



Outpost of Catholicism Survives Among the Tibetans of 'Shangri-la'

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Washington Post Service
December 4, 2000

CIZHONG, China - "Hello, are you Catholic? I am Bernard-Marie."

An elderly Tibetan stood in the middle of a dirt road in this isolated mountain village on the banks of the Mekong River. In French only a little rusty after more than 50 years of disuse, Bernard-Marie identified himself as caretaker of one of the most intriguing structures in these parts: a Roman Catholic cathedral in the Tibetan-inhabited stretches of northwestern Yunnan province, where the mountains rise toward the Himalayan highlands of Tibet proper.

The story of this solid stone church in Cizhong, and of the Catholic communities that cling to the valleys and hillsides near the Mekong and Salween rivers, are either unknown or forgotten in the West. But they are reminders of some enduring lessons about China as it enters a new century.

While 50 years of communism have distorted or liquidated some of China's manifold cultures, many have survived, limping but alive. Despite Beijing's intermittent crackdowns on religion, faith still exerts a powerful hold on the imagination of the Chinese. And up in these regions where the air is thin and the mountains high, one gets a new appreciation of the complexity of China's Tibetan question and the West's changing views about the "roof of the world."

A few years back, this tranquil village of rambling wooden houses topped with satellite dishes was declared a lost Shangri-La by the prefecture of Deqen, to which it belongs. The decision was a moneymaking ploy to profit from the fame and exoticism of James Hilton's 1933 novel "Lost Horizon."

Since then, other towns in the area have followed suit. A race is on to be certified as the paradise depicted in Hilton's fantasy of monks and the fountain of youth. Cizhong did the others one better, instructing a local woman, Roanna, to tell visitors she was the granddaughter of Chang, the inimitable Chinese character in Hilton's book. The village's sloping fields of barley and corn, blood-red bell peppers drying on rooftops, the roiling waters of the Mekong below and lofty glaciers above all fit the part of Shangri-La. But in this case, truth—the story of the Catholics here—might be stranger than fiction.

Catholicism came to this region in the late 19th century. For decades, French missionaries had planned to enter Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism in those days did not have the cosmic pull that it exerts on the West today, and Catholics and Protestants dreamed of "civilizing" Tibet's "savages."

In the mid-19th century, the Foreign Missions of Paris, a major missionary organization in China, ordered its priests to move from Xinjiang, China's far northwestern region, south onto the forbidding Tibetan plateau. They were not welcomed. Within a few years, Tibetan brigands, backed by Buddhist lamas, had killed 10 priests and destroyed all the Catholic missions but one, in Yanjing, or Yerkalo, a small salt-mining town on Tibet's border with Yunnan. It remained open intermittently and is still working today.

More than 80, with a shock of white hair and a long, creased face, the Rev. A.F. Savioz is a veteran of the Vatican's attempts to bring the Bible to Tibet. Savioz, a Swiss-born member of the Order of St. Bernard, recalled the decision to switch the church's efforts from Tibet to Tibetan communities in China such as this one.

Tibet at that time was not under Chinese rule, and the Buddhist lamas who controlled it did not want competing religions inside its borders. China's government was more malleable. A series of foreign military victories against the Chinese had forced its rulers to grant foreign missionaries the right to proselytize in China.

"In Tibet proper, it was a local chief in the monastery who had the power," recalled Savioz, who repaired to Taiwan after he was expelled from Yunnan following China's communist revolution and now lives in a small village there. "They didn't want the people to have contact with the Christians." So the Catholics began preaching to the Tibetans in Sichuan and Yunnan, hoping their religion would slowly filter into the region. Savioz worked around Cizhong from 1947 to 1952. He recalls the hardship of life in Deqen, several days' walk from Cizhong.

"There was always trouble over there. Bandits from everywhere were coming. . . . There was trouble for many years, '48, '49. There was a lot of fighting," he said. "Once, many of us were robbed on the road, and all of our clothes were taken away. The Chinese government was not able to control anything. Someone said they had never seen a city so dirty." One of the saddest events in Savioz's life was collecting the remains of Maurice Tornay, another Swiss priest, who was killed in an ambush, apparently by Buddhist monks, on Aug. 11, 1949. Tornay had just been expelled from his church in Yerkalo by the local chief monk.

To gain the Tibetans' trust, Catholic missionaries started farms, opened schools and dispensed medicine. In Cizhong, the missionaries obtained several acres of land and planted barley, wheat and grapes. One farmer still brews a pungent wine from vines transplanted from Europe 90 years ago.

They also adapted Catholicism to local tastes. The ceiling of the Cizhong church, completed in the early 20th century, is painted with the Taoist yin and yang symbol and lotus blossoms, central to Buddhist iconography. Perhaps the most beautiful church in the region is a chapel in Baihanluo, a village 8,200 feet above sea level overlooking the Salween River near the border with Burma. Built 124 years ago, it resembles a Tibetan fort. Its wooden frame sports paintings rich in Buddhist imagery. On its roof, there is a slightly bent wooden cross.

Each night the villagers come to pray. Their only text is a dog-eared booklet of hymns published in 1932 by Catholic missionaries in the town of Tatsienlu, now known as Kangding, in Sikang province, now part of Sichuan.

Even the hymns were adapted to local tastes. Catholic priests used traditional Tibetan tunes, plugging in Christian lyrics. In the twilight of a recent evening in Baihanluo, voices emanating from the creaky wooden structure, lit only by candles and filled with people smelling of wood fires and dust, sounded like those from a Tibetan monastery.

"He is more powerful than gold," said an 8-year-old boy, reading from a book of scriptures, "because his gold will never fade."

Chinese law bans people under age 18 from participating in religious activities and bans Catholics from expressing loyalty to Rome. But the long arm of the law has trouble stretching to Baihanluo. Only one priest, from Kunming, about 360 miles away, cares for this widely dispersed community of several thousand believers. He comes once a year.

"We lack a father," said one believer in Baihanluo. "But we don't lack faith."

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