

Early Christianity in China: Finding the Forgotten

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, I had the privilege of travelling extensively in China. The trip was enriched by my having with me a retired Chinese archaeologist who had previously served China as Director General of The State Administration of Cultural Heritage. It is no surprise that a multitude of issues are currently keeping China near the centre of global interest, but there is one which has consistently been overlooked: the presence of Christianity in China from 635 to 1369 AD. For more than half that period it had recognition from the highest powers in the country. I will be weaving together shards of relevant information supporting that statement. The discussion will move through three phases.

Phase I.

The story revolves around the Syriac **Church of the East**, also known erroneously as “Nestorianism.” It was recognized as orthodox by other Christian denominations, first in 418¹ by the Greek church established in Constantinople and then by the Latin church in Rome in 586.² Its missionary impulse was particularly strong, leading it far East through Eurasia. It is estimated that by 800 AD, it became the largest Christian body in the world.

A priest, Alouben and his company illustrated the energies of the Church. In 635 they were introduced to Emperor Gao Zu, head of the Tang dynasty and the ruler of China. For almost three years, they remained nearby. Alouben and those with him were thoroughly examined, and the books he had brought were translated into Chinese. In 638, the new emperor, Tai Zong, issued the following proclamation focusing on the teachings of the Church of the East: [They] “set forth the most important things for living, their words are not complicated, and their principles, once learnt, can be easily retained. Everything in them benefits man. It is appropriate that it should spread throughout the empire.”³ There was more to the statement, and it all was affirmative. The Church of the East and its doctrine were welcomed in China.⁴

1 Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2000), p. 17, and it repeated this recognition in 630 AD, Baum and Winkler, p.40.

2 Baum and Winkler, p. 36.

3 *Stele on the Diffusion of Christianity (The Luminous Religion) from Rome (Da Qin) into China (The Middle Kingdom) ‘The Nestorian Monument’* 11.10.2020. Translated by dr. L. Eccles and Prof. Sam Lieu

4 This is also affirmed by Lin Wushu: “A General Discussion of the Tang Policy Towards

The primary information regarding the ministry of the Church of the East is found on a massive *stèle*, or stone monument, which was raised in the city of Chang'an in 781. In 1756 Chinese characters, it detailed how the Church of the East gained acceptance in China, what it taught, how it was nurtured, and who some of the heroes were. While passing over major troubles that the church encountered in 700, and even worse tragedies suffered by the whole Tang dynasty in the 750s, it affirmed the imperial willingness to underwrite various renovations to churches. The *Stèle* and other sources showed that legal openness extended to the Church of the East. Other religious groups from the West, the Zoroastrians and the Manicheans, were closed to native (Han) Chinese. In contrast, there is considerable evidence to show that there were positive relations between the Christians and the much larger and stronger Buddhists.

The Church of the East developed successfully from 635. There were challenges, but the net experience was positive. Damaged buildings had been repaired; people with extraordinary abilities were recognized and honoured; the message they had proclaimed spread widely and had been integrated. However, as it moved into the 840s, things began to change.

Phase II

For some regions of this spreading Christian body, events and activities were unfolding positively. Patriarch Timothy I, head of the Church of the East back in Baghdad, managed to forge constructive relationships with a series of Muslim Caliphs. Other Christian priests were sought by Muslim leaders because of their excellent medical skills. Elsewhere, there are concrete indications of Christian growth. For example, in 814, in Luoyang, the other capital of China, a funerary pillar was erected. The epitaph carved on it identified the woman who had died and those who mourned her death as Christians.

However, change came in 840 when Wu Zong became emperor of China. He inherited catastrophic consequences of both environmental and political areas. Desertification in central China, starvation, and panic had brought devastation in the mid 700s.⁵ During the same period, there was a concerted attempt to overthrow the Tang Dynasty. In the mayhem, China witnessed its rulers fleeing for their lives, much of Luoyang being reduced to ruins, and thousands upon thousands of inhabitants dying from sword, starvation, or sickness. With help, the ruling dynasty managed to stop the violence and start rebuilding life in its capital. However, even though the Tang Dynasty survived until 907, it never fully escaped the trauma of the 700s. Consequently, when Wu Zong ascended to the throne, normalcy

Three Persian Religions: Manichaeism, Nestorianism and Zoroastrianism” [Abridged English Translation] *Chinese Archaeology and Art Digest*, 4/1 (2000):109. Translated by Bruce Doar.

5 See Xunming Wang et al, “Climate Desertification, and the Rise and Collapse of Chin’s Historical Dynasties,” *Human Ecology*, 38(2010): 157-72 and C. Mackerras, “Uygur-Tang Relations, 744-840,” *Central Asian Survey*, 19(2000):23.

was still only a dream.⁶

The new emperor was outraged by what he saw. Buddhism had grown in China religiously, numerically, and financially. People flocked to this religion, or pretended to, and by doing so, managed to be exempt from paying taxes. Further, so much of what could be called the “precious metals,” gold, silver, and perhaps copper, was being used by Buddhists for decoration, for statues, and even for roofing on monasteries. The government treasury was running dangerously low. As a Taoist and as the person primarily responsible politically, Wu Zong was indeed appalled. At one point he was heard to say derisively, “Why do we need a small western religion to compete with me?” The Buddhists had to go.

In August 845, Wu Zong summarized the results of the action he had launched against the Buddhists across China: 4600 temples destroyed; 260,500 monks and nuns sent back to ordinary life; 40,000 shrines ravaged; thousands of acres of land taken into government hands; and 150,000 men and women slaves freed.⁷ All of this, he said, meant first, a large tract of land was available to cultivate, and second, an influx of cash would provide new taxes from the population. This illustrated a Taoist pushing hard against Buddhists and a Head of State desperately hoping for a huge flow of revenue to alleviate his empty coffers. Then, as something like an afterthought, he said, “I also ordered over 3000 Nestorian and Zoroastrian monks to be laicized, so that they will not pollute the Chinese custom.”⁸

Was this the end for the Buddhists, “Nestorians,” and the Zoroastrians? The general opinion has been that the answer is “no” for the Buddhists and the Zoroastrians but “yes” for The Church of the East (Nestorians). In other words, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism reappeared in the area shortly after these events, but The Church of the East did not.

As time has passed, it has become obvious that that assumption should be carefully reviewed because it may have been overstated. Apparently, Emperor Wu Zong died just a few months after his last statement. It is possible that he saw few or none of the results he might have hoped for. Furthermore, at his death, the negative actions he had launched were immediately reversed, particularly with regard to the Buddhists. That is the context in which we must approach the events.

First, Wu Zong’s focus had been on priests and other leaders connected to the religious groups. Lay followers were not directly affected. Evidence suggests there was a significant number of these in the Church of the East who could probably just stay where they were.

6 Jiu Tang Shu, [Old Book of Tang] Old Book of Tang; vol.18, p. 606; see Ennin: Ru Tang Qiu Fa Xunli Xingji Jiaozhu [Ennin’s Diary: The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law] annotated by Ono Katsutoshi (Shijiazhuang: Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1992), 440.

7 Ronald Kydd. “Abolition in the Midst of Turmoil: The Case of the Tang emperor Wu Zong (814-846 CE),” *Bondage and the Environment in the Indian Ocean World*, Edited by Gwyn Campbell, (Palgrave macmillan), 2018. pp. 42-46.

8 Kydd, p. 45.

Second, there was a funeral monument found in Quanzhou in the south-east of China, which suggests not only that the Church of the East survived there but also that indigenous Chinese had joined that church.⁹ Third, iconography points to a significant link. There were Christian images carved into stone dating long before Wu Zong. The Xi'an Stele raised in 781 is the prime example. The same images appeared in southern China hundreds of years after Wu Zong died. There must be some connection between the carvers who created these works even if they were centuries apart.¹⁰

A fourth consideration stems from the late 12th century. When the Mongols had gained control of the whole of China, particularly the south, Chinese from that area were hired to handle administrative responsibilities. They came to realize that among the Mongols there were newcomers to the region who were Christians, and they coined a special name for them—"Yelikewen." The important point is that as the servants of the Mongols went about their work they encountered a surprise. There was another group in the area that was a lot like the Yelikewen. These people called themselves the "Da Qin," and they were Christians, too. The critical difference was that the "Da Qin" were descendants of Christians who had lived in the area several hundred years earlier. Their ancestors were those Christians who had occupied the area in the 840s AD when Emperor Wu Zong was in power. As noted above, Wu Zong tried strenuously to remove any religion which stood in the way of Taoism, but it is quite clear that he failed. Buddhism surged back from his efforts to control it, and the Christian community appears to have survived. This likelihood is supported by Wang Yuanyuan. He supported the argument that Wu Zong took action to terminate the ministry of the Da Qin priests. However, he went on to say, "[T]he religion itself was not eradicated and it survived in the Hebei region and in south China after the Tang period."¹¹

Finally, there is an author and theologian named Ibn at-Taiyib, who lived in Baghdad around 1040. At one point he discussed the way Patriarch Timothy I, working more than 200 years earlier, had organized the Church of the East. Timothy had included Christians in China and Tibet. The point to be emphasized is that Ibn at-Taiyib commented on Christians in the south-east of China *as though they were still active there*.¹²

9 Lance Eccles and Samuel N.C. Lieu, "Inscriptions in Latin Chinese, Uighur and Phagspa," *Medieval Christian and Manichaean Remains from Quanzhou (Zayton)*; Corpus Fontium Manichaeorum, Series *Archaeologica* et *Iconographica*, 2 (Brepols, 2012), p. 141.

10 Ken Parry, "The Art of the Christian Remains at Quanzhou," *Medieval Christian and Manichaean Remains from Quanzhou (Zayton)* ; Corpus Fontium Manichaeorum, Series *Archaeologica* et *Iconographica*, 2 (Brepols, 2012), p. 243.

11 Wang, Yuanyuan, "Priests of *Jingjiao* in the Xiazhou Uighur Kingdom (Five Dynasties—the Early Song Period)" in *Winds of Jingjiao: Studies on Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, Eds. Li Tang and Dietmar W. Winkler (Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2016), p. 344. See also Majella Franzmann and Samuel N. C., "Nestorian Inscriptions in Syro-Turkic from Quanzhou", *Medieval Christian and Manichaean Remains from Quanzhou (Zayton)*; Corpus Fontium Manichaeorum, Series *Archaeologica* et *Iconographica*, 2 (Brepols, 2012), p.209.

12 "As for the far away lands, such as China and India, in the time of Timothy it was decided bishops would gather and name the Metropolitan (or Patriarch)" Arabic translated by Dr.

It has long been assumed by many that the Church of the East had been driven out of China in approximately 845. What we have been looking at suggests that that was not the case and considerable evidence which remains supports this conclusion.

Phase III

The background to all of this is the missionary compulsion of the Church of the East to inform those who had never heard of them or their God. Starting as early as the second century AD, they travelled East following what came to be known as the Silk Roads. That took them from Baghdad to places like Merv, Samarkand, and ultimately Khanbaliq, now Beijing. They encountered many clans in the process, Sogdians, for example, and as they moved farther during the ninth through twelfth centuries they became immersed in mass converts among Turkic-speaking peoples, the Uighurs, the Keraites, the Naiman, the Merkit, the Ongut and of course, the Mongols.

Genghis Khan, a Mongol, became ruler of most of China in 1189 and asserted his power until his death in 1227. He created the greatest continuous empire in human history, and amidst the blood and thunder, ironically, he practiced religious toleration and engineered reasonably safe commercial routes across Eurasia.

An intriguing figure in this story of power and might was a Kerait woman named Sorkaktani Beke. She became a daughter-in-law of the Great Khan and eventually gave birth to three men, two of whom rose in turn to the seat of their Grand-Father. Along the way she brought in Church of the East priests in order to teach and mould her sons. Believe it or not, the marks remained throughout their lives.

In 1276 Khublai rose to be the Great Khan, leading the Yuan Dynasty. He became the first Mongol to rule the whole of China. Under his controlled peace people streamed into central and south China. Among them were many Christians. As indicated before, the newcomers were called “Yelikewen” and those whom they encountered were the “Da Qin.” It would be wonderful to know if and how the two groups merged. A newspaper dating from the 1330s, with a long footnote a hundred years older tucked into it, tells some interesting stories.¹³

From the limited material available one gets the impression that conditions did improve as the Yuan Dynasty moved into the 1330s. However, soon conditions shifted. There was a change in climate resulting in floods and destruction of dams. At the same time there was corruption in the government, fierce competition for the control of the emperor, and economic crises. In the 1340s a great plague swept through central China bringing death in places that took up to 50 percent of the population. Then again there were floods, disease,

Wafik Wabha. Ibn at-Taijib, *Fiḥ an-Nasraniya (Das Reicht der Christenheit)*, II Teil. Edited by W. Hoenerback and O. Spies. *Scriptores Arabici*, 19: *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, vol. 168, (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Dunbecq, 1957), p. 135.

13 Li Tang, *East Syriac Christianity in Mongol-Yuan China*, *Orientalia Biblica et Christiania*, Edited by Alessandro Bausi, Eckart Otto und Siegbert Uhlig, Band 18 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), p. 115 to 133.

and devastation. Faced with this in the 1360s the Yuan emperor left the area to continue his dynastic rule as “Northern Yuan,” safe beyond the Gobi Desert. In the land he left behind, the Ming Dynasty soon replaced Mongol Yuan.

CONCLUSION

We have had a walkthrough of Chinese history: the “Middle Kingdom” evokes wonder, curiosity and apprehension. Out of the centuries upon centuries of intrigue and honour a picture emerges, not of dominance, but presence. Christians came from the West. Over time and in many places they achieved various degrees of integration and were frequently accepted at all cultural levels. They offered themselves and their beliefs to the people among whom they lived. Current evidence does not allow us the clearest picture throughout, but they were present and active in a variety of ways for approximately 700 years.