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

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Summary

Ever since the seven so-called earliest Chinese Christian manuscripts were removed from Dunhuang Cave 17 in 1900 and published by the first generation of scholars, they were quickly and widely recognized as sources used by the Tang church, an offshoot of the Church of the East that entered China in 635 and allegedly disappeared after 845. Their conventional chronology, although widely accepted, is far from certain. This empirical, technical and philological work is the first systematic attempt to date these sources and the first book-long discussion of their chronology. It is also the first monograph to propose that the local Dunhuang Christians deserve to be examined in their own right.

The methods used in this research are related to historical events (the earliest arrival of Christianity in China and the time at which Cave 17 was sealed), a very demanding tradition (the imperial name taboo), orthographies promoted by the state (Empress Wu's new forms) and historical linguistics (the evolution of Chinese passive). All methods have been utilized by scholars, Chinese and Western alike, to date old sources. Although a new dating method has not been introduced and no cutting-edge laboratory work (like Carbon-14 dating and non-destructive technologies) has been brought into play, the traditional dating methods have yielded surprising results:

Firstly, the putative earliest manuscripts might be the latest sources.

Secondly, the only two dated manuscripts are modern forgeries.

Thirdly, only two manuscripts are actual Tang documents.

Fourthly, manuscript P.3847 is the work of post-Tang Christians.

Chinese Christian Manuscripts		Old Chronology	New Chronology
<i>The Messiah Sutra</i> 序聽迷詩所經		635-638	800-1010s
<i>On One God</i> 一神論		641	
Kojima Forgeries	Kojima Forgery A 大秦景教大聖通真歸法讚	720	modern forgeries
	Kojima Forgery B 大秦景教宣元至本經	717	
<i>Mysterious Bliss Sutra</i> 志玄安樂經		late eighth century	745-787
<i>Sutra of Origins of Daqin Jingjiao</i> 大秦景教宣元本經			
P.3847	<i>Praise of Three Majestics</i> 景教三威蒙度讚	late eighth century	907-1010s
	<i>Sutra of Reverence</i> 尊經		

This new chronology has a far-reaching significance. It compels us to draw a picture of a local Dunhuang Christian community that maintained a continuous presence from the eighth century well up into the twelfth century. It also prompts us to alter our current thinking about the institution known as the Tang church. In addition, it challenges the present consensus that Christianity was extinguished after 845. Finally, as a whole, all the findings give us food for thought and encourage us to rethink the traditional historiography of pre-twelfth-century Christianity in China.