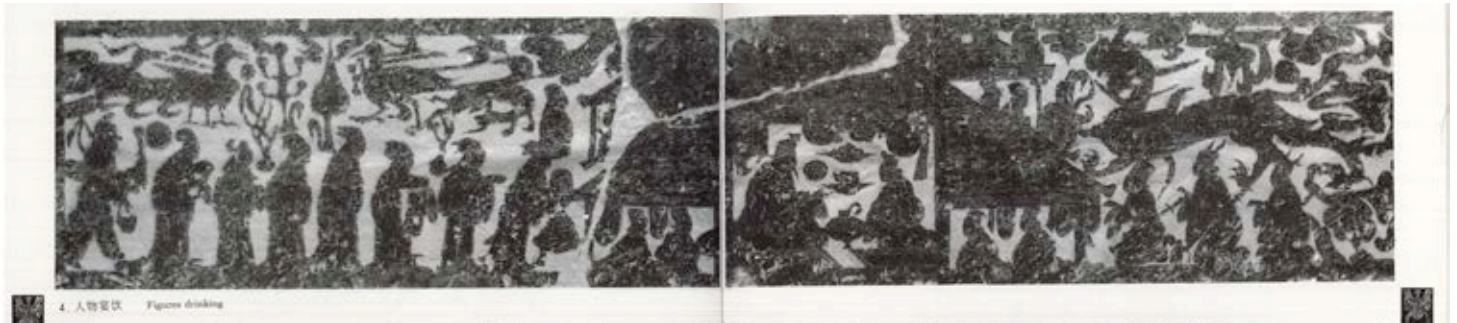


*Tombstone Carvings from AD 86*

*Did Christianity Reach China In the First Century?*

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In 2001, I wrote an article entitled “Christian Spirit in Ancient China<sup>1</sup>”, which suggested the possibility that “*the Gospel had reached China during the Eastern Han Dynasty.*” (25-220 AD)<sup>2</sup>. One of the basis of this assumption was the statement by Li Wenbin: “During the Eastern Han period, two Syrian missionaries came to China. Their purpose was to spread Christianity<sup>3</sup>.” Another basis was the discovery of an iron cross in Luling, Jiangxi Province in the Ming Dynasty during the reign of Emperor Hongwu (1368-1398 AD). Carved on the cross was a couplet:

*“Four seas rejoice o’er peace; iron rod splendors a cross;  
Ten thousand folks for grace yearn; a thousand autumns incensed by golden urn.”*

The date of this relic was “*the ninth year of Chi-wu, Eastern Wu*<sup>4</sup>.” Chi-wu was the name for the fourth period of reign of Sun Quan who became King of Eastern Wu in the year 222 AD. “The ninth year of Chi-wu” was actually the 25th year of Sun’s reign, 222-246 AD. The fact that such a large iron cross existed, and that a Christian intellectual could compose a couplet with this degree of sophistication lead to the speculation that the Christianity must have been in China before Sun Quan’s reign. In other words, the Gospel could very well have been brought to China in the Eastern Han dynasty.

## I. The Gospel carved on stone

During the Han Dynasty, especially Eastern Han, carved stone objects were often used for burial. Furthermore, elaborate tombs were constructed with limestone, with carvings on the doors and walls of underground chambers. In June 2002, a colleague from Xuzhou (in northern Jiangsu Province) informed me that the museum in this city contained many excavated carvings with Middle East cultural characteristics.



*Fig. 1 situation of Xuzhou*

So, with the hope of finding evidence of Christianity in Eastern Han China, I visited the Art Museum in Xuzhou. Later the church in Xuzhou (formerly a Presbyterian church within the Synod of Jiang-Huai) gave me a newly published book *Xuzhou Han Stone Carvings* compiled by the director of the museum, Mr. Wu Liuhua<sup>5</sup>. Most of the picture illustrations on these pages are taken from this volume. These illustrations are stampings of the reliefs of some of Xuzhou's tombs.

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From the Web site *Christianity Today*, October 7, 2002, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/011/19.14.html>, Revised version by Maxime Yevadian.

<sup>1</sup> See *Jinling Theological Review*, vol. 2, 2001, p. 25-27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Eastern Han is a dynasty established by Liu Xiu, with Luoyang as its capitol. From 25-220 AD, the dynasty lasted only 196 years.

<sup>3</sup> *A History of China* by Li Wenbin.

<sup>4</sup> From Wang Zhi-xin, *A History of Chinese Christianity* which quoted from *A Record of Careful Thoughts* by Li Jiugong of Ming Dynasty, and from “Poem of the Iron Cross” in Liu Zigao’s Collection of Poetry.

<sup>5</sup> Published in Beijing, November 2001.



(A)

*Fig. 2 : The phoenixes and the fish*

The first startling piece of art I came upon was a carving with fish and phoenix as symbols<sup>6</sup>. The phoenix, also known as “eternal” or “everlasting” bird, was a symbol for resurrection in Egyptian myths. The letters of the word fish in Greek (Gr. ἰχθύς / ichthys), form the initials of the formula “*Jesus Christ God’s Son our Savior*”, which was used by early Christians on their doors and tombs. The combination of these two symbols on the Han tomb may indicate the hope of Christians for salvation and resurrection by faith in Christ. To the left of this carving was the date: “*The seventh day of the third month in the year of Yuan-he*”: 86 AD. Yuan-he was the name of the reign of Emperor Zhangdi in Eastern Han.

So the construction of this tomb was 550 years before the Nestorian monk Alopen reached Changan (today’s Xi’an) in 635 AD, and about 50 years after the mass persecution in Jerusalem, resulting in Christians being dispersed to other parts of the world<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Tomb No. 12 of Xuzhou, Han Stone Carvings, Xuzhou Museum of Han Carvings.

<sup>7</sup> In *Acts VIII*, 1-4, the persecution took place about 35 AD, just before the conversion of Paul.

## II. The Creation and the Fall

One of the carvings seems to describe the creation story<sup>8</sup>. On the top are “two great lights” of sun and moon, a fish and a bird.



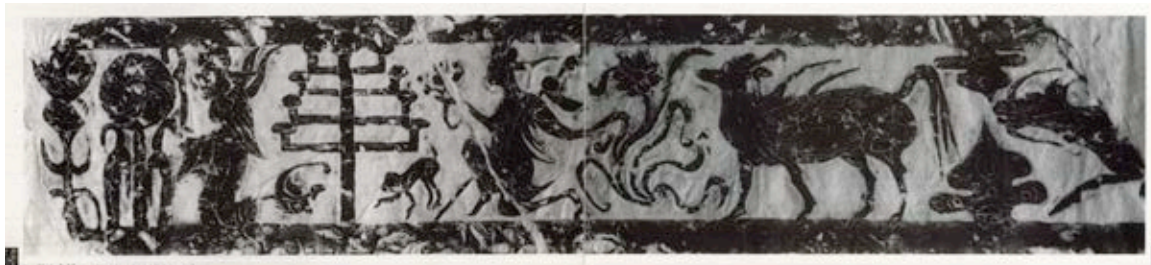
(B)

*Fig. 3: Domestic animals*

On the right are wild beasts. The left are domestic animals such as donkey, horse and ox. The images are typical of Western Han art – exaggerated, flowing and lively – except for the two beasts with intertwining necks, which are in the style of Middle East art.



(C)



*Fig. 4: temptation of Eve*

<sup>8</sup> Originally published in *Wen Hui Bao* (Daily), August 9, 2002.



Another carving shows the temptation of Eve. On this carving we read from right to left (in Chinese and Jewish order): the devil, serpent, Eve, the tree of discerning good and evil, the cherubim, then the sword (symbols of evil and deceit on the right; symbols of goodness and kindness on the left.) The seductive and crafty serpent is waving beautiful flowers to Eve while biting her left hand. At the same time Eve's right hand is already picking the fruit from the tree.

To the left of the tree we see the cherubim and the sword, flaming and turning, guarding the tree of life.



(D)

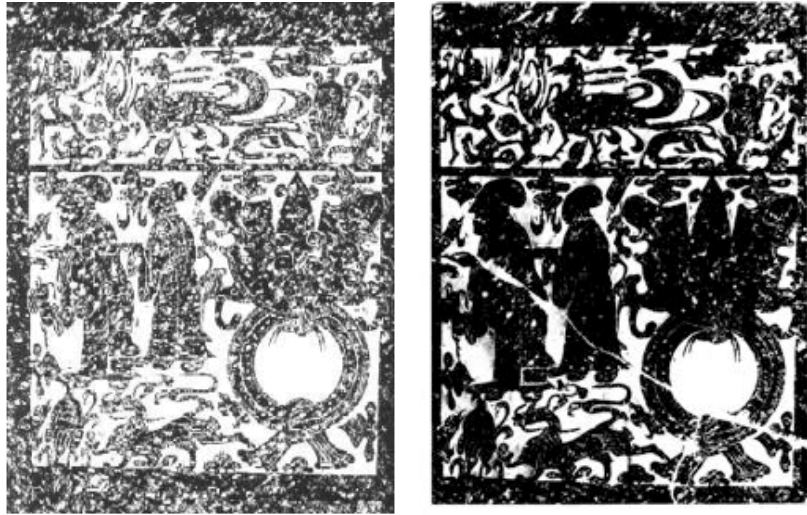
*Fig. 5: The cherubim and the sword*

Two other carvings have figures like Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden. The first one (Fig. 5) shows a man and a woman wearing clothes made with animal skins. The woman's skirt seems to have a design of snakes, while the man is holding a tool resembling a hoe. Another interpretation of this bas-relief would be the representation of the apostle Thomas, in large, recognizable by his *petalon*. Next to him his deacon, Shofarlan, in a smaller form, recognizable by his fan (*shofar*) held in his left hand as on Kong Wang Shan's frieze<sup>9</sup> [MY].

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<sup>9</sup> See Perrier 2011, p. 64-, 66-67.





*Fig. 6: The exit of the Eden garden*

The second carving (Fig. 6) depicts a man and a woman moving away from a locked gate. The woman looks sad and the man's face has two sides, one side looking forward and the other side turning back as if reluctant to leave. Both of these carvings were excavated from the tomb of "Jiu nu dun" (which can mean "the mound of the ninth daughter").



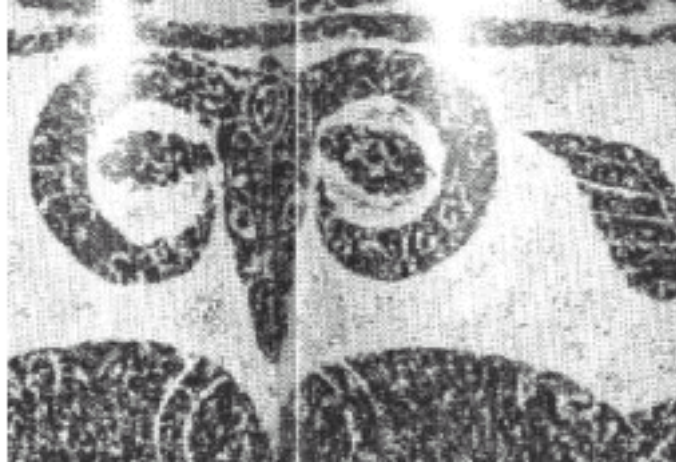
*Fig. 7: Pillar of ferocious dragon*

In this same tomb is also a stone pillar with a ferocious dragon (Fig. 7), unlike the traditional Chinese dragon which stands for honor, majesty, dignity and transcendence. To have such a frightening dragon placed in the center of the tomb could mean that Chinese Christians in those days had identified the dragon with the Old Testament serpent as a monster, representing evil and darkness<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> See : *Deuteronomy XXXII, 33 ; Psalm CXLXIII, 7 ; Isaiah, XXVII, 1*

### III. The Passover Lamb Over the Gate

A number of the limestone entrances to the Eastern Han burial chambers have carvings of fish and lamb, (Fig. 8) which, for Christians, would mean “Christ Jesus the Savior” and the lamb of Passover saving the Israelites from death.



*Fig. 8: Lamb of Passover*

Some of the beams from the tombs have just the lamb (Fig. 9) while others have both the lamb and the eternal bird (phoenix), combining salvation and resurrection.



(H)

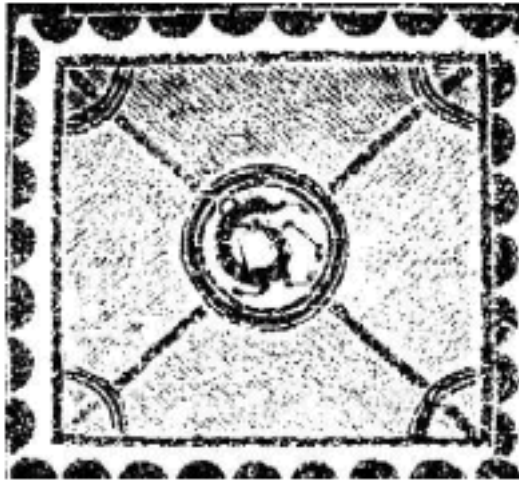
*Fig. 9: An other lamb*

The fish and the lamb were seldom seen in traditional Chinese art. The phoenix in China was a symbol for prosperity and good luck, unrelated to resurrection.

An Eastern Han tomb discovered at Wang Shan had semicircular upper beams with two levels (Fig. 10)<sup>11</sup>. The upper level describes “heaven” with the tree of life and the eternal bird ; the lower level is “earth,” with two dragons bound by three chains. The tree of life and the eternal bird represent resurrection and everlasting life, while the dragons represents the ruler of demons<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> No. 135 of Xuzhou Han Stone Carvings, measuring 106 cm x 200cm x 35cm.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew XII, 22-30.



(J)



(K)

*Fig. 11 a and b*

On another stone, a highly artistic piece, the dragon is bound by three chains<sup>13</sup>. There are other dragons, one imprisoned (Fig. 11 a)<sup>14</sup> and guarded by swords from four directions, and another dragon with a broken leg (Fig. 11 b)<sup>15</sup>. Though different in style, these dragons have all departed from the traditional Chinese portrayal of this sacred creature.

#### IV. The Nativity

It is common for carvings on Han tombs to illustrate activities of everyday life, and some seem to tell the story of the life of Christ. One of them may be the Christmas story, with wise men worshipping the Christ child (Fig. 12).

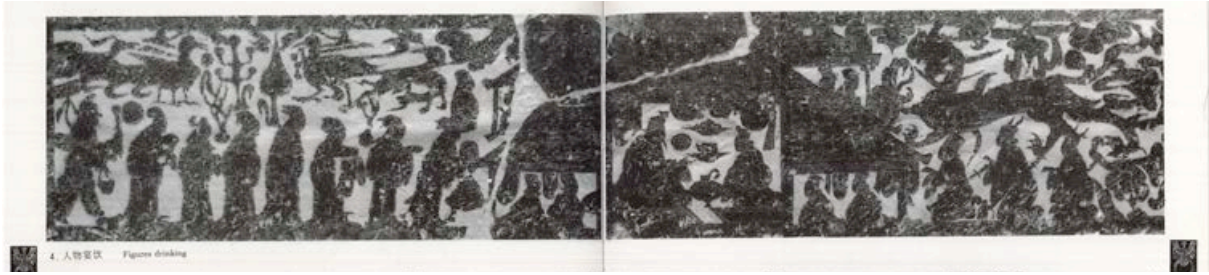


<sup>13</sup> No. 99 of Xuzhou Han Stone Carvings, 127cm x 271cm x 20cm, from the eastern wall of the Huangshan tomb in Tongshan County, now in the Xuzhou museum.

<sup>14</sup> No. 134 of Xuzhou Han Stone Carvings, from Jia-wang District, Qing Shan Quan, 100cm x 212cm x 20cm, now at Xuzhou Museum.

<sup>15</sup> Photographed by the author at the Xuzhou museum.





*Fig. 12: Christ child*

While the birds (and angels) are rejoicing above the shed, the human figures show reverence and admiration. A wise man is offering a gift. On the ground is a vase, possibly containing myrrh? At the lower left of the shed is a little sheep.

A larger likely “manger scene” clearly shows the baby held on the lap of his mother. (Fig 13) This, too, has celestial beings above the roof, and wise men coming to pay homage.



(M)

*Fig. 13: Baby and his mother*

A huge dragon seems to be overwhelming to the small human figures below (Fig. 14), as if Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus were threatened by the powerful and murderous Herod on their flight to Egypt (Lc II, 13-15). Kneeling behind the carriage are two women, bidding their sad farewell.



(N)

*Fig. 14: Escape to Egypt*

## V. The Yi Vessel

In the Xuzhou museum, I saw a bronze container, also dating back to the Eastern Han period (Fig. 15 a and b)<sup>16</sup>.



Fig. 15 a and b: Photo of the fishes and loaves' container and its statement

The bottom is carved with two fishes and five loaves, plus the character “Yi”. In the *Book of Records*, one of the Five Classics which are considered part of the sacred scriptures of China, it was said that “the offering is to God; while the yi is used for offering by the emperor.” This container with the five loaves and two fishes could be a vessel for offering to God. The word Yi also means “sharing.” In the *Book of Poetry* (詩經), also part of the Chinese sacred scriptures, it says “To share with you.” It is not difficult to imagine that this was a vessel used by the early church in Eastern Han for sharing food and to celebrate the “love feast,” Holy Communion.

These speculations are the results of my initial research, made possible with the help of the Xuzhou Han Carving Arts Museum, and the assistance of the church in Xuzhou. It is important to note that Xuzhou is not the only place where Han stone carvings have been found. Several locations in Henan and Shandong provinces have sizable collections of these excavated stone carvings. As if these very stones are “crying out” for our attention, they deserve our serious study and research. The task will take years, requiring rigor and discipline. Eastern Han was the first period in history when many religions were introduced to China. In the Western Han period, Zhang Qian (張騫; † 113 av. J.-C.) had explored the west and went on the Silk Road to Da Qin which is today’s Syria. It is not difficult to trace the footsteps of the Gospel by way of the Silk Road to Eastern Han, from Jerusalem, Samaria and Syria, through what is today Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Xinjiang, Dunhuang to reach Changan (Xi’an). The ancient Christians had braved the long and arduous journey to reach our land. Therefore with gratitude we say: ***How beautiful are the feet of those who brought good tidings.***

<sup>16</sup> No. 81 of Xuzhou Han Stone Carvings, from the northern wall of the stone chamber of a tomb at Mao Village, Tong Shan County, Xuzhou.

