

Nestorianism (*jingjiao* 景教) in the Tang Dynasty

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“Nestorianism”, “Syriac Oriental Church”, “Church of the East”, “Syro-Oriental Christianity”, “Luminous Religion”, “Religion of the Light” – these are some of many names for early Christianity that has reached the Tang Empire in the first half of the seventh century. In Syriac sources we find it as Church of the East (ܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ ܕܡܘܨܪܝܐ ‘Ē(d)tā’ *d-Maḏn(ə)hā*) or later Assyrian Church of the East (ܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ ܕܡܘܨܪܝܐ ܕܐܬܘܪܝܐ ‘Ē(d)tā’ *d-Maḏn(ə)hā’ d-Āturāyē*). In Chinese sources, this religion was named, since late eighth century, *jingjiao* 景教 (translated into English as *Luminous Religion*, *Illustrious Religion*, or *Brilliant Religion*).

For instance, in the Xi’an “Nestorian” stele of AD 781 we can read: “真常之道。妙而難名。功用昭彰。強稱景教。” (This ever True and Unchanging *Way* is mysterious, and is almost impossible to name. But its meritorious operations are so brilliantly manifested that we make an effort and call it by the name of “The Luminous Religion.”).¹

The introduction of Christian religion (Nestorianism) to China during the Tang dynasty is one of the most important products of the contacts between Europe and East Asia along the Silk Roads. Nestorianism was present in China (or, more exactly, in the territory of modern China) during two separate periods: the Tang and the Yuan dynasties. The first presence of Christianity in China is attested by the existence of a Nestorian community in the seventh century.

In 1907, explorers headed by Aurel Stein (1862–1943) discovered a vast treasure trove of ancient scrolls, silk paintings, and artefacts dating from the fifth to eleventh centuries, in a long-sealed cave in Dunhuang 敦煌, in a remote region of China, today in Gansu Province 甘肅省. Among them, written in Chinese, were scrolls that recounted a history of Jesus’ life and teachings in Taoist concepts and imagery, together with the Buddhist one. Therefore, there is no surprise, that one of books published recently by a British Anglican scientist Martin Giles Palmer (b. 1953) bears the title *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist*

¹ SAEKI, P. Y. (Saeki Yoshiro 佐伯好朗): *The Nestorian Monument in China*. With an introductory note by Lord William Gascoyne-Cecil and a preface by the Rev. Professor A. H. Sayce. London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1916: 261.

Christianity.² These writings told a story of Christianity that was by turns unique and disturbing. Together with the inscription on the well-known Xi'an monument and few texts in Syriac (ܠܝܫܢܐܐܘܪܝܝܬܐ *Leššānā Suryāyā*), a dialect of Middle Aramaic, these scrolls form unique sources for the study of early Christian religion in China. These scriptures are more than one thousand years old and comparable with scrolls from the Dead Sea. They elucidate the beginnings of Christianity as well, but in this case one of its eastern branches which is usually called "Nestorianism".

Advent of Christianity to China

The extant and provable record of the earliest advent of Christianity to China dates back to AD 635 when a mission from Persia headed by a Syrian bishop Alopen (in Chinese sources: 阿羅本 = 阿羅本 *Āluóběn*, sometimes rendered as *Abraham*)³ reached Chang'an 長安, then the capital of Tang Dynasty (modern 西安 *Xī'ān* in Shaanxi Province 陝西省). To be able to evangelize in China without problems, it was useful for early Christian missionaries to gain support from the Chinese emperor. That time the emperor was 唐太宗 *Táng Tàizōng* (598–649, r. 626–649), one of the greatest rulers in Chinese history. The priests have prepared, with the aid of Taoist and Buddhist monks, a specimen translation of one of the texts with the explanation of Christian teaching into Chinese and have submitted it to the emperor. He has carefully read over the text and because he found out that new teaching might enrich the Chinese culture he has issued an Edict of Toleration for the Christians.⁴ The edict ordered that the Christian scriptures should be translated into Chinese and provided for a church to be built. Alopen received permission to build a monastery in Chang'an, and settled there with a few missionaries. It probably was the first Christian mission in China.

² PALMER, M. et al: *The Jesus Sutras. Rediscovering the Lost Scroll of Taoist Christianity*. New York, Ballantine Wellspring, The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2001.

³ 本 is an older variant of 本. Alopen's name is sometimes seen as a translation of the name Abraham (Hebrew: אַבְרָם *Avrām*, Syriac: ܐܒܪܗܡ *'Abrāhām*). — Cf. TAKAHASHI, Hidemi 高橋英海: „Transcribed Proper Names in Chinese Syriac Christian Documents“, in: George A. Kiraz (ed.), *Malphonon w-Rabod Malphone: Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock*. Piscataway, Gorgias Press, 2008: 639.

⁴ FORTE, A.: „The Edict of 638 Allowing the Diffusion of Christianity in China“, in: P. Pelliot: *L'inscription nestorienne de Si-ngan-fou* (ed. avec suppléments par Antonino Forte). Kyoto, Scuola di Studi sull'Asia Orientale – Paris, Collège de France/Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1996: 349–373.

Subsequent emperors generally favoured the Christians, many of whom rose to prominent positions in society.⁵ More churches and monasteries were built. Although there was some limited persecution at times, in general, the Christians experienced only few difficulties over the next two centuries.

In 1998 the earliest Christian church in China from the Alopen's time was rediscovered. This church is located at 整屋縣 *Zhōuzhì Xiàn* (modern 周至縣), some distance from Xi'an, close to 樓觀台 *Lóuguān Tái*, a famous Taoist centre.⁶

Luminous Religion

The early Christian texts from China belong to the eastern branch of Christianity, mostly labelled as “Nestorianism”, but this name may be somewhat confusing. As the missionaries in China of the Tang dynasty are mostly defined as “Syriac missionaries”, researchers name the early Chinese Christianity as “Syriac Oriental Church” or “Church of the East”. Sometimes a term “Syro-Oriental Christianity” is used. Moreover, in China it has become largely acculturated using legacy of religions already existing in Chinese territory – indigenous Taoism and Chinese Buddhism, as already mentioned.

But the early Chinese name for this new religion was 波斯經教 *bōsī jīngjiào*, or Persian religion of the Scripture, as the monks who came in the company of Persian merchants were considered members of the Christian Church of Persia. Later, according to the imperial edict of AD 745, the name was changed to “Da Qin” religion (大秦教 *Dàqín jiāo*). *Da Qin*, or “Great Qin,” was designation of eastern parts of former Roman Empire, thus referring to the region of ancient Syria and its neighbourhood, which we call the Middle and the Near East – i. e. parts of today's Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.⁷

In the inscription on the Xi'an monument, erected in AD 781, new name 景教 *jǐngjiào* (Religion of the Light, or Luminous Religion) was used for the first time to designate new religion. Why *jingjiao*? The primary sense of the character 景 *jǐng*, which defined this religion, is “sunlight,” “light.” There are many theories about why this *jing* was employed to

⁵ One such Christian was Yazdbozid 𐭕𐭓𐭕𐭓𐭕𐭓 *Yazdbōzīd* (Chinese name: 伊斯 *Yīsī*), a married monk from Balkh (modern Afghanistan) who was a general in the Chinese army with a reputation for serving the poor and healing the sick.

⁶ PALMER, M. et al: *The Jesus Sutras*: 11–39.

⁷ Syriac equivalent of that time was ܒܝܬ ܕܗܘܢܘܩܝܝܬܐ *Bēī Yawnāyē* (the Land of the Greeks), i. e. the land of the inhabitants of the Byzantine Empire.

translated” (餘大數具在貝皮來猶未翻譯).¹⁰ *Pattra* leaves (in Chinese: 貝葉 *bèiyè*) was material for writing sutras; *pattra* is some type of a palm tree (*Borassus flabellifer*, the Asian palmyra palm, toddy palm, or sugar palm; or *Corypha umbraculifera*, talipot palm). *Zun jing* lists thirty-five books in Chinese, which we know only according their names in this source. Some can be easily identified, e. g. *Book of Moses* (《牟世法王經》 *Móushì fǎwáng jīng*), *Book of Zachariah* (《刪河律經》 *Shānhélù jīng*), *Paul's Epistles* (《寶路法王經》 *Bǎolù fǎwáng jīng*), *Book of Revelation* (?) (《啟真經》 *Qǐzhēn jīng*).

We do not know the original language of the texts, but most likely the scriptures were written in Syriac which is still the liturgical language of some Christian churches of the East. In Syriac was also partly written the inscription on the Xi'an monument, and there were found several Syriac inscriptions in China, as well. The total number of twenty-seven books mentioned on the stele of AD 781 (經留廿七部), coincides with the number of books of the New Testament, as we know it. Nestorian Christians, however, considered only twenty-two books of the New Testament as canonical.

Alopen's texts

The Chinese texts from Dunhuang are usually grouped into two groups, according to their authorship. The older and smaller group of these texts is ascribed to Alopen, a maybe Syrian bishop (in some Chinese sources he is entitled as 波斯僧 *bōsī sēng*, “Persian monk”). His name we know mainly from the inscription on the Xi'an monument, but it is also attested in Chinese historical book 《唐會要》 *Táng Huìyào* (Institutional History of the Tang Dynasty) (*juan* 49). The information in the Xi'an monument tells us that within three years after his arrival to Chang'an, Alopen was able to present at least an outline of the Christian doctrine, translated into Chinese, to the Tang emperor. There are two documents translated between AD 635 and 638 among the Dunhuang scrolls: 《序聽迷詩所經》 *Xùtīng Mishīsuǒ jīng* (The Jesus Messiah Scripture) and 《一神論》 *Yīshén lùn* (Discourse on One God).¹¹

¹⁰ SAEKI, P. Y. (Saeki Yoshiro 佐伯好朗): *Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*: 276; TANG Li: *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China*: 188.

¹¹ TANG Li: *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China*: 109–111. For the translation into English see *ibid.*: 157–181.

These texts describe the life of Jesus Christ beginning with the virgin birth, his baptism by John the Baptist, continuing with his ministry, miracles, arrest, crucifixion, suffering, death, and finally his resurrection.

The first treatise is not entitled “The Book of Jesus Christ,” since the Chinese transcription of the name “Messiah” is never taken from the Greek translation Χριστός *Christós* (“anointed one”), but always from the Syriac form of ܡܫܝܗܐ *Məšīhā* (Hebrew: מָשִׁיחַ *Mašīaḥ*, מֶלֶךְ הַמְּשִׁיחַ *Meleḵ ha-Mašīaḥ*, Biblical Aramaic: מְשִׁיחָא *Mešīḥā*, transcribed into Chinese as 迷詩訶, 彌施訶, 彌師訶, 彌尸訶 *Mishīhē*, or 迷詩所 *Mishīsuǒ*, maybe a mistake in writing the last character). This indicates that the early Chinese scriptures might be translated from the Syriac versions of the Gospels. This Messiah is Jesus, known to the Syrian authors by its Aramaic form of his name: ܐܝܫܘܘܢ *Īšō* ‘ or *Īšū* ‘. The phonetic transcription of the name of Jesus was 移鼠 *Yishǔ* (which has been very unfortunate because the character 鼠 means “rat” in Chinese), 翳數 *Yishù*, 夷數 *Yishù*, 遺鼠 *Yishǔ*.¹² Other version of the Jesus’ name was 序聽 *Xùtīng*, which may be the erroneous transcription of 序聰 *Xúcōng*, presumably pronounced as *Jeso*, at that time.¹³

The second scroll ascribed to Alopen is largely fragmentary. It is composed of three parts, the most important of them being Part Three titled 《世尊布施論》 *Shìzūn bùshī lùn* (The World’s most Venerable Teaching on Charity) which starts out with some summary quotations from Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 6 and 7).

In both of these documents, abundant use is made of Taoist and Buddhist terms and concepts in order to communicate basic Christian beliefs. This is perhaps because the author or authors sought the help of Taoist or Buddhist clergymen. Some of the terms used can be interpreted both as Taoist and Buddhist, because early Chinese Buddhism borrowed his terms from Taoism, as well. Thus Christian God is named as 天尊 *Tiānzūn* (Lord of Heaven; Taoist term), 世尊 *Shìzūn* (The World’s most Venerable; from Sanskrit लोकाज्येष्ठ *Lokajyeṣṭha*, or

¹² Cf. FOLEY, Toshikazu S.: *Biblical translation in Chinese and Greek: verbal aspect in theory and practice*. Brill, Leiden, 2009: 256, n. 16.

¹³ TANG Li: *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China*: 145; WENG Shaojun 翁绍军 *Hanyu jingjiao wendian quanshi* 汉语景教文典全释 (Chinese documents of *jingjiao*, with explanatory notes). Beijing, Shenghuo – Dushu – Xinzhi Sanlian shudian 北京·生活·读书·新知三联书店, 1996: 86; FOLEY, Toshikazu S.: *Biblical translation in Chinese and Greek*: 256, n. 16.

लोकनाथ *Lokanātha*, Buddhist term) or 一神 *Yīshén* (One God), in some places also as 佛 *Fó* (Buddha).

Ādam's texts

The second group of texts is attributed to the priest 景淨 *Jǐngjìng* (ܐܕܡ 'Ādam in Syriac) and they date back to the eighth and ninth centuries. Jingjing or Ādam was the author of the inscription on the Xi'an stele (781) where is clearly inscribed in Chinese: "Handed down by Jingjing, a monk of the Da Qin Monastery (大秦寺僧景淨述)" and in Syriac: "Ādam, priest and *chorepiscopus*, and *papas* of Sinestan" (in Syriac: ܐܕܡ ܩܪܝܫܝܫܐ ܘܟܘܪܝܥܩܘܦܐ ܘܦܦܫܐ ܕܫܝܢܫܬܐܢ 'Ādam qaššīšā w-kōre p̄isqōpā w-papš' d-Šīnestān). The title of *chorepiscopus* (from Greek χωρεπίσκοπος) is an approximate equivalent of "suffragan bishop" in the Western Church, *papas* may be the head of a church province.

Jingjing or Ādam was an important person among the early Christian missionaries in China. He must have known Chinese language very well and have mastered the technique of translation, because, as written in the text of *Zun jing* already mentioned, he was entrusted with the translation of thirty texts of the Luminous Religion into Chinese: "Afterwards, by the Imperial Orders, Priest Jingjing, Bishop of this Religion was summoned (to the Court) and the above-mentioned thirty books were translated." (後召本教大德僧景淨譯得已上卅部卷)。"¹⁴

Ādam was not only a translator of Christian books into Chinese, but he also was involved in translating of some Buddhist sutras. He is named even in famous 《貞元新定釋教目錄》 *Zhēnyuán xīndìng shìjiào mùlù* (Newly composed catalogue of Buddhist teaching from the Zhenyuan Era), edited by 圓照 *Yuán Zhào* in AD 799/800. He, together with the Buddhist monk Prajña (प्रज्ञा *Prajñā*, Chinese: 般若 *Bōrě*, ca. 785–810) had translated 《大乘理趣六波羅蜜多經》 *Dàchéng lǐqù liù bōluómìduō jīng* (The Mahayana Sutra of the Six Paramitas), one of the esoteric sutras, from Iranian (or Sogdian?) into Chinese.

Ādam brought the Christian Church of the Tang dynasty to its classical period of literary production in the second half of the eighth century. He was a scholar who, though a foreigner from the West, knew the Chinese classics and was able to fill his works with classical allusions. He had studied the writings of Taoist mystics, and was skilful in choosing illustrations from them. Above all, he was able to talk with Buddhists in terms of their

¹⁴ SAEKI, P. Y. (Saeki Yoshiro 佐伯好朗): *Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*: 276.

philosophy, and was accustomed to borrow from them both background and terms to expound his Christian theme.

Ādam was first and foremost the chief composer of the Nestorian inscription on the Xi'an monument. He has translated a number of Syriac books into Chinese. He borrowed many terms from Buddhism. John Foster in his *The Church of the T'ang Dynasty* (1939) comments, "Undoubtedly Buddhists regarded Ādam as a dangerous man. He was dangerous not because he was making Christianity too Buddhist. But because he was trying to make Buddhism too Christian."

From the scriptures attributed to Ādam one of the most important is 《【大秦】景教三威蒙度讚》 [*Dàqín*] *Jǐngjiào sānwēi méngdù zàn* ([Da Qin] Luminous Religion Hymn in Adoration of the Holy Trinity), often referred to as the Nestorian *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. It is the only text we can compare to its Syriac original (text is based on a East Syriac version of that hymn called ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ *Tešbuḥto l-Aloho bamrawme*, Glory to God in the Highest). This hymn is the only preserved text from the list of the thirty-five scripture mentioned in *Zun jing* (under the title of 《三威讚經》 *Sānwēizàn jīng*, Book in Adoration of the Holy Trinity).

APPENDIX

The first group: Alopen's scriptures:

- between 635 and 638/641: *Xuting Mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所(訶)經 (The Jesus Messiah Scripture)
- around 641: *Yi shen lun* 一神論 (On the One-God)
 - often translated as *A Discourse on Monotheism*
 - the Scripture has three parts:
 - *Yu di'er* 喻(論)第二 (Parables, Part II)
 - *Yi tian lun diyi* 一天論第一 (On the Oneness of Heaven, Part I)
 - *Shizun bushi lun di san* 世尊布施論第三 (The World's most Venerable's Teaching on Charity, Part III)

The second group: Jingjing's & later scriptures:

- 717: (1) [*Da Qin jingjiao*] *Xuanyuan zhi ben jing* 【大秦景教】宣元至本經 (The Da Qin Luminous Religion's Scripture that Expounds the Origins and Reaches the Basics)
 - more complete than the following
- 8th century: (2) [*Da Qin jingjiao*] *Xuanyuan ben jing* 【大秦景教】宣元本經 (A Scripture on Declaring the Origin of the Luminous Religion of the Da Qin)
 - a variant of the preceding, a fragment

- 720: [*Da Qin jingjiao*] *Dasheng tongzhen guifa zan* 【大秦景教】大聖通真歸法讚 (The Daqin Luminous Religion's Hymn of Penetrating Truth and Taking Refuge in the Law in Praise of the Great Holy One)
- ca. 780: *Zhixuan anle jing* 志玄安樂經 (The Scripture of the Peace and Happiness)
 - This mysterious peace and happiness is nothing other than eternal happiness presented in the Buddhist perspective of the Pure Land School (*Jingtu Zong* 淨土宗). In this school, Paradise for Buddha Amitābha (in Chinese: *Omituofo* 阿彌陀佛) is the Kingdom of Peace and Joy (*Anle jingtu* 安樂淨土, *Sukhāvātī*)
- 781: *Jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei song bingxu* 景教流行中國碑頌并序 (The Eulogistic Verses on the Stele about the Diffusion of the Luminous Religion in China, with Preface); also known as the Xi'an Monument or Stele
- 8th century: [*Da Qin*] *jingjiao sanwei mengdu zan* 【大秦】景教三威蒙度讚 (A Hymn of the Luminous Religion of Da Qin of the Three Majesties for Obtaining Salvation); also known as Nestorian *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*
- around 800, or between 906 and 1036: *Zunjing* 尊經 (Honored Persons and Sacred Books)