CHAPTER 5

Discovery and Documentation of Nestorian Remains in Inner Mongolia after 1949

Martin had been right when he remarked that governmental authorities were discouraging foreign excavation in China. In fact, already in 1930 China had passed its Law on the Preservation of Ancient Objects, prohibiting archaeological excavation by foreigners and domestic sale of objects to foreigners. A year later, in 1931, the law had been expanded upon.¹

From 1949, archaeology in China became, what legal cultural heritage expert David Murphy calls “in all aspects a state directed enterprise”.² In 1950 unauthorized foreign participation in archaeological fieldwork was largely prohibited.³ From 1949 until the end of the twentieth century the Nestorian sites in Inner Mongolia thus became the exclusive domain for Chinese researchers and archaeologists. The Chinese discoveries were numerous and would shed new light on the Nestorian presence in the region. The methods of excavation remained, however, for a long time crude and when in 1982 the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics was adopted, the Explanation commenting on the law called the nation’s archaeological abilities ‘very weak’ and appealed to institutions to leave the ‘relics untouched under ground’ until techniques for excavation were improved.⁴ Under these 1982 provisions foreign participation in excavations remained prohibited, unless a host of Chinese institutions, including the departments of National Defense, Foreign Affairs, Public Security and State Security, and the State Council, had issued special permission.⁵

At the end of the twentieth century foreign field research was resumed in Inner Mongolia through partnerships between Chinese and foreign institutes and, unofficially, by independent field projects.⁶ With or without foreign participation, the archaeological finds in Inner Mongolia are staggering. Murphy reports the discovery of some fifteen thousand historical relic sites in Inner Mongolia through partnerships between Chinese and foreign institutes and, unofficially, by independent field projects. With or without foreign participation, the archaeological finds in Inner Mongolia are staggering. Murphy reports the discovery of some fifteen thousand historical relic sites in Inner Mongolia.⁷

⁴ Murphy (1995) 33 and 91. For a review of this law see 81 ff. in the same publication.
⁵ For new measures regarding these permissions in 1991, see Murphy (1995) 123 and 178, note 51.
Mongolia and the collection of some five hundred thousand items by museums in the years before 1995 alone.\footnote{Murphy (1995) 37.}

This chapter gives an overview of Chinese field research on the Nestorian remains in Inner Mongolia after the proclamation of the PRC in 1949. It focuses primarily on the research conducted by Chinese archaeologists Gai Shanlin and, to a lesser extent, the research overseen by Wei Jian. The final sections introduce foreign field research from 1997 onwards, including my own research and fieldwork conducted in Inner Mongolia between 2001 and 2005.

5.1 Gai Shanlin (1936–)

In the 1970s Chinese archaeologist and historian Gai Shanlin conducted extensive field research on the historic sites related to the Öngüt of Inner Mongolia. The research frequently brought Gai to Nestorian sites and remains in Inner Mongolia. Apart from excavating known sites, Gai discovered a number of previously unknown Nestorian sites in Inner Mongolia. In the early 1970s Gai was the first researcher to conduct extensive archaeological excavations on these sites. The archaeologist is nevertheless best known for his research on rock paintings in the Yinshan mountains and his political work in later life.

A historian by training, Gai became director of the Archaeology of Cultural Heritage Research Institute at the Cultural Heritage Protection Department of Inner Mongolia in 1962. In 1996 he was appointed Vice-Chairman of the 9th CPPCC\footnote{Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress.} Inner Mongolia Autonomous Regional Committee.\footnote{http://www.chinavitae.com/biography_display.php?id=2223  [consulted on 23 August 2006].} In 1991, after an initial article in 1986 on Nestorian aspects of the Öngüt,\footnote{Gai (1986).} he published his research on the Öngüt in \textit{Yinshan Wanggu}, ‘The Öngüt of the Yinshan’\footnote{Gai (1991).}. \textit{Yinshan Wanggu} contains hundreds of images of Öngüt sites and objects, including a number of Nestorian remains. Gai’s team mapped most sites and documented objects with line drawings, data, rubbings and photographs. I limit myself here to Gai’s research on the sites and remains that have a Nestorian dimension.\footnote{Gai’s numbering of images and maps is rather elaborate. I will list Chinese numerals in Roman numerals and leave Arabic numerals as they are.} It is important to note that \textit{Yinshan Wanggu} is not a study of Nestorian Christianity or Nestorian heritage \textit{per se} but of the Öngüt people. Also, both