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

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Chapter 1 The traditional narrative of China's pre-twelfth-century Christians

In the country *Daqin*, the Great Virtue named Aluoben, [...] reached Chang'an in the ninth year of the Zhenguan reign [635]. (大秦國有上德曰阿/羅本 [.....] 貞觀九祀至於長安)

— *The Xi'an Stele* (781)¹

The Foreign Ministry will document [other] monks and nuns and clearly indicate their foreign teachings. The three thousand strong *Daqin* [Christians], *Muhu* [Muslims?] and Zoroastrians will resume lay life and cease to confound Chinese customs. (隸僧尼屬主客，顯明外國之教。勒大秦[、]穆護、祆三千餘人還俗，不雜中華之風。)

— *The Chinese Intolerance Edict* (845)²

The mentions of Christianity in contemporary Chinese authors of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries are very few, and what there are are either extremely vague or refer definitely to an already distant past, and we believe that nothing has yet been found to suggest that there were Christians surviving in China during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

— A.C. Moule (1870-1957)³

These three excerpts give a rough indication of China's pre-twelfth-century Christians, in which the seven Chinese Christian manuscripts are conventionally placed: Christians led by Aluoben, it is argued, first reached China in 635, and were extinguished after 845. To understand this traditional historiography better, this chapter begins by discrediting the theories that propose that Christianity might have been introduced into China prior to 635, and then reiterates that the earliest presence in China is the Tang church by presenting affirmative evidence to back up this claim. Finally, the chapter introduces the popular picture of the Tang church depicted by mainstream scholars.

1.1 Possible Christian presence in pre-Tang China and expansion of the Church of the East

It is not known when Christianity first entered China. There are rumors, legends and possibilities, all of which suggest that Christianity might have been introduced into China anytime between the first century and the sixth century. However, these theories rest on tenuous indications drawn either from such legends as that about Thomas working in Asia in the first century, or from knowledge about the earliest Sino-Roman contacts that are mentioned in historical sources, or from the legendary role the Silk Road played in facilitating

¹ For column numbering of this Stele, this dissertation follows Paul Pelliot (1996: Fig.2, Cols. 10-11).

² Liu Xu 劉昫 945/1975:605.

³ A.C. Moule 1930:73.

East-West cultural exchanges. None of these is based on solid evidence.⁴ The most reasonable scenario is that the Church of the East gradually expanded to the Far East and introduced Christianity to China before 635 and, at the present stage of knowledge, this scenario still cannot be dismissed from the realms of possibility.

1.1.1 The Church of the East in the pre-fifth-century Middle East

The origins of the Church of the East can be traced back to early Christian communities in the Middle East. In this early period, cities in frontier regions between the Roman and the Parthian Empires (247BCE-224CE) — for example, Antioch, Edessa (modern Urfa in southeastern Turkey) and Arbela (in northern Iraq) — were Christian strongholds. The Parthian-controlled province of Assyria in particular provided an ideal shelter for Christians who escaped the persecutions of the Roman Empire. There, Christians used Classical Syriac as a major literary language into which to translate the Bible, explore theological concepts and write liturgy and poetry; in the process gradually developing their own religious traditions and rituals.⁵

During the Sasanian Empire (224-651), the Church of the East continued to prosper. In the early fourth century, the bishops of Seleucia-Ctesiphon assumed leadership over the churches in Persia.⁶ In the fifth century, Christians grew into a force strong enough to exert some competitive pressure upon the Persian state religion, Zoroastrianism. Meanwhile, the local Christian church was reinforced demographically and theologically by the arrival of adherents of Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople (r. 428-431), who were being persecuted by other Christians in the Roman Empire on account of their adherence to what is called the Nestorian controversy after the 431 Council of Ephesus.

The Nestorian controversy concentrated on the debate about Christology. Nestorius claimed that the Virgin Mary should be called *Christotokos* (mother of Christ) rather than *Theotokos* (mother of God). This doctrine contradicted the understanding of some then prominent churchmen, most notably Cyril of Alexandria (r. 412-444), who were not natives of Antioch,

⁴ For a concise review of these theories, see A.C. Moule (1930:1-26). Lately, a number of scholars have proposed that, in the years between 65 and 68 CE, the group around Thomas carved some stone images (fish, birds, human figures) on the rock faces of Kongwangshan 孔望山 in Lianyungang 連雲港, a northern Chinese port city. For more information, see Pierre Perrier (2012) and the Thomas-in-China webpage maintained by Enjeux de L'Étude du Christianisme des Origines, <http://www.echo.fr/category/christianisme-apostolique/thomas-en-chine/>. However, mainstream scholars have shown that, as one would expect, these images were made by Buddhists. For a short English introduction to these sculptures, see Sonya Lee (2010:33 ff.).

⁵ For more details, see David Wilmshurst (2011:1-11), Christoph Baumer (2006:99-25), and Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler (2003:7-11).

⁶ David Wilmshurst 2011:12, 32.

the city in which Nestorius received his theological training. Cyril and others argued that the term Christotokos implied that Christ was not truly God but merely human. Driven by zealous piety, personal ambition and other factors, they vehemently accused Nestorius of undermining the unity of the human and divine natures of Christ, thereby of denying the reality of the Incarnation. After a heated and complex debate, they successfully deposed Nestorius, and had his teaching officially condemned as a heresy not once but twice; first in the Council of Ephesus and then in the Council of Chalcedon (451).⁷ Denounced by official anathemas, his followers faced severe persecution in the Roman Empire, and they fled to the Persian Empire in large numbers. There, they were welcomed by church theologians who, like Nestorius, had been trained in Antioch. They intermingled with regional Christians and strengthened the local church.

1.1.2 The expansion of the Church of the East from Central Asia to China's western borders

Examining the ancient Christian presence in Central Asia, it has to be acknowledged that the surviving evidence is not very extensive. Few contemporaneous local records have come to us. For instance: "No Christian Sogdian texts have been discovered in Sogdiana."⁸ As far as I am aware, there are no Chinese historical sources that document Christians in Sogdiana, even though the Tang court had set up post stations along the Oxus River in the mid-seventh century and only retreated from this area in the mid-eighth century in the wake of the historical confusion caused by the conjunction of Muslim expansion into Central Asia and the devastation of the Tang heartland caught up in the throes of the An Lushan Rebellion 安史之亂 (755-763).

Despite scant evidence, the Christian presence and Christian activities in Central Asia are undeniable. It has been attested by relevant passages contained in the Syriac and Arabic texts that have been examined by Alphonse Mingana, and archeological finds like the many Syro-Turkish tombstones that are being digitized by P.G. Borbone.⁹ All these materials suggest that major centers like Merv, Samarkand, Semiryechye and Turfan had nourished sizable Christian communities for some time.

⁷ The condemnation of Nestorius cannot be reduced to a merely theological disagreement. Political factions, personal maneuverings, confusion about terminology, powers of discourse and rhetoric and interpretative methods all appear to have played important roles in his downfall. For more details, see Susan Wessel (2004), Sebastian P. Brock (1996), John A. McGuckin (1996:7-21, 1994) and W. Macomber (1958:142-154).

⁸ Nicholas Sims-Williams 1992a:532.

⁹ Alphonse Mingana 1925. For the project directed by P.G. Borbone in Pisa University, see Margherita Farina (2013).

Among these cities, Merv seems to have played a leading role in the evangelization of Central Asia. As the gateway to Central Asia proper, the oasis city of Merv and its adjacent lands probably served as a springboard for the Church of the East from which it could expand to the north and beyond. In the early fifth century, the city was the seat of a bishopric that sent delegates to participate in synods held in Mesopotamia. Bishops Bar Shabba and John, for instance, represented Merv in the synods of 424 and 497.¹⁰ In the sixth century, Merv became a metropolitanate, “ranking seventh in seniority after other cities located mainly in Mesopotamia”.¹¹ During these two centuries, dozens of Christian centers were established along the western bank of the Oxus River, and these centers like Herat and Sīstān regularly continued to send representatives to church meetings for a few more centuries.¹²

In Sogdiana, Christians were residing in its principal city, Samarkand, no later than the seventh century. Early evidence of their presence there are a possible Christian cross on the obverse of coins attributed to a ruler of Osrūšana (sixth or early seventh century) and some ossuaries with Christian symbols excavated in Samarkand and dated not later than the seventh century.¹³ However, the time of the creation of a metropolitan see in Samarkand is unclear. B.E. Colless states that Arabic and Syriac sources yield various dates, ranging from the early fifth century, under the patriarchate of Ahai, to the early eighth century under Patriarch Selibha Zekha.¹⁴ The local Christian community seems to have flourished in the tenth and again in the thirteenth century. Many tombstones from this period have been found by Soviet archeologists, and they are being re-examined by Mark Dickens.¹⁵ In the fifteenth century, Samarkand Christians were annihilated during a persecution.¹⁶

When precisely Christians journeyed farther east and created centers or metropolitanates in China’s westernmost province, Xinjiang 新疆, is very hard to determine. The information is fragmentary. The earliest record of the metropolitan see of Kashgar seems to be that of Patriarch Elijah III (r. 1176-1190) nominating two successive metropolitans: John and Sabrisho.¹⁷ In Khotan, a Christian cemetery has been found as well as the remains of a church building can be dated to the mid-fifth century.¹⁸ Closer to the desert’s eastern fringes, there is an impressive Christian presence in the Turfan Oasis. In Bulayiq, a town situated about 10

¹⁰ Alphonse Mingana 1925:320.

¹¹ Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit 1999:210.

¹² Erica C.D. Hunter 1992:365; Alphonse Mingana 1925:318-320.

¹³ Cited from Nicholas Sims-Williams (1992a:532).

¹⁴ B.E. Colless 1986:51-52.

¹⁵ Mark Dickens 2016:106-129.

¹⁶ B.E. Colless 1986:53-55.

¹⁷ Alphonse Mingana 1925:325.

¹⁸ Cited from Nicholas Sims-Williams (1992a:532).

kilometers north of Turfan in the foothills of the Tianshan 天山, the German teams led by A. von Le Coq found a whole library of Christian fragments at the beginning of the twentieth century. The presence of Sogdian and other religious manuscripts focusing on asceticism and the religious life has led scholars to assume that the site must have been a monastery of the Church of the East. These manuscripts are written in various languages, but the majority are in Sogdian and Syriac. Most can be dated around the ninth and tenth century.¹⁹ The bulk of them are now housed in Germany and have attracted the attention of a long line of scholars from J.P. Asmussen and Nicholas Sims-Williams to Erica C.D. Hunter and Mark Dickens.²⁰

1.1.3 Speculation about a pre-Tang Christian presence

Since there is little doubt that the Church of the East had reached the western edge of China proper by the seventh century, many scholars have speculated that Christian missionaries, using Central Asia as a transit route, could have entered China before 635. For instance, Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit write that “a Christian presence in China in the 6th century cannot be completely ruled out”.²¹

While nobody would deny that the expansion of the Church of the East is impressive, the speculation about a pre-Tang presence has not been substantiated by any archeological finds, by Chinese annals or by church records. Crucially, so far there has been a failure to distinguish between the incidental presence of Christian travelers and traders, as opposed to the presence of a settled Christian community.

We should realize that some Christians traveling into ancient China does not necessarily provide sound evidence that Christianity as a faith was introduced into the Far East. By analogy, today technologies allow people to mobilize in unprecedented numbers. Even the remotest corners of the Earth welcome massive numbers of visitors each year, but most of these visitors do not travel to diffuse their faiths. Almost all travelers are concerned with pragmatic matters — family, business, sightseeing and the more mundane aspects of life. At this moment, for instance, thousands of Westerners who are Christians are touring China; but, undeniably, the majority are not promulgating Christianity. Similarly, among the millions of ancient Christians who trekked along the Silk Road, the majority were merchants who traveled in endless caravans for business rather than for propagating their faith.

¹⁹ Nicholas Sims-Williams 1990:545.

²⁰ J.P. Asmussen 1982. The fragments are so numerous it took 100 years for scholars to publish them. For the latest publications, see Nicholas Sims-Williams (2014), and Erica C.D. Hunter and Mark Dickens (2014).

²¹ Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit 1999:267.

Pertinently, although some of these people were zealous about evangelizing the foreign lands, it is inconceivable that the majority of the Christian merchants would have taken a vow to spread their faith at every opportunity wherever they stopped. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that, even if some pre-seventh-century remains (for example, a cross) are excavated in the future, this evidence will still be too flimsy to pronounce that Christianity as a faith (religion) had been introduced into China. After all, there is nothing to stop an individual convert roaming through a new land, but undeniably the ability or the conviction to implant a religion into a new culture is something that goes very well beyond the realm of an individual's capacities. In a nutshell, for the first clear evidence of a Christian presence in China, in spite of the impressive pre-seventh-century expansion of the Church of the East, we must still look to the Tang church.

1.2 The earliest undisputed Christian presence in China: the Tang church

This research agrees with mainstream scholarship that the earliest Christian presence in China can be traced back solely to the Tang church. Apart from the seven Christian manuscripts found in Dunhuang Cave 17 that are the subject of this thesis, the other primary records used by scholars are quite explicit. Roughly speaking, these records can be divided into three groups: Chinese Christian sources and Chinese historical texts supplemented by a few other fragments. As most documents will be discussed more extensively in the following chapters, this section will focus predominantly on the Xi'an Stele and will mention the other sources only briefly.

1.2.1 The Xi'an Stele

The Xi'an Stele, also known as the Nestorian Monument, stands 2 meters tall and is now housed in the Xi'an Stele Museum 西安碑林博物館 — see Figure 1.1.²² Of all the evidence, it is by far the most important primary source, yielding a rich variety of information about the Tang church. Most of the historical data are derived from this Stele and cannot be found anywhere else.

In structural terms, the Stele can be divided into two parts.²³ The first part is a crest that is decorated with a common Chinese religious motif — Figure 1.2. It has been dressed into a half-round circle on which two intricately entwined dragons facing a large circular object

²² The Stele is about 20 centimeters thick. For a detailed measurement, see Henri Havret (1897:140, 161). For how the Stele was moved into the museum in 1907, see Lu Yuan 路遠 (2009).

²³ As shown in Fig. 1.1, the Stele should have one more part, a tortoise foundation called a *guifu* 龜趺 in Chinese. Sadly, the original base has never been found. Figs 1.1 and 1.2 are photographed by David Castor.

(pearl?). They support a flat face that is decorated with a Maltese cross set on a lotus flower below which is carved the title of the Stele, *Daqin Jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei* (大秦景教流行中國碑). The second part of the Stele is the inscription that is entitled *Jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei song bing xu* (景教流行中國碑頌並序).



Figure 1.1 The Xi'an Stele



Figure 1.2 The crest of the Xi'an Stele

The inscription is a long text that contains approximately 1,800 Chinese characters supplemented by a few lines of Syriac at the bottom. Seventy monks' names are inscribed in both Chinese and Syriac on both sides of the Stele.²⁴ It was composed by Jingjing, "Adam priest and chorepsicopus and *fapsh'* of *Şin(i)stan*" (መርቀኛ የመመሪያ የመ የፌስ የፌስ የፌስ የፌስ).²⁵ The inscription opens with a theological introduction, recounting the Creation, the fall of man, the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Ascension of Jesus, the Trinity as well as the important rites and practices — baptism, facing east in worship, growing beards, sevenfold daily worship and so on. Then follows a historical account that documents the expansion of

²⁴ Some names on the Stele's left side were ruined by Han Taihua 韓泰華, who added a few columns of Chinese to document that he built a roof to shelter the Stele in 1859. For more details, see Michael Keevak (2008:107). For a full translation of the Syriac names, see Paul Pelliot (1984:55-61).

²⁵ For the English translation of the original Syriac, see Samuel N.C. Lieu (2009:229). The rank, chorepsicopus [chorepiscopus], means country-bishop or a suffragan bishop; *fapsh'* seems to be the Chinese Buddhist (Daoist) term for a priest or a monk; *fashi* 法師; *Şin(i)stan* is China.

the Tang church under the patronage of various Tang rulers between 635 and 781 — see below. The third part consists of a verse of poetry that recapitulates the theology and showers lavish praise on the Chinese emperors. The final part is a short yet important note that sheds some light on the communication maintained between the Tang church and its mother church in the Middle East. It gives the time of the setting up of the Stele (781) and mentions that “The ruling Patriarch Ningshu learns about the *Jing* community [Christians] in the East” (時法主僧寧恕知東方之景眾也).²⁶

A few more words must be said about the historical account given in the inscription. This account is not a simple historical narration recounting how the Tang church expanded over time. It is also a meticulous list of the imperial patronage bestowed by six male Tang emperors: Taizong, Gaozong, Xuanzong, Suzong, Daizong and Dezong, providing crucial chronological points of reference. Understandably, this account also eulogizes the Tang court and this rules out any chance of neutrality. Upon consideration, it should probably be considered more a claim to a historical pedigree than a purely historical document. As demonstrated by the extensive quotations below, the phrasing is so ornate that when translated into English many sentences do not make any sense at all. It sings the praises of the emperors who supported it to the skies, but carefully avoids criticizing the Empress Wu, during whose reign, as will be discussed in detail, the Tang church suffered severe setbacks. “In the eyes of the author of the [S]tele,” Pénélope Riboud observes, “tolerance towards foreign religions depended almost entirely on the emperor’s will to accept them.”²⁷ Therefore, this short account also offers us a unique glimpse of the church-state relationship.²⁸

The Stele was discovered in Xi’an by chance in the 1620s.²⁹ Over the past four hundred years, it has generated an abundance of literature. A debate about its genuineness, for instance, was ignited soon after the Jesuits in China reported the discovery to Europe in the 1620s. This debate occupied the better part of three centuries, involving almost all the best Western minds — Athanasius Kircher, Leibniz and Voltaire, to name just a few.³⁰ Doubts were stilled

²⁶ Paul Pelliot 1996: Fig.2, Col.31. Ningshu is the phonetic transcription of Hananishu, the patriarch of the Church of the East in Seleucia-Ctesiphon who died in 780. Given the distance, it is generally assumed that this news probably had not yet reached Tang China by 781. For more details, see Samuel N.C. Lieu (2009:230-231).

²⁷ Pénélope Riboud 2001:31.

²⁸ For the latest research on the church-state relationship, see Pénélope Riboud (2001:30-33) and Chen Huaiyu 陳懷宇 (2015).

²⁹ For the exact time and place of discovery, see Li Tang (2004:25-29) and Pénélope Riboud (2001:12-15).

³⁰ Jesuits treated the discovery as a providential sign, utilizing the Stele to convince the Chinese that Christianity (Catholicism) was not new and to persuade more Europeans to support their work (Order). However, opponents suspected that the Jesuits had fabricated this Stele for their own interests. For this debate and how the Stele was accepted in Europe, see Michael Keevak’s monograph (2008).

only in the early 1900s when the Stele was meticulously studied by Henri Havret and P.Y. Saeki and more supporting sources were found.³¹

1.2.2 Chinese non-Christian sources

In the course of the twentieth century, scholars also found a few Tang Chinese non-Christian texts, official and lay, that document Tang Christians. All are very short. Most mention the Tang church only in passing — actually as no more than a designation. Yet they provide an important context to our discussion. All will be used in the following sections.

The first group are three edicts. The 638 edict is the one that permitted the propagation of Christianity in the Tang Empire. One version of this edict is also carved on the Xi'an Stele. The 745 edict ordered that the name of the Christian church be changed. The 845 edict curbed the propagation of all so-called non-Chinese religions, including Christianity.

The second source is a catalogue of Chinese Buddhist sutras, *The Datang Zhenyuan xu Kaiyuan shijiaolu* 大唐貞元續開元釋教錄. It was compiled by the monk Yuanzhao 圓照 in 794. It briefly documents that Jingjing collaborated with Prajna to translate the Buddhist sutras. This cooperation was first studied by J. Takakusu, who relied on an almost identical version found in *The Zhenyuan xinding shijiaolu* 貞元新定釋教錄 that was also composed by Yuanzhao six years later in 800.³² I shall concentrate on the 794 version.

The third source is *The Chongyansi beiming bingxu* 重巖寺碑銘並序, a Chinese text that commemorates the renovation of a Buddhist monastery in E'zhou 鄂州, a city in the mid-Yangtze River region. It was authored by a local governor, Shu Yuanyu 舒元輿, in 824.

Besides these documents, there is one private source that is often mentioned by scholars, *The Liangjing xinji* 兩京新記. As it contains a record of the topography of Xi'an and Luoyang, there is a chance that it mentions the Tang church under the designation *Bosisi* 波斯寺 that this study translates as Persian Monastery. It was compiled by Wei Shu 韋述 in the 720s. The original version is long lost but many of its sections seem to have been preserved in other, later sources. The fly in the ointment is that these surviving sections have obviously been

³¹ P.Y. Saeki 1916; Henri Havret 1902, 1897, 1895.

³² J. Takakusu 1896.

redacted, and for this reason *The Liangjing xinji* is not used in this dissertation to construct its arguments.³³

1.2.3 Newly discovered Christian inscriptions

Between the early 1950s and 2016, a few more Christian stone inscriptions have been excavated in China. All are dated to the early ninth century. The most reliable ones are those known as *Mi Jifen muzhi* 米繼芬墓誌 (806), *Hua Xian muzhi* 花獻墓誌 (828) and the Luoyang Pillar (829). The most dubious example is *Li Su muzhi* 李素墓誌 (818). As argued below, it should not be included in the source material.

Furthermore, *Aluohan muzhi* 阿羅憾墓誌 (about 300 characters) has also been associated with the Tang church for some time. This tombstone reveals that Aluohan was a Persian nobleman who had made a successful political career in Tang China. It was reported by Duan Fang 端方 (1861-1911). In 1913, Haneda Toru initially suspected that Aluohan was the transcription of Abraham; in 1916, P.Y. Saeki, who was inspired by Haneda Toru, was the first to identify Aluohan as a Christian.³⁴ Recently, however, Antonino Forte has lucidly exposed the fact that Haneda Toru's suspicion was taken for granted to be factual and fueled an impressive amount of speculation. He concludes that "there is no basis whatsoever allowing to state that Aluohan was a Christian nor that his original name was Abraham."³⁵ As far as the sources are concerned, there is no longer any reason to take this stone as a Christian source.

1.2.4 Other sources

There are yet more texts that seem to document the Tang church. The first are five Syriac and Arabic fragments that might refer to Tang Christians. These are discussed by A. Mingana and Pénélope Riboud.³⁶ The second are a few other Dunhuang manuscripts that also mention Christianity, albeit briefly — like the fragments of *The Lidai fabao ji* 歷代法寶記. They are dealt with in Chapter 6.

³³ This source seems to have been rather popular and was frequently quoted. For instance, it was the main text Song Minqiu 宋敏求 used when he compiled *The Henan zhi* 河南志 and *The Chang'an zhi* 長安志 in 1054 and 1076 respectively. Scholars believe that the original Tang version can be reconstructed on the basis of later quotations. For a restored version, see Xin Deyong 辛德勇 (2006).

³⁴ Cited from Antonino Forte (1996a:375-428).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 409. See also Ma Xiaohe 馬小鶴 (2008:538-578) and Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2003:227-270).

³⁶ Pénélope Riboud 2001:9; A. Mingana 1925:305-308. These sources suggest that the Church of the East had a metropolitan see in China. However, these small nuggets of information are no more than brief mentions, and their information is too fragmentary to allow a more detailed reconstruction.

1.3 The three periods of the Tang church (635-840s)

In the conventional narrative, the fate of the Tang Church was tragic: all Christians disappeared after 845. To understand how scholars have arrived at this narrative with its gloomy ending, this section introduces the Tang church taking into account ancient sources, the general background of Tang culture and scholarly publications. In order to get a grip on the materials, I have divided the Tang Christian presence into three periods: arrival-diffusion (635-649), expansion-setback-recovery (649-790s) and disappearance (800-840s).³⁷

1.3.1 Arrival-diffusion (635-649)

According to the Xi'an Stele:³⁸

Taizong, the accomplished emperor, was glorious and inspirational. He learnt from the sages how to reign over people. In the country of *Daqin*, the Great Virtue was named Aluoben. By observing the blue clouds and catching the rhythm of winds, he carried true sutras, traveled through perils and reached Chang'an in the ninth year of the Zhenguan reign [635]. At the command of Emperor [Taizong], the minister Duke Fang Xuanling led an escort of guards of honor to the western outskirts [of Xi'an], receiving and then conducting Aluoben to the palace. Aluoben translated books in the library and was questioned about the Way in the imperial apartments. Understanding the profound truth, the Emperor thereafter permitted the propagation. In the seventh month (autumn) of the twelfth year of the Zhenguan reign [638], the edict was issued: "The Way does not have a constant name. The Holy does not have a permanent form. All teachings are established according to the locality, benefiting the living. Aluoben, the Great Virtue from the country of *Daqin*, has brought scriptures to the Upper Capital from afar. Perusing the doctrines, one finds that they are mysterious and non-action; scrutinizing the fundamental principles, one finds that they are established and essential. The wording should be concise; the reasoning should be flexible. As they are beneficial to things and people, they should be promulgated under Heaven. Have the requisite offices construct a *Daqin* Monastery in the Yining quarter of the capital and ordain twenty-one monks." (太宗文皇帝光華啟運明聖臨人大秦國有上德曰阿/羅本占青雲而載真經望風律以馳艱險貞觀九祀至於長安帝使宰臣房公玄齡總仗西郊賓迎入內翻經書殿問道禁闈深知正真特令傳授貞觀十有二/年秋七月詔曰道無常名聖無常體隨方設教密濟群生大秦國大德阿羅本遠將經像來獻上京詳其教旨玄妙無為觀其元宗生成立要詞無繁說理有忘筌/濟物利人宜行天下所司即於京義寧坊造大秦寺一所度僧二十一人)

This quotation outlines the first stage of the Tang church: the arrival and diffusion during the reign of the second Tang emperor. According to this record, the first missionary, Aluoben, arrived in 635 and was given a warm official reception by high-ranking court officials. After he

³⁷ There are other ways to periodize the Tang church. For example, John Foster (1939) visualizes a progression of five stages: arrival (635-649), advance and opposition (650-711), recovery (712-754), great influence (756- the early ninth century) and eclipse (the early ninth century-845). Samuel Hugh Moffett (1998:291-314) proposes four stages: the first Christian mission (635-649), persecution (656-712), recovery (712-781) and disappearance (781-980). As only the pre-781 presence was recorded in some detail thanks to the Xi'an Stele, Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit (1999:267, 282) simply divide the Tang church into two periods — appearance (before 781) and disappearance.

³⁸ Paul Pelliot 1996: Fig.2, Cols. 10-13.

had spent a few years translating religious texts into Chinese and discussing these texts with Tang Taizong, Aluoben won the emperor's trust, securing an edict that allowed him to begin the propagation of his religion in 638 by constructing a church building in Xi'an.

Admittedly, this record is over-concise. Some critical details are not clear. For example, who exactly was Aluoben? How did he establish contact with the Tang court? The paucity of the information has already caused some scholars to doubt the accuracy of Jingjing's narration of the early-seventh-century history almost 150 years later in 781 — for example, the grandiose reception might have been an exaggeration.³⁹ Nevertheless, it is true that Jingjing did redact some texts. The most obvious proof of this is the usage of the term *Daqin*, that, as will be shown, was widely used only after 745. Most likely, the first church building was designated a *Bosisi* (Persian Monastery) rather than *Daqinsi* (Daqin Monastery). Nonetheless, both the general conditions and other sources indicate that by and large this brief record seems accurate.

Firstly, conditions in the early seventh century seem to have been very favorable to the implantation of a new religion in Chinese society. The Tang dynasty at the time was a young court led by open-minded, strong rulers. These early Tang rulers were less extravagant and were more empathetic toward people. They often consulted court officials and were willing to follow professional advice. Internally, they reformed the government and encouraged agriculture, literature and trade; externally, they sought to improve relations with neighbors by diplomatic negotiations. Tang Taizong, for instance, is widely regarded as one of the greatest rulers in China's history. His rule became the exemplary model for future emperors. His policies were so effective that the Tang court quickly grew strong enough to bring changes into the Asian political arena. In 630, he brought Turkic powers under his rule and was given the title Heavenly Qaghan, as if he were the suzerain of all the Turkic peoples.⁴⁰

Secondly, several specific points contained in the Xi'an Stele are confirmed by other records. The most informative and important source, the Diffusion Edict, was also recorded in other sources like *The Tanghuiyao* 唐會要, an institutional history of the Tang dynasty compiled in 961. In all versions, the diffusion year (638), the construction site of the first church (the Yining quarter) and the number of the ordained monks (21) are consistent. As far as this edict,

³⁹ For more detail, see Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2011a:123-127, 2003: 57-61).

⁴⁰ For more details, see Denis Twitchett (2007:222) and Zhu Zhenhong 朱振宏 (2003).

or at least these detailed aspects, is concerned, Jingjing neither forged it nor made any serious redactions. The 638 Diffusion Edict can be safely used as a source.⁴¹

1.3.2 Expansion-setback-recovery (649-790s)

The fortunes of the Tang church in the period of expansion-setback-recovery are also recorded almost exclusively on the Xi'an Stele. Nevertheless, there are a few additional sources that yield interesting clues to endorse these findings. All these sources will be incorporated together in chronological order in this section.

After Taizong died in 649, his son Gaozong inherited many of his policies, one of which was that of religious tolerance. The Xi'an Stele confirms that Gaozong continued to patronize Christians, and he even bestowed a high title on Aluoben:⁴²

Gaozong, the great emperor, duly succeeded to the ancestors and embellished true principles. Not only did he have *Jingsi* [Christian monasteries] erected in each prefecture, but he also promoted Aluoben to be the State Great Protector. The law spread into ten provinces. The country enjoyed great prosperity and stability. Monasteries stood in one hundred cities. All families enjoyed the *jing* [Christian] blessings. (高宗大帝克恭繼祖潤色真宗而於諸州各置景寺仍崇阿羅本為鎮國大法主法流十道國富元休寺滿百城家殷景福)

Unquestionably the expansion documented is impressive. By the end of the seventh century, Christianity would be seen to have been spreading into many provinces of the Tang Empire. As some phrases like the “ten provinces” exactly match the administrative system of Tang China (that divided the Empire into ten provinces), it is an intriguing challenge to try to see how far Christianity actually penetrated into Tang China and if it exerted any influence on Chinese culture. The greatest problem is that these numbers and indications, like “each prefecture” and “one hundred cities”, cannot be taken at face value.⁴³ So far, no archeological evidence for the Tang church has been found in any Chinese cities other than Xi'an and Luoyang. These grandiose indications might, therefore, be little more than polite flattery of both the reigning dynasty and the Tang church. The text on the Stele is, of course, a form of court panegyric, and the choice of words might have done little more than add some extra color to a rather modest achievement.

⁴¹ Except for the usage of the terms *Daqin* and *Bosi*, other variations remain on the morphological level. The close similarity between the different versions has prompted Antonino Forte (1996b:349-373) to restore the full, original edict.

⁴² Paul Pelliot 1996: Fig.2, Cols. 15-16.

⁴³ For more discussions, including other numbers recorded on the Xi'an Stele, see Pénélope Riboud (2001:25-30), F.S. Drake (1936-1937), and Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2003:27-64).

Nonetheless, the fate of Christians changed dramatically after Tang Gaozong died in 683. Setbacks quickly presented themselves:⁴⁴

In the Shengli reign [698-700], the Buddhists seized the advantage and raised their voices [against Christians] in the Eastern Capital [Luoyang]. At the end of the Xiantian reign [713], the *xiashi* [Daoists] derided and slandered [Christians] in the Western Capital [Xi'an]. (聖曆年釋子用壯騰口於東周先天末下士大笑訕謗於西鎬)

Although neither the Stele nor other Chinese sources give any supplementary information and are silent about whether similar incidents occurred outside Luoyang and Xi'an, the inference that can be drawn from the sources discussed below is that the setback was in deadly earnest. The churches in the two capitals were damaged, if not ruined. They do not seem to have been restored until the 720s when efforts to make a recovery finally succeeded. Since the general atmosphere and religious policies changed abruptly when the Empress Wu seized the imperial power from the Li family, it seems that the Tang church did suffer severe duress in the period from the 690s to the 710s, and that the achievements of the earlier fifty years all threatened to come to naught.

The Empress Wu was an ambitious and intelligent woman, gifted with excellent judgment in politics and men. She was born into a rich family that had supported the first Tang emperor in his fight for the throne. At the age of fourteen, she was taken to the palace to be a low-ranking concubine of Taizong. When Taizong died, she married his son Gaozong, and finally became the empress in 655 after a series of bloody power struggles. After her second husband died, she gained full control over the court and her ambition seemed to know no bounds. She successively raised the rank of and then demoted her other two sons, Tang Zhongzong and Tang Ruizong. Finally, she wearied of this puppet show, took the title of Emperor 皇帝 herself and ascended the throne, not only removing the capital from Xi'an to Luoyang but also changing the title of the dynasty from Tang to Zhou in 690.⁴⁵

Understandably, such a usurpation by a female could not easily be tolerated in a patriarchal society. The Li family and orthodox royalists rebelled and instigated a number of *coups d'état*. Undeterred to secure her grip on power, the Empress Wu devised a series of strategies. On the one hand, she responded with ruthlessness and cruelty. Before she was deposed by a *coup d'état* led by her daughter Princess Taiping and her grandson, the future Emperor

⁴⁴ Paul Pelliot 1996: Fig.2, Col.16.

⁴⁵ For more introduction to the rise in power of Empress Wu and her reign, see N. Harry Rothschild (2015, 2008).

Xuanzong, in 705, she like all other male emperors ruled with an iron fist.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, she shrewdly realized that religion could benefit her ascendancy. With this in mind, she altered state religious policies and used Buddhism to legitimize her rule. In Tang China, Daoism had enjoyed a special status. Tang emperors claimed to be descendants of Li Er 李耳, the legendary founder and presiding deity of Daoism, who happened to have shared the same family name as that of the Tang royal family. For this reason, they had elevated Daoism to the status of a state cult.⁴⁷ In 666 Gaozong, for example, visited the temple of Li Er and created him “grandiose and primordial emperor” (太上玄元皇帝).⁴⁸ To ensure that her machinations were successful, Empress Wu deliberately reversed this policy by promoting Buddhism. Six months after her ascension, she “ordered: Buddhist doctrine ranks higher than the Daoist law, and the Buddhist monks and nuns take precedence over the Taoist priests and convents” (令釋教在道法之上, 僧尼處道士女冠之前).⁴⁹ Taking matters even further, she also utilized the Buddhist eschatological prophecy of Maitreya, a future Buddha of this world. It was foretold that this bodhisattva would be reincarnated as a female deity who would become the monarch of the entire world. She ordered that this prophecy be recorded in *The Dayunjing* 大雲經 and dispatched it throughout the empire.⁵⁰

It goes without saying that the change in state policy upset the religious status quo. The ascendancy of Buddhism on this surge of imperial favor triggered a large-scale reallocation of societal resources. The changed religious dynamic presented a competitive challenge not to mention a certain threat to other religions including Daoism. Minor beliefs like Christianity probably felt even more pressured than Daoism, especially given that it lost its imperial patronage in a period of political turmoil. The actual pressure, one should imagine, must have been much greater than the verbal threats recorded in the Xi'an Stele.

Of course, Christians sought measures to face these challenges and looked for ways to consolidate and revive the Tang church. One of the steps that they took was to seek outside assistance. The Xi'an Stele tells us that monks and noblemen arrived in China from the West and offered great help:⁵¹

Luohan, the head monk, and Jilie, the Great Virtue, together with the noblemen from the West and other eminent monks who had forsaken all earthly interests; all cooperated in

⁴⁶ For more details, see Charles Benn (2002:5).

⁴⁷ For a concise introduction of the Tang Daoism, see T.H. Barrett (1996).

⁴⁸ Liu Xu 劉昫 945/1975:90.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵⁰ Several copies of this text have been found in Dunhuang. For more details, see Antonino Forte (2005, 1988).

⁵¹ Paul Pelliot 1996: Fig.2, Cols.16-17.

restoring the fundamental principles and rebinding the broken ties. (有若僧首羅含大德及烈並金方貴緒物外高僧共振玄網俱維/絕紐)

Not much is known about this delegation. Some of its members must have been high-ranking and resourceful officials or diplomats. Their primary aim seems to have been to contact the Tang court and attempt to regain imperial patronage. And their strategy worked: the following passage on the Stele reveals that imperial patronage was resumed. Churches in the Tang capitals were repaired. Emperor Xuanzong commanded five of his brothers or the five kings in the following quotation to visit the church and bestowed his favor on the renovated church by sending portraits of deceased Tang emperors, all males of course. By the 740s, when the second delegation led by Jihe arrived in China from the West and was even granted the privilege of holding a service in the Chinese imperial palace, the Tang church would seem to have recovered from its previous setback:⁵²

Xuanzong, the Perfection of the Way Emperor, ordered the Ningguo King and four other kings to visit the monastery and set up the altars. The temporarily distorted beam of the Law was rectified; the momentarily turned stone of the Way was restored. At the beginning of the Tianbao reign [742-756], he commanded the General Gao Lishi to dispatch the portraits of the five sages [the previous five male emperors] to be placed in the monastery and bestowed one hundred rolls of silk [on it]. In the third year [744], Jihe from the country of *Daqin* examined the stars, chose an auspicious day and came to the court. Seventeen monks including Luohan and Pulun, were summoned as was Jihe, the Great Virtue, to perform religious services in the Xingqing Palace. The emperor personally wrote the calligraphy for the name of the monastery. The dragon [emperor's] writing was hung above the door. The writing was richly decorated, sparkling more brightly than the gleaming clouds; the writing of the wise pervaded space, rising and radiating as if vying with the sun. (玄宗至道皇帝令寧國等五王親臨福宇建立壇場法棟暫橈而更崇道石時傾而復正天寶初令大將軍高力士送五聖寫真寺內安置賜絹百匹[.....]三載大秦國有僧侶和瞻星向化望日朝尊詔僧羅含僧普論等一七人與大德侶和於興慶宮修功德於/是天題寺榜額戴龍書寶裝璀璨灼爍丹霞睿扎宏空騰凌激日)

The recovery seems to have culminated in a special edict issued by the Tang court in 745, ordering the designation of Christian church buildings to be changed from *Bosisi* to *Daqinsi*. This crucial edict is recorded in several Chinese sources that have been examined by Antonino Forte; the following version is from *The Tanghuiyao*:⁵³

The sutras and teaching of Persia that originated in *Daqin* had been propagated and practiced in China for a long time. Hence these had given their name to the first monasteries. If it is to be revealed to more people, however, it must follow its origins. Therefore, [the designation] *Bosisi* [Persian Monastery] in the two capitals will be changed to *Daqinsi* [*Daqin* Monastery]. The prefectures and counties that have [these monasteries] shall conform to this change. (波

⁵² *Ibid.*, Cols.17-18.

⁵³ Wang Pu 王溥 961/1955:864. There are a few other versions that are slightly different. They have been examined by Antonino Forte (1996b).

斯經教。出自大秦。傳習而來。久行中國。爰初建寺。因以為名。將欲示人。必修其本。其兩京波斯寺。宜改為大秦寺。天下諸府郡置[寺]者。亦准此。)

As it is the only eighth-century Chinese court document about Christianity that has come down to us, this edict has received considerable scholarly attention, much of it devoted to two interrelated questions: Why was it promulgated and why was the term *Daqin* advocated? For example, Antonino Forte states that “[it] may have been adopted just because by that time official Persian backing of the religion [Christianity] had already ceased. That was quite normal given the collapse of the country and the loss of any hope that the Sassanian dynasty would be restored.”⁵⁴ T.H. Barrett notes that the Byzantines were “seasoned international diplomats” and “were practising a culturally sensitive diplomacy in Asia” that suggests that they could have been involved. He argues:⁵⁵

If they felt any stake in the use of the name Da Qin, then it is possible that its use by Nestorians formed part of a deal for information in exchange for protection that could easily have been brokered in advance of the Christians' securing the edict of 745 by the Byzantine mission to China of 742, which certainly included an important cleric, according to the Chinese record.

It is certainly possible that politics played a role in the promotion of the name *Daqin* and the abandonment of the name *Bosi*, because by that time the Persian Empire had ceased to exist.⁵⁶ However, in view of the evidence on the Xi'an Stele, it is more likely that the Church of the East rather than Byzantium was involved in this development. As attested by the above records, at least two delegations arrived at Xi'an during this period: one sometime in the 710s and the other in 744. Although there is no record that the first team knew about and communicated with the second team, it would not be a complete leap in the dark to assume that some members of the first team went back to and briefed the West on the difficult situation in which the Tang Church found itself; while some would have been ordered to remain in China to liaise between the East and the West. Luohan, for instance, seems to have been responsible for liaising. With the assistance of Luohan who had remained in China for three decades, Jihe could have effortlessly updated the Chinese court on the latest

⁵⁴ Antonino Forte 1996b:364.

⁵⁵ T.H. Barrett 2002:560.

⁵⁶ For more details, see David Wilmshurst (2011:121-124) and Pénélope Riboud (2001:18, 20).

developments in the West. Working together, these two Christians could have successfully persuaded the Tang court to abandon the term *Bosi* and use the term *Daqin* instead in 745.⁵⁷

This recovery of the Tang church seems to have led to a period of expansion in the second half of the century. Of this the Xi'an Stele says: Tang Suzong permitted “*Jingsi* [Christian monasteries] to be re-erected in Lingwu and the other four counties” (於靈武等五郡重立景寺); Tang Daizong bestowed incense and food on the Tang church.⁵⁸ Moreover, some Christians became quite famous. Yisi 伊斯, for instance, came from Central Asia and served in the imperial army led by Guo Ziyi 郭子儀, who played a critical role in crushing the An Lushan Rebellion. Probably in appreciation of his loyalty and medical skills, Yisi was summoned by Tang Suzong. Later, he was also rewarded with high-ranking titles and money that enabled him to renovate old churches, take care of the poor, bury the dead and finance the erection of the Stele in 781.⁵⁹ Yisi's son, Jingjing, seems to have been familiar with religious circles. He cooperated with the Buddhist missionary Prajna in the translation of the Buddhist sutras around 786, but the quality of their translations was unsatisfactory and their efforts were rejected by the Tang court. This cooperation is documented in *The Datang Zhenyuan xu Kaiyuan shijiaolu* composed by Yuanzhao in 794.⁶⁰

After petitioning to translate the sutras, [Prajna] began working with Jingjing, the Persian monk in the *Daqin* Monastery, rendering the Satparamita-sutra from a foreign language into seven rolls. At that time, however, Prajna was not familiar with this language, nor did he understand Chinese; Jingjing could not read Sanskrit, nor understand the Buddhist teachings. They claimed that the text had been translated, but they had not extracted even half the meaning. They [...] submitted the translation in the hope of propagating the text. The Emperor [Tang Dezong] was intelligent, wise and accomplished. He revered the Buddhist canons and found out that the translation made no sense and the wording was confusing. Moreover, Buddha's monastery and the *Daqin* Monastery are located in different places. Their practices are diametrically opposed to each other. Jingjing was bound to preach the teaching of the Messiah, and the Buddhist monks had to promulgate the sutras of the Buddha. [The Emperor ...] commanded [others] to rework the text and submit a retranslation. (〔般若〕請譯佛經。乃與大秦寺波斯僧景淨。依胡本六波羅蜜譯成七卷。時為般若不諳胡語。復未解唐言。景淨不識梵文。復未明釋教。雖稱傳譯未獲半珠。[.....] 錄表聞奏。意望流行。聖上睿哲文明允恭釋典。察其所譯理昧詞疏。且夫釋氏伽藍大秦僧寺居止既別。行法全乖。景淨應傳彌尸訶教。沙門釋子弘闡佛經。[.....] 重更翻譯訖聞奏。)

⁵⁷ This still does not eradicate the problem of the place to which the term *Daqin* actually refers. Although *Daqin* is often associated with Rome, many Chinese texts use this term inconsistently and vaguely to refer to some country to the west of China. In some Daoist sources, as pointed out by T.H. Barrett (2002:558-559), *Daqin* is not even a real country; it is “a specifically Daoist utopia” in the West, for which the “obvious candidate is Byzantium”. For a broader discussion of the term *Daqin*, see Samuel N.C. Lieu (2013:123-132).

⁵⁸ Paul Pelliot 1996: Fig.2, Col.20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Cols.22-25. The then ruling emperor was Tang Dezong. For the discussions of Yisi, see Max Deeg (2013) and Nie Zhijun 翟志軍 (2010:215-220, 2008).

⁶⁰ Prajna arrived China in 782. The translation event took place after Prajna had found his relatives and settled down in 786 (貞元二祀). The text here is cited from http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T55/2156_001.htm.

1.3.3 The so-called disappearance (800-840s)

As mentioned several times above, the conventional narrative of the first presence of Christianity in China is that the Tang church disappeared in the ninth century. The 845 Intolerance Edict, Pénélope Riboud points out, “is commonly taken as marking the end of the first period of Christianity in China proper.”⁶¹ As attested by A.C. Moule’s verdict quoted at the beginning of the chapter, it is maintained that not a single Christian could be found in the heartland of China from the ninth century and thereafter.

It is not surprising that this has led to a preoccupation with the so-called “failure” of the Tang church.⁶² Pondering the reasons for its eclipse, some scholars assert that an overdependence on too many Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian expressions watered down the theology and this heavy borrowing in its turn weakened the Christians’ identity. Others accuse the Tang church of relying too much on imperial patronage. On the other hand, many argue that, besides any exacerbation that might have been caused by religious and theological issues, the disappearance was an extremely complex matter and involved larger historical and societal developments.⁶³

Although the findings of this dissertation challenge this narrative of disappearance, it is essential to note that two principal reasons have inspired this theory. The first is related to sources. Before the 1980s, not a single ninth-century Chinese Christian source was known. At the same time, all the then known sources (including the 845 Intolerance Edict) do suggest a tragic fate. Two Arabic sources, for instance, indicate that the Tang Christians died out. A travel account authored by Abu Zayd in the tenth century notes that many Tang Christians did not survive the civil strife that followed the collapse of the court. Abu Zayd reports that “120,000” Muslims, Jews, Mazdeans and Christians were slaughtered in 879 when rebels led by Huang Chao 黃巢 sacked Guangzhou, a port city in South China.⁶⁴ The other account, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm*, a tenth-century survey of Muslim culture, also suggests that Christians

⁶¹ Pénélope Riboud 2001:8. This edict is fairly long, and some extra clues are supplemented by Chinese annals and by some passages written by the incumbent minister Li Deyu 李德裕. All these records have been reprinted by P.Y. Saeki (1916:281-287). The parts concerned with Christianity were translated into English by John Foster (1939:158-162).

⁶² Pénélope Riboud 2001:35. For more details, see also Samuel Hugh Moffett (1998:303) and Lin Wushu 林悟殊 (2003:85-119).

⁶³ For instance, P.Y. Saeki (1955:(6)-(7)) offers a comprehensive cluster of nine interrelated reasons, of which the first eight are directly related to characteristics of the Tang church that supposedly was too heavily dependent on outside factors.

⁶⁴ Cited from Pénélope Riboud (2001:28). This travelogue is *Ancient Accounts of India and China*.

had all but disappeared. The author, Ibn al-Nadim, was told by a Christian monk from the southern Arabian city Najran who just returned from China that “Christians who used to be in the land of China had disappeared and perished for various reasons, so that only one man remained in the entire country”.⁶⁵ Moreover, the short Chinese essay, *The Chongyansi beiming bingxu*, composed in 824 to commemorate the renovation of the Buddhist Chongyansi Monastery, also indicates that the Christian community had been rather small and its presence was not at all impressive.⁶⁶

The current court follows but surpasses medieval times. It also tolerates the advent of various foreign teachings that include Manichaeism, Daqin [Christianity] and Zoroastrianism. All the three barbarian monasteries under Heaven [Tang China], when taken together, are not enough to equal the number of our Buddhist monasteries in one small city. (國朝沿近古而有加焉。亦容雜夷而來者。有摩尼焉。大秦焉。祆神焉。合天下三夷寺。不足當吾釋寺一小邑之數也。)

The second reason has to do with political instability. By the second half of the ninth century, the Tang government was being openly challenged by powerful local warlords, and the Tang court seemed to be nearing its end. Consequently historians label this period the late Tang. In 907, the last emperor was poisoned at the age of fifteen, and China's central plains descended into chaos. During the ensuing fifty years or so, five dynasties were established in the North and ten states in the South only to fall again, succeeding one another in quick succession, and it is from them that the usual name of this period, the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, is derived. Stability was only gradually restored after 960 when Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤 founded the Song dynasty that spent roughly the next three decades unifying China's heartland. This instability, many scholars believe, could have inflicted further, perhaps fatal, damage upon the already weakened Tang church.

These arguments, although widely shared, are not convincing. The ancient sources are anything but clear. All, like the comment about the last Christian, seem to be exaggerated. Moreover, since a few Christian stones have recently been excavated in Xi'an and Luoyang, the dismal fate of the people known as the Tang Christians requires some reconsideration. These stones demonstrate that a number of rich Christian families resided in the two capitals of the Tang Empire and that there was at least one church building in each capital in the first half of the ninth century. Given that the 845 edict did not target these Christian families, Christian ecclesiastics could have left their churches or monasteries and returned to the

⁶⁵ Ibn al-Nadim 1970:837.

⁶⁶ Dong Gao 董誥 1819/1983:7498.

bosom of their lay families from where they could have continued to preach their faith. In other words, Christians could have still been living in the Tang capitals or their vicinities after 845. As the Conclusion to this dissertation will revisit this argument, this section will just cast a swift eye over what these stones add to the sum of our knowledge of Christianity in Tang China.

The early-ninth-century Christian presence in Xi'an is confirmed by the stone *Mi Jifen muzhi*, on which fewer than 500 characters, some of them illegible, have been carved. The inscription briefly records the life of Mi Jifen who was buried in 806. It was found in 1955 but failed to attract much attention until Ge Chengyong re-examined it in 2001 and Matteo Nicolini-Zani translated Ge Chengyong's article into English in 2004.⁶⁷ As the inscription records that Mi Jifen had two sons and "the younger is the monk Siyuan who resides in the Daqinsi" (幼曰僧思圓住大秦寺), the Christian attribution of this stone is irrefutable.⁶⁸

The presence of Christians in Luoyang is attested by two stones. The first is that known as *Hua Xian muzhi*. This tombstone was found in 2010; the preliminary examination was conducted by Mao Yangguang and Wu Changxing.⁶⁹ The inscription contains almost 600 characters, giving a brief overview of the life of Hua Xian. According to the inscription, Hua Xian remained aloof from worldly concerns, and did not pursue higher governmental posts. Instead he chose to be with his family. He died of an illness at his home in Luoyang and was buried in 828. The inscription on the stone states that Hua Xian was a pious Christian who "often cleansed his heart to serve the *Jingzun* [the Messiah] and strictly observed the teaching" (常洗心事景尊, 竭奉教理。).⁷⁰ The nomenclature *Jingzun* was a key term favored by Tang Christians to refer to the Messiah. The 781 Xi'an Stele, for example, uses this phrase: "Therefore, my one-in-three divided, and the Jingzun Messiah concealed His true majesty and was born like a man" (於是我三一分身景尊彌施訶戢隱真威同人出代).⁷¹ Pertinently, the phrase *Jingsi* 景寺 that occurs in the final verse of the inscription was also used several times in the paragraphs from the Xi'an Stele quoted above. Every time it occurs it refers to a church building or monastery.⁷²

⁶⁷ Ge Chengyong 2004; Ge Chengyong 葛承雍 2001.

⁶⁸ Ge Chengyong 葛承雍 2001:182.

⁶⁹ Wu Changxing 吳昶興 2015a:247-266, 2015b:197-198; Mao Yangguang 毛陽光 2014. The tombstone of Hua Xian's wife was also discovered at the same time. Sadly, neither inscription documents any religious faith. For the rubbings, see Mao Yangguang 毛陽光 and Yu Fuwei 余扶危 (2013:534-535, 546-547).

⁷⁰ Cited from Mao Yangguang 毛陽光 (2014:85).

⁷¹ Paul Pelliot 1996: Fig.2, Col.6.

⁷² For a good list of the use of the character *jing* 景 on the Xi'an Stele, see Xu Longfei (2004:115).

The second stone is the Luoyang Pillar — see Figure 1.3.⁷³ It was unearthed in Luoyang in 2006 and has caused quite a stir around the world. So far, a number of English and Chinese articles have been published about it; some accompanied by fine plates have been collected into a volume by Ge Chengyong.⁷⁴ The pillar is made of limestone and is carved into an irregular octagonal prism. The surviving part is the top half, measuring 40 centimeters in diameter and about 70 centimeters in height.⁷⁵ As indicated by the Buddhist term *jingchuang* (經幢), the stone was not a gravestone buried underground but a pillar erected above the ground, probably directly in front of the tomb.



Figure 1.3 The Luoyang Pillar

Structurally, the pillar can be divided into four parts. The first part, as indicated in Figure 1.3, consists of its top faces that are elaborately decorated with various images including flying human figures and crosses — for the cross rubbings, see also Figures 6.10 b-c. The second part is its main body. Faces 1-4 are inscribed with a short religious text (431 characters), *The Sutra of Origin of Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao* 大秦景教宣元至本經. Attached to this religious text is the third part, *The Pillar Epithet of the Sutra of the Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao* 大秦景教宣元至本經幢記, that is carved on Faces 5-6. It consists of 364 characters,

⁷³ The picture shows Faces 5, 6 and 7 (anti-clockwise). It has been downloaded from the website of the *Sichou zhilu* 絲綢之路, <http://www.siluyou.org/index/citywwinfo/id/237.html>.

⁷⁴ Ge Chengyong 葛承雍 2009. For the English introductions, see Ge Chengyong (2013), Matteo Nicolini-Zani (2013b, 2009), Zhang Naizhu (2013), and Li Tang (2009).

⁷⁵ The height of each face varies from 60 centimeters to 85 centimeters. For detailed measurements, see Luo Zhao 羅炤 (2007:100, note 1).

documenting the erection of this pillar. The fourth part is the year of the burial 829 that is inscribed at the top of Face 8.⁷⁶

Although the loss of the pillar's lower part precludes our knowledge of some details, its Christian attribution is not contested. Firstly, the crosses, as argued in Chapter 6, are reproduced and decorated in the style preferred by the Church of the East. Secondly, the religious text can be matched to the Dunhuang manuscript, *The Sutra of the Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao*. In fact, the two sources seem to be two versions of the same text. Only a few characters are different, probably because the original text was copied many times and fell victim to inevitable scribal errors. As the differences are limited to the morphological level, many scholars have been tempted to reconstruct an original Tang text.⁷⁷ Finally, four people from the local Daqin Monastery are listed although it is very hard to decipher these names. They are the monk Qingsu (景僧清素), who seems to have been the brother of the deceased, "Xuanying, Harmony of the Doctrine, head of the monastery, whose secular family name was Mi" (寺主法和玄應俗姓米), "Xuanqing, Great Virtue of the Respect-Inspiring Deportment, whose secular family name was Mi" (威儀大德玄慶俗姓米) and "Zhitong, Great Virtue of the Nine Grades, whose secular family was Kang" (九階大德志通俗姓康).⁷⁸

Besides these examples, there is another questionable tombstone, that of *Li Su muzhi*. The inscription infers that Li Su was a blood nephew of a Persian king. His family had moved to China in the mid-eighth century when his grandfather was sent to the Tang court as a 'hostage' and had had the family name Li bestowed on him. Li Su himself was an excellent astronomer and served in the Tang astronomical bureau for half a century. He died in 818 and was buried alongside his wife, whose tombstone was also unearthed in Xi'an in 1980.

For some time, *Li Su muzhi* did not attract much attention. Recently, however, Rong Xinjiang, with whom Pénélope Riboud concurs, has argued that Li Su was a Christian and that the Li family constituted a big Christian house.⁷⁹ He adduces four pieces of evidence to support his argument. 1. All Li Su's six sons' names contain the character *jing* 景, that, as indicated above, was used as a key term by Tang Christians. 2. *The Simenjing* 四門經, a text on astronomy translated into Chinese by Li Su, is also listed in the Christian manuscript P.3847. 3. At the

⁷⁶ The Pillar bears another important date, 815 (元和九年). This date might have been the time the anonymous deceased died. See also Matteo Nicolini-Zani (2013b, 2009) and Nie Zhijun 聶志軍 (2014; 2010:054-063).

⁷⁷ For more details and the reconstructed version, see Wu Changxing 吳昶興 (2015c:137-171), Nie Zhijun 聶志軍 (2010: 020, 360-361); Lin Wushu 林悟殊 and Yin Xiaoping 殷小平 (2008:329-335).

⁷⁸ All these names are listed in the lower part of Face 8. They have been studied by Matteo Nicolini-Zani (2013b:145-149; 2009:122-124).

⁷⁹ Pénélope Riboud 2015:46; Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 2001:254-257.

time that Christians erected the Xi'an Stele in 781, Li Su and his family were resident in Xi'an.

4. Li Su's courtesy name, Wenzhen 文貞, also appears on the Xi'an Stele, “羅僧文貞” (Luka Monk Wenzhen). Therefore, Li Su could have been this Christian monk named Luka in Syriac.

As interesting as all of these are, the evidence still remains inconclusive. The association between the information contained in other sources and the clues extracted from the *Li Su muzhi* is tenuous. The character *jing* and the name Wenzhen, as Wu Changxing has already pointed out, are common Chinese characters. Many people used these characters as or in their given names.⁸⁰ That Li Su lived in Xi'an when Christians erected the Xi'an Stele is of no further significance, since it could well have been a coincidence. Turning to Li Su's translation, it is rather complex. The translated source analyzed by Rong Xinjiang is entitled *Yusi simengjing* 耶斯四門經. Wu Qiyu argues that it is not the same as the Christian source *The Simenjing*.⁸¹ More importantly, both Li Su's translated work and the Christian text have been lost. Only their titles are known to us and it is not safe to equate one source with the other simply because their titles are similar. Lastly, given that Li Su's family was very successful and served the court for almost a century, it is odd that neither the Chinese historical annals examined by Rong Xinjiang, nor Li Su's tombstone nor his wife's gravestone mention anything about their religion.⁸² In light of all of this, there is very little compelling evidence to continue to claim that Li Su was a Christian.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter has not exhausted every aspect of the conventional historiography of China's pre-twelfth-century Christianity. Nevertheless, it has attempted to present some crucial evidence that has supported the traditional narrative, showing why the Christian texts are widely believed to have been produced between the 635 and 845.

Christians could have entered China before 635 as the Church of the East gradually expanded toward China's western borders. However, stable Christian communities did not emerge from such occasional visits before the seventh century. It is therefore inconceivable that an individual Christian would have received a theological training adequate to translate or

⁸⁰ Wu Changxing 吳昶興 2015b:200.

⁸¹ Wu Qiyu 吳其昱 (2001:41-42) argues that *Yusi simengjing* 耶斯四門經 is an Indian source translated into Chinese. The Christian source *The Simenjing* could have been translated from the *Tetrabiblos*, a Greek text on the philosophy and practice of astrology written by the Alexandrian scholar Claudius Ptolemy in the second century.

⁸² For the transcriptions and rubbings of these two stones, see Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 (2001:239-243).

compose these religious texts, or indeed that a small group of believers would have felt the need to produce these Chinese manuscripts.

Although the Tang church is not documented in detail, its presence is obvious. The evidence is diverse and has been accumulating over the past four hundred years. There is no doubt that Christianity gained an institutional presence in China under the Tang Dynasty. The Christians arrived in 635 and began to diffuse their faith in 638. Despite the setbacks in Empress Wu's reign, by and large the Tang church enjoyed imperial patronage, appearing to make considerable advances in Tang China. Sadly, according to the traditional understanding, the 845 Intolerance Edit inflicted unprecedented damage on the Tang church. Consequently, Christianity disappeared in China that had been thrown into turmoil by the chaos that ensued after the collapse of the late-ninth-century Tang court. By the time the Song dynasty had gradually stabilized the country in 960, it is said that not a single Christian remained in China. Therefore many scholars assume that not a single Christian text was composed between the second half of the ninth century and the early eleventh century.

However, newly excavated stones indicate quite clearly that there were Christian families living in China around the area of the capital in the ninth century. It therefore behooves us to take a closer look at what has been called the disappearance of the Tang church and hence the traditional chronology of the seven Dunhuang Christian manuscripts and these topics will be examined in the following chapters.