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

Sun, J.

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Author: Sun, Jianqiang

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Conclusions and Implications

When I began to investigate the first statement of Christian faith in China, I had not expected that the re-reading of the seven putative earliest Christian manuscripts removed from Dunhuang Cave 17 in 1900 would turn into such an empirical, philological and technical undertaking. My initial goal was to explain how minorities represented their religious beliefs in a powerful culture through translation. Nevertheless, a thorough perusal of these manuscripts revealed that they presented many unsolved problems and that, if not tackled, these obstacles will result in an unconsciously gerrymandering of the sources.

One of the most salient stumbling-blocks is their chronology. In the field, these manuscripts — more precisely, the eight titled texts written on them — are currently assumed to be sources used by the Tang church, an offshoot of the Church of the East that entered China in 635 and allegedly disappeared after 845. However, this chronology has never been substantiated by any hard evidence. The prevailing dating in these primary sources, as pointed out by Matteo Nicolini-Zani, is “based on an almost uncritical acceptance of a small amount of uncertain data and on the passive transmission of many unfounded assumptions.”¹

Therefore, this project abandoned the interpretative, theoretical and narrative approach, and turned instead to digging out solid evidence that would provide a sound foundation for the dating of all the earliest Chinese Christian manuscripts. Now this work has drawn to an end, the time has come to propose a new chronology of these manuscripts and to anticipate some of the directions in which future scholarship might go.

1 A new chronology

This research reveals a new chronology that differs radically from the traditional dating. In order to refine the difference, this section will adhere to the conventional order of discussing these manuscripts and pull the findings together so as to assign new dates to each source.

1.1 The date of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*

Very probably, *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* were newly written by one scribe in the period of Late-Tang, Five-Dynasties and Early-Song, say between 800 and the early eleventh century. This conclusion rests on five statements, each building on its predecessor.

¹ Matteo Nicolini-Zani 2006:38.

The first statement is that the two manuscripts could only have been made after Christianity was first introduced to China. The postulation that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* were made *before* the founding of the Tang church must be abandoned. The main reasons for this assertion are offered in Chapters 1 and 2.

Tracing the earliest introduction of Christianity to China, Chapter 1 demonstrates that a pre-seventh-century presence is hypothetical and that the Tang church is still the first clear evidence of the presence of Christianity in China. The chapter points out that conditions in the seventh century would have favored such a venture. The Church of the East had been strengthened in the wake of the Nestorian controversy centered on Christology that erupted in the fifth century and had established several metropolitans in Central Asia. Meanwhile, China was unified by the Li family that established the Tang Dynasty in 618, had by and large embraced an open worldview and welcomed many immigrants from far and wide in Asia. Importantly, the contemporaneous Tang evidence, although not ample, is diverse and has been accumulating over the past 400 years. There are stone inscriptions, religious texts, Tang edicts and a few sporadic clues contained in Chinese annals and other sources. Despite the fact that many details still remain unclear, the presence of the Tang church and such specific dates as the year 638 when the Tang court officially consented to Aluoben propagating his faith are undeniable and have been confirmed by other sources.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* are indisputably ancient Christian manuscripts. The codicological features suggest that they are common Dunhuang manuscripts. The synopsis reveals that they are religious texts and are largely intelligible. The former narrates Gospel stories in a fairly detailed way. Generally speaking, it can be matched to biblical teachings. The latter, although its three essays have been put in the wrong order, is devoted to explaining one theme, One God, and some parts of its third essay can also be matched to Gospel stories.

Consequently, *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* were not made before Christianity gained an institutional profile in China, that is, in the Tang period. Intellectually the creation (translation) of two such long sources would have required a considerable amount of theological training and, more pragmatically, financial support. In pre-seventh-century China, it is inconceivable that stable Christian communities would have been able to have found its feet simply on the basis of some occasional visits by individual Christian travelers. Before the Tang church, there would have been no need to make religious texts in Chinese. These two

texts can only have been created when there was a community both stable and sizable enough to need to use Chinese texts to nourish its faith.

The second statement about the new dating for *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* is that their traditional chronology is wrong. The two existing manuscripts were not created by the first missionary, Aluoben, in 635-638 and 641 respectively. They cannot have been the originals that were used by Aluoben to discuss his religion with the second Tang emperor, Taizong. Three reasons support this refutation.

The first reason is that the traditional dating is not supported by any evidence. As argued in Chapter 2, it does touch upon the possibility, suggested by the historical event: Aluoben did translate some texts. This event is documented by the 781 Xi'an Stele and the colophon of manuscript P.3847. However, neither source specifies that *The Messiah Sutra* or *On One God* was among these texts, let alone that the two surviving sources are the very versions sanctioned by Tang Taizong. In addition, as shown in Chapter 6, *The Sutra of Reverence* contained in P.3847 also strongly suggests that the two sources were not made by Aluoben. Although it lists thirty-five titles of sources that were made by Aluoben and Jingjing, strangely enough *The Sutra of Reverence* does not record the titles of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*.

The second reason is that the customary argumentation is not convincing. As analyzed in Chapter 2, the date of *The Messiah Sutra* (635-638) is based on the date of *On One God* (641). However, Haneda Toru, who first noted the Chinese numeral 641, was not confident about this date for *On One God*. Although he clearly knew that the two sources were written in the same hand, Haneda Toru never assigned the date of *On One God* (641) to *The Messiah Sutra*. Instead, his argument was that *The Messiah Sutra* had been made before the mid-Tang (mid-eighth century). The nub of the problem is that the original context in which the numeral 641 is mentioned is far from clear. It is impossible to determine whether this numeral refers to a specific year or to a time-span. Furthermore, there is no way of knowing whether the point of reference is the death of Jesus Christ or some other event. In other words, Haneda Toru's tentative dating of *On One God* is taken for granted as a fact, an acceptance that in its turn fuels speculations about the date of *The Messiah Sutra*. Moreover, the historical, philological and doctrinal aspects examined by P.Y. Saeki, who proposed that *The Messiah Sutra* was older than *On One God*, are dubious. As pointed out in Chapter 2, these three arguments do not stand up to closer scrutiny. By and large P.Y. Saeki's observation rests upon faulty premises

and fallacious reasoning, for instance, the out-dated idea that translation is a progressive process and the later translation would necessarily be better than the earlier translation.

The third reason for rejecting the older date of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* is that the alleged author, Aluoben, would have not only offended his great patron, Tang Taizong, but also greatly anticipated his time by using the taboo forms of complex characters. Chapter 3 shows that these two documents are inconsistent in their avoidance of Tang Taizong's name. On the one hand, *shi* 世 and *min* 民 are not tabooed, and *shi* and *min* 愍 occur in their normal forms. On the other hand, Tang Taizong's name, demonstrated by three complex characters, *die* 牒, *qi* 棄 (from *On One God*) and *hun* 昏 (from *The Messiah Sutra*), was indeed tabooed. In the original manuscripts, for instance, the right top element of *die* 牒 was changed into 云. Given that name taboo was a demanding, enduring tradition, this egregious violation reveals that the two Christian manuscripts could not have been the versions that were presented to the Tang court. In fact, the method of avoiding complex characters, *gaijian*, was only officially promulgated in 658 by Tang Taizong's son, Tang Gaozong. It was a new technique. It differs from the *quebi* method, whose first instance is dated 648. The promulgation of the *gaijian* method is recorded in *The Jitangshu* and is also confirmed by inscriptions on Tang tombstones carved between 618 and the 660s. In the five volumes of rubbings examined in the course of this research, the taboo forms of *die* 牒, *hun* 昏 and *die* 諫 do not occur on any pre-658 stones. Had he been the author, it would seem that Aluoben was far ahead of his time.

The third statement I want to make about the new date of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* is that they were not copied between the 650s and the 760s or indeed soon after. There are four reasons for this assumption. The first three are offered in Chapter 4. First and foremost, neither of the two sources avoids *zhi* 治, the given name of Tang Gaozong. *On One God* actually employs the very orthodox form of *zhi*. The second reason is the non-taboo of Empress Wu's name, *zhao* 曩, and their neglect of Wu's New Forms. Between 689 and 690, Empress Wu introduced eighteen new forms of seventeen characters in five consecutive batches. As she promoted these new forms for political reasons and with the full panoply of state power behind her, all new forms were widely accepted and used, quickly replacing their orthodox orthographies. Among 422 tombstones carved between 689 and 704, only one inscription fails to employ any of these new forms. All other 421 inscriptions adhere strictly to the prescriptive edicts. In stark contrast to these stones, neither *The Messiah Sutra* nor *On One God* adopts any of these new forms. All the characters that correspond to the new forms

have been written their orthodox orthographies. The only suspicious case, 惡 might have been the new form of *chen* but is demonstrated to be a scribal error of *e* 惡. The third reason is that neither source avoids the name of Tang Xuanzong, *longji* 隆基. In *On One God*, the character *ji* 基 is written in the orthodox form. The fourth reason, as argued in Chapter 1, is that the Tang church of this period initially enjoyed an impressive rise during the reign of Tang Gaozong, who bestowed a high official title on Aluoben. However, it suffered serious setbacks when Empress Wu took over rule in China and reversed the religious policy. Although Christians made endeavors to stabilize the position of the church and did regain Tang Xuanzong's patronage in the 720s, the recovery was modest and of short duration. During the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763) when the Tang court had to flee, China's heartland was ravaged, and the Tang church probably did not have sufficient resources to re-establish itself properly.

The fourth finding to support the new timeline of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* is that their texts were newly created no earlier than the Late-Tang and the Five-Dynasties period. This is demonstrated by their use of passives. As argued in Chapter 5, the frequency of the employment of passive markers in the two Christian sources matches the common usage in the Late-Tang and Five-Dynasties period. In the eighth century and thereafter, the changes in the way Chinese passive was indicated are pretty obvious and the rise of *bei* is irrefutable. Whereas the use of *yu* and *jian* had almost disappeared and *wei* continued to fall, *bei* was asserting itself everywhere. In poems composed by Li Bai and Du Fu in the first half of the eighth century, 40 percent of passive sentences are *bei* constructions. In Bai Juyi's poems, composed somewhat later between the end of the eighth century and the early ninth century, 70 percent of passive examples are *bei* constructions. Toward the middle of the tenth century, *yu* and *jian* had died out, *wei* occurred only spasmodically and more than 90 percent of all occurrences contained *bei*. In a nutshell, *bei* was the dominant marker. By the early eleventh century, *bei* seems to have been the only passive indicator applied by Chinese users. Turning to the use of the passive in *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God*, the proportion of the use of *bei* is 90 percent that is much higher than of its occurrence in Li Bai's and Du Fu's poems. It even exceeds its use in Bai Juyi's poems and essays, approaching the number of occurrences of the passive in the mid-tenth century source *The Zutangji* (94%).

Moreover, the use of the rare order '*bei* + verb + *jiangqu*' clearly indicates that the two Christian texts were not redacted. The coalescence of the '*bei* + verb' order with *jiangqu* had been introduced in the fifth century. All pre-eighth-century examples are of the '*bei* + verb1 +

verb2' order, in which *jiangqu* is a verb. As *jiangqu* lost its verbal status in the eighth century and was reduced to an ending, the coalescence developed into the 'bei + verb + *jiangqu*' order. During the following centuries, this new order continued to expand. Examples can be found in sources made not only in Dunhuang but also in the Chinese heartlands and on the southern Chinese coast. Nevertheless, before the twelfth century, its use remained fairly limited. Most sources yield only one occurrence. In *On One God*, however, not only is this order used more frequently than in other sources, in the three instances in which it does occur it also employs *jiangqu* as an ending rather than as a verb. Given this fact, it is strange that someone who seems to have had a marked tendency to use this particular order would have intentionally employed it to replace the original passive sentences of the pre-eight-century sources. The most plausible explanation for the use of this rare order is that it was adopted naturally in conformity with the then general practice. In other words, the two Christian texts were newly created when the 'bei + verb + *jiangqu*' order was in common use.

The fifth statement to buttress the new chronology of *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* is that the strong possibility that the manuscripts were newly created between the Late-Tang and Five-Dynasties period and the sealing off of Dunhuang Cave 17. Besides the fourth statement, two other arguments support this inference. The first of these is related to the inconsistency of the tabooing Tang Taizong's name. As said in Chapter 3, Tang Taizong's name was widely avoided throughout Tang China, and it even remained tabooed for a while after the Tang had collapsed. Pertinently, the taboo forms of complex characters had been being used so long that they seem to have become accepted as common forms, frequently employed alongside their orthodox orthographies. The taboo forms of these complex characters including *die* 𣦵 and *hun* 昏 that occur in the Christian documents were, as observed by a thirteen-century official Zhang Shinan, still being resorted to on an impressive scale in his own time. Therefore, the inconsistency in the observance of the taboo suggests that the Christian manuscripts could have been made long after Tang Taizong died, or in a very much later time when the force of the taboo had either waned or had been officially abandoned.

The fifth statement is given even more support by the recorded pre-twelfth-century presence of Dunhuang Christians. As argued in Chapter 6, Christians first appeared in Dunhuang after the eighth century. A seventh-century presence has not been confirmed. Should *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* have been made in the seventh century, these two Christian sources would seem to have been completely isolated instances of Christian writings. Apart from

these two sources, no other contemporaneous texts have been found. Cogently, not a single clue contained in any evidence found in Dunhuang can be dated to the seventh century. Conversely, if *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* are shown to be much more recent, the two sources look far less isolated. The closer we approach the time of the closure of the Dunhuang Cave 17 in the early eleventh century, the less the isolation of the two sources becomes. Especially from the Late-Tang and Five Dynasties period (the ninth century and thereafter), the wealth of evidence grows and the presence seems more diversified. Secular Sogdian sources demonstrate that Christians in Dunhuang were in contact with the outside world and this knowledge opens the door to the strong possibility that new Christians were then coming to China from the West. Despite this influx of newcomers, Chinese religious texts and silk paintings would also seem to indicate that some local Christians were descendants of the original adherents of the Tang church. Given this continuous presence, *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* could be just two among many other sources made by Dunhuang Christians in a later period.

1.2 Kojima Forgeries A and B

Kojima Manuscripts A and B are not Tang texts but modern forgeries. Not only do the manuscripts themselves contain inexplicable variations, a number of critical points in their earlier contextualization also cannot be accounted for.

The most salient point in this argument is that their authenticity has been doubted by scholars ever since their first publications. Although P.Y. Saeki published them as Tang texts that bear the dates 720 and 717 respectively, Haneda Toru was chary about endorsing this opinion. He noticed that the use of *Daqin* predates the Chinese Designation-change Edict promulgated in 745.

The second point is that the latest research has confirmed Haneda Toru's suspicion. Scholars reiterate the textual variations by demonstrating the ways in which the Kojima Forgeries A and B differ from other Christians sources in terms of the use of some key theological terms like Messiah and God. They also reveal that other points, although accepted, are puzzling. They have discovered that Li Shengduo or the larger Li family from whom Yasushi Kojima allegedly purchased the two sources in the 1940s did not own these two manuscripts. The actual slip that was supposedly written by Li Shengduo himself does not match his calligraphy. Strangely, this important piece of evidence was printed by Haneda Toru, but it was never noted by P.Y. Saeki and has now long been lost.

Thirdly, as demonstrated in Chapter 6, other points are highly suspicious. P.Y. Saeki was not clear about when he firstly learnt of (the photos of) the manuscripts. He never bothered to clarify whether it was 1943, 1944 or 1947. Compounding this uncertainty is the fact that the Japanese collector Yasushi Kojima remains a mysterious figure. Both Haneda Toru and P.Y. Saeki did claim that Yasushi Kojima was their friend, but it seems that neither of them actually knew him and, when it is all said and done, they barely mention him. Moreover, for some mysterious reason Yasushi Kojima sent two different sets of photos to Haneda Toru and P.Y. Saeki simultaneously, and he, it appears, wanted to keep both his recipients in the dark about each other. As stated in Chapter 6, Haneda Toru certainly had no idea that P.Y. Saeki had also received the photos.

In light of these arguments, it is reasonable to believe that Kojima Forgeries A and B were made in the first half of the twentieth century and therefore they cannot be used as Tang Christian sources. As for this forgery business, if Yasushi Kojima was not the mastermind behind it, at least he seems to have been directly implicated in the fraud. We suggest using the phrase ‘Kojima Forgeries A and B’ to label the two dated manuscripts.

1.3 The date of *The Mysterious Bliss Sutra* and *The Sutra of Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao*

This research finds that the traditional dating of *The Mysterious Bliss Sutra* and *The Sutra of Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao* can be accepted. However, Chapter 6 does set further limits on the time-span, proposing that the two manuscripts were produced between 745 and 787.

The most prominent reason for this assertion is that they were written in the same hand.

Secondly, they are unquestionably authentic ancient manuscripts. Both were stamped by Li Shengduo with his personal seal and he annotated them. A second version of *The Sutra of the Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao* has been found on the Luoyang Pillar dated 829 that was discovered in 2006. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 6, the variations in the two versions are few and far between and are on the morphological level. Most parts are exactly the same.

The third factor that endorses this dating is that the name taboo practice suggests *The Mysterious Bliss Sutra* was copied no earlier than the reign of the Tang emperor, Ruizong. The taboo example is *dan* 旦, a complex character whose right element is the given name of the emperor, *dan* 旦.

Historical events also give some clues to the dating of *The Mysterious Bliss Sutra*. As said in Chapters 1 and 6, Dunhuang was conquered by the Tibetan empire in 787 and was re-captured by the Tang court in 848. Therefore, it seems that *The Mysterious Bliss Sutra* was made before 787.

Lastly, the use of the term *Daqin* suggests that *The Sutra of the Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao* seems to have been made after 745.

Taking all the evidence together, the conclusion has to be that these two manuscripts were written in one hand between 745 and 787.

1.4 The date of manuscript P.3847

It is hard to date each part of P.3847 as a separate piece. The seal is broken and illegible. It is certainly possible that *The Praise of the Three Majestics* and *The Sutra of Reverence* could be Tang texts. However, this assumption still has to be substantiated by hard evidence. Given the current state of knowledge, it is impossible to venture any opinion beyond the claim that the whole manuscript P.3847 was made after the collapse of the Tang court, perhaps sometime between 907 and the sealing-off of Dunhuang Cave 17.

The evidence is the phrase ‘Emperor Tang Taizong’ used in the colophon. In Tang China, the use of such a phrase was extremely rare. Few Tang sources place the name of the dynasty, Tang, in front of Emperor Taizong. More often than not, Tang people placed laudatory characters in front of the actual dynasty’s name (Tang). Or they simply wrote ‘Emperor Taizong’. As noted in Chapter 6, phrases like ‘Emperor Tang Taizong’ do often appear in sources made after the dynasty fell.

1.5 An overview of the new chronology

From the data that can be extrapolated from the foregoing summary, only five Chinese Christian religious manuscripts were taken out of Dunhuang Cave 17. Not a single one of these manuscripts can be dated to the seventh century. All were made in rather later periods. Their new chronology is:

Two Tang manuscripts were made between 745 and 787:

1. *The Mysterious Bliss Sutra* 志玄安樂經
2. *The Sutra of the Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao* 大秦景教宣元本經

Two manuscripts, including the texts they contain, were newly created between 800 and the early eleventh century:

3. *The Messiah Sutra* 序聽迷詩所經

4. *On One God* 一神論

Manuscript P.3847 was made after 907 and before the early eleventh century. It contains two texts, that we cannot confirm to be Tang texts:

5. *The Praise of Three Majestics* 三威蒙度讚

6. *The Sutra of Reverence* 尊經

2 Implications

This new chronology has far-reaching significance. Given the research topic, this section will focus on drawing its implications for the history of Christianity in China. After this, in the next section more and broader implications will be proposed as future directions for research.

2.1 *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* are not modern forgeries

The theory that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* were forged in the early twentieth century is untenable. It emerged from the general interest in forgeries of Dunhuang manuscripts, and was first suggested in the year 2000. But it has never been proved. Taking another tack to counter the criticism of other scholars who have focused on orthographies and transcribed Syriac words, this dissertation shows that the general arguments propounded in the forgery theory are heavily based on presuppositions. As argued in Chapter 2, these presuppositions have been shown to be either untrue or problematic and none stands up to closer scrutiny. Furthermore, the premise that *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* were the official texts used by Aluoben to discuss with Tang Taizong has been refuted by this dissertation.

Even more importantly, this research has also demonstrated that few people, if any, would have had the knowledge to forge these two manuscripts. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, even today scholars still do not fully understand the taboos on the complex characters that can also be found in the two Christian manuscripts. In fact, before 2010, not a single expert on the Tang church knew anything about the taboo form of *die* 牒. Its handwritten form has been transcribed incorrectly as 片京, a form that cannot be found in any dictionary and is very

probably a modern invention. Moreover, as shown in Chapter 5, a more thorough knowledge of the evolution of the Chinese passive was only began to be built up in the early twentieth century. The thick, historical, descriptive method of studying Chinese was not systematically introduced into China until the 1930s. A great deal of what we know about the evolution of the Chinese passive has only been produced by second-generation scholars, especially those publishing since the 1980s. Even today, the rare order '*bei* + verb + *jiangqu*' still remains virtually unknown. Only two examples had previously been collected and first reported in the 1990s. Therefore, it is very unlikely that a forger in the early twentieth century could have been so far ahead of his time that he was better informed than many of today's best experts. The knowledge he would have had to command of Chinese taboos and language including Syraic would have been too accurate and too erudite to be credible.

2.2 Dunhuang Christians must be understood in their own right

Dunhuang Christians have to be understood in their own right. The local presence of Christians in Dunhuang must be clearly delineated and thoroughly analyzed before it can be utilized to examine the presence and position of ancient Christians in China. Although it is too early to make any claim that they had developed their unique identity or customs, their local presence was unquestionably continuous for at least four centuries.

As indicated by the sources dealt with in Chapter 6, Christians had established themselves in Dunhuang no later than the late eighth century. During the ensuing couple of hundred years, they kept their feet firmly planted in this oasis well into the twelfth century. Among these Christians, some seem to have been newcomers who maintained spasmodic contact with the West and preferred to use Sogdian in their written communications. Nevertheless, this Christian community almost certainly also included descendants of adherents of the Tang church. These converts had been accustomed to using Chinese as a vehicle in which to write religious texts and to create religious images with special elements that can be seen far more prominently on many inscribed stones from China's central plains than those found on stones from Central Asia. Moreover, they were also fairly well informed about their ancestral Tang legacy.

2.3 Revisiting the traditional historiography of China's pre-twelfth-century Christians

The traditional historiography of China's pre-twelfth-century Christians must be revisited. The overall picture, sketched in Chapter 1, has to be re-drawn.

First and foremost, our current knowledge about what is called the Tang church has to be modified. A great deal of what is commonly believed sits uneasily with the new chronology set out above.

Abiding by the conditions of this new timeline, it is obvious that a great deal about of Tang theology is still unknown. In our present state of knowledge, it seems that no religious texts made in the seventh century have come down to us. All Christian sources known so far have been dated to the eighth or ninth century. In fact, only two religious texts made in the Tang central plains have come to us. One is the small religious section on the Xi'an Stele that is dated 781. The other is the other version of *The Sutra of the Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao* carved on the Luoyang Pillar that was erected in 829. Even if it were to be insisted that Dunhuang once fell under the auspices of the Tang court and consequently Dunhuang manuscripts can be used to analyze the Tang church, only two more manuscripts, *The Mysterious Bliss Sutra* and *The Sutra of the Origins of the Daqin Jingjiao*, could be referred to with any certainty. Even were they to be used, according to this new chronology, they are eighth-century documents.

The findings of this research have revealed that an enormous amount of knowledge about the presence of the Tang church still waits to be revealed. So far all that is possible to produce is only a rough picture of the bare outlines. Most of the information available is still that contained on the Xi'an Stele, that documents the history of the previous 150 years. Besides this Stele, there are a few Chinese sources like the 638 Diffusion Edict and the 745 Name-change Edict. After the year 781, information about the Tang church is fragmentary and widely dispersed. In fact, the 845 Intolerance Edict is the only official record that has so far been identified. Besides these official sources, there are three dated stones, *Mi Jifen muzhi*, *Huaxian muzhi* and the Luoyang Pillar. They bear witness to the fact that a number of Christian families remained living in Xi'an and Luoyang in the early ninth century and they appear to have been using two church buildings at the time at which it was erected. These stones shed some light on religious practice, church organization and the day-to-day life of the Tang Christians. As they have only recently been found, they have still not been properly contextualized.

The final point to be made in this context is that the traditional narrative of the tragic fate of the Tang Christians seems to be inaccurate. The impact of the 845 Intolerance Edict seems to have been exaggerated. This edict was more concerned with economic matters than with religion. It did not command church office-bearers to renounce their faith. It simply ordered

them to return to the ranks of the laity. In the eyes of the Tang court whose economic foundation was an agricultural economy, these religious people had adopted an unproductive profession that cloistered them to their monasteries all year round and made them completely dependent on people like farmers who produced the essentials of life. Importantly, the purport of this edict is tailored to religious people and does not target laymen like individual converts. As Christian families or clans or even individuals were unquestionably engaged in production and were not dependent on others to support them, the edict ignores them. Consequently, they were free to continue to practice Christianity and perhaps they offered religious people shelter after the edict had been promulgated and the latter had been forced out of their monasteries. Pertinently, the force of this edict was short lived. Tang Wuzong died only a few months after its promulgation. As the new emperor was a supporter of Buddhism, he revoked it. Its revocation would have meant that the religious people could have again returned to their monasteries, resumed their preaching and the propagation of their faith in areas adjacent to the Tang capital.² That is to say, not all Tang Christians necessarily left China's heartland after 845.

The underpinning of this premise sets us on a search for the post-Tang church. As stated in Chapter 1, it is conventionally assumed that the post-Tang period the church had ceased to exist. This assumption seems to have been too gloomy. On the basis of the evidence adduced in Chapter 6 and the new timeline set out for the Chinese Christian manuscripts, it is conceivable that Christians did continue to dwell in the Chinese central plains after the Tang court collapsed in 907.

It is not beyond the bounds of possibility to speculate that a fair number of these post-Tang Christians were descendants of Tang Christians. Nevertheless, some might have been related to the Dunhuang community. As shown in Chapter 6, Dunhuang was home to a sizeable number of Christians before Cave 17 was walled up around 1006. These Dunhuang Christians, as the Sogdian business letters clearly reveal, maintained contacts with the outside world. Moreover, as attested by Chinese Christian manuscript P.3847, some Dunhuang Christians used Chinese to write sources and also knew about their Tang predecessors. Given how geographically close they were and their undoubted linguistic advantages, it is feasible to suggest that some Dunhuang Christians, especially missionaries, could have traveled to the plains of China and taken up residence there.

3 Future directions

² For the restoration of Buddhism after 846, see Stanley Weinstein (1987:136-144).

Future research has a number of issues on which to focus.

For instance, we should delve deeper into the local Dunhuang Christian presence in a search for answers to a number of questions: How did Dunhuang Christians maintain contact with the outside world? Did they communicate with other strongholds of the Church of the East along the Silk Road like Turfan? What form did their religious life take? What was the position of Dunhuang in the church hierarchy? In order of seniority, did Dunhuang rank before or after Xi'an and Luoyang? How was the church organized in ancient China?

These questions set us the challenge of re-analyzing all the Chinese Christian religious manuscripts and from them deduce the lines of development or patterns of ideas and beliefs. Having extrapolated more data from them, we should be in a better position to reconstruct the theology of ancient Dunhuang Christianity. In particular, we must re-interpret *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* within the confines of their ninth-tenth-century cultural milieu, and explain why the scribe (author?) dropped many elements and produced manuscripts plagued by a number of meaningless, gibberish sentences.

Another challenge facing us is to re-think the society (culture) of Tang China in the context of producing a re-depiction of China's ancient Christians. For instance, to what degree do common labels like cosmopolitanism, early Tang, high Tang, mid-Tang and late Tang truly reflect Tang society?

This refined new chronology can, of course, be narrowed down. To accomplish this mission, another task will have to be undertaken: the substantiation of the situation by reference to historical records and archeological discoveries.

Admittedly, this research raises more questions than it has answered. Nevertheless, what has been established in this dissertation is clear cut. *The Messiah Sutra* and *On One God* were not the work of Aluoben, penned sometime around the 640s. The Kojima Forgeries A and B are modern products and must not be taken as Tang Christian sources. Unquestionably post-Tang Chinese Christian manuscripts do exist. Whereas Dunhuang Christians most certainly deserve to be understood in their own right, the Tang church needs to be re-described, and post-Tang Christians are still waiting to be revealed. In sum, the overall picture of pre-twelfth-century Christians in China is much more complicated than it was ever thought to be. Their whole story is crying out to be re-told. Or perhaps, more aptly it is still waiting to be told.