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Purdue Galleries Opens New Exhibit Focusing on China and Christianity

By Tim Brouk



Craig Martin is shown at the Stewart Gallery on the Purdue University campus with art work by Yuanming Cao

Western influence in China has been quite prevalent in the last several years.

Pop music, the National Basketball Association and even World Wrestling Entertainment have had a big impact in world's most populous nation.

Purdue University has had a burgeoning relationship with the country as well. In 2002, the Purdue Varsity Glee Club had multiple performances there, and now the university is welcoming Chinese photographer Yuanming Cao to Stewart Gallery inside Stewart Center.

The young artist's exhibition, "Strangers No More: Village Churches on the Good Earth of the Sacred Land," focuses on Christian influence in China. It runs Monday through Oct. 10. Christianity's presence dates back centuries but when communism took over in the 1950s, Western missionaries were driven out. However, Christianity remains strong today in tiny villages and rural regions.

"When all churches were closed down during the Cultural Revolution from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s, Christians survived by meeting at people's homes," said Fenggang Yang, Purdue professor of sociology, exhibit organizer and interpreter for the artist. "Such 'house churches' have become an important movement and Christianity has been growing fast in China."

Cao focused his lens on 100 of these churches, some in disrepair, others in surprisingly good shape. Many, you would never think it was a church except for the bright red cross painted on it.

He assembled most of his images into collages. "Exteriors" shows the plain, rustic conditions of the churches, many nestled in woods or rocky, remote locations. "Interiors" documents the small interiors. Again, some are meager, others fairly elaborate. Same with "Cushions." This collage shows little sacks of fabric meant to be knelt on during services. Most look like they offer little comfort and are made from recycled materials. Some are covered in Chinese characters.

"Caretakers" shows the jagged features of these country men and women who take care of the house churches and help lead services. "Couplets" displays banners that are similar in almost every shot. Each are divided in two parts with large script descending. "Calendars" spotlights Chinese posters and calendars with many different depictions of Jesus Christ, while "Doors" shows the humble entrances to these churches. Many are painted a deep, bright red, a color that shows up often in Cao's photography and in Chinese culture.

Yang said most Chinese Purdue students are Christian, and the faith has spread quickly in recent decades. **[correction:** Yang actually said "the largest religious group among Chinese students at Purdue is Christian..."]

"There were fewer than a million Christians in 1949 when the Chinese Communists took power in China," Yang said. "By 1982, the number increased to 3 million. Now there are at least 30 million Protestants and several million Catholics."

Since China seems to be a hot-button issue in America, Purdue Galleries director Craig Martin believes "Strangers No More" will be a thought-provoking show and should get discussions going, a good result for any art exhibition.

"I was told at one time, too, that there are some people that find controversy in Christianity and the Western world inserting itself into China and how that is perceived in Chinese culture," Martin said. "I'm interested in finding out what Christianity's role is in China today."