

Journey to Tibet

By Cynthia Chu

Two years ago, Scarborough's China mission team celebrated Thanksgiving in Tibet. This was my first gathering with the whole group and I cherished my time with the team.

While I had visited quite a few temples in China, I never had the opportunity to speak with a Buddhist monk or to ask questions. In Tibet, monks are everywhere. They are very visible and eager to talk to you about their faith and religion.

I was amazed at the many similarities between Buddhism and Catholicism. Like us, they have many rituals. They burn incense; they have votive candles; they touch tassels and other items just as we kiss and touch statues, icons and relics.

They say mantras on their prayer beads similar to our rosaries. They pray for the world and for the suffering souls. Some monks spend their life in contemplative prayer, as some Catholic religious orders do. A gong or chime is used to call the monks to assembly just as some churches ring the church bell to call the faithful to Sunday service.

Little children go to the temple for a blessing from the monk who will put a smudge on their noses. This reminds me of the ashes we get on Ash Wednesday, except that for Catholics this is done for atonement rather than for blessing.

In Buddhism, some statues look very kind and some look very fierce. The fierce look is to scare away evil spirits so as to

protect the faithful entering the temple. Some statues have multiple eyes to indicate that they see the sufferings of the world.

Hierarchies abound among the Buddhas and the clerics, the lamas and the monks. There are many different Buddhas with different names and ranks. The god of compassion has many hands; sometimes two, or four, or eight, and upwards even to a thousand. The hands signify reaching out to those in need.

Buddhists fly prayer flags on their roof tops. Every time these flags are blown in the wind the family's prayers are carried to God with the wind. The imagery is beautiful. Prayer wheels do the same thing. Each turn of the wheel carries your prayer along on its way to God. The more turns there are, the more your prayer intensifies.

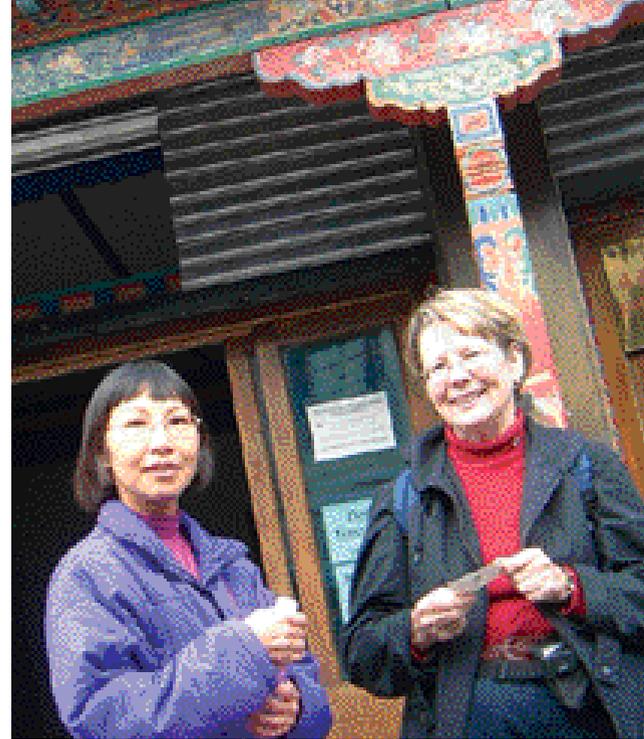
Of course, there are many differences between the Catholic and Buddhist faith traditions. For example, they believe that God does not save people. People are responsible for their own fate. If they do well in this life, they will live a better life next time around. If they do not live a good life, the next life will be worse. They believe in continuous reincarnation until you attain the highest state—*Sakyamuni*—the highest-ranking Buddha. They pray to the god statues to help them do better, but not to make

their lives better. They do not believe that the gods can change people's life situation.

I found Tibet to be clean, pristine, and spiritual. The people here pray all the time. Shopkeepers pray with their prayer wheels when they have no customers. People walk around the temples praying, as a pilgrimage, with some prostrating themselves again and again throughout the pilgrimage.

As I walked around the town, my heart warmed to see the elderly monks and the young monks spending time with their families, chatting and laughing. Buddhist monks can go home for a week or two every now and then, and the old ones can choose to retire with their families.

My Tibet trip was very fulfilling. I was touched by the people's spirituality. I learned so much about faith and especially about my faith. I loved every moment, every sight and sound, and every person I met. I am grateful for such a wonderful opportunity to see God from



Scarboro missionaries Cynthia Chu and Mary Lou Howard on a visit to Tibet. Mary Lou is now in Canada after completing her three-year contract with Scarboro Missions.



By Sr. Jean Perry, CSJ

Peach blossoms in China

Another rainy day in Chengdu. Our weather seems to be a repetition of the same pattern: weeks of overcast skies, days of rain, hours of smog or fog, and a few moments of sun. Sunblock is not a popular item in the stores in Chengdu.

Yesterday, two of us who teach English at the university here, went by bus to the town of Longquan, 20 kilometers away, to see the peach blossoms. In spite of the lack of sun, the blossoms were beautiful. I was surprised to see that the peach trees were short with branches that spread out over a wide area. The short trees must make harvesting easier.

Like vegetable gardens and rice paddies, farmers plant the peach trees terrace-fashioned on the hillsides. Hidden among the blossoms of the peach trees, we discovered that the ingenious local people had set up open-air tea rooms, impromptu restaurants, card tables and 'pay as you sit' rest-stops. Since thousands of people travel to this area to see the blossoms, I wondered if the farmers get part of the profit.

On the day of our visit, the precarious footpaths leading to the tops of the hills were already well trodden. The atmosphere was like a festival. The colors of clothing, banners and balloons were as vibrant as the blossoms. Coupled with the variety of people was the aroma of freshly cooked food. A friendly mood was evident. People were in no hurry. No one seemed to mind stopping to allow the faster, younger and more sure-

footed to pass, or to help those who needed an extra boost to make it to the next level.

Fortunately, our students had suggested that we pack a lunch. After climbing most of the way up the hill, we came upon a tea room nestled to one side of the footpath. Here we perched on slightly slanted chairs to enjoy our food and admire the view while tea was served. Below us was a sea of pink and white blossoms and a trail of weary pilgrims.

Continuing up to the peak, we were besieged by groups of students wanting to practice their English or to have photos taken with us, the foreigners. Finally, we said our goodbyes and made our way down the other side of the hill, away from the crowds.

Within ten minutes of our descent we realized that we had indeed left crowds, noise and entrepreneurs behind. We were still surrounded by the same natural beauty, but this time in a quiet and peaceful atmosphere. For another two hours we crisscrossed the terraced hills until we made our way down to the road that led around a lake and back to the bus station.

The station was crammed with young and old wanting to get back to the city. Although many were the same people who had walked the hills with us just hours ago, the atmosphere had definitely changed. Now everyone was pushing and shoving to get to the



Visitors at a hillside rest-stop among the peach blossoms in Longquan, China.

ticket counters.

Over the heads of the crowd a security guard beckoned for us to step to one side. Maybe he was worried that he might later have to explain to his superiors how two foreigners had been crushed to death while he was on duty. Or, maybe he felt sorry for us because we looked so pathetic. However, without saying a word, he officiously helped us to push our way to the correct counter to buy tickets, and then back to the other side of the room where he just as officiously opened a security door and pushed us through. We found ourselves standing on a platform directly in front of our bus. When we turned to thank him, he never smiled, but in broken English replied, "It was my duty."

As we approached Chengdu the poor weather did not seem to be so significant. It did not mar our wonderful memories of peach blossoms in China.∞

Sr. Jean Perry is a Sister of St. Joseph serving in China with Scarboro Missions.