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Re-dating the seven early Chinese Christian manuscripts : Christians in Dunhuang before 1200

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Chapter 2 Introducing *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*

This chapter is an introduction to the most conspicuous Christian religious sources, *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*. It describes the manuscripts and traces the history of their initial contextualization. It also contains a summary of their content. After these essentials have been dealt with, the chapter weighs up the theory assuming that the two sources are modern forgeries and then turns to the conventional chronology that places their creation in the 640s. In a nutshell, the goal of this chapter is twofold: to demonstrate that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* are genuine Christian texts and that their accepted dating is untenable.

2.1 Description and the earliest publications

The Messiah Sutra and *On One God* are both written on long rolls consisting of sheets of paper glued together. The former measures 26.3 centimeters (width) by 276.8 centimeters (length). According to Takakusu Junjiro 高楠順次郎, the seven badly damaged end columns had been cut off by the Chinese seller and replaced by the empty heading we see today — see Figure 2.1.¹ In contrast, *On One God* is more complete and much longer. It measures 25.4 centimeters by 640.0 centimeters. Although the text opens with a sentence rather than a title, the roll seems to have come down to us in its entirety — see Figure 2.2.



Figure 2.1 End part of *The Messiah Sutra*



Figure 2.2 The roll of *On One God* and the first frame

As shown in their color photos, the two manuscripts are in good condition. The paper is thick and the ink has not faded. The Chinese characters arranged in small columns divided by fine

¹ Takakusu Junjiro told this story to Haneda Toru in 1925. However, Haneda Toru 羽田亨 (1926:118) suspected that these mutilated columns could have been much longer and had been deliberately removed to make the overall sale more profitable. For the detailed measurements of these two manuscripts and their color photos, see Takeda Science Foundation 武田科学振興財団 (2012:83-96).

black lines are exquisitely executed. Despite some water stains, none of the glued sheets has deteriorated, crumbled or is infested with wormholes, probably because, besides the local semi-arid climate and the sealing off of Cave 17, the paper was treated with a *huangbo* 黄檗 solution that not only acted as an insecticide but also dyed both manuscripts bright yellow. Judging by these codicological features (appearance, layout, paper treatment and the like), the making of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* conformed to ancient Chinese manuscript-making techniques.² They bear a close resemblance to many other manuscripts found in Dunhuang Cave 17 — see Figures 6.3-6.7.

Both manuscripts were first described and identified as Christian sources by Haneda Toru in the early twentieth century. Haneda Toru claims that *On One God* was purchased from a Chinese book-seller by a Japanese lecturer, Tomeoka Kenzo 富岡謙藏. The latter kept it for a while and then showed it to Haneda Toru, who made the two earliest but very brief studies — one in 1918 and the other in 1923.³ *The Messiah Sutra*, as said, was obtained from an unknown person in China by Takakusu Junjiro. In 1925, he transferred it to Haneda Toru, who disclosed the source a year later.⁴ In 1931, Haneda Toru photographed the complete manuscripts and published them together in one booklet with short introductions that summarize his own previous publications.⁵ After their disclosure to Japanese scholarship, the two sources were rapidly introduced to the West by P.Y. Saeki, who prepared the first full translations in the early 1930s and republished them together with annotations and the Chinese texts in 1937.⁶

Three more issues need to be discussed in this preparatory section. Importantly, *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* have been studied and documented only perfunctorily. With the exception of what has just been noted, very little is known about their history before or since they were sold to Japanese collectors. Another, perhaps the greatest, issue is the inaccessibility of the original manuscripts referred to in the Introduction to this dissertation. After these two sources together with *The Mysterious Bliss Sutra* and *The Sutra of the Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao* were moved to Japan, these four documents have been all kept locked away in secret. Besides the Japanese collectors and Haneda Toru, very few scholars have had the opportunity to study the original scrolls. As far as can be discovered, the only non-

² For more details and the general codicological features of the Dunhuang manuscripts, see Rong Xinjiang (2013:483-492) and Stephen F. Teiser (2012).

³ Haneda Toru 羽田亨 1923:157-158, 1918:141-144.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1926:117-118.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1931.

⁶ P.Y. Saeki 1951:125-247 (English translation), 13-70 (Chinese texts), 1934c, 1933, 1932.

Japanese scholar who has had access to the originals was and remains A.C. Moule, and he examined *The Messiah Sutra* only in the 1920s. The combined drawbacks of non-accessibility and poor documentation have been a major impediment to research, because they have made the sources a mystery, thereby adding fuel to the theory that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* are modern forgeries.⁷ Fortunately, the Takeda Science Foundation generously exhibited these manuscripts in 2010. It also re-photographed and catalogued them under Haneda Toru's name — the catalogue numbers of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* are 羽 459 and 羽 460 respectively. Hopefully, this exhibition and these new color photos will remove some lingering doubts.

The third outstanding issue is the relationship between the two sources. As observed by many scholars, including Haneda Toru himself, the two sources do display some textual similarities.⁸ The closeness of their wording and style is marked and their contents are equally difficult. Many sentences have been broken off and do not lend themselves to straightforward readings. Judging by the calligraphy, they were written within a reasonably short time of one another by one hand.⁹ Despite these correspondences, it is still an uphill battle to explore the interconnection between the two sources. Questions of chronological precedence (which text was made earlier than the other) and hierarchy (was the later text based on the earlier one) are topics that involve many other issues among them manuscript production (purpose, authorship and the like), the study of all other Christian sources as well as a general understanding of the Christian presence in ancient China; all topics that await more research.

2.2 A synopsis of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*

As suggested above, both texts are difficult. This difficulty has even led some to suggest that the manuscripts cannot be authentic, because they would have been beyond the comprehension of and hence could not have served any real purpose for these ancient Christians — a matter taken up in Section 2.3. Surely, this is an exaggerated assertion. To demonstrate that both are Christian texts and that, generally speaking, their contents are intelligible, in the course of my research I have re-read the manuscripts, incorporated the latest exegetical works and prepared a synopsis that not only reflects their textual structures but also enables readers to match their contents readily with the original columns.

⁷ A.C. Moule 1930:58. See also footnotes 17 and 18 in the Introduction to this dissertation.

⁸ Haneda Toru 羽田亨 1926:125-127. For a short summary, see also Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2003:212-228).

⁹ The scribe was gifted with good artistic taste. His calligraphy is rather elegant. For more detail, see Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2003:189-228), Luo Xianglin 羅香林 (1966:32), and Chen Yuan 陳垣 (1927/1980:98).

2.2.1 Four sections of *The Messiah Sutra*

The Messiah Sutra retells the Gospel stories and many parts can be traced back to the Bible. In terms of content, it can be divided into four sections.

2.2.1.1 The title: *The Messiah Sutra*

The title, *The Messiah Sutra*, is contained in the opening column that also gives the length of the manuscript (one roll) — *xuting mishishuo jing yijuan* (序聽迷詩所經一卷). Despite its brevity, this title presents difficulties and has elicited no fewer than four theories in an attempt to solve them.

The first explanation is the ‘error’ theory postulated by Haneda Toru whose basic assertion is that the first five characters are non-standard Chinese transcriptions of Jesus the Messiah.¹⁰ Although this theory is generally accepted, its most serious defect is that *xuting* and Jesus do not match each other phonetically and that the transcription of Messiah in the main text (彌師訶) is different and seems to be correct — see the quotation below.¹¹ On the basis of this error theory, the second hypothesis asserts that these glaring mistakes in key theological terms in the title suggest that the source was not made by a pious believer but by an ignorant forger.¹² However, this forgery theory, as will be argued below, is untenable. Another viewpoint is the ‘correct’ theory that alleges that none of the characters is an error because they do not mean Jesus the Messiah. Zhao Bichu argues that *xuting* may be related to the Greek word “SOTAIR” (σωτήρ) that means Savior and *mishisuo* is the Greek word “MESSON” (μέσον) that means middle; Wu Changxing, on the other hand, associates the title with Syriac, claiming that *xuting* is “zedikā” (ܙܕܝܟܐ) and *mishisuo* “metsāyā” (ܡܬܫܝܐ).¹³ Although the ‘correct’ theory seems to solve the problem of the ‘wrong’ characters, it still cannot explain why *mishisuo* does not sound closer to Messiah than it does to either μέσον or ܡܬܫܝܐ.

Finally, the fourth theory seems to make the most sense. Accepting the premise that *mishisuo* corresponds to Messiah, this theory points out that *xu* means a narrative or an account whereas *ting* is taken in its common meaning of to hear. Therefore, the title is: Narrate the

¹⁰ Haneda Toru 羽田亨 1926:127-128.

¹¹ For instance, P.Y. Saeki was influenced by Haneda Toru. He (1951:147) wrote that *xuting* would have been pronounced “‘Jo-cho’ in Japanese and ‘Ye-chu’ in Old Chinese, and can correctly be identified with the Chinese sound ‘Ye-su’ of the T’ang Dynasty.” See also A.C. Moule (1930:59).

¹² Lin Wushu 林悟殊 2003:228.

¹³ Wu Changxing 吳昶興 2010b:240-241; Zhao Bichu 趙璧礎 1998:38. The first Syriac word means justice and the second mediator. The Greek word, σωτήρ, shall be transcribed as SŌTĒR.

Heard Messiah Sutra. This interpretation was first proposed a century ago by J.M. Menzies, who was inspired by the first sentence of *The Messiah Sutra* that imitates the opening of Buddhist sutras: “At that time the Messiah expounded” (爾時彌師訶說).¹⁴ Lately, this theory has been reinforced by Xiang Bingguang who has found that a number of Tang essays, including later texts, use *xu* in a similar way. Xiang Bingguang claims that the title could mean “Document *The Messiah Sutra* That Has Been Recounted” (記敘所聽到的迷詩所經).¹⁵ I tend to lean toward this theory, despite its imperfections. Most importantly, it does not explain why the word Messiah was transcribed differently in the same manuscript.

2.2.1.2 Section Two: theological themes

The second section expounds on the many theological themes used in the manuscript, among them God, evil, the use of idols and the like.

Cols. 2 – mid-40: God, “*tianzun*” (天尊), a common Daoist term for the highest deity who is invisible, like the wind. He creates life and rules the world.¹⁶

Cols. end-40 – end-43: Evil is the fruit of one’s previous sinful actions.

Cols. 44 – end-52: Ignorant humans make statues of elephants, cows and other animals. The use of statues made of clay, wood, gold, silver and copper is foolish.

Cols. end-52 – mid-62: To follow the teaching of God is good. To serve God is to obey His commands.

Cols. end-62 – mid-81: Obeying the emperor and respecting one’s parents are all facets of service to God. However, to serve God comes first, loyalty second and filial piety third.

Cols. end-81 – mid-92: The Chinese version of the Ten Commandments, called The Ten Vows (十願) — for example, be loyal to the emperor, be filial to parents, do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not covet another’s property or one’s neighbor’s wife and house and do not bear false witness against others.

¹⁴ J.M. Menzies’ suggestion is cited from F.S. Drake (1935a:679). For the original Chinese, see Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2003:387, Col.2).

¹⁵ Xiang Bingguang 項秉光 2011:18.

¹⁶ Lin Wushu 林悟殊 2003:387, Col.2.

Cols. end-92 – mid-113: Explains other commands from the teachings of Jesus or created for a particular occasion: do not exploit the weak, help the poor and the sick, do not gossip, do not be an instigator of evil and the like.

2.2.1.3 Section Three: a transitional part

The third section is a short transitional passage, linking the second section to the Gospel stories.

Cols. Mid-113 – mid-115: Humans do not obey the teachings in the second section. Nevertheless God shows mercy and admonishes humans to do good deeds but humans still do not heed God's words.

Cols. end-115 – 122: Therefore, God commands a “cool wind” (涼風) to enter a virgin whose name is “Mary” (末艷).¹⁷ The resultant miraculous pregnancy makes humans realize God's might. God instructs people to return to the good karma.

2.2.1.4 Section Four: Gospel stories

The fourth section contains the Gospel stories about Jesus Christ. Lately this section has received considerable attention. It seems to hold critical information about the authenticity of the two sources. Skeptical scholars have asserted that the corrupt phonetic transcriptions of Syriac and Persian names suggest that the sources must be modern forgeries, whereas mainstream scholars point out that the transcriptions in fact show their authenticity because very few people would have mastered these ancient languages in the early twentieth century. For more detail, see 2.3.

Cols. 123 – 139: The birth of Jesus the Messiah around “Jerusalem” (烏梨師斂), Jesus' childhood and baptism including His temptation.¹⁸

Cols. 140 – end-152: The ministry of Jesus (particularly, His healing and teaching).

Cols. end-152 – 170: The trial and crucifixion of Jesus at the hands of “Pilatus” (毗羅都思) and the resurrection — the tomb is open and rocks fall away.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 397, Cols.115, 116.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 398, Col. 127.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Col.153.

2.2.2 The Four parts of *On One God*

On One God also has four parts: three titled essays plus the source's general title, *On One God*. Although the essays appear to have been arranged in a fairly slipshod fashion (Part II comes before Part I), all are devoted to one single theme that is indicated by the general title: the One God.²⁰

2.2.2.1 Essay One: The Parable, II

Part 1 is the first essay entitled The Parable, II (喻第二).²¹

Cols. 1 – end-4: The One God created all things. All things visible and invisible reveal the One God.

Cols. end-4 – end-23: God's unseen and yet mighty power. All things are sustained by this power; just as the unseen strength of the archer propels the flying arrow. Humans have no other resting place but in the sustaining power of God. This divine power of the One God is possessed by no other god.

Cols. end-23 – mid-60: the content of these columns is heavily theological and philosophical. The author struggles to explain the dichotomy: visible and invisible, by comparing it with the body-soul and host-visitor relationship. God is visible and invisible. All things (the visible and invisible) spring from one source. Body and soul together constitute humans, and neither is complete without the other.

Col. mid-60: the title of this part, The Parable, II.

2.2.2.2 Essay Two: On One Heaven, I

Part 2 is On One Heaven, I (一天論第一).²² As pointed by F.S. Drake, this essay has two sub-themes:²³

Sub-theme One is about theological dichotomies — visible and invisible, male and female, body and soul among other topics.

²⁰ According to P.Y. Saeki (1951:6), the essays are “tracts” or *logdia*, short pieces of writing on religious subjects.

²¹ Lin Wushu 林悟殊 2003:355, Col.60.

²² *Ibid.*, 368, Col.206.

²³ F.S. Drake 1935a:684-685.

Cols. 61 – 76: Man is made of the visible and of the invisible. All things, visible and invisible, were created by no other god but by the One God Whose power like the wind is invisible to the human eye.

Cols. 77 – end-114: Humans were created by God in two kinds (sexes). Body and soul are interdependent. Their relationship resembles the relationship of a wheat kernel to the earth, and of host to a guest.

Cols. end-114 – mid-142: We must all pass hither (此處) and thither (彼處).²⁴ We are born here to sow the seeds of goodness that will bear fruit there. It is here that all good deeds must be performed and all spiritual discipline and worship must be accomplished; it will be too late if left until we have gone hence.

Sub-theme Two is about the mighty work of salvation of the One God.

Cols. end-142 – end-157: From the One God Himself proceeds the holy work of transformation. He bears the sufferings of all humans. Worship of the One God and the keeping of His commandments is the foundation of all true merit. To see God, one must be pure in heart.

Cols. end-157 – end-181: The many races of humankind are all in the likeness of the One God, and all are cherished by Him, and will be judged by Him at the End of Time. The Holy One is wise, complete and eternal. God is mightier than all emperors. To adhere to other gods is foolish and is to be led astray by devils who become the adversaries of humankind by taking advantage of human stupidity.

Cols. end-181 – 205: Humans can turn to the ways of evil. They fall from Heaven and dwell with “Satan” (參怒) who has deluded foolish people and turned them against the One God.²⁵ People perverted by devils do not revere the One God and fall into “three evil ways” (三惡道, a Buddhist term).²⁶ As a consequence, they will be reborn only in a lowly position. The One God is good and is loving. Devils confound and pervert people. Those who follow the One God will be sanctified.

Col. 206: The title of this essay, *On One Heaven, I*.

²⁴ Lin Wushu 林悟殊 2003:360, Cols.118,119.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 367, Col.194.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 368, Col.200.

2.2.2.3 Essay Three: *Shizun* On Almsgiving, III

Part 3 is the final essay, *Shizun* on Almsgiving, III (世尊布施論第三).²⁷ As pointed out by P.Y. Saeki, the first phrase, *shizun*, is an epithet for Buddha that is also used to designate Jesus, and the second phrase, *bushi*, the Chinese translation of the Buddhist term for almsgiving, is one deed that is mandatory to achieve salvation.²⁸

Col. 207: the title of this part, *Shizun* on Almsgiving, III.

Cols. 208 – end-249: generally speaking these columns seem to be subjects that are treated in Verse 1 of Chapter Six to Verse 14 of Chapter 7 in the Gospel according to Matthew plus parts of the Sermon on the Mount: almsgiving, worship, laying up of treasure, the search for food and clothing, judging others, casting pearls before swine, questing after knowledge and knocking on the door, and the choice between the broad and the narrow paths. Dispersed among these columns is the work of the One God: the One God gives us everything; other gods give nothing.

Cols. 250 – end-344: The ministry, betrayal, trial and death of the Messiah, the sin of Adam, the Incarnation and the Redemption. The Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Great Commission, the promise of the Holy Spirit, the Ascension and the conquest of death through faith in the Messiah. The gift of the Holy Spirit, namely: the manifestation of the Messiah in the world to bring Judgment and to grant men the gift of everlasting life. The devils that incite hatred against the disciples of the Messiah.

Cols. 345 — mid-376: The punishment of the “Jews” (石忽人) and the martyrdom of Christians.²⁹ The Second Coming and the work of Salvation. Persecution in the “Roman Empire” (?) (拂林) and in Persia.³⁰ The holy and mighty power of the One God.

Cols. end-376 — 404: Salvation: righteous living, reliance upon the One God, performing the Will of the One God, knowing the One God, freedom from false religion and from fear of men and of devils, faith. Troubles that will be caused by the devils in the Last Days. The Last Judgment (the fate that will befall the good and the evil in Heaven and in Hell.)

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Col.207.

²⁸ P.Y. Saeki 1951:231-232.

²⁹ Lin Wushu 林悟殊 2003:381, Col.343-344.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 382, Col.354.

2.2.2.4 The title: On One God

The final part of *On One God* is contained in the very last column, Col.405, “On One God, Roll III” (一神論卷第三).³¹ This short title ends the whole manuscript and seems to imply that the preceding manuscript has come down to us in a complete form. Nevertheless, the title ‘Roll III’ suggests that there could have been other rolls in the same series.

2.3 Rejecting the forgery theory

Since the first publications, little doubt has been cast on the authenticity of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*. In the 1990s, however, in the wake of the rise of a more general interest in the presence of forgeries in the collections of Dunhuang manuscripts a few scholars began to question their authenticity. Skeptics asserted that a number of indications suggest that both manuscripts were copied in the early twentieth century.

This section is devoted to a discussion of this thesis and begins by tracking the path of its emergence, followed by an outline of the alleged indications and ends with an exposé of the weakness of these premises. The long and the short of its argument is that the forgery theory is not substantiated by any evidence and that none of the arguments adduced is convincing. Later, the dissertation will rely on more findings in its refutation of this theory.

2.3.1 The emergence of the forgery theory

Probably because Dunhuang Cave 17 was only opened in 1900 and most manuscripts were afterwards rapidly transported to Europe by Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot, no questions about the forging of these sources rippled the waters of scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century. The first suspicions began to make themselves felt when more Dunhuang manuscripts appeared on the market after WWII and they were strengthened every time a newly reported manuscript displayed textual and codicological features that deviated from texts already in well-known collections. Qualms were reinforced when scholars unexpectedly discovered that even the finest collections like that kept in the British Library contain a number of fakes. At that point the issue of forgery in the whole Dunhuang hoard suddenly became a matter of some urgency. In 1997, the Chinese Department of the British Library decided to accord the issue proper public attention. It organized a workshop and then published a monograph that establishes that a number of documents had indeed been forged

³¹ *Ibid.*, 386.

in the early twentieth century and that the bulk of the dubious examples were those manuscripts that had been purchased from private organizations, unknown owners and in antiquities markets.³²

It is in the throes of this scholarly furore that two Chinese scholars, Rong Xinjiang and Lin Wushu, raised the possibility that the Tang Christian manuscripts were forgeries at the time they were doing research in London in 1991. According to an anecdote recalled by Rong Xinjiang at the celebration of Lin Wushu's seventieth birthday (2013), two matters in particular caught their attention.³³ One is that only Manuscript P.3847 has a known history; all the other six manuscripts were obtained from mysterious vendors and collectors whose background would not bear investigation. The other is that whereas P.3847 is very short, the other manuscripts are comparatively long. "Therefore," Rong Xinjiang writes, "I suspect that some of these said privately collected Christian manuscripts might be forgeries" (因此我懷疑，這些散藏的所謂景教寫本中是不是存有偽造的呢？).³⁴ When Rong Xinjiang voiced his suspicions, Lin Wushu concurred with him. They planned to scrutinize each manuscript. However, probably because of the tight research schedule as visiting scholars, they just skimmed *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* and focused in detail on Kojima Manuscripts A and B, co-authoring an article that convincingly exposes that the Kojima manuscripts are indeed modern forgeries — for details, see Chapter 6.

The forgery issue was also brought to Wu Qiyu's attention when Lin Wushu left London for Paris. Wu Qiyu (d. 2011) was a leading expert on Dunhuang manuscripts and he agreed with Lin Wushu and Rong Xinjiang on many points. "Wu Qiyu clued [hinted] to me," Lin Wushu recalls, "that these two documents [*The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*] were forgeries, but he also said that it is very difficult to prove this."³⁵

At this early stage, scholars still trod cautiously and did not rush to publish any articles, probably because no one yet possessed any hard evidence. After almost a decade of simmering the forgery issue was finally brought to the boil by Lin Wushu. In the opening years of this new century, he published three articles in quick succession, announcing that both the manuscripts are modern forgeries. He began with an examination of *On One God* in 2000 and later in 2001 argued that *The Messiah Sutra* was also a forgery. He brought the forgery issue

³² This workshop was entitled *Forgeries of Dunhuang Manuscripts in the Early Twentieth Century* (June 30 - July 1). The curator of the Stein Collections in the British Museum, Susan Whitfield (2002), was commissioned to edit the workshop papers. For more details, see also Rong Xinjiang (2013:501-523).

³³ For this anecdote, see Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 (2014:268-271).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 269.

³⁵ Lin Wushu 2006:133. For Wu Qiyu's works, see <http://www.crao.fr/spip.php?article513&lang=fr>.

into the world arena when he wrote some additional notes and sent them in an English presentation to the First Salzburg Conference on the Church of the East held in 2003.³⁶

Since this initial productive period, Lin Wushu has continued to work on reinforcing this theory to the present day. He carefully considers comments, most of them passed on in private, and makes slight adjustments to his words in order to polish them and to attain greater precision. In a careful application of these processes, he has republished the initial three articles in his books, and has continued to give lectures on the forgery issue in symposiums.³⁷ In addition, he has summarized the main elements of his theory in several other articles, frequently reminding the scholarly world to “study and distinguish [determine] the authenticity of the documents [rather] than [to] engage in endless arguments [about] or deliberate search for explanations” of how to interpret their contents.³⁸

2.3.2 The arguments propounded by the forgery theory

Despite minor rewordings, the gist of the forgery theory does not vary in the different (re)publications. In brief, this theory alleges: Both *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* were made in China in the early twentieth century by someone who relied on ancient Christian sources; some of which might even have been Tang Christian texts. To get a feel for his argument, we can refer to the following conclusion about the authenticity of *On One God*, that is known as the Tomeoka Document. It first appeared in 2000 and was republished in 2011. It also has been excerpted in studies of the authenticity of *The Messiah Sutra*:³⁹

The Tomeoka Document is not an authentic Dunhuang manuscript. It was copied in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, the forgery was not pure invention. The forger(s) relied on ancient source(s). As for the ancient source(s), the Jesuits' works of the Late-Ming-Early-Qing period [the seventeenth century] cannot be excluded with absolute certainty. It is highly probable that the Dunhuang hoard contained some other Tang Christian sources in addition to the widely known Christian manuscripts. The texts of these sources would have resembled *On One God* and these fell into dealers' hands. As they were damaged and would not have fetched a good price, veteran forger(s) recopied them and made a new manuscript. The Tomeoka Document must be one of the masterpieces produced by these veterans. As [I was] earnestly instructed by my mentor Cai Hongsheng, it is a “perfect forgery.” (富岡文書並非敦煌本真跡，而是 20 世紀初葉時人所抄寫；但其並非憑空臆作，而是有古本可依。這古本，當然不排除明季清初耶穌會士的作品；但更有可能是，在當年問世的敦煌遺書中，除了眾所周知的景教寫本外，還有類似《一神論》之類內容的一些景教寫經，落入骨[古]

³⁶ Lin Wushu 2006; Lin Wushu 林悟殊 2001, 2000.

³⁷ For these republications, see Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2011b:324-380, 2005a:215-226, 2003:186-228). For the conference presentation in Research of Chinese Religious Documents (November 18-21, 2004), see Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2004:142-143). This meeting was held in Kyoto. A report of it can be downloaded from Kyoto University database: <http://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/dspace/handle/2433/65875>.

³⁸ Lin Wushu 2006:133. For these summaries, see Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2005a:183-188, 2002:266-269).

³⁹ Lin Wushu 林悟殊 2011:342-343, 2003:206, 2000:81.

董商人之手，但過於殘爛，在當時難以鬻得好價，遂由造假高手重新加以謄寫製作。富岡文書就是該等高手的傑作之一；如業師蔡鴻生先生所提命，是件“精抄贗品”。)

The forgery theory, its advocates claim, rests on a number of clues that range from early-twentieth-century forgery practice in China to textual indications in the manuscripts. Below, I shall begin by summarizing the six main arguments abstracted from Lin Wushu's many publications and then add a few more put forward by Rong Xinjiang and Hidemi Takahashi.

1. An argument based on authority: A few scholars seem to support the forgery theory in one way or another. Besides Wu Qiyu, Peter Hofrichter e-mailed Lin Wushu stating that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* “are ‘too Catholic’” (過於‘天主教’), suggesting that these two sources were not a product of the Church of the East.⁴⁰ Cai Hongsheng also agrees with Lin Wushu. He coined the most memorable summary of the theory when he stated that we are dealing with “a perfect forgery”.

2. Dubious discovery and ownership. All the information about the collection, Lin Wushu protests, came from Haneda Toru. “Reliable and supportive documentation appears to be lacking” (似乏堅實可靠的背景資料作支撐).⁴¹ In dealing with “any so-called ‘Dunhuang documents’ whose origin [discovery] is obscure and whose authenticity cannot be confirmed, we must keep [remain] alert and distinguish [investigate] them carefully. Especially [... when] those documents [... are of] important academic value, we cannot not relax our vigilance.”⁴²

3. Historical background and technical feasibility. “China has a very rich tradition of forging” using sophisticated techniques, and the forgery business was certainly alive and well in the early twentieth century fed by the huge demand for Dunhuang manuscripts.⁴³ Meanwhile, some genuine Christian manuscripts had been obtained by the famous collector, Li Shengduo 李盛鐸 (1859-1937), and many scholars (for example, Luo Xianglin in China and Paul Pelliot in Europe) were very keen to study Tang Christianity. “So,” Lin Wushu argues, “it could have been some modern people who forged the ancient manuscripts for money.”⁴⁴

4. “Since the ‘Kojima Manuscripts’ are forged, it proves that those professional forgers had actually aimed at [set eyes on] Nestorian manuscripts.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2005a:220.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2003:194; 2000:73.

⁴² Lin Wushu 2006:136.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

5. The contrast between appearance and composition. Lin Wushu thinks that the neat, elegant appearance of the calligraphy is too good to be true. His first point is that not a single character has been “modified” in these two long manuscripts. “The intention [in keeping the manuscripts so neat] is determined by profit [,] if not by religious piety.”⁴⁶ Having made this point, he goes on and argues that, despite their neatness, there are too many ‘wrongly written’ characters and broken sentences. Moreover, the same character has been written in different forms and those used for key theological phrases have even been dropped. The contrast, according to Lin Wushu, is so stark that:⁴⁷

Examining its appearance, we can confirm that the copier was a Tang Christian who was not only very pious but also well educated; exploring the composition, however, [we] can ascertain that the copier was not a Tang Christian and he might even have known nothing at all about Tang Christianity. 觀其外貌，我們可以認定抄經人是一位很虔誠、很有文化修養的景教徒；窺其內涵，則可以肯定抄經人並非景教徒，甚至對景教一竅不通。

6. Anachronistic contents. Lin Wushu argues that “some expressions [used in *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*] were of a later date than other Chinese Nestorian documents”, supposedly made in the eighth century.⁴⁸ He doubts that either “Aluoben, in the middle of 7th century, was ahead of his time or the modern people made the forgery.”⁴⁹

Lately, Rong Xinjiang has added three more arguments. He emphasizes that the Tang court established strict rules for “translating foreign religious doctrines” (外來宗教經典的翻譯); therefore the ‘wrongly written’ characters, the disordered structures and other peculiarities suggest that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* cannot be “official Christian Tang texts” (唐朝正規的景教經典) used by Aluoben in his discussions with Emperor Tang Taizong.⁵⁰ In his second point he turns to official Tang rules and procedures that demanded that the nomenclatures be “highly standardized” (高度統一); the rub is that this consistency does not carry over to some key theological terms (like Messiah) in the two Christian texts.⁵¹ Thirdly, he turns to codicology and stresses that many Tang religious manuscripts sanctioned by the government were written on good paper, and yet the first piece of *On One God* is on “coarse

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁷ Lin Wushu 林悟殊 2003:197.

⁴⁸ Lin Wushu 2006:139.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵⁰ Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 2014:282, 285.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

paper of a dry-grass color” (‘麤紙，柴色’), consequently differing from the other pieces in terms of quality and color.⁵²

Finally, Hidemi Takahashi has suggested that certain phonetic transcriptions of proper names show that the sources are forgeries.⁵³ He notes that a number of transcriptions are “closer to the Syriac in their Middle Chinese forms than in their modern forms”, whereas the Middle Chinese pronunciations of a few transcriptions do not match their Syriac counterparts.⁵⁴ For example, the name of John the Baptist occurs three times in *The Messiah Sutra*. In the first instance it is *ruohun* 若昏; in the other two occurrences *yuhun* 谷昏 — I suspect that *yu* 谷 is an error for *ruo* 若. Hidemi Takahashi argues that *yuhun* “is no closer to the Syriac ‘Yōḥannān’ (cf. sogd. ywhnn) in its Middle Chinese pronunciation than in the modern” Chinese; *ruohun* “is further away in both [Middle and Modern Chinese]”.⁵⁵ “Such instances”, Hidemi Takahashi concludes, “suggest that the text [*The Messiah Sutra*] has been corrupted, giving support to Lin’s view of the manuscripts as being later forgeries.”⁵⁶

2.3.3 A critique of the forgery theory

The forgery theory has been contested by a number of scholars. In their research Zhang Xuefeng and Wu Changxing have concentrated on investigating the transcription of names. They claim that few people in the early twentieth century would have been able to deal with Chinese, Syriac and Middle Persian, and that a number of transcriptions do match ancient pronunciations almost perfectly. They argue that (some of) the contents must have been created in Tang China.⁵⁷ Moreover, Wang Lanping has examined the inconsistency in the writing of the characters. He finds that orthographic variants, including those analyzed by Lin Wushu, are not ‘wrong’ at all, because they were in popular use in and after Tang China. He also points out that a character was not always written in one particular form in many Dunhuang manuscripts. His conclusion is that the two sources are “not forgeries” (非偽).⁵⁸

When it is all said and done, the forgery theory does not stand up to scrutiny. Some of the reasoning put forward, for instance, Nos 1 and 3, are not arguments in themselves: the first is

⁵² *Ibid.*, 287. For the observation on paper, see Takeda Science Foundation 武田科学振興財団 (2012:88). Many thanks to Hidemi Takahashi and Hsiang-ming Chang for helping me to type the character *chu* 麤.

⁵³ Hidemi Takahashi 2014, 2013, 2008.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2013:15.

⁵⁵ The character 谷, according to Hidemi Takahashi (2013:16), should be pronounced *yu*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* There are two other similar cases: *xusuo* 序娑 used in *The Messiah Sutra* and *kenu yishu* 客怒翳數 used in *On One God*. They are believed to be related to the word Jesus.

⁵⁷ Zhang Xuefeng 張雪松 2016:51-52; Wu Changxing 吳昶興 2010a:13-14, 32-33; 2007:105-106.

⁵⁸ Wang Lanping 王蘭平 2016b:33. For an expanded discussion, see Wang Lanping 王蘭平 (2016a:54-123).

a simple appeal to authority; the latter at best shows that forgeries were indeed made in twentieth-century China, a fact that was already known and is without any further significance. Argument No. 4 merely reveals possibilities. All the other arguments, like the observations about the paper, structures and standardized nomenclatures, are based heavily on the conventional assumption that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* were the earliest official texts used by Aluoben in his discussions with Tang Taizong, a contention that will be refuted by this research. More problematically, the forgery theory is based on several other unfounded presuppositions, although the skeptics rarely admit as much.

The first premise concerns the poorly documented discovery. It is worth recalling that documenting discoveries was not seen as important until archeology was transformed into a highly disciplined branch of scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century. To the early-twentieth-century scholars, including archeologists and collectors, documenting was not routine but a task newly added to the already heavy load of their duties. It would be impossible to expect that these early scholars would have recorded their discoveries as minutely as we do today.

Other, rather parlous, assumptions are based on the alleged contrast between appearance and composition (including calligraphy). It is presupposed: 1. Good calligraphy suggests that the calligrapher is well educated and consequently well versed in Chinese; 2. Even the most pious and assiduous of copiers would inevitably have made and corrected errors when they were copying religious doctrines; 3. A source with handsome appearance should contain unambiguous contents and well-arranged structures; 4. As we cannot decipher these sources today, the ancient Christians did not understand these sources either. However, none of these assumptions is convincing. For example, many present-day Chinese PhD students (myself included) are not skilled in refined calligraphy, whereas numerous calligraphers with a limited education sell their works at unbelievably high prices in China. Examining these assumptions, although the latter two seem the stronger, they are probably the weaker. Admittedly, the two Christian texts resist a simple interpretation. But what ancient source is easy to read today? Language is constantly changing. Orthographies, vocabularies, meanings and many other aspects all change considerably over time. Given these changes, none of the old texts is transparent and straightforward to any of today's readers, including experts. To comprehend an ancient text, regardless whether that text is written in Chinese, Syriac, Arabic, Greek, Latin or Coptic or any other language, requires vast knowledge and special training. Therefore, difficulty in decipherment is not because the texts ARE really difficult. The difficulty

is far more readily attributable to our limited knowledge of ancient languages and backgrounds — the following chapters will demonstrate this point. Nevertheless, what should never be lost sight of is that what is difficult for us to understand today was not necessarily difficult for ancient people to read and comprehend.

In sum, no decisive evidence has ever been produced to support the notion that the two texts are twentieth-century forgeries. The weakness of the arguments for the forgery is in itself sufficient basis to continue to regard these texts as genuine, and the remainder of this dissertation will prove beyond reasonable doubt that there is decisive proof *against* any theory that these texts are late forgeries.

2.4 The tenuous conventional chronology

Neither *The Messiah Sutra* nor *On One God* carries a date. Their chronology was assigned when they were first published in the early twentieth century. In order to demonstrate more exactly that the traditional dating is tenuous, this section will briefly introduce their common dates and the literature, after which it will scrutinize the arguments one by one.

2.4.1 The popular dates

It is said that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* were translated by Aluoben and were used in his discussions with Emperor Tang Taizong. More precisely, the former was created between 635 and 638; the latter in 641. Together the two sources are commonly known as Aluoben's documents, a label coined by P.Y. Saeki in 1937.⁵⁹

This time-frame, the 640s, has so far never been seriously challenged. In the early years, for instance, it was upheld by P.Y. Saeki's contemporaries. A.C. Moule writes that the two texts "have been with some reason dated about 640, or not more than five years after the arrival of the mission in 635".⁶⁰ Even those who have criticized the exact dates have in principle agreed with this dating, and have merely proposed minor revisions. For example, John Foster notes that the date of *The Messiah Sutra* is based on the accustomed calculation of the Christian era. "The earlier Patristic tradition," he argues, "placed the birth of our Lord from two to three years earlier. The year 641 thus becomes 638."⁶¹

⁵⁹ P.Y. Saeki (1937/1951:8) employed the old transcription, Alopen.

⁶⁰ A.C. Moule 1940:13-14.

⁶¹ John Foster 1939:47, *sic*.

This chronology was also unanimously accepted by the second-generation researchers. Among them are Peter C.H. Chiu, Samuel Hugh Moffett and Ian Gillman in the West and Gong Tianmin, Luo Xianglin, Jiang Wenhan and Weng Shaojun in China.⁶² As pointed out in the above, this universal acceptance could at least be attributed in part to the fact that the manuscripts had become inaccessible in the aftermath of WWII, and many scholars, especially those who cannot read Chinese, have been forced to quote P.Y. Saeki, including his errors.

In the current surge of interest stimulated by the growing number of Chinese Christians, *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* are still overwhelmingly believed by present-day scholars to “constitute the first statement of the Christian faith” in China.⁶³ With the exception of Matteo Nicolini-Zani who has been mentioned in the Introduction to this dissertation, as far as I know, only Pénélope Riboud has openly cast some doubts on the dating, even though a lack of space did not permit her to set out her reasons in full and pursue her conclusion. The specific dates of the two sources, she states, “are rather uncertain”.⁶⁴

2.4.2 The problematic arguments

The above dating, its advocates point out, has been extrapolated from a number of indications contained in the manuscripts themselves supported by a few additional sources. However, not a single indication withstands closer scrutiny.

2.4.2.1 Three inconclusive arguments about *On One God's* date

Its proponents argue that the date of *On One God* is suggested by three strands of textual evidence. Two frequently cited pieces, in which he acknowledges Haneda Toru's contribution, are neatly summarized by P.Y. Saeki:⁶⁵

Regarding the date and the authorship, however, no specialist has as yet committed himself to declare his judgment, except Prof. Haneda [Toru] who pointed out the fact that [... *On One God*] contains the following passages: “Though it is only 641 years since the time of the birth of the Messiah, ‘consisting of the five attributes’, yet (His name) is known in all parts of the world.” [... The other] passage [is], “A point of space in the world of tangibility, for instance, is like the point between Persia and Fu-lin (i.e., Ephraim).” [...] And judging from these passages it is right that Prof. Haneda [Toru] should declare that [... *On One God*] must have been originally written in 641 A.D., at a certain place situated somewhere on this side of the Persian Territory.

⁶² Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit 1999:275-278; Samuel Hugh Moffett 1998:291-314; Peter C.H. Chiu 1987:173-211; Weng Shaojun 翁紹軍 1996:13-16, 111-155; Jiang Wenhan 江文漢 1982:59; Luo Xianglin 羅香林 1966:32-33; Gong Tianmin 龔天民 1960:24-29.

⁶³ Jean-Pierre Charbonnier 2007:44.

⁶⁴ Pénélope Riboud 2001:5.

⁶⁵ P.Y. Saeki 1951:114.

The third piece of evidence is that the Liao people (遼人, Khitans?) are disparaged as swine (豬). P.Y. Saeki claims that this derogative usage was related to a specific historical event: Tang Taizong began his campaign to conquer the Liao area in 631 but encountered massive resistance. The Liao people, P.Y. Saeki explains,⁶⁶

had become the object of hatred and contempt to the Chinese people with their capital in Ch'angan. It would be no surprise at all to find "the people of Liao" used as the synonym of the word "swine" as we do here. On the other hand, the Nestorian Mission met with a cordial reception of the Emperor T'ai-tsung in 635 A.D., and the Scripture began to be translated into Chinese under the auspices of the Emperor who sent the expedition army to Liao-tung in 641 A.D. Under these circumstances it might not have been impossible that the Chinese officials and courtiers with whom our author had to do [a] great deal might have called the enemy "people of Liao" by the name of "swine" as is often the case with the Chinese who call the enemy by very nasty names such as "vermin" or "swine."

Basically, P.Y. Saeki is claiming that, under the auspices of imperial patronage, Aluoben was simply following the then trendy practice of Chinese officials and dismissed the Liao people as pigs. Consequently, in P.Y. Saeki's opinion, this derogatory usage suggests that *On One God* was created in this period.

However, none of these three strands of evidence is conclusive. The original Chinese text is very difficult to punctuate. The immediate meaning of its context is unclear. P.Y. Saeki's reading of the Chinese, including Haneda Toru's Japanese publications, could have been more accurate. For example, the third piece of evidence very probably has nothing to do with the 630 conquest at all. The derogatory association of 'the Liao people' and 'swine', as pointed out by A.C. Moule, was proverbial. It was a term of abuse that had been in use since the fifth century as shown by the historical account *The Houhanshu* 後漢書.⁶⁷

Turning to the second argument, parsing the original Chinese is exhausting. Usually, three or four complete columns offer enough information to punctuate ancient texts; however, these four columns are (virtually) unsolvable: "無接界一處兩處第一第二時節可接界/處喻如從此至波斯亦如從波斯至拂林無/接界時節如聖主風化見今從此無接界亦/不起作第一第二亦復不得此一神因此既無."⁶⁸ It took me a while to match P.Y. Saeki's translation to the underlined Chinese. Importantly, this passage deals with space or location. It has nothing to do with the time of the writing of *On One God*. Not to put too fine a point on it, P.Y. Saeki misread Haneda Toru's argument. Haneda Toru took it as an indication of where *On One God*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 236, note 13.

⁶⁷ A.C. Moule 1940:17.

⁶⁸ The Chinese is cited from Cols. 39-42. See Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2003:353).

was made: a place east of Persia. He does not relate this evidence to the time of the making the source at all.⁶⁹ I shall discuss this point in more detail below.

Finally, let us deal with the first argument, the one that seems to carry the most weight. Unquestionably the original Chinese, *liu bai sishiyi nian* 六百四十一年, does contain a time. However, the nub of the problem is that it is hard to ascertain whether it is a date, the year 641 or a time-span consisting of 641 years. Should it be a time-span, it is not clear which specific year was taken as the starting point from which to calculate it. The surrounding Chinese text is obscure. Indeed, the texts are so ambiguous that I do not feel confident to offer any punctuation here. Even if one accepts P.Y. Saeki's punctuation, “弥[彌]師訶向天下見也。向五蔭身六百四十一年不過。已於一切處。” his version of the Chinese, unlike his above underlined English translation (Though it is only 641 years since the time of the birth of the Messiah, 'consisting of the five attributes', yet (His name) is known in all parts of the world.), is far from clear.⁷⁰ The last two parts of P.Y. Saeki's Chinese punctuation are ungrammatical and unintelligible. Some elements have been dropped. The second part, for instance, is meaningful only if (1) the verb *xian* 見 ('to give birth' in P.Y. Saeki's English) is inserted after *wuyinshen* 五蔭身 ('the five attributes') and (2) the final phrase *buguo* 不過 ('only') is moved from the end of the sentence to a position before the Chinese numeral 641: 向五蔭身[見不過]六百四十一年. Even after such a complex reconstruction, however, the third part fails to make sense. To his credit, it seems that P.Y. Saeki was aware of the difficulty and did try to tackle the obscurity of this third part. To make his English translation intelligible, he surreptitiously interpolated “His Name”, a phrase that does not appear in the original Chinese at all.

Moreover, P.Y. Saeki tries to convey that Haneda Toru was confident about his interpretation of the Chinese time, 641. However, a rereading of the literature shows that it is obvious that Haneda Toru was by no means convinced of his own interpretation. There are various indications that support this contention. Firstly, Haneda Toru dealt with the chronology of *On One God* only very briefly. Secondly, the fairly conspicuous Chinese numeral curiously escaped his initial attention. In 1918, he mentions in passing that the source is “a Tang manuscript” (唐代の寫本).⁷¹ In 1923, for the first time, he quotes the Chinese numeral and assigns the year 641 to *On One God*. However, this dating only appears in a page-long summary of a report on

⁶⁹ Haneda Toru 羽田亨 1923:157.

⁷⁰ P.Y. Saeki 1951:66 (Chinese text).

⁷¹ Haneda Toru 羽田亨 1918:142.

the Tang church presented at the meeting of The Society of Historical Research.⁷² In 1931, Haneda Toru mentioned this evidence again. But again he was sparing in his comments, and did not offer any arguments or justification for his punctuation of the text.⁷³ Most importantly, Haneda Toru actually refused to assign the date 641 to *The Messiah Sutra*. Instead, in 1926 he first suggested that *The Messiah Sutra* had been written “pre-mid-Tang China [mid-eighth century]” (中唐代時代以前), and then vaguely rephrases this claim in 1931: the source was created by “early” (初期) Tang Christians.⁷⁴ Given that Haneda Toru clearly knew that the two Christian sources were written in the same hand and display some textual similarities, it is rather odd that he, should he have been comfortable with the date ‘641’ of *On One God*, did not claim that *The Messiah Sutra* was also made around 641.

2.4.2.2 Three dubious observations about *The Messiah Sutra*’s date

First of all, the date of *The Messiah Sutra*, 635-638, was first systematically proposed by P.Y. Saeki. In 1937, P.Y. Saeki observed that “Prof. Haneda [Toru] somehow refrained from expressing his own view definitely regarding the date and the authorship of” *The Messiah Sutra*, and therefore he claims that, “it is our first duty to decide the most important question, viz. which is the older of all these documents, whether [... *The Messiah Sutra*] is the oldest of all the Nestorian documents yet found in China, or whether [... *On One God* is] older than [... *The Messiah Sutra*].”⁷⁵

Despite these misgivings, even before P.Y. Saeki had written a word about it, this source had already been claimed to be the oldest text. In 1930, even though he had not studied the latter source because of the inaccessibility of the original manuscript, A.C. Moule briefly proclaimed that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* “are apparently earlier” than the other eighth-century Christian texts.⁷⁶ The “slight indication of early date” of *The Messiah Sutra*, A.C. Moule writes, is that the cross is called “a ‘tree’” (木) and “the ‘figure of ten’” (十字) was not “adopted” until the end of the eighth century.⁷⁷

Furthermore, the date 635-638 seems to have been in circulation in the literature before 1937. As far as I know, it first appeared in the Introduction to P.Y. Saeki’s translation of *The*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1923:156.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1931:3. His punctuation is: 弥[彌]師訶向天下見也。向五蔭身。六百四十一年不過已。 It differs slightly from P.Y. Saeki’s version.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1926:126, 1931:1.

⁷⁵ P.Y. Saeki 1951:114-115.

⁷⁶ A.C. Moule 1930:58.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

Messiah Sutra published in 1932: “The date may be given as between A.D. 635-638.”⁷⁸ As no further explanations are given and this Introduction was added by the journal editor, Evan Morgan, from this distance it is hard to determine who made this claim, or on what grounds.

In spite of all these uncertainties, P.Y. Saeki did unquestionably carry out a comparative study supported by a historical survey to determine which of the texts predated the other. He compared *The Messiah Sutra* with *On One God* and made the leap of faith of linking the making of the sources to a historical event, Aluoben’s translation work. He gave three arguments for his assumption, namely: historical, philological or ideographical, and doctrinal observations. As each argument, P.Y. Saeki claims, provides independent proof that *The Messiah Sutra* was made before *On One God*, they will be reviewed one by one.

2.4.2.2.1 Historical observations

P.Y. Saeki initially placed greatest stress on the historical observations because the 781 Xi’an Stele documents the historical event that Aluoben translated some doctrines into Chinese between 635 and 638. This particular record, P.Y. Saeki claims,⁷⁹

will show to any one, that between 635 A.D. and 638 A.D., a certain kind of Christian literatures must have been translated or composed in Chinese either by Bishop Alopen himself or by his men with the assistance of native Chinese scholars, whilst the Emperor [Tang Taizong] himself investigated “the Way” or the outline of the Nestorian doctrine in his own Forbidden Apartments by reading these Nestorian literatures that might have been written by Bishop Alopen or his men.

On these grounds, P.Y. Saeki proceeds to associate this record with the making of *The Messiah Sutra*. He asserts that the contents of *The Messiah Sutra* “show that the document was written with special intention to give the Emperor the outline or general sketch of the whole Christian Teaching.”⁸⁰ One of the examples he chose to make his point is the Ten Vows mentioned above. He argues that the Chinese version of the Ten Vows reveals an integration of both Chinese culture (Emperor and ancestor worship) and Christian teachings, in order “to solicit the Imperial favour for the Nestorian Mission just arrived at the Capital”.⁸¹

⁷⁸ P.Y. Saeki 1932:31.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

With this idea in mind, P.Y. Saeki compares the contents of *The Messiah Sutra* with those of *On One God*:⁸²

any one who went through [... *The Messiah Sutra*], as we have it, cannot but be convinced that [... *The Messiah Sutra*] contains a surprisingly complete outline of the fundamental doctrine of Christianity, and that it must have been presented to some one in order to teach the outline of Christianity, and that, therefore, it must have preceded [... *On One God*] in the order of reading, since the latter contain more advanced Nestorian doctrines than the former.

In the wake of these observations, P.Y. Saeki alleges that “we may rightly presume that [... *The Messiah Sutra*] must really be the very first Nestorian Sutra that was ever composed in the Imperial Library between 635 and 638 A.D.”⁸³

However, these historical observations do not prove that *The Messiah Sutra* was made by Aluoben sometime between 635 and 638. As suggested in the Introduction to this dissertation, these observations do show us that *The Messiah Sutra* could have been composed by Aluoben. Nevertheless, the section on emperor and ancestor worship does not necessarily reveal that *The Messiah Sutra* was written with the special intention of impressing Tang Taizong specifically. As the emperor and ancestor worship were an uncontested part of Chinese tradition, it could have been written to impress any Chinese emperor.

Even more importantly, P.Y. Saeki’s argument does not demonstrate that *The Messiah Sutra* was composed earlier than *On One God*. The presumed existence of the “surprisingly complete outline of the fundamental doctrine of Christianity” contained in *The Messiah Sutra* is not enough to demonstrate that *The Messiah Sutra* was made to show “the outline of Christianity” to someone (Tang Taizong), who knew nothing about Christianity. It could have been created for and read by newly converted people or simply by younger members of the community, whose faith had to be nurtured and strengthened. As the purpose of the writing of this source is not known, too many possibilities are raised, none of which counts as a reliable historical argument. In addition, P.Y. Saeki did not present any textual evidence that could demonstrate that the doctrines outlined in *The Messiah Sutra* are less “advanced” than the doctrines set out in *On One God*. The determination that one doctrine is more advanced than the other is actually subjective. It is a value judgment that depends on the standards on which a particular scholar relies. Since P.Y. Saeki does not explicitly mention his criteria, it is impossible to evaluate whether or not his criteria were objective.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

2.4.2.2.2 Philological observations

Philological observations, P.Y. Saeki goes on to argue, “will also prove beyond any doubt that [... *The Messiah Sutra*] was written before” *On One God*.⁸⁴ In this part, he analyzes the translations of some words, including the phonetic transcriptions of key theological terms. In particular, he focuses on how “‘God,’ ‘Messiah,’ ‘Holy Spirit,’ ‘Jesus-Messiah’ and ‘Holy-Jesus’” are transcribed.⁸⁵ P.Y. Saeki writes: “Judging from these few decisive evidences taken out of many other proofs, it is natural that we should conclude that [... *The Messiah Sutra*] is older than [... *On One God* ...] written in 641 A.D.”⁸⁶

However, these observations rest on a problematic premise that translations (transcriptions) pass through an evolutionary process from ‘bad’ to ‘good’ and this process can therefore shed light on the order of precedence of the sources. Take for instance, P.Y. Saeki’s reliance on the translations of the word God to determine which source is earlier than the other. God is translated differently in the two sources. In *On One God*, God is *yishen* 一神, that literally means one god. In *The Messiah Sutra*, that is referred to as the Takakusu Document, God is *fo* 佛, a Chinese translation of Buddha. Discussing these different translations, P.Y. Saeki asks:⁸⁷

What does this mean? We believe that this fact clearly shows us that the Nestorian missionaries in 641 A.D., came to know for the first time that the Chinese word “I-shen” (一神) was a better word for the Nestorian document than the word “Buddha” [*fo* 佛] to designate God, whilst, on the other hand, it shows that the Nestorian missionaries at Ch’angan did not even know of the proper word for God when they composed the Takakusu Document.

In this quotation, P.Y. Saeki shows that he obviously believed that *yishen* was a “better” translation of God than *fo*. He is assuming that the Tang Christian translators had passed through an upwardly progressive process. His claim is that these translators had initially used a ‘bad’ term, *fo*, in *The Messiah Sutra*, and only later became aware that *yishen* was more appropriate. On these rather arbitrary grounds, P.Y. Saeki argues that *The Messiah Sutra* was made earlier than *On One God*.

This reasoning is based on a rigid mechanical understanding of translation. Recent work in Translation Studies has shown that translation is not merely a linguistic operation, the results

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

of which can be evaluated on a linguistic basis.⁸⁸ “Translations are not made in a vacuum. Translators function in a given culture at a given time.”⁸⁹ Translation is a complex dynamic process involving many factors (client, patronage, purpose and the like), all of which influence translators in one way or another. Consequently, certain expressions can be modified in order to suit the dominant ideology in a particular culture. A translated work, as Theo Hermans, André Lefevere and other scholars confirm, is a manipulated or rewritten product.⁹⁰ In other words, there is no ultimate standard by which to evaluate that one translation is necessarily better than any other.

Even if one sticks to the traditional view of translation and believes that a translation can be evaluated in terms of linguistic accuracy, to judge that one ancient translated term is more appropriate than the other is still very tricky. Not only should the today’s researcher be careful about the evaluation standard they rely on, but he or she must also be very familiar with the whole (ancient) translation process. At the point we come up against what has been so far an insurmountable problem, as little is still known about how Tang Christians translated their religious texts, as the processes they resorted to for matters like quality control, editing, selecting original texts and so forth are completely shrouded in mystery. In short, there is nothing that would allow us to suggest that Tang Christian translators “came to know for the first time” that the expression (*yishen*) would be “better than” the other term (*fo*).

2.4.2.2.3 Doctrinal observations

In the part on doctrinal observations, P.Y. Saeki revisits emperor and ancestor worship. He also pays attention to Christian precepts governing daily life and social morals, Christology and several other points. He notices that what is emphasized in one source is not stressed in the other:⁹¹

We find that no such social morals or Christian precepts for daily life [contained in *The Messiah Sutra*] were taught emphatically in [*On One God*]. But in [*On One God*] the doctrine of Monotheism was emphasized, together with the story of the Fall of Adam, besides the necessity of the vicarious death of the Messiah as well as His death on the Cross, and His Resurrection and Ascension, and even the story of the Pentecost were stated. No such statements were found in [... *The Messiah Sutra*].

⁸⁸ Out of this new idea emerged a new discipline, Translation Studies. Since the 1960s, many scholars have no longer seen translation as a target text based on a source text. They have abandoned the rigid traditional understanding and have begun to approach translation from a pluralist point of view. For more details, see Anthony Pym (2016), Jeremy Munday (2016), Edwin Gentzler (2001), Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (1998), J.C. Catford (1965) and Eugene Nida (1964).

⁸⁹ André Lefevere 1992a:14.

⁹⁰ Theo Hermans 2014; André Lefevere 1992b.

⁹¹ P.Y. Saeki 1951:123.

On these grounds, P.Y. Saeki alleges:⁹²

We, therefore, can not imagine that the comparatively difficult theological documents owned by Mr. Tomeoka [*On One God*] were written before the Takakusu Document [*The Messiah Sutra*] which gives the outline and general view of Christian precepts for daily life.

However, these doctrinal observations are ill-considered. The most striking difficulty is that any decision about which doctrine is more advanced than another, as critiqued in the above, is a value judgment. Secondly, these observations are not really connected to the question of which source is older than the other. They simply demonstrate the given fact that what is found in one source is not necessarily found in another. If any two texts deal with different topics, obviously their contents should not be the same. Similarly, the substance of *The Messiah Sutra* need not be found in *On One God* or vice-versa. They are two distinct texts, not two versions of one source. Therefore, P.Y. Saeki's observations simply list the given textual variations. They belong to a 'compare and contrast' study that examines the differences between *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* and have nothing to do with the time of the making of the two sources.

2.5 Conclusion

This short discussion allows two conclusions to be drawn about *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*. The first is that the two documents are not early-twentieth-century re-copies of (lost) ancient Christian sources but genuine old religious documents. Despite their poor archeological documentation, difficult contents and the inaccessibility of the original manuscripts, their layout, binding, paper-treatment and other codicological features confirm that they are two normal Dunhuang manuscripts. They also can be matched with Christian scriptures. *The Messiah Sutra* recounts the Gospel stories. *On One God* is devoted to clarifying one particular theological theme, One God. Furthermore, the forgery theory is not supported by any evidence and is hence open to serious criticism. The arguments, in point of fact, are plagued by unfounded premises, of which the most obvious and important one is that the two sources were made by Aluoben and submitted to Tang Taizong in the 640s. As will be demonstrated by more findings of this research, the forgery theory must be abandoned.

The other conclusion concerns the chronology of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*. The two sources are not dated. The dates they bear were proposed in the early twentieth century

⁹² *Ibid.*, 123-124.

when they were first examined by scholars. For the date of *On One God*, 641, none of the so-called evidence is conclusive. The phrase, a place to the east of Persia, can at best only be taken as an indication of where the manuscript was made. It has nothing to do with the time of making the source. The derogatory association of the Liao people with swine was used much earlier than Tang China and was not invented in the aftermath of the Tang invasion of the Liao area. Therefore its use in *On One God* was customary. The most important indication, the Chinese numeral 641, remains a problem that is still difficult to solve. Even P.Y. Saeki's version of the Chinese is not intelligible. It is hard to say with any certainty whether it indicates the year 641 or a time-span of 641 years. Should it be a time-span, there is nothing to suggest that the point of reference of the calculation is the very year in which the Messiah (Jesus Christ) was born.

Compared to that of *On One God*, the date of *The Messiah Sutra*, 635-638, is even more uncertain. Firstly, its conventional date was proposed on the basis of the unconfirmed date of *On One God*. Secondly, none of P.Y. Saeki's three arguments actually leads to the conclusion that *The Messiah Sutra* is older than *On One God*. His doctrinal and philological observations consist of a long list of textual differences; the historical aspect merely establishes possibility. In essence, none of these arguments touches upon the question of which source is older than the other.

Furthermore, P.Y. Saeki also tried to rely on Haneda Toru's authority to date the two sources, but in doing so he misinterprets Haneda Toru. Haneda Toru himself was not confident about the chronology of the two texts. On the one hand, he clearly knew that the two sources were written in the same hand. On the other hand, he refused to assign the date of *On One God* (641) to *The Messiah Sutra*, asserting albeit briefly that *The Messiah Sutra* must have been made before the mid-eighth century.

In a nutshell, the common arguments about the timeline of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* present difficulties. Their chronology, the 640s, is problematic. In the next chapter, we shall examine the empirical findings that refute this dating.