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

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Introduction

1 Main question

This study reconsiders the chronology of seven early Chinese Christian religious manuscripts.¹ These manuscripts were found in China's remote western oasis, Dunhuang 敦煌, in 1900. Ever since their first publication, all have been accepted as the earliest statements of Christian faith in China, the first fruits of Sino-Christian relations and the inauguration of the translation of the Bible into Chinese. Together with a small dossier of evidence, they have also been used to establish China's earliest undisputed presence of Christianity, *Jingjiao* 景教, created by the Church of the East in 635 and allegedly extinguished during the Tang dynasty 唐朝 (618-907) sometime after 845.² More precisely, the eight named religious texts listed below, of which the last two are written together in one manuscript (P.3847), are believed to have been composed by the Tang Christians.³ Not a single text is claimed to have been made after the Tang court collapsed in 907.

To date, this timeframe still prevails. It can be found in almost all current publications, like the monographs written by doctoral researchers on the Tang church, chapters noted by historians of Christianity and sections sketched by all other sorts of experts.⁴ Although some scholars

¹ Since all sources, their historical background and earlier scholarly literature will be introduced in greater detail in Chapters 1, 2, and 6, this Introduction will use such phrases as 'see Chapter 1' only when absolutely necessary.

² This Chinese phrase is often translated into Luminous Teaching, hereafter the Tang church. *Jing* 景 is a key theological term frequently used by Christians to designate their faith, buildings and followers. The usage seems to be related to one of the character's basic meanings, light. In Chinese, the Tang church was also named the *Daqin Jingjiao* 大秦景教, in which *Daqin* supposedly refers to the country from which Christians originated. For more detail about these Chinese key phrases and designations, see Chapters 1 and 6. Moreover, the Church of the East goes by several names in the West — for example, the Nestorian church, the Syriac church and the Assyrian church. For a concise treatment of these appellations, see Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler (2003:1-5), Sebastian P. Brock (1996) and Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2011a:226-259).

³ With the exception of manuscript P.3847, scholars do not distinguish between (the composition of) texts and (the production of) manuscripts. The obvious reason is that most sources are too short and do not allow us to delve into this complex relationship. However, *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* are fairly long, and we are able to make this distinction. In Chapter 5, we shall rely on the composition of the texts to date these two manuscripts. In other words, with the exception of Chapter 5 and a few other places, the whole dissertation is discussing (the production of) manuscripts, NOT (the composition of) texts. Another problem is that these eight titles are difficult to decipher in spite of many efforts at exegesis. Their English versions are offered here only for reference. Hopefully, their translations will be standardized in the near future. For the latest attempts at exegesis, see Wang Lanping 王蘭平 (2016), Wu Changxing 吳昶興 (2015a), and Nie Zhijun 聶志軍 (2010). Note that this study follows Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2011b:314-321; 2003:124-127, 176-177, 190, 210, 350-402) in his counting of the characters and his numbering of the columns of all the manuscripts.

⁴ For example, not a single paper contained in the four volumes that were produced as the outcome of the triennial Salzburg symposia on the Church of the East is devoted to examining the chronology of these manuscripts. This symposium was first convened in 2003 and so far it has been held five times (2016, 2013, 2009, 2006, 2003). For the four volumes, see Li Tang and Dietmar W. Winkler (2016, 2013), Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang (2009), and Roman Malek (2006). For doctoral projects on the Tang church, see R. Todd Godwin (2016), Li Tang (2004), Peter C.H. Chiu (1987), Wang Lanping 王蘭平 (2016), Nie Zhijun 聶志軍 (2010), Liu Zhenning 劉振寧 (2007) and Zeng Yangqing 曾陽晴 (2005). For chapters and sections contained in doctoral works, see Toshikazu S. Foley (2009:6-16), Jingyi Ji (2007:23-80), Sangkeun Kim (2004:120-127). For other

have occasionally tried to assign different specific years to each manuscript (text) over the past 100 years or so, such revisions as there are have been slight and minor, and have never departed significantly from the traditional chronology. Below, I provide a summary of the conventional timeline that will be the subject of a critical examination in this study:⁵

1. Two sources were created in the 640s by Aluoben 阿羅本, the first known missionary who arrived at Chang'an 長安 (the modern Xi'an 西安), the then capital of Tang China, in 635. Commonly labeled the Aluoben Documents, they were first published by the Japanese scholar Haneda Toru around the 1920s.⁶

The Messiah Sutra 序聽迷詩所經, that is dated between 635 and 638 and has 2,845 characters;

On One God 一神論, that is dated 641 and contains 6,949 characters.

2. Two manuscripts, often associated with a mysterious Japanese collector Kojima Yasushi 小島靖, bear a date in the 720s. Both sources were first examined in 1949 by Peter Yoshiro Saeki, a great Japanese scholar of the Tang church who had been baptized into the Anglican-Episcopal Church of Japan.⁷

Kojima Manuscript A is *The Praise of a Great Saint, Pervading Truth and Conversion to the Daqin Jingjiao* 大秦景教大聖通真歸法讚. It has been dated to the year 720 and is eighteen columns long.

Kojima Manuscript B is *The Sutra of the Origin of the Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao* 大秦景教宣元至本經. It has been assigned to the year 717. Only its final thirty columns have survived.

3. Four texts that were written in the late eighth century or around the year 781 when the Christian priest Jingjing 景淨 composed the famous Chinese-Syriac bilingual Xi'an Stele 景教碑. They are known as the Jingjing Documents:

publications, see Daniel H. Bays (2012:7-11), Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit (1999:265-285), Samuel Hugh Moffett (1998:288-323) and Wu Changxing 吳昶興 (2015b).

⁵ This timeline has often been summarized by researchers who survey the whole field of the Tang church. Cf. Pénélope Riboud (2015:47-48, 2001:1-42), Matteo Nicolini-Zani (2006:35-36) and Wu Changxing 吳昶興 (2015c: lxx-lxxi).

⁶ Haneda Toru 羽田亨 1931, 1926, 1923, 1918.

⁷ He also publishes in Japanese under his native name, 佐伯好郎 (Saeki Yoshiro). In the English works, he prefers to use the initials of his Christian name, P.Y. Saeki. In this study, therefore, he and his works including those written in Japanese, will also be referred to as by 'P.Y. Saeki'. These two manuscripts were inserted as appendices in the book *Christianity in China: the Qing Dynasty* 清時代の支那基督教 published in Japanese. This study refers to the reprinted version of this book (1979). For P.Y. Saeki's contribution to the field, see below.

The Mysterious Bliss Sutra 志玄安樂經 (2,596 characters), that was first published by Haneda Toru in 1929;

The Sutra of the Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao 大秦景教宣元本經 (465 characters), that was first studied by P.Y. Saeki in 1934;

The Praise of the Three Majestics 景教三威蒙度讚 (327 characters), that together with the following source, was discovered by Paul Pelliot in 1908;

The Sutra of Reverence 尊經, that is 277 characters long.⁸

Despite this apparent consensus, the traditional chronology is by no means settled. Fairly recently, a few other modern scholars, whose works will be referenced below, have already observed that the common dating is uncertain. For instance, in his article presented to the first Salzburg Symposium on the Church of the East, “Past and Current Research on Tang Jingjiao Documents: A Survey”, Matteo Nicolini-Zani points out: “In summary, we can say that the traditional position [of Chinese Christian manuscripts] was based on an almost uncritical acceptance of a small amount of uncertain data and on the passive transmission of many unfounded assumptions.”⁹ Probably because these scholars have not really pursued the problem any further, nor have they proposed a new chronology, their voices have remained marginal, even though we have seen a resurgence in published research on the Tang church over the past twenty years or so.

Nevertheless, these recent observations are a source of inspiration. Indisputably, the chronology of the Chinese Christian manuscripts is, as said, still far from certain. As they are analyzed below, most common arguments do not stand up to scrutiny. In general, the argumentation is plagued by defects that range from the impressionistic and cursory treatment of the alleged textual and historical evidence to faulty reasoning and to fallacious presuppositions. For instance, the dating of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* can even be proved wrong by the empirical findings — see Chapter 3. In addition to analyses of the specific traditional arguments offered in the following chapters, three major, more general criticisms need to be addressed in the introductory part of this dissertation.

First and foremost, the traditional chronology has never been substantiated. Any pertinent information relevant to determining the date (including the authorship) of each text (manuscript) is in fact extremely sparse, if it exists at all. The manuscripts themselves contain

⁸ P.Y. Saeki 1934b; Haneda Toru 羽田亨 1929.

⁹ Matteo Nicolini-Zani 2006:38.

little explicit information about the time of their production. The majority of them give no indication of either their dates or their authors. The only two dated and assigned sources, the Kojima manuscripts, are of questionable authenticity, and one strong argument, discussed in Chapter 6, is that their assigned dates are difficult to reconcile with their linguistic peculiarities. Moreover, among these texts, only *The Sutra of the Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao* can be confirmed to have once been used in Tang political centers. In 2006, the other version was discovered carved on the Luoyang Pillar 洛陽經幢 that was erected in the 820s. However, the two versions do differ slightly, and their origins and dispersion remain largely unknown.

Even more significantly, no information about the production of these Chinese Christian manuscripts can be extrapolated from other contemporaneous sources that are, when it is all said and done, very limited.¹⁰ Chinese texts, both official and private, mention the Tang church only sporadically. As far as is known at present, not a single document has ever mentioned a Christian text. Turning to the horse's mouth is no help as church records are even sparser than Chinese documents. To the best of my knowledge, not one single record that clearly documents the Church of the East dispatching a delegation to Tang China has survived, let alone any mention of Christians translating texts into Chinese and indeed making and using these seven extant manuscripts.

As a matter of fact, the only indication of the use of the Tang Christian texts that we can find today, if we can call it indication, is tenuous at best. The information is extremely brief and is contained in the eighty-five-characters-long colophon of manuscript P.3847, that is quoted at the very beginning of Chapter 6. This colophon states that Aluoben and Jingjing translated thirty-five texts, whose titles are listed in *The Sutra of Reverence*. However, the colophon does not specify who composed which particular text. Even if we were to rely on what it says and assume that Tang Christians did use the thirty-five texts, only one listed title, 'The Mysterious Bliss Sutra' (志玄安樂經), exactly matches the heading of one of the surviving eight texts.¹¹ Since it is the only example in which the titles can be matched to each other, extreme caution should be exercised if we are to make the claim that the extant manuscript of *The Mysterious Bliss Sutra* is the exact version listed in *The Sutra of Reverence* as being used by Tang Christians.

¹⁰ Source scarcity has been acknowledged and will be demonstrated in Chapter 1. For this acknowledgement, see Matteo Nicolini-Zani (2013a).

¹¹ The other listed title 'The Sutra of the Origin of the Origins' (宣元至本經) appears to be identical to the shortened title of Kojima Manuscript B. It also varies slightly from the heading of the surviving text *The Sutra of Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao*.

Secondly, the idea that the manuscripts were composed in Chang'an by Aluoben and Jingjing and eventually sent to the remote oasis of Dunhuang is a hazardous assumption that in its turn has already tempted scholars to utilize these Christian sources to analyze the whole Tang church. However, the question of to what degree that we can utilize them to examine the Christian presence in a much larger geographical area (China) is certainly a matter that needs to be addressed before we proceed any further. Somewhat extravagantly, as these Chinese Christian sources seem to have been artificially isolated from other sorts of Christian sources found in Dunhuang, they have been used indiscriminately to analyze the whole Tang church. Nevertheless, so far, we do not possess any record that attests that a known Christian document was made in the Tang capital. The problem is compounded by the fact that Dunhuang was under siege for ten years before being conquered by the Tibetan Empire in 787 and only nominally came under the rule of the Tang court when Tang loyalists overthrew the Tibetans in 848, after which it maintained a relationship of suzerainty with the Chinese central government.¹² As a matter of fact, this small oasis has yielded significantly more sources that exceed those found in the Tang heartland in terms of diversity and quantity. When put together, all the local sources reveal a picture that emerges as rather different from what is commonly believed. It seems that Christians remained uninterruptedly in Dunhuang from the eighth century well up into the early twelfth century. Therefore, as argued in Chapter 6, the Dunhuang Christians must be understood in their own terms. It seems we shall probably need to adjust our research and embrace a local perspective if we are to examine all the Christian sources, including the Chinese religious manuscripts, properly.

Thirdly, the conventional timeline has never been thoroughly questioned. It was devised by modern scholars in the early twentieth century. All specific dates were first systemically explicated by P.Y. Saeki in his book published in 1937, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, "the only [English] monograph that covers all the Tang Christian documents and provides the basis for our current historical assessments of Tang Christianity".¹³ P.Y. Saeki's investigation of the dates, although it was and still is the most extensive discussion available, amounts to little more than thirty pages in total.¹⁴ As the criticism in Chapter 2 implies, his

¹² The reasons Dunhuang was besieged for ten years are complex. One interesting cause is that the Tibetan court seems to have been deeply concerned about the potential damage that might have been inflicted on Dunhuang Buddhism. For general surveys of Dunhuang under Tibetan rule, see Gertraud Taenzer (2012), Sam van Schaik (2011:26-30) and Yang Ming 楊銘 (1997).

¹³ Johan Ferreira 2014:2. P.Y. Saeki's book is in two versions that do not greatly diverge. Besides minor rephrasing and corrections, the most obvious difference is that the 1951 edition incorporates the Kojima manuscripts. This dissertation refers to the 1951 edition unless otherwise stated.

¹⁴ P.Y. Saeki 1951:8-9, 113-124, 248-265; 1937:8-9, 113-124, 248-265. For more detail about P.Y. Saeki's dating and my critiques, see Chapters 2 and 6.

argumentation cannot withstand scrutiny, and certain of his arguments are based on unfounded assumptions. Admittedly, there are some other attempts to date the sources in addition to P.Y. Saeki's explication. But, as said, all are minor revisions that do not stand up to closer scrutiny. Take for instance the common reason for the assertion that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* were created and presented to Tang Taizong by Aluoben around the 640s. This reason is based on the possibility derived from this historical event: Aluoben translated certain texts into Chinese and discussed them with Tang Taizong who was convinced that Aluoben's faith could not do his empire any harm and finally permitted the diffusion of Christianity in Tang China in 638 by issuing an edict to this effect. Moreover, it rests upon this unfounded assumption: the obscure texts such as *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* must have been composed by a foreigner like Aluoben who had then only just arrived in China and was still very unfamiliar with Chinese.¹⁵ Importantly, this reason, though widely accepted, is awkward. It would have us believe that, even though Aluoben and his team did not have the requisite command of Chinese, they would still have possessed enough linguistic skill to have translated *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*, that are the longest among the surviving manuscripts, into that language. However, if these two texts are as difficult as they are commonly believed to be, it is puzzling to understand why Christians would have submitted such incomprehensible texts to Tang Taizong. Even if Aluoben did compose these difficult texts, one still has to wonder how Tang Taizong would have managed to understand them.¹⁶

All that has just been said suggests that the conventional chronology of these manuscripts rests precariously on extremely tenuous circumstantial information. The production of the Chinese Christian manuscripts or texts still remains a mystery on which only the tip of the veil has been lifted. Various important aspects, like their provenance, authorship, usage, dissemination, reception and so forth have not yet been determined. The persistence of the traditional dating is largely the result of the fact that more recent commentators have simply reproduced the findings and intuitions of the first generations of experts.

¹⁵ The obscurity of the texts, the chronology of the sources and the foreigners' linguistic incompetence were first associated together by Haneda Toru 羽田亨 (1931, 1926, 1923, 1918) when he introduced the two manuscripts to the world. However Haneda Toru only discussed the association in passing. He never explicitly claimed that the author was Aluoben. Nonetheless, the first-generation scholars already accepted this association and specified that it was Aluoben who made these two sources. For example, John Foster (1939:44-45) and F.S. Drake (1935a: 679).

¹⁶ P.Y. Saeki (1951) might recognize the awkwardness of this reason. On one hand, he relied on Aluoben's translation activity to establish possibilities of creating these two manuscripts. On the other hand, he avoided mentioning the obscurity of the texts. In fact, I am not aware that he ever made serious complaints about the difficulties of interpreting the sources.

Looking at the persistence of the traditional dating, it must be conceded that there are two good reasons for this practice. The first reason is the inaccessibility of the original manuscripts. All manuscripts were unobtainable for a long time after World War II. Since the end of the 1940s, all other documents, with the exception of manuscript P.3847, have been kept locked away in secret after their removal from China to Japan. Excluding the collectors and Haneda Toru, only a handful of scholars have ever had the opportunity to study the original rolls. Even P.Y. Saeki, as far as can be inferred from the information available, never had the chance to examine any original manuscripts. To date, *The Messiah Sutra*, *On One God*, *The Mysterious Bliss Sutra* and *The Sutra of the Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao* are still inaccessible, although their custodian, the Takeda Science Foundation 武田科学振興財団, did open the doors of its Osaka library (the Kyou shooku 杏雨書屋) in 2010 and exhibited them to the public for the first time in 100 years. It also took this opportunity to re-photograph all its holdings in the series *Dunhuang Secret Collections* 敦煌秘笈.¹⁷ Moreover, the original Kojima manuscripts, as discussed in Chapter 6, were lost, and only their photos have been preserved. Nonetheless, the inaccessibility of all the original manuscripts, as observed by scholars, has been a major impediment to research, forcing almost all scholars to quote P.Y. Saeki's and Haneda Toru's transcriptions, translations and publications, including their errors.¹⁸

Another complicating factor is that the conventional chronology and the common understanding of the pre-twelfth-century presence of Christians in China are inextricably interlocked. As said in Chapter 1, Christians enjoyed a period of prosperity for some time under Tang patronage. After they had built the first church in Chang'an in 638, the Tang Christians seem to have constructed more buildings in several other places, even though these edifices, it is said, were demolished in the midst of the rising xenophobia epitomized by an edict issued in 845 to curb the so-called non-Chinese religions (including, and presumably, targeting Buddhism especially). As few post-Tang sources document the activities of Christians, not a single Christian, it is widely assumed, remained in China's heartland between the tenth and the eleventh century, and the Bible was read again in the Far East only after

¹⁷ In total, this foundation has published ten volumes (including one volume of catalogue information), and printed 250 non-commercial copies that are sent, free of charge, to noted scholars and institutions all over the world. For information about how this foundation collected, kept and published Dunhuang documents, see Zheng Acai 鄭阿財 (2013). Furthermore, a Chinese scholar, Chen Tao 陳濤 (2012), visited the exhibition (April 19-24).

¹⁸ For the consequences of the inaccessibility and the (re)-appearances of these four manuscripts, see Matteo Nicolini-Zani (2016). For these modern errors, see Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2003:146-155, 162-170, 192-193). In addition, A.C. Moule (1940:5) once commented that P.Y. Saeki's English translations "are loose, vague, and sometimes make one smile, while his ideas and notes often lack critical feeling". For more criticism and the wide acceptance of P.Y. Saeki's study, see Johan Ferreira (2014:2), Max Deeg (2006:115) and Matteo Nicolini-Zani (2006).

Franciscans and Dominicans sailed to China in the thirteenth century. The upshot is that these eight Chinese Christian texts are taken to be the sources used the Tang Christians. In its turn, their chronology reinforces the common understanding of China's pre-twelfth-century Christianity, a position that will be challenged in the concluding part of this study.

Leaving aside these more recondite considerations, a more reasoned timeline of these Chinese Christian manuscripts is obviously a crucial matter to anyone interested in the early history of Christianity in China. The chronology of ancient manuscripts is an issue central to the entire field. Dates anchor manuscripts in the flow of time, offering the proper time frames into which studies can be slotted. More often than not, dating is the very pillar of historical research. It is one of the most fundamental areas that need to be clarified before any general point is pressed. If a manuscript is wrongly dated, it is wrongly used. Cause is confounded with effect or vice-versa. More common conclusions will be founded on false premises. Until the chronological problem is settled, no satisfactory research, whether it be historical or theological or textual or cultural, can be undertaken. Only with a sound timeline will it be possible to draw inferences from the Chinese Christian manuscripts about the so-called Tang church, and to produce an accurate overall historical sketch of Christianity in medieval China.

Therefore, this study embraces an empirical, philological, historical approach and attempts to find solid bases on which to establish a more reliable timeline for these sources. In simple words, this research re-dates the manuscripts of early Christianity in China.

More specifically, this dissertation is concerned with *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*. The main reason for this focus is that they feature much more prominently than any other manuscript in the current discussion on the history of Christianity in medieval China. In terms of length, they are the longest of the manuscripts. All other five sources combined are just a little bit longer than *The Messiah Sutra* alone, and much shorter than *On One God*. In terms of chronology, according to the traditional view, they are the oldest Christian manuscripts and the only known seventh-century religious texts. Moreover, these two manuscripts were written by the same hand.

The other manuscripts will also be examined, but more briefly. Each one of them presents its own unique problems. The Kojima manuscripts have been exposed as modern forgeries by Chinese scholars whose voices still remain marginal in the West. This study supports their findings and will also condemn them as recent forgeries, by adding a few more pieces of significant evidence to what earlier experts have already adduced. *The Mysterious Bliss Sutra*

and *The Praise of the Three Majestics* were also written by the same hand. This study finds their common conventional dating acceptable, although it hopes to refine it with more detailed evidence. The colophon attached to *The Praise of the Three Majestics* and *The Sutra of Reverence*, is quite definite that they (manuscript P.3847) were made after the Tang dynasty had collapsed in 907. Given these special conditions, this dissertation will deal with these five manuscripts collectively in Chapter 6. In time, more detailed examination will have to be conducted; ones that will do justice to each manuscript and to China's ancient Christians.

2 Methods of dating sources and research scope

Many dating methods and criteria have been advanced, ranging from the traditional techniques of extracting paleographical, codicological, philological and historical information to cutting-edge laboratory work like Carbon-14 dating and non-destructive technologies (NDT).¹⁹ In the light of the current inaccessibility of the manuscripts, it is not possible to date Chinese Christian manuscripts using modern technologies. Therefore, this research will adopt traditional methods, making use of the most recent photos. The following section begins with general considerations before it introduces the four main techniques used in this dissertation. As it does so, it will outline the scope of the research.

First and foremost, this research takes it for granted that a manuscript was not made in a vacuum. The various features of a manuscript contain temporal and spatial information that often allow it to be dated. This assumption is not at all new. Modern scholars already make the basic distinction between the text in the manuscript and the materiality of the manuscript, paying attention not only to the text but also to decorations, bindings, layouts and many other aspects inherent in the document. Lately, a growing number of researchers have been studying manuscripts as material objects, cultural products and historical artifacts. The rise of a new field of Manuscript Studies has already yielded an important new vocabulary, replete with a number of analytical terminologies like "Manuscript Cultures" and "Composite and Multiple-Text Manuscripts".²⁰ As these latest developments point out, the production of a manuscript should not be seen as static. Rather, it was a complex, dynamic process that involved contents, authors, patrons, scribes, editors, binders, distributors, readers and so on.

¹⁹ In the past, not all manuscripts could be dated. Small pieces often do not contain adequate information and cannot be examined using traditional methods. Thanks to modern technologies, however, today even scraps can be dated, although there are some demanding requirements, for example, samples should not be contaminated. For concise overviews of various dating methods, see Alessandro Bausi and Jost Gippert (2015:27-30), Natalie Tchernetska (2009:748-756), and Raymond Clemens and Timothy Graham (2007:121).

²⁰ Michael Friedrich and Cosima Schwarke 2016; Jörg Quenzer *et al.* 2014. For the latest developments in this new area, see Giovanni Ciotti and Hang Lin (2016), Alessandro Bausi and Jost Gippert (2015), and Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen (2015).

The making of the manuscript also had to comply with the prevailing societal norms and practices, including technologies. The whole production process, therefore, was heavily influenced, if not completely determined, by contemporaneous needs or milieus, although different parties like owners, copyists and collectors, might have made some impact on the bases of their own interests, inclinations and habits.²¹ A manuscript, it is agreed, is a product of a society or context. For today's scholars, in this sense a manuscript is a time capsule: its various aspects reflect the past general environments, and have a lot to tell about the chronology of the manuscript.

These more general codicological aspects having been established, in its attempt to date these early Chinese Christian manuscripts this research begins by exploring specific historical events. Two events are of particular interest. The first is the recorded historical presence of Christianity in China. As will be discussed in Chapter 1, it is possible that some Christians who were involved in long-distance trade did enter China before the seventh century. However, there is no hard evidence to affirm their presence, especially not that such occasional visits bore fruit in the form of any stable Christian communities. It is inconceivable that an individual Christian who had arrived in China would have been equipped with a theological training adequate to have translated or composed these religious texts, or indeed that a small group of believers would have needed to make these Chinese manuscripts, especially the very long ones like *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*. These manuscripts could only have been produced when there was a Christian community in China that was stable and sizable enough to need religious texts in Chinese to nourish its faith. Therefore, this dissertation assumes that these sources were not made before the rise of the Tang church. As will be outlined in Chapter 1, the emergence and growth of the Tang church can be divided into three periods: arrival-diffusion (635-649), expansion-setback-recovery (649-790s) and disappearance (800-840s). This periodization provides a thread that will be followed in the three main chapters.

The second crucial historical event is the sealing off of Dunhuang Cave 17, in which all the seven Christian manuscripts were allegedly found. This cave, also known as the Cave of Stored Sutras 藏經洞, is 2.6 meters (L) x 2.6 meters (W) x 3 meters (H). It is one of a complex of caves carved out of the cliffs by devout locals, the majority of whom were Buddhists. It was originally built as a memorial chapel dedicated to the eminent monk, Hongbian 洪辯, who died in the 860s. Sometime in the very early eleventh century, for some mysterious reason

²¹ For manuscript production before photocopying, see Eltjo Buringh (2011), Raymond Clemens and Timothy Graham (2007), Barbara Rhodes and William Wells Streeter (1999), and Qian Cunxun 錢存訓 (1992).

this small cave was stuffed with manuscripts (more than 50,000 of them, the earliest of which were dated to the fourth century), ritual objects, textiles, prints, paintings and so on. Once it was sealed, it lay abandoned until *circa* 1900, when a Daoist priest accidentally re-opened it and all the materials in it were dispersed around the world and initiated a new research area, Dunhuang Studies.²²

A number of theories have been proposed to explain the exact time of and the reasons for the sealing off of the cave.²³ Aurel Stein, the first European explorer to visit this spot in 1907, suggested that given the variety of materials the cave had been used as a waste repository. Paul Pelliot, who arrived shortly after Aurel Stein, postulated that Buddhist monks hid their belongings hastily just before the Tanguts conquered Dunhuang in 1035. One of the arguments he put forward is that not a single text is written in the Tangut script. Recently, Rong Xinjiang has proposed that local monasteries filled the cave with their items and walled it up when they learnt that the Islamic Karakhanid power had sacked the Buddhist kingdom of Khotan in 1006 and seemed to be on the verge of expanding farther eastward. Whatever the reason was, it seems that Cave 17 was indeed closed off not long after 1002. The evidence for this is provided by the latest dated manuscript, F.32, that is currently held in St. Petersburg. Its colophon states that this Buddhist source was made on the orders of the Dunhuang governor and was then deposited in a monastery in 1002.²⁴ Since the dated sources before this year continue uninterrupted and the date of other, presumably later, manuscripts cannot be confirmed, the early years of the eleventh century are taken as *terminus ante quem* for the closure of Cave 17 and consequently for the making of all the Dunhuang treasures.

In the light of these two events, this research spans a period from 635 to the early eleventh century, presuming that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* and the other Chinese Christian manuscripts were made within this time span. In order to arrive at a more detailed dating, this dissertation employs three other methods.

The first of these has to do with the Chinese tradition of tabooing emperors' (given) names, *bihui* 避諱, a practice often translated as name taboo.²⁵ This method is one of the most common techniques for dating Chinese texts. In ancient China the use of the names of the emperors of the ruling dynasty or, more precisely, the Chinese characters that happen to be

²² For the re-opening and the disposal and description of these treasures, see Rong Xinjiang (2013:79-176). For the latest snapshot of Dunhuang Studies, see Imre Galambos (2016), Irina Popova and Liu Yi (2012).

²³ For a concise summary, see Sha Wutian 沙武田 (2001:69-77) and Liu Jinbao 劉進寶 (2000).

²⁴ For more detail including the translation of this colophon, see Rong Xinjiang (2013:109-131).

²⁵ I am not aware of that the Chinese tabooed the surnames of the royal families. That is, this dissertation only deals with the forenames of the emperors.

(part of) the emperor's first names, was strongly discouraged. In coming to terms with this demanding tradition, Chinese people invented a number of methods that enabled them to use these characters without violating the custom, thereby offending their supreme leaders and suffering any subsequent punishment. The upshot was that certain known characters were intentionally modified, removed or substituted on a large scale. Relying on the name taboo practice, scholars generally assume that, whenever such a tabooed character is present, the source must be dated somewhere between the corresponding emperor's reign and the end of his dynasty. If a certain emperor's name is not avoided, the source was probably produced either before the enthronement of that ruler, or after the collapse of his house. This well-attested, enduring Chinese tradition has given birth to the rise of a new research area, Studies of Name Taboo. Lately, it has been systematically introduced to the West by Piotr Adamek.²⁶ I shall pay particular attention to this method in Chapter 3.

A second strong indicator of a source's chronology is the use or non-use of the Empress Wu's new forms. Between the end of 689 and 697, the Empress Wu, the only Chinese female who ever assumed the title Emperor 皇帝, modified the common way of writing a number of characters and promoted the new orthographic forms with complex political, ideological motivations in mind. These new forms were widely used during her reign but quickly fell into general disuse after 705 when she was overthrown by a *coup d'état*. As these forms differ radically from their common orthographies, they serve as a rather useful method for dating sources. Whenever these forms are encountered, scholars often confidently claim that the source was made in Empress Wu's reign, even though some forms were still used sporadically well up into the eleventh century, and even later. This method has also been used by Western researchers like Imre Galambos.²⁷ I shall employ it in Chapter 4.

Another way of dating manuscripts relies on evidence for the time of the composition of the texts in the manuscripts. It goes without saying that the manuscripts that have come down to us cannot have been made earlier than the period in which their texts were created. Therefore the time of the composition of the texts must be taken as *terminus post quem* for the production of the manuscripts. When examining the time at which a text was created, a useful method is to investigate its linguistic features. Historical linguistics has shown that language is constantly changing, evolving and adapting to the needs of its users. Over time, a language's morphological, semantic, syntactic and other elements in one period will differ from features in another period. In other words, each period of language has its own

²⁶ Piotr Adamek 2015.

²⁷ Imre Galambos 2012.

morphological, semantic and syntactical features. These features are characteristics that define the language of a period and will not be found in language of another period. In turn, these linguistic features of a source will indicate to which period the language contained in that source belongs, shedding great light on the earliest possible time at which the texts in their current version could first have been created.

These language changes have often been utilized by scholars to examine sources. Famously, in the fifteenth century, Lorenzo Valla relied on such indicators to demonstrate that a presumed fourth-century decree in which the Roman emperor Constantine had transferred authority over Rome and the western part of the Roman Empire to the Pope, the *Donation of Constantine*, was a forgery. He observes, for instance, that the text referred to high-ranking Roman officials by the term ‘satraps’. He writes: “I cannot recall reading that anyone, either in Rome or even in the provinces of the Romans, was ever named a satrap [in the fourth century].”²⁸

Relying on similar lines of research, this study examines the time of the composing of the Christian texts, *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*. Although both the Chinese writing system and the Chinese language make it impossible to use the same lines of reasoning Lorenzo Valla applies to his Latin text to the Chinese Christian texts, this study will venture into the field of syntax in its exploration of widely observed changes in the construction of the Chinese passive.

Historically, the Chinese passive construction has undergone significant changes. Several passive markers have been introduced at different times, subsequently pushing earlier markers out of usage one after the other. There seems to have been one dominant marker in various definable periods. Speaking retrospectively, therefore, the rise and fall of different markers is explicit as is indicated by the rich qualitative data collected by many historical linguists who are aided by statistics software. In addition, the usage of a specific marker also evolved, expanding from simplicity to complexity as new orders or sequences were introduced. Given the general evolutionary spectrum of the Chinese passive and the observable changes in each marker, passive constructions in a text can shed light on the time of creation of the text, and in turn this determines the time at which the manuscript can first have been produced. The evolution of the Chinese passive construction has been scrutinized

²⁸ Lorenzo Valla 2007:67-69. Etymologically, the word ‘satrap’, meaning governor of a province, was introduced from Old Persian. In addition, Lorenzo Valla also examined other aspects like style. Today, it is commonly agreed that this forgery was made in “the second half of the eighth century”. For more details, see Raymond John Acciardo, Sr. (2007), Wolfram Brandes (2007) and Johannes Fried (2007).

by such scholars as Alain Peyraube, and it also has been utilized by scholars like Yuan Bin as an instrument for dating sources.²⁹ Chapter 5 discusses and adopts this method.

3 Dissertation structure

These lines of research govern the organization of this dissertation. Besides the Introduction and the Conclusion, it consists of six chapters, of which the most important are devoted to the question of the dating of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*.

Chapter 1 discusses the traditional narrative of China's pre-twelfth-century Christians, in which all surviving Chinese Christian manuscripts have always been accorded a place. Chapter 2 describes *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*, shows that the suspicion of forgery can be abandoned and critically examines their conventional chronology. Chapter 3 elucidates the reason their traditional dating must be wrong. Building on this argument, Chapter 4 demonstrates that it is not possible that the two manuscripts could have been made between the 650s and the 760s. Chapter 5 argues that the two texts were composed not earlier than the ninth-tenth century, suggesting that the manuscripts were produced somewhere between the ninth and the eleventh century. Chapter 6 investigates five other Christian manuscripts. Furthermore, this chapter associates archeological finds and non-Chinese Christian manuscripts from Dunhuang, sketching a larger historical context in which all the Christian sources, Chinese and non-Chinese, can be better positioned. Finally, this dissertation wraps up the findings, proposing a new timeline for the Chinese Christian manuscripts. It also highlights some implications of the new dating and lays out directions for further research.

²⁹ Alain Peyraube 1989; Yuan Bin 袁賓 2000.