is not entirely accurate. For example, the text is written in ancient Chinese and this is why modern day Chinese readers find difficulty in understanding its exact meaning. In this text it becomes clear that Christianity tried to expand in china trying to use the philosophical terminology familiar to the Chinese. For example, a very beautiful missionary method was used in order to approach the people through their own culture, language and cultural expressions, expression of their own civilizations. This unfortunately does not happen today always.

The fact that this stele existed in the 7th century under the sufferance/approval of the Chinese emperor indicates that Christianity had spread quite widely and had been respected enough around the Chinese Capital. This means that at least one hundred years, roughly, of contact and expansion of Christianity had to have passed. Christianity was introduced through the silk road by missionaries and merchants coming from the west.

Once again I have to emphasize how important and crucial it was that these missionaries tried to express their faith through Chinese cultural concepts and terminology. Of course, a rather amusing event is the usual tour guide descriptions of the site as a Baptist or Roman Catholic in origin. In Xian I was not able to find any other Christian monuments. After all, I do not have the necessary time or the archaeological skills and resources for such a task. Nevertheless I was very excited from having read Palmer's book to seek to find the location of the church in which that stele was located. Palmer states that the stele was near LuGuan Temple. Following his directions (in his book) we rented a taxi which drove us about two hours out of town to LuGuan Temple which the driver knew because that was the location which according to tradition Lao Tse wrote his famous Tao Teh Ching.



no the dragon pagoda, no cars please!

On the way there the taxi driver knew exactly where the Christian pagoda was. In fact they even had small cloth type maps. The drivers informed us that we could not reach the exact destination by car and that we had to rent horses. I was so excited that I would be prepared to rent even a helicopter, if I had the resources of course, which, needless to say, I didn't. Afterwards I realized that one can also reach that place on foot. However on horseback is a much wiser decision since the ground is very muddy.



the pagoda

At some point I could see, quite overwhelmed with emotion, the pagoda in the distance. Approaching it, we found ourselves in a small area which has seen quite a few foreign and native visitors every day ever since Palmer discovered it. The Pagoda dominates the surrounding area. Next to it there is a small building which functions as a small museum. To the right side there are two small Buddhist cells. Apparently they belong to the

spiritual descendants of the elderly Buddhist nun who had revealed to Palmer that the Pagoda had originally been Christian, then Taoist and finally Buddhist.



the monks near the pagoda



several monks near the pagoda



out of the pagoda, and the place the stele was found

I stood there, speechless, overwhelmed with emotion, staring at the monument. At the center of the area between the Pagoda and the museum is an identical copy of the original stele which of course is located in the museum in Xian (the original).



stele, the place where the stele was found and the small museum behind

The Stele stands on a turtle as is customary in other similar Chinese steles. I was very lucky to have met the director of the Da Qin museum who took great care of us,

offering us tea and showing us great hospitality. He told us the story regarding the pagoda and that there are two more locations in China where there are Nestorian sites. God willing I will try to visit them in a future trip. When he heard that I am Greek he said that he was under the impression that there are some Greek inscriptions not been certain. He there had been some China with letters not ascertain. However, by that area and, LuGuan Temple, had were ancient Greek.



with the very public director of the museum

the cultural revolution, all ancient ruins, Christian or Chinese, were destroyed. However, I want to believe that if I have the time and resources for a future trip, I will be able to return to China and see if there can be found other interesting pieces of information about ancient Christianity there.

The director told us that the pagoda used to tilt slightly like the famous Tower of Pisa, and that the Chinese government rectified it and maintained it. Very hesitantly I requested to be allowed perhaps to enter the pagoda. I had seen that the door was locked. He said that normally this is not allowed



the door of the pagoda is closed

because it is very dangerous but also because if the door opens there is nothing to be seen inside. However, after my consistent, if polite, petitions, he gave his permission for us to construct a makeshift ladder and to try to

enter from the upper window, emphasizing to us that he bears no responsibility for any possible accidents that might occur. First, however, he politely suggested that we take a look at the museum exhibits.



daqin museum

He told us that an olive leaf and a fish are possibly the ones that are depicted on some of the findings there, which, if true they are depictions of Christian symbols. Of course all this needs scientific verification by experts, and I pray that such verification takes place soon.



Entering the Christian Pagoda

Meanwhile, our makeshift ladder was ready. Thus, with a degree of risk but with a greater amount of excitement we climbed upward. Overwhelmed, we entered through the window. We faced an empty space. There is a small wooden ladder in the interior that leads to the other floors. From the level in which we entered till the top there are seven floors. Climbing up that wooden ladder, on the next level, we came face to face with the relief pictured in the photo herein.



wall icon 1 detail

Palmer states that this is possibly a relief of the Nativity of Christ. This is because if we compare it with Byzantine icons, the positioning of the feet is almost identical to the positioning of the feet of the Panagia. The position of the feet on the relief is, furthermore, not a known, to the Chinese, Buddhist or other meditational position. Rather it seems that we have the presentation of a woman with a child next to her. The rocks on the background is a characteristic of Byzantine painting as you can see in some of the pictures that follow. Definitely, the artwork bears no resemblance to any form of Chinese artwork, to the best of my non-specialist knowledge.



large wall icon 2



wall icon 2, detail, the legs

Overwhelmed, I prayed a small prayer in front of that relief. Then we climbed to the next level where we saw the next relief. Palmer suspects that the presentation is that of the prophet Jonah outside the city of Nineveh as per the famous biblical story. As it shows, again we have no usual Chinese or Buddhist positioning of the feet. In the background we can detect the city with a clear Byzantine artistic expression. It has to be made clear, of course, that these are quite safe but by no means one hundred percent certain assumptions. Nevertheless these assumptions are based on the unusual for the Chinese or Buddhist styles positions and postures



of the figured depicted on the relief.

(Here it has to be noted that there are many Byzantine icons with the same gesture, a saint or evangelist sitting, having a city as background, as you see)



view from inside the pagoda

Through the arches of the windows there is a very captivating view of the valley outside. Under one such arch which did not lead to an outside view I saw a square board that resembled a bulletin board which covered something under its glass surface. With great difficulty I was able to see an inscription with Assyrian letters. I know they were of Assyrian origin because they were the



steps, inside, inscription behind the glass

same style of writing characters with those which are at the lower part of the stele at



Xian. On the next level there was another such box. The letters on the inscription did not seem to be of the same origin, Assyrian, as the ones on the previous level. I was very curious about this and went back down the ladder, requesting that someone open these boxes for me. One of the staff unhinged it for me and then I saw the inscription whose photograph I am including below. I cannot say with certainty



inside the pagoda



daqin pagoda ,on the wall , greek characters?

what kind of writing this is. It appears to have a certain Greek character to the letters, but I cannot be sure. I can only invite whoever has the relevant experience to decide.



inside the pagoda , on the floor

Eventually we reached the uppermost level and we stopped there to pray for all those who brought the message of Christ to China so many centuries ago and have now passed away. I am certain that their souls will be rejoicing today with the discovery of the location of this monument and with the fact that some people have prayed again in that same place so many centuries later.



daqin pagoda , 7th floor, the roof



Unfortunately the time was getting late and we had to get back downstairs. We went down the dangerous makeshift ladder which subsequently they took disassembled. I so wish I could have stayed longer. Nevertheless, I am not an archaeologist, neither did I have unlimited time available to me. Mine was mostly a trip of pilgrimage to this one of the places which Christianity reached perhaps for the first time. However, it has to be noted that the location is very suitable to the location of a church or monastery. It is no coincidence of course that the monument lies near the same area in which Lao Tzu is supposed to have written his famous work.



Today in that area stands Lu Guan Temple in memory of Lao Tzu. Very near the DaQin pagoda the locals display what they purport to be Lao Tzu's tomb.

I cannot believe this, of course, because historically the sage's final resting place is not mentioned

anywhere and also because, as a Taoist friend had told me there are another three or four spots in China displaying Lao Tzus tomb.

The pictures below are from the famous luguan temple dedicated to Lao tzu, still famous and with a unique beauty.



Returning to Xian I tried to retain the taste of the beautiful one-time Chinese capital and cradle of the Chinese civilization. This feeling is alive today for everyone who will be lucky to walk by the temples and walls of that glorious city. There, I tried to imagine how

Christianity succeeded in becoming important there, a fact that is attested to by the written approval by the emperor for the construction of the stele. I pray to God that He enables me to visit again these wonderful sites as well as the other locations that host Christian monuments in China.

A map of the area



More full size photos are available at our web site <http://www.orthodox.com.tw/>