

[A Hindu's Pilgrimage to China](#)

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A Hindu's Pilgrimage to China

Hinduism actually crossed the Great Wall of China in the Tang dynasty (618-971ce) when members of the Tang royalty practiced the Hindu faith and a Hindu monastery was established at Guang. The Chinese aristocracy used to wear white ash on their foreheads like Saivite Hindus [photo top right-taken from a Chinese vase]. Three Hindu monasteries and several temples were erected during the North Song dynasty, but were later destroyed in a civil war. At the port town of Quanshou a highly venerated Buddhist deity statue has been identified as a Siva Dakshinamurthi. Children wear the red 'pottu' during certain festivals [see above photo]. Preety Sengupta writes this brief report on her experience of spiritual China.

By Preety Sangupta

My boat was moving fast down the Yangtze River. The city of Chongqing was left behind, hidden in morning fog. On the shore, suddenly, I saw a small shrine. Although I could not see whose image it was, I did see several oil lamps burning in front of it. Between my first trip to mainland China ten years ago and the current one, a lot of water has gushed on in the mighty Yangtze River. Whole ideologies and lifestyles have changed. Free enterprise and material comfort are on the mind of every urban individual. But what has also happened is that religion is on the upsurge. It isn't banned anymore. A worshipper doesn't face punishment now, and many closed temple doors are finally flung open.

In Wuhan I was taken to the Guiyan Temple, which was a complex of prayer halls. Only local worshippers come here and, refreshingly, I did not find any tourists. In one room was the Goddess of Fertility, a deity with a "dangerous blessing" for the Chinese. In the mid-70s when family planning was strictly and mercilessly enforced upon urban Chinese, the doors to this goddess were closed, and nobody dared pray to Her. The day I was there, this room was not crowded.

I like Chinese temples. Many of them have a combination of purposes. There, the locals gather to pray, to linger, to socialize, to find a quiet reprieve. These are clean, cool and quiet places. There are shrubs, flowers and artistic pemjim (bonsai) plants. Sometimes a hall or two are given to exhibitions of Chinese artwork and handicrafts. In huge cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou, such centers of worship provide a necessary escape from the chaos of the new, ambitious world of China.