Early Chinese Christianity in the Tang Empire: On the Crossroads of Two Cultures

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EARLY CHINESE CHRISTIANITY IN THE TANG EMPIRE – ON THE CROSSROAD OF TWO CULTURES

"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 7th century. In Chinese sources, we can find this religion named as *jingjiao* 景教 (Luminous Religion). For instance, in the Xi'an "Nestorian" stele 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.") (Saeki 1937: 56)

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 artifacts 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 bears the title *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity* (Palmer 2001).

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, an Aramaic lan-

guage, these scrolls form unique sources for 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 that of one of its eastern branches which is usually called "Nestorianism". In China, this religion has soon become acculturated as a new Chinese religion, known since late 8th century under title *jingjiao* 景教 (Luminous Religion).

Political background

The Chinese empire attained its greatest brilliance under the Tang dynasty (618-907). Politically, Tang China was perhaps the most powerful, the most advanced, and the best-administered country in the world. The frontiers of this empire stretched to the borders of Persia, to the Caspian Sea, and to the Altai Mountains. The period of Tang rule was a time of prosperity and peace. People could travel safely along good roads in almost any part of the country; mules and horses were available to travelers. Chang'an (modern Xi'an), the capital of the empire, was the largest walled city ever built and about 2 million people lived in and around the city. Officials from every part of the great empire, travelers, merchants and representatives of other countries were able to meet and exchange news and opinions. People became receptive to new ideas and customs. In the sea ports, especially Canton, there were large permanent communities of the Arabs, Persians, Indians, and other foreign traders, people of many races, religions and backgrounds.

China was in relations with the peoples of Annam, Cochinchina, Tibet, the Tarim basin, and India; with the Turks, the Persians, and the Arabs. Men of many nations appeared at the court of China, bringing tribute and merchandise, as well as new ideas that influenced both thought and art in the Tang Empire. Persian and, more remotely, Greek influence is apparent in much of the sculpture and painting of the Tang period. There had been friendly intercourse, since the days of the Wei emperors, between China and Persia: for instance, a Zoroastrian temple was erected in Chang'an in AD 621.

There was much to facilitate the contact between Persia and China at this time. Most of the nations lying between them were

well populated. Travel was frequent, the highways were well cared for, and an abundance of vehicles and inns to facilitate merchants and tourists was at hand. It would yet be many a century before the devastations of the Mongols and the ravages of Timur (Tamerlane) would lay these countries desolate. The population was large enough to keep back the encroaching sands which later buried many a fine city. The Buddhists of China were constantly travelling west, especially to India, to obtain ancient writings of the faith. It was the time of Xuan Zang's great pilgrimage to India. In AD 645, Xuan Zang 玄奘 has returned to China, after his sixteen years' pilgrimage of over 100,000 miles to the Holy Land of India. Much evidence goes to prove, moreover, that the rulers of China were tolerant of, or indifferent to, all faiths, so that the door was open to the arrival of new religions.

Though there is evidence that Christianity existed in Mesopotamia and Persia during the fourth century, as evidenced by the persecutions which began in 345 under Shapur II (309-379), there is no proof that it spread to China. It should be added that, according to Ebedjesus, some thought that Archæus, Archbishop of Selucia, had created a metropolitan see in China in AD 411, while others said that the metropolitans of China dated only from Selîbâ Zekhâ (or Sliwazkha), patriarch of the Nestorians from AD 714 to 728.

From the end of the fifth century, Nestorian missionaries were working in Central Asia and there was a possibility of Christians coming into contact with the Chinese. Moreover, the Sassanid Persia had opened trade connections with China in the fifth century and Nestorian merchants were numerous in the merchant class of those times and Persian Nestorians might have gone to China for trade. (Latourette 1955: 275-76) However, the first effective Christian mission to China of which we have definite knowledge was that sent by the Patriarch Yeshuyab (or Îshô'yabh) II (628-643/44) in about AD 635.

Who was the first Christian in China?

When the Christianity reached China? The message of Jesus, the Messiah and Savior, was brought to China when the largest part of Europe and the rest of the world still did not know it, namely, in the Tang dynasty around the year AD 635. Pope John Paul II recalled

this fact in his Letter to the Chinese Catholics' Patriotic Association of December 10, 1999: "*…as early as the fifth and sixth centuries groups of Syrian monks crossed Central Asia and brought the name of Jesus to your forebears. Even today, a famous stele in the capital Chang'an (Xi'an) powerfully evokes that moment in history, from 635 onwards, which saw the official entrance into China of "the Religion of light"…*"

But there are some indirect indications that Christianity might have entered China already before the Tang dynasty. A.C. Moule in his book *Christians in China before 1550* (Moule 1930) mentions a tradition that Thomas the Apostle (1st century) visited China. Both the Latin and Syriac writers in the medieval period (Francis Xavier, Antonio de Gouvea, Christopher Borrus among the Latin writers and Ebedjesus among the Syrians) mention this tradition. The tradition that St. Thomas had preached in China originated in the East Syrian Church around AD 500. The full version of this tradition had been developed by the Portuguese in India; it was taken over by missionaries in late Ming China and by Christians there (Tubach 1997: 58-74).

Besides the legend that St. Thomas the Apostle himself came to China twice to evangelize (sometime in the seventies of the 1st century), there are some other indications. John Stewart refers to another tradition current among the Chinese of Chang'an, a tradition referred to also in the Chinese records. According to this tradition, in AD 64, the Chinese emperor Mingdi, as a result of a dream, sent messengers along a road leading to the west to find out who was the greatest prophet who had arisen in the west. They met two Christian missionaries on the way to the court and returned with them. The missionaries remained there till they died six years later. (Stewart 1928) The introduction of Christianity to China has been ascribed not only to St. Thomas, the Apostle of India, but also to St. Bartholomew.

Arnobius of Sicca in north Africa, an early Christian apologist, flourishing during the reign of Diocletian (284-305), in his *Adversus Nationes* (originally *Adversus Gentes*, "Against pagans") written around AD 295 speaks of the *Seres*, with the Persians and the Medes, as among the nations reached by *"that new power which has arisen from the works done by the Lord and his Apostles"* (*„Enumerari enim possunt atque in usum computationis venire ea*

quæ in India gesta sunt, apud Seras Persas et Medos…" 2, XII, 3). *Seres* was an ancient name for the Chinese or China.

Li Tang, in his *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China and its Literature in Chinese*, mentions that during the Ming dynasty, a number of crosses were unearthed, some of them dating to the third century, some of them were supposed to be made between the fourth and fifth centuries. (Li 2004: 77-78)

Nestorianism – its emergence and spread to the East

The history of "Nestorianism" or "Nestorian Church", as we used to name this teaching, dates back to the fifth century. In AD 431, during the Council of Ephesus, Nestorius (ca. 382-451), patriarch of Constantinople, was condemned because of his belief that the Messiah was in fact "two persons": God and human being, and that the Virgin Mary was *Christotokos* (Christ-bearer) instead of *Theotokos* (God-bearer). His teaching was declared heretic and he and his followers were repudiated by Rome and Constantinople. Nevertheless, Nestorius' followers established themselves quite solidly in Persia, where they joined the East Syrian Church (or Church of the East). From there the Nestorianism spread all over Central Asia, Arabia and India. Soon, metropolitan bishops were nominated in Merv, Balkh and Samarkand, which were significant centres of trade and civil administration. These cities were also of significant religious importance because Buddhist, Manichean and Zoroastrian communities had established themselves there as well.

Whereas orthodox Christology holds that Christ has two natures, divine and human, ineffably united in one person, or hypostasis, Nestorianism stresses their independence as to suggest that they are in effect two persons, or hypostases, loosely joined by a moral union. Nestorianism envisages the divine Word as having associated with itself at the incarnation a complete, independently existing man. From the orthodox point of view, Nestorianism therefore denies the reality of the incarnation and represents Christ as a God-inspired man rather than as God-made man. Since the fifth century all the principal branches of the Christian church have united in condemning Nestorianism and have affirmed that Christ is a single person, at once wholly human and wholly divine. Even the so-

called Nestorian church is not Nestorian in the strict sense, though it venerates Nestorius and refuses to accept the title *Theotokos*.

It is questionable, however, whether Nestorius himself ever taught, or intended to teach, the heresy named for him. The fact is that Nestorius repeatedly affirmed the perfect unity of the incarnate Christ, and he repudiated any suggestion of there being two persons existing side by side in his being. Nestorius can be better understood as the victim of his own intolerant personality and crudely provocative rhetoric, and as having been the loser in one of the rivalries between great episcopal sees that were a feature of the time.

What Nestorius actually taught was a prosopic union. The Greek term *prosopon* means the external, undivided presentation, or manifestation, of an individual that can be extended by means of other things. So the Son of God used manhood for his self-manifestation, and manhood was, therefore, included in his *prosopon*, so that he was a single object of presentation. (Loofs 1914)

Nestorianism was crushed within the Roman Empire but survived outside its frontiers. The Christian church in Persia adopted it, largely to obtain the protection of its rulers by assuring them that its religion was not that of their enemies, the Romans. After the Arab conquest of Persia (AD 637), the Caliphate recognized the Church of the East as a separate religious community, and granted it legal protection. Nestorian scholars played a prominent role in the formation of Arab culture, and patriarchs occasionally gained influence with rulers. For more than three centuries the church prospered under the Caliphate, but it became worldly and lost leadership in the cultural sphere. By the end of the tenth century, there were fifteen metropolitan provinces in the Caliphate and five abroad, including India and China. Nestorians also spread to Egypt, where Monophysite Christianity acknowledged only one nature in Christ.

Certainly, as with all successful missionary work throughout history, the expansion of the Nestorians into Asia was primarily the result of the many dedicated men and women (primarily the former) who were willing to sacrifice their comfort in order to obey the Great Commission. In Atiya's words, *"the backbone of Nestorian expansion lay with its monastic rule, which furnished the church*

with a great army of dedicated men ready to penetrate unknown regions and expose themselves to every peril to spread the faith in the Far East.... They combined with their enthusiasm for their faith a monastic system and hierarchy ready for action and self-sacrifice." (Atiya 1968: 256-257) However, although there were many clergy involved in evangelizing Asia, there were also a considerable number of lay people, especially traders, merchants, artisans and teachers. In particular, the Sogdians, an ancient Iranian people who lived in Transoxiana and who were inveterate traders, were key players in the transmission of Christian teaching along the Silk Road (they also played a significant role in propagating Buddhism, Manichaeism and Islam throughout Central Asia at various times). *"Although Syriac was the liturgical language of the Nestorian church, the language in which Nestorian Christianity was disseminated across Asia was principally Sogdian."* (Foltz 1999: 68)

In addition, in the early days of the church, there was a high value placed on literacy and learning. Theological training schools also played a key role in the propagation of the gospel. In addition to theology, these schools trained students in medicine, music and other academic subjects. Whenever the Nestorians established a new episcopal see, they also set up a school, a library and a hospital, thus combining educational and medical work with their preaching. Finally, when persecution came, which it did often in the early days, it tended to act as a purifying agent, strengthening the Christian community. All of these were significant factors in the ongoing expansion of the Nestorians into much of Asia.

There is considerable debate about the degree to which Nestorian Christianity adapted to Chinese culture. Buddhism and Taoism were so prevalent at the time in China that it was difficult to walk the fine line between appearing to be a purely foreign religion and contextualizing the gospel so much that Christianity ended up looking like a Buddhist sect. At any rate, the church never influenced more than a small segment of the population and its great distance from the Nestorian centre in Persia meant that there was little opportunity for ongoing oversight and input from the better established churches to the west. In the end, the church's very existence was dependent on the whims of the Chinese rulers; when it

fell out of favour with the emperor, its demise was certain, since it had not become integrated into Chinese culture.[1]

Luminous Religion

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: *Aluoben* 阿羅本; probable Syriac name: *Alopeno*, sometimes rendered as *Abraham*) reached Chang'an 長安, then the Tang capital (modern Xi'an 西安 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 Taizong 太宗 (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. The edict ordered that the Christian scriptures 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. Subsequent emperors generally favoured the Christians, many of whom rose to prominent positions in society.[2] More churches and monasteries were built. Although there was some limited persecution at times, in general, the Christians experienced 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 Zhouzhi

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[1] For more on the demise of Nestorianism in Tang China, see (Moffett 1998: 302-314), where the author examines four possible reasons: religious persecution, theological compromise, cultural foreignness and political dependence on the ruling dynasty.

[2] One such Christian was Yazdbozid, 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.

盩厔縣 (modern 周至縣), some distance from Xi'an, close to Louguan Tai 樓觀台, famous Taoist center. (Palmer 2001: 11–39)

The early Christian texts from China belong to the eastern branch of Christianity, mostly labeled as "Nestorianism", but this name may be somewhat confusing. As the missioners 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 exiting in Chinese territory – indigenous Taoism and Chinese Buddhism, as already mentioned.

The early Chinese name for this new religion was *bosi jingjiao* 波斯經教, 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 (*daqin jiao* 大秦教). *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, Iraq.

In the inscription on the Xi'an monument, erected in AD 781, new name *jingjiao* 景教 (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 *jing* 景, which defined this religion, is "sunlight," "light." There are many theories about why this *jing* was employed to describe new religion. When we look into the Bible we can find some explanations. The word "light" is one of main concepts through the text of Holy Scripture. The light illustrates the holiness of God, also Jesus says that he is the light of the world. In the Gospel of John we can read: *"Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."* (Jh 8:12)

The texts that Syrian monks have brought to China were translated with the aid of both Buddhist and Taoist monks. Therefore they contain many terms and concepts borrowed from Chinese Buddhism and Taoism. Only nine documents in Chinese have pre-

served from the Tang dynasty. These have been translated and published in full only twice before this century, in 1930 and 1937. In particular, the edition by Professor Yoshiro Saeki 佐伯好郎 *Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* of 1937 is of great importance. It brings not only the translations of the scrolls, but also original texts, very detailed notes to them, and other relevant materials.

New interest, new discoveries and new interpretation on the first arrival of Christianity in China have been recently brought to public attention. Since the beginning of this century many books and papers on Chinese *jingjiao* were published, together with new translations of written documents. Among them the book by Martin Palmer *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity* (2001) is very inspirational. Martin Palmer is the author of many books on religious topics and one of the foremost translators of ancient Chinese Taoist texts. In 1998 he has rediscovered the earliest Christian church in China from the Alopen's time. This church is located at Zhouzhi 盩厔縣 (now 周至縣), some distance from Xi'an, close to Louguan Tai 樓觀台, famous Taoist center. His *The Jesus Sutras* demonstrate the brilliant fusion of early Christian, Taoist and Buddhist ideas in Tang China.

In 2001, a Chinese student Li Tang has defended, at the University of Tübingen, his doctoral dissertation *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China and its Literature in Chinese*. His work brings not only the history and teaching of Nestorianism as a whole, and *jingjiao* in China, but also his translation of Dunhuang Christian scrolls. In 2002, Institut Monumenta Serica in Sankt Augustin has published the collected proceedings *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ. Volume 1*, which contains valuable articles regarding early Chinese Christianity from Tang to Yuan. Finally, in May 2003, the first International Conference "Research on Nestorianism in China" has been organized in Salzburg, Austria.

The scrolls and their authors

Alopen and his missionaries brought scriptures with the explanation of Christian religion with them. They might have brought also the images of saints, as resulted from the inscription on the Xi'an stele. In one of the Dunhuang scrolls, in *Zunjing* 尊經 (Honored Persons and Sacred Books), there is written that there were 530

Christian texts altogether, and only some 30 were translated – *"all other were preserved on* pattra *leaves and have not yet been translated"* (餘大數具在貝皮來猶未皹譯). (Saeki 1937: 276, Li 2004: 188) *Pattra* leaves (in Chinese: *beiye* 貝葉) was material for writing sutras; *pattra* is some type of Chinese banana tree (*Borassus flabelliformis L.*). *Zunjing* lists also thirty-five books in Chinese, which we know only according their names in this source. (Original Chinese text with modern commentaries see Weng 1996: 207-215.)

We do not know the original language of the texts, but with most probably the scripture were written in Syriac, a language close to Aramaic, 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.

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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 *bosi seng* 波斯僧 "Persian monch"). His name we know mainly from the inscription on the Xi'an monument, but it is also attested in Chinese historical book *Tang huiyao* 唐會要 (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 around AD 635, among the Dunhuang scrolls: *Xuting Mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所經 (The Jesus Messiah Scripture) and *Yishen lun* 一神論 (Discourse on One God).

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 *Christos* ("anointed one"), but always from the Aramaic or Syriac form of *M'shīḫā* (transcribed in Chinese as *Mishihe* 迷詩訶, 彌施訶, 彌師訶, 彌尸訶, in the *Book of Jesus-Messiah* as *Mishisuo* 迷詩所, which maybe a mistake in writing the last character). This indicates that the early Chinese scriptures might be translated from the Aramaic or Syriac versions of the Gospels. This Messiah is Jesus, known to the Syrian authors by its Aramaic form of his name: *Īshū* or *Īshō*. The choice of Chinese characters for the phonetic transcription of the name of Jesus (*Yishu* 移鼠) in the *Book of Jesus-Messiah* has been very unfortunate because the character chosen to represent the sound *shu* 鼠 means "rat" in Chinese. Fortunately, this transcription was quickly abandoned. In later scriptures the name for Jesus is also *Yishu*, but written as 夷數[3] or 翳數. (For the discussion about Chinese names of Jesus see e.g. Weng 1996: 86, Zetzsche 2002: 144-145)

The second scroll ascribed to Alopen is largely fragmentary. It is composed of three parts, the most important of them being *Shizun bushi lun di san* 世尊布施論第三 (The World's most Venerable Teaching on Charity, Part Three) 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

[3] The name *Yishu* 夷数 was used mostly by Manicheans, for whom he was one of Buddhas – 夷数佛 (Buddha Jesus).

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 *Tianzun* 天尊 (Lord of Heaven)*, Shizun* 世尊 (The World's most Venerable) or *Yishen* 一神 (One God), in some places also as *Fo* 佛 (Buddha).

Tianzun 天尊, The most honoured among *deva*s, is a title of a Buddha, the highest of divine beings; also used for certain maharāja protectors of Buddhism and others in the sense of honoured *devas* (*deva-ārya*). This title was also applied by the Taoists to their divinities as a counterpart to the Buddhist *Shizun* 世尊 which means *lokajyestha*, *lokanātha*, most excellent of the world, lord of the world, epithet of Brahma and of a Buddha. Most of the texts that we have insist on the uniqueness of God. God, therefore, is often designated by the Taoist term, Yishen 一神, the unique Spirit (as in the *Discourse on One God*).

Ādam's texts

The second group of texts is attributed to the priest Jingjing (景淨, or 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 chorepiscopos, and papas of Sinestan" (in Syriac: *Ādam qaššīšā w-koreppisqopā w-pāpaši d-Sīnestān*). The title of *chorepiscopos* is an approximate equivalent of "archbishop" in the Western Church, *papas* may be the head of a church province. But Pelliot explains this *pāpaši* (or *p'apsê*) as the Syriac transcription of *fashi* 法師 (Master of Law), a well-known Buddhist title (*dharmacārya* in Sanskrit). (Pelliot 1911; Pelliot / Dauvillier 1984: 67, n. 3)

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 *Zunjing* 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 [*more exactly:* Jingjing, monk of Great Virtue of this Religion – *VL*] was summoned (to the Court)

and the above-mentioned thirty books were translated [by him – *VL*].”(後召本教大德僧景淨譯得已上卅部卷).” (Saeki 1937: 276)

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 in even in famous *Zhenyuan xinding shijiao mulu* 貞元新定釋教目錄 (Newly composed catalogue of Buddhist teaching from the Zhenyuan Era), edited by Yuan Zhao 圓照 in AD 799/800 In this is mentioned that he together with the Buddhist monk Prajña (fl. 8th/9th century) had translated *Satpāramītāsūtra*, one of the esoteric sutras, from Iranian (or Sogdian?) into Chinese: *“[The monk Prajña] together with the Persian monk Jingjing of the Da Qin monastery basing themselves on a* hu *text, translated the* Liu boluomi jing, *7 juan* (【般若】乃與大秦寺波斯僧景淨依胡本六波羅蜜經譯成七卷).” According to Pelliot, *hu* 胡 (or barbarian) could have meant “Sogdian” in this case, implying that Ādam might come from Sogdiana. (Pelliot 1912: 109) A. Forte, however, objected to this by recalling that Ādam is said to be a “Persian” monk, therefore *hu* can be translated as “Iranian”. (Forte 1996²: 442-449)

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 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 *[Da Qin] jingjiao sanwei mengdu zan* 【大秦】景教三威蒙

度讚 ([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 *Tešbuḫta la-alaha bamroma*). This hymn is the only preserved text from the list of the thirty-five scripture mentioned in *Zunjing* (under the title of *Sanwei zan jing* 三威讚經). (Original Chinese text with commentaries see Weng 1996: 197-206)

The inscription on the Xi'an stele

This inscription provides the cardinal information on the introduction of Nestorianism to China. In the year 1625 the Jesuits in Peking were informed that a slab referring to the Christian religion had been found not long before, possibly in 1623, at Chang'an (modern Xi'an). Father Nicolas Trigault (1577-1628), coming from the territory of modern Belgium, was sent to inspect the stone, which had been discovered at Zhouzhi 盩厔縣 (now 周至縣), some distance from Chang'an, beside Chongren Temple (崇仁寺), where it was moved to.

The Xi'an stele was made on January 7, AD 781 (during the reign of Emperor Dezong of the Tang dynasty) in Chang'an. At the top a cross is incised, under which are nine large characters in three columns for the heading, which reads as follows: *Da Qin jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei* 大秦景教流行中國碑 (Stele [commemorating] the introduction and propagation of the Luminous Religion of Da Qin in the Middle Kingdom). The calligraphy was by Lü Xiuyan (呂秀巖), and the content was composed by Jingjing (Ādam), using four- and six-character euphemistic style (*piantiwen* 駢體文) in Chinese (total 1,756 characters) and a few lines in the Syriac language, in Estrangelo script (70 words). Calling God "Veritable Majesty", the text refers to Genesis, the cross, and the baptism. It also paid tribute to missionaries arrived in date. Jingjing has entitled his text *Jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei song bing xu* 景教流行中國碑頌并序 (Eulogy on the Propagation of the Luminous Religion in the Middle Kingdom, with an Introduction). (see Saeki 1937: 53-77; Weng 1996: 41-81)

The text opens with a dogmatic explanation of the Luminous Religion and an account of the history of Nestorianism in China,

from AD 635 to 781, i.e. from the time when Alopen is supposed to arrive at Chang'an to the year when the stele was erected. Then follows a praise of the donor Yisi 伊斯 (Yazdbozid in Syriac), a versified praise of the Luminous Religion, a conclusion and a colophon. In the very end there is a list of bishops and monks of the Da Qin monasteries.[4]

The stele is dated both in Chinese (大唐建中二年歲在作噩太蔟月七日 *"[This was erected] in the 2nd year of Jianzhong, of the Great Tang dynasty, when Jupiter was in Aries, on the 7th day of the month* taicou*"*), and in Syriac (*"In the year of the Greeks one thousand and ninety-two*[5]*, the Lord Yazdbozid, Priest and Vicar-episcopal of Khumdan*[6]*, the royal city, son of the enlightened Mailas, Priest of Balkh, a city of Turkestan, set up this stele, whereon is inscribed the Dispensation of our Redeemer, and the preaching of the apostolic missionaries to the King of China."*).

The first mention of the discovery of the stele appears in a letter which the Chinese scholar Li Zhizao 李之藻 (1565-1630) received from his friend, together with a rubbing of it. Li published the Chinese part of the inscription, with a postscript *Du jingjiao bei shu hou* 讀景教碑書後 (After having read the letter on the Nestorian stele) dated June 10, 1625. (Standaert 2001: 13) The first and anonymous translation into a European language (1625) was made in Latin. Jesuit Nicolas Trigault has been taken for its author.[7] A Portuguese translation (now lost) was the bases for the Italian version *Dichiaratione di vna pietra antica, scritta e scolpita con l'infrascritte lettere, ritrouata nel Regno della Cina* (Rome 1631). Several other translations based on *Dichiaratione* have soon fol-

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[4] There are many studies and translations of the inscription on the Xi'an stele. For the translation of the Chinese text see Pelliot 1996; for the translation of Syriac part of inscription see Pelliot / Dauvillier 1984: 55–61.

[5] The Chinese "2nd year of Jianzhong, of the Tang dynasty, on the 7th day of the month *taicou*" (太蔟月 *taicou yue* is one of the names for the first month. – *Shiji. Lüshu* 史記・律書) corresponds to the 7th Dystros 1092, according to the Seleucid Era, or 8th Xantikos 1092, according to the Syro-Macedonian Greek Era; it was Sunday [= February 4, AD 781].

[6] *Khumdan* was the Syriac and Sogdian name for Chang'an, probably derived from Sanskrit. (Pelliot 1928; Vaissière 2002)

[7] This translation was published, for the first time, as late as in 1902. (Havret 1902: 67-71)

lowed. One of the first interpretators of the inscription on Xi'an stele was Athanasius Kircher, S.J., (1602-1680). In his *China illustrata* he has published the whole text (Chinese and Syriac) of the stele with his interpretation. (Kircher 1667)

An impressive number of Western sources take 1625 as the year of the discovery of the stele. There are some, however, indicating the year of 1623. This date relies upon the Chinese Christian sources, such as the inscription which Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 (Paulus Hsu, 1562-1633), one of well-known Chinese converts, composed for the church at Jiangzhou (Shaanxi) in ca. 1630, saying that the stele was found in 1623.

The question of the authenticity of the inscription has been formerly often raised, but today no one can doubt the genuineness of this most important document for the history of the propagation of the Faith in the Far East. The Xi'an stele constitutes an important archaeological and written source. Since 1907 it stands in the Beilin 碑林, or Forest of Steles, in the Shaanxi Province Museum 陝西省博物館, in Xi'an. A replica is placed in Musée Guimet, Paris, France. Another replica is in Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. A replica was erected on September 21, 1911 also at the top of Mt. Koya in Japan.

The Xi'an inscription displays a grace of style and contains literary allusions and phraseology which indicate competence in Chinese language and familiarity with Taoism and Buddhism of the author.

The Chinese adaptation of Christianity

It is rather difficult to know how Nestorianism was received during its first centuries in China. The small number of sources that mention Christianity indicates that its first attempt to spread its teaching to China was far from being a success. No other foreign religion has such an impact on Chinese mentality and culture as Buddhism. Christianity, Manichaeism and Zoroastrism, though officially tolerated, were never truly encouraged. Most foreign religions, however, made an effort to penetrate Chinese culture. Manichaeans even attempted to syncretise their religion with Buddhism. (Standaert 2001: 34)

The introduction of Christianity as a monotheistic religion to Chinese culture was slightly different from the others. The Christian doctrine was translated very early into Chinese. The Xi'an inscription explicitly mentions that the Emperor had the texts brought by Alopen translated (Saeki 1937: 57; Weng 1996: 54); this decision might prevent these texts from being totally incomprehensible or written in a mediocre style.

Christian missionaries went through a process of linguistic adjustment and adopted a vocabulary borrowed from Buddhism, Taoism and Confusianism. (Chiu 1987: 237-253; Standaert 2001: 34) An obvious example is the name for Nestorianism as a teaching, which is at times called *fa* 法, *dao* 道 or *jiao* 教. Jingjing (Ādam) borrowed many expressions from both Taoism and Buddhism. Pelliot and Forte have demonstrated that Jingjing, for his inscription on Xi'an stele, used a famous Buddhist inscription as a literary model. (Pelliot 1996: 189; Forte 1996[4])

There was, however, an evolution in the use of terms. For instance, God is called *Fo* 佛 (Buddha) in the earliest text (*Xuting Mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所經, possibly written between 635 and 638), and *Yishen* 一神 (one God) in *Yi shen lun* 一神論. Also phonetic transcriptions are more numerous in Nestorian than in Manichaean documents. In these texts we can find Syriac in their phonetic Chinese transcription. I have already mentioned *Mishihe*. Besides, to name the God, a term Aluohe 阿羅訶 is often used. What does it mean? These three Chinese characters were chosen as a transliteration of Syriac word Aloha (Alaha), a Syriac equivalent of the Hebrew *'elōha* (or *'elōhim*), which is one of names for the God. This transliteration is identical with one of Chinese designations for *arhat*[8], the highest type or ideal saint in Hīnayāna. Also, we can find several names for Satan in their transliteration from Syriac into Chinese. Apart from Syriac terms, also some Persian and Sanskrit words were used.

On the other hand, the four Evangelists and other eminent persons or Saints of the Church of East, are entitled in these texts as

[8] Aluohe 阿羅訶 is one of Chinese transcriptions of the Sanskrit *arhan*, *arhat* (also 阿羅漢, 羅漢, 阿盧漢, 阿羅呵, 阿梨呵, 阿黎呵 or 羅呵), an enlightened, saintly man; the highest type or ideal saint in Hīnayāna in contrast with the *bodhisattva* as the saint in Mahāyāna.

fawang 法王, which can be translated as the "Kings of the Law", but also as the "Dharma Kings". In Buddhism, this title, *dharmarāja*, King of the Law, belongs to Buddha.[9]

Some conclusions

The whole question how Chinese Nestorians have inculturated Christian thought still deserves new study on the basis of methodologies of cultural translation. Till lately, the prevailing opinion was that Nestorianism had been a case of a marginal religion in Chinese society. In the history of its reception one observes aspects characteristic of the reception of other foreign religions in Chinese society. But recent archaeological discoveries may finally alter that perception.

Scientists now propose that Christianity exerted significant influence during at least the first two centuries of the Tang dynasty. This won't surprise everyone. Some evidence suggests that several Chinese emperors through the centuries allowed or promoted Christianity and that even during times of persecution Christianity persisted in outlying areas. For example, in 1330, long after Alopen's journey but well before Ricci's, China may have been home to as many as 30,000 followers of *jingjiao*.

Questions remain, however, about what these people really believed. At best they retained the basic teachings of the Nestorian missionaries, which already make their theology suspect in the West. A remote Christian outpost in the heart of Taoist country would also have been susceptible to syncretism.

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[9] Thus, in the *Book of Honour*, we can read such names as *Yuhannan fawang* 瑜罕難法王 (King of the Law Yohannân [John]), *Lujia fawang* 盧伽法王 (King of the Law Lûqâ [Luke]), *Mojuci fawang* 摩矩辭法王 (King of the Law Marqôs [Mark]), *Mingtai fawang* 明泰法王 (King of the Law Mathai [Matthew]), *Mushi fawang* 牟世法王 (King of the Law Musa [Moses]), *Duohui fawang* 多惠法王 (King of the Law David), *Baolu fawang* 寶路法王 (King of the Law Paulôs [Paul]), etc., twenty-two persons altogether.

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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(諭)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* 阿彌駝佛) is the Kingdom of Peace and Joy (*Anle jingtu* 安樂淨土, *Sukhāvatī*)

- 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)