

Article

Exploring Early Buddhist–Christian (*Jingjiao* 景教) Dialogues in Text and Image: A Cultural Hermeneutic Approach

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Abstract: The dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism began during the Tang dynasty (618–907) when East Syrian Christian missionaries from Persia arrived in China in 635. At this time, Buddhism was prospering under the Tang Empire, and the “Church of the East” was established, known as the “Brilliant (or Radiant) Teaching” (*Jingjiao* 景教). Historical records and archaeological evidence indicate that the *Jingjiao* church employed the method of “matching concepts” (*geyi* 格義). This methodology, initially utilized in the early stages of Buddhism’s dissemination from India and Central Asia to China for the translation of Buddhist texts, was similarly applied to the translation of Christian texts and concepts. These translation efforts and dissemination activities represent the earliest documented encounters between Christianity and Buddhism in premodern times. Furthermore, recent archaeological discoveries reveal that the dialogue between the two religions in China transpired through textual and visual representations (iconography) in the form of “borrowing pictures”. This study investigates these interactions across disciplines, exploring the evidence of early cultural exchange between Buddhism and Christianity while reviewing the motivations behind the missionaries’ translation and dissemination activities. It addresses pivotal questions regarding these early dialogues by examining the proselytization strategies employed and analyzing the reasons why imperial authorities sanctioned Christian activities and facilitated their propagation during the Tang dynasty.

Keywords: Buddhism; *Jingjiao* church; *Geyi*; cultural hermeneutics; borrowing pictures



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1. Introduction

The *Jingjiao* (景教) Church emerged as a significant religious community during the Tang dynasty (618–907) and marks the earliest historically documented presence of Christianity in China. Anglophone scholars often describe it as the “Luminous Religion”, though it is also referred to by several names, such as Nestorianism, East Syriac Christianity, the East Syrian Church, and the Church of the East.¹ The scholar Max Deeg (2006a) advocates for the translations “Brilliant Teaching” or “Radiant Teaching”, emphasizing the religion’s connections to solar imagery and symbolism.²

The *Tang huiyao* 唐會要 (*Institutional History of the Tang Dynasty*, c. 961) documents that East Syrian Christian missionaries reached China from Persia in 635 during the Tang dynasty.³ It is probable that these Christian missionaries were seeking refuge from the turmoil and rapidly deteriorating conditions in Iran.⁴ They were received with great honor by Tang emperors, such as Emperor Taizong (唐太宗, fl. 599–649, r. 626–649) and Emperor

Gaozong (唐高宗, fl. 628–683, r. 649–683), and their teachings, referred to as “*Jingjiao*” (lit. the “Teachings of light”), thrived for some period.⁵ However, during the Huichang Persecution of Buddhism (會昌滅佛, between 843 and 845) under Emperor Wuzong (武宗, 814–846)⁶, the *Jingjiao* Church was banned⁷ and reportedly vanished from public awareness for nearly a millennium.⁸

The discovery of the renowned inscription on the Xi’ an stele,⁹ known as the *Da Qin Jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei* 大秦景教流行中國碑 (the “Stele of the Promulgation/Diffusion of the ‘Radiant Teaching’ of Da Qin [Rome]¹⁰ in China [the Middle Kingdom]”), frequently referred to as the “Nestorian stele”, the “Nestorian tablet”, the “Nestorian Monument in China”, or simply the “Xi’ an Inscription/Stele” (hereafter referred to as “*Jingjiao bei*” 景教碑, *JJB*), revitalized interest in this tradition. The stele, dating to the second year of the Jianzhong era (建中, 781)¹¹, was unearthed between 1623 and 1625 during the Ming 明 dynasty (1368–1644) in proximity to Xi’ an 西安, China. This significant discovery prompted a resurgence of early historical examinations (Pelliot *INS* 1996; Saeki 1916; L. Tang 2002; Godwin 2018; Nicolini-Zani 2023).¹²

A considerable amount of scholarly attention has been directed toward elucidating the relationship between Buddhism and *Jingjiao*, resulting in numerous comparative studies. Initiated by the pioneering scholarship of Japanese scholar and Anglican (Peter) Yoshirō Saeki (佐伯好郎, 1871–1965) in his work *Keikyō no Kenkyū* (Saeki 1935)¹³, various Japanese scholars have investigated the early interactions between Buddhism and *Jingjiao* in China.¹⁴ More recently, Naoya Hamada (2007) conducted an analysis of the “Discourse on ‘One God’ [i.e., Monotheism]” (*yi shen lun* 一神論), juxtaposing it with the teachings of Buddhist Pure Land (淨土), illuminating the shared exegetical practices between early Christianity and Buddhism in China (Hamada 2007, pp. 61–75).

Zhu Qianzhi established the foundational framework for “Nestorian” (*Jingjiao*) studies in Mainland China (Q. Zhu [1993] 1997–1998). Subsequently, scholars such as Yang Xiaochun (X. Yang 2004, pp. 11–20) and Yin Xiaoping (X. Yin 2024, pp. 1–19) have published comprehensive review articles that catalog major research pertaining to *Jingjiao* in China over the past four decades. These reviews provide an extensive survey of monographs and articles by Chinese scholars, accentuating significant studies on scripture translations, doctrines, and iconography. Additionally, they explore the extent to which Christianity during the Tang era drew inspiration from and borrowed elements of Buddhism in its early missionary endeavors.

The distinguished German scholar of comparative religion, Hans Joachim Klimkeit (1939–1999), published an extensive study in 1999 and 2003 concerning the dissemination of ancient Christianity in Central and East Asia (Klimkeit 2003; Gilman and Klimkeit 1999). More recently, Matteo Nicolini-Zani has undertaken an examination of the texts and history of the *Jingjiao* Church in China, as evidenced in his publications from 2022 and 2023. Both scholars, to varying degrees, investigate the relationship between Buddhism and *Jingjiao* (Nicolini-Zani 2022, 2023). Additionally, Deeg has made significant contributions to the field through numerous studies that analyze the influence of Buddhism and Daoism on the theological concepts of *Jingjiao* during the Tang dynasty (Deeg 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2009, 2020a, 2020b).

In his compilation of essays, Chen Huaiyu has included four discussions addressing the relationship between Buddhism and *Jingjiao* (H. Chen 2012). These discussions juxtapose the “Hymn in Praise of the Three Majesties (i.e., the Holy Trinity) of the Brilliant Teaching (of Da Qin), through which Salvation is Obtained” (*Da Qin Jingjiao san wei meng du zan* 大秦景教三威蒙度讚, also referred to as the Latin *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*) with the *Dasheng bensheng xindi guan jing* 大乘本生心地觀經 (Skt. **Mahāyānamūlagāta-hṛidayabhūmi-dhyāna-sūtra*, or *Xindi guan jing*) from a comparative linguistics perspective.¹⁵ Furthermore,

Bai Yu has conducted a comparison in 2023 of the verbatim language and “shared imagery” present in the *Xindi guan jing* with the *Zhixuan anle jing* 志玄安樂經 (“*Sūtra/Book on Aspiring to [Attain] Profound Bliss*”), highlighting noteworthy intertextuality and potential collaboration between *Jingjiao* missionaries and influential Buddhist translators (Bai 2023). These scholarly endeavors underscore a sustained interest in the comparative study of Christianity centered on *Jingjiao* and Buddhism.¹⁶

Despite these notable contributions, some areas continue to be inadequately explored. Specifically, there has been a lack of comprehensive systematic analysis regarding the content of the translations produced by the *Jingjiao* Church and the doctrinal themes emphasized following its arrival in the Tang Empire. Moreover, although scholars have scrutinized the concepts of “syncretism” and “loan words”,¹⁷ the historical practice of *geyi* (格義)—the hermeneutical method of “matching meanings” or “categorizing concepts”—has yet to be thoroughly investigated for its relevance to the translation of early Christian texts in contrast with Buddhist writings.

Furthermore, the motivations for Christian involvement in Buddhist translation activities and the initial cultural interactions between Buddhists and Christians during the Tang dynasty have garnered limited attention or have been overshadowed by other scholarly pursuits.¹⁸ Thus, the hermeneutical studies of the *Jingjiao* texts conducted to date have led to various explanations and translations of their contents, resulting in divergent interpretations of Tang Christianity as a whole (Nicolini-Zani 2023, p. 12; Wickeri 2004, pp. 46–52). This study addresses these gaps by examining the early dialogues between Buddhism and Christianity. It analyzes the missionary strategies employed by the *Jingjiao* Church and explores the factors that facilitated the acceptance of its teachings by the Tang imperial court, contributing to their spread during this period.¹⁹

2. The Phenomenon of *Geyi* in *Jingjiao* Translations

The *Jingjiao* monks, led by the first missionary Bishop A-lo-pen (Aluoben 阿羅本, also rendered 阿羅牟, d.u.)²⁰, aligned themselves closely with imperial authority. They actively translated scriptures and contributed significantly to the *Jingjiao* “missionary strategy”.²¹ Their localized missionary methods incorporated Buddhist terms and ideas and employed the practice of *geyi* (格義), “matching meanings” or “matching concepts”, to adapt their teachings to the social, political, and artistic context of the time (Foster 1939, p. 112; X. Huang 1996, p. 84; Malek 2002, p. 36).

The concept of *geyi* has been interpreted differently over centuries (Kantor 2010, pp. 283–307, esp. pp. 284, 285). Its earliest definition is found in the “Clarification of Doubts” (*Yuyi lun* 喻疑論, c. 428?) (Zürcher [1959] 2007, p. 328, note 56), which states the following:

At the end of the Han [dynasty] and the beginning of the Wei [dynasty], the chancellor of Guangling and the chancellor of Pengcheng ‘joined the Order’ and were both able to maintain the great light (of the Doctrine). Inspired by their actions, worthy [intellectuals of the time] began to take an interest in [discussing and] lecturing on Buddhism. Thus, using ‘matching meanings’ (格義), they ‘broadened the scope’ [of the teachings], and, by ‘pairing explanations’ (配說), made them indirect and circuitous.

漢末魏初，廣陵，彭城二相出家，並能任持大照，尋味之賢，始有講次。而恢之以格義，迂之以配說。²²

In the biography of the monk and translator Zhu Faya (竺法雅, d.u., fl. c. 4th century) in the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳), Huijiao (慧皎, 497–554) elaborates on this method:

[Zhu Faya] took the ‘numerical categories’ (*shishu* 事數) of the *sūtras* and matched these with (terms from) non-Buddhist works (secular literature), as a method to make [his disciples] understand. This was called “matching meanings” (*geyi*).

以經中事數, 擬配外書, 爲生解之例, 謂之格義.²³

Modern interpretations of *geyi* have varied (Zürcher [1959] 2007, p. 184; Lai 1979, pp. 238–57; Sharf 2002, pp. 5, 10–11, 97–98; Mair 2012, pp. 29–59). The Chinese historian Tang Yongtong (湯用彤, 1893–1964) identified *geyi* as the first method employed by Chinese scholars to integrate Indian Buddhist concepts with Chinese thought (Y. Tang [1938] 2010, pp. 191–94 [1937, p. 171ff, 1938, pp. 234–38]; 1968). Philosopher Feng Youlan (馮友蘭, 1895–1990) expanded this concept, describing *geyi* as a universal method of “interpreting ancient concepts with current ones”, “interpreting Chinese concepts in terms of Western thought”, and employing any approach aimed at bridging different cultural systems. (Y. Feng 1989, p. 155). In this broader context, *geyi* serves as a universal framework for explanation and commentary, functioning as a form of cultural hermeneutics.²⁴ In 2007, Liu Zhenning presented statistical analyses concerning the utilization of Buddhist vocabulary within the *Jingjiao* texts. Liu posits that both *Jingjiao* and Buddhism occupied a similar status as representations of “the Other”, originating from “foreign western territories”, which cultivated mutual empathy between the two. The earlier Buddhist strategy of *geyi*, as it was initially transmitted, provided *Jingjiao* with a referential framework vital for its persistence (Z. Liu 2007a, 2007b).

In addition to the *JJB*, several other *Jingjiao* documents have been discovered.²⁵ Among these, the *Sūtra of Hearing the Messiah* (*Xu ting Mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所經)²⁶ is considered the earliest.²⁷ It was first identified by the Japanese Buddhist Junjirō Takakusu (J. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, 1866–1945) in 1922 and verified to date back to between 635 and 638, corresponding to the ninth and twelfth years of the Zhenguan 貞觀 era.²⁸ Consequently, it is plausible that Alopen and his team translated this text.

The *Yishen lun* 一神論 (*Discourse on the “One God”*) is believed to have been translated in 641, as it contains the following statement: “[From then, when] He (Christ) took on the body of the five aggregates (*wuyin* 五蔭), it has not been more than six hundred and forty-one years” (彌詩詞) 向五蔭身, 六百四十一年不過已.²⁹ This translation, too, is likely to have been carried out by Alopen and his team. Scholars like Wushu Lin (2000, 2021) have conducted detailed analyses of these manuscripts and generally agree that they were copied and transmitted by later generations from earlier *Jingjiao* (Nestorian) texts. The original manuscripts are believed to represent some of the earliest translations of *Jingjiao* scriptures (Lin 2000, p. 81; 2021).

As noted earlier, the method of *geyi*, initially used during the early dissemination of Buddhism in China, was also employed in these texts. The *Xuting Mishisuo jing* adopted the Buddhist concept of “retribution” (Ch. *guobao* 果報, Skt. *vipāka*; *phalavipāka*) to articulate God’s (Ch. *tianzun* 天尊, “the Heaven-Honored One”) omnipresence, omniscience, and His role in “reward and judgment” (天尊常在靜度快樂之處. 果報無處不到).³⁰ Furthermore, the text incorporated concepts such as “serving and obeying the Lord (God)” (translated as *shi tianzun* 事天尊, *shou tianzun fajiao* 受天尊法教, i.e., “accepting the doctrines of the Heaven-Honored One”), “serving and honoring one’s parents” (*xiaoyang fumu* 孝養父母; *xu pa fumu* 須怕父母; *zhicheng fumu* 祇承父母; *shi fumu buque* 事父母不闕), and serving “The August Ruler” (i.e., the Emperor) (口聖上)³¹, aligning its teachings with mainstream Confucian values.³²

The *Xuting Mishi suo jing* also reinterprets the concept of the “original sin” of living beings and their “transgressions of the precepts (connected to God)” (*fanni yu Zun* 返逆於尊) through the lens of Buddhist *karmic retribution*. Those with bad karma cannot approach God (何因? 众生在于罪中...)³³. The text emphasizes that good merit and positive condi-

tions (Ch. *shan* 善, Skt. *kuśala*; Ch. *fu* 福, Skt. *puṇya*; Ch. *luan* 緣 Skt. *pratyaya*), as well as “attaining the way to Heaven” (Ch. *de tiandao* 得天道) at “the final moment of death” (Ch. *lin mingzhong zhi shi* 臨命終之時, Skt. *cyuti-kāla*; *maraṇa-kāla-samaya*), are fundamental to “beholding God” (得見天尊) and understanding the hierarchical respect for the emperor. This assertion further bridges Christian theology with prevailing Confucian and Buddhist ideologies.³⁴

In the *Yishen lun*, the terms *wuyin shen* 五蔭身 (“*wuyin* body” or “five *skandha* body”) and *hunpo* 魂魄 (the “ethereal” [*hun*] and “corporeal” [*po*] aspects of the soul) are employed to parallel the Christian concepts of “body” and “soul”, respectively.³⁵ Additionally, the term *si se* 四色 (“four manifest forms [or Skt. *rūpa*]”) is used to describe the material world.³⁶ Hamada (2005, 2007) has conducted an in-depth study of Buddhist thought in the *Yishen lun*, emphasizing its adaptation of the Buddhist concept of *shen shi* 神識 (“spirit-cum-consciousness” or “sentient consciousness”, Skt. *vijñāna*) (Hamada 2005, pp. 244–57; 2007, pp. 61–75). In Christianity, *shen shi* traditionally signifies “divine guidance from God”; however, in the *Yishen lun*, this concept is expanded to encompass the Buddhist notion of “eternal abiding” (*changzhu bumie* 常住不滅). Huang Xianian (X. Huang 1996, pp. 83–90; 2000, pp. 446–60) has also examined the influence of Buddhist doctrines on *Jingjiao* texts. In his research, Huang underscores the extensive use of Buddhist terminology in *Jingjiao* scriptures, particularly noting how the *Xuting Mishisuo jing* incorporates Buddhist moral and ethical principles to explain humanity’s inability to enter heaven due to the accumulation of excessive negative karma. He also investigates the *Yishen lun*’s use of *hun* and *po* (魂魄) to articulate the Christian conception of the soul (*linghun guan* 靈魂觀).

It is conceivable that during the initial spread of *Jingjiao*, the (perhaps) Persian Bishop Alopen had not been in the Tang Empire for long and was, therefore, not yet proficient in Chinese. As a result, the early scriptures were likely translated in collaboration with individuals skilled in Chinese.³⁷ Although the specifics of the early translation process for *Jingjiao* scriptures are not preserved in existing records, Buddhism, which faced a similar situation upon its introduction to China, can serve as a useful reference, given the detailed accounts of its early translation activities.

According to the *Chu sanzang ji ji* 出三藏記集 (*Compilation of Notes on the Translation of the [Chinese] Tripitaka*, compiled c. 515, hereafter CSZJJ), the oldest surviving catalog of Buddhist translations, and the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (*Biographies of Eminent Monks*, compiled between 519 and 520), foreign Buddhist monks and missionaries who first arrived in China beginning in the mid-2nd century from various regions, including Western and Eastern Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia, often had limited proficiency in literary Chinese. As a result, they tended to employ collaborative translation methods. For instance, during the Eastern (Later) Han dynasty (東漢, 25 BCE–220 CE), the Parthian Buddhist lay practitioner (*upāsaka*) and translator An Xuan (安玄, fl. 131–231, who arrived in Luoyang 洛陽 in 181) worked alongside the first-known Chinese monk, *śramaṇa* Yan Fotiao (嚴佛調, also recorded as Yan Foutiao 嚴浮調, d.u.), to translate the *Fa jing jing* 法鏡經 (Skt. *Ugraparipṛcchā-sūtra*, ‘Dharma Mirror Sūtra’) (Zürcher 1991; Harrison 1987; Nattier 2008, p. 92).

Although little is known about their lives, the early bibliographer Sengyou 僧祐 (c. 435/45–518) provides specific details about their translation methods. He reports that An Xuan “orally translated the Indic language text” (口譯梵文), while Yan Fotiao “wrote it down” (筆受).³⁸

The Buddhist scholar Jan Nattier (2008) observes that, while it is common to think of translation teams as comprising a foreign monk and his lay assistants, this case was the opposite: a foreign lay practitioner (*upāsaka*) who was sufficiently fluent in spoken Chinese and the source language (likely a Prākṛit vernacular) provided an oral Chinese translation

of the scripture, paired with a Chinese monk whose literary education enabled him to render the translation into polished prose (Nattier 2008, p. 90).

An Xuan is also noted for his active involvement in monastic life and Dharma practice (常以法事爲己務). He frequently engaged in doctrinal discussions with Chinese monks, and such discussions not only deepened his understanding of Chinese but also gradually enhanced his ability to expound the *sūtras* (漸練漢言, 志宣經典).³⁹

Another example is the Khotanese (Kustana) monk Mokṣala 無叉羅 (var. 無羅叉, Ch. Wuluocha, d.u.), who brought Indic scriptures to China but was unable to teach them due to his lack of Chinese proficiency. At that time, an Indian-born *upāsikā* named Zhu Shulan 竺叔蘭 (d.u.), who had fled to Henan 河南 with his father, had already become Sinicized and was deeply devoted to Buddhist Dharma. Having studied multiple languages, he was proficient in both Sanskrit and Chinese. Zhu Shulan assisted Mokṣala in translating the *Pañcaviṃśati-sāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*Fanguang bore boluomi jing* 放光般若波羅蜜經, “The Sūtra of the Emission of Rays”) into Chinese in 291.⁴⁰ The oral translation was transcribed by two Chinese laymen, while prominent devotees and donors from Cangyuan (倉垣) actively encouraged and supported the project. As Erik Zürcher notes, this scripture “perhaps more than any other would come to play a dominant role in the formation of Chinese Buddhist thought” (Zürcher [1959] 2007, pp. 63–65).

Furthermore, these translation efforts were sometimes backed by official imperial patronage. During the Tang dynasty, beginning with the inauguration of the Xianqing 顯慶 era (656–661) under Emperor Gaozong 高宗, eminent monks convened at prominent translation centers such as Ximing Monastery 西明寺 and other major imperial monasteries in Chang’an 長安 to undertake large-scale, state-sponsored translation projects (Zhan 2023–2024). Ximing Monastery became a renowned center for translation, where scholars worked on some of the earliest Esoteric Buddhist texts, including *dhāraṇī* scriptures and other selections based on Emperor Gaozong’s decree.⁴¹

These records demonstrate that collaborative translation of Buddhist scriptures had long been conducted with imperial support—a practice dating back as early as the Liang 梁 dynasty (c. 502–557)⁴². Given this precedent, it is reasonable to surmise that during Alopen’s early years in China, when he was not yet proficient in Chinese, he must have relied on native scholars and translators fluent in both Chinese and foreign languages to assist in his translation work.

It was through a combination of imperial support and a synthesis of Confucianism and Buddhism that Alopen was able to gain the favor of the rulers and secure a degree of freedom for the development of the *Jingjiao* Church in China. This strategy continued to be employed until the Late Tang, as evidenced by the *Zhixuan anle jing* 志玄安樂經 (“Sūtra/Book on Aspiring to [Attain] Profound Bliss”)⁴³ and the *Da Qin Jingjiao sanwei mengdu zan* 大秦景教三威蒙度贊 (“Hymn in Praise of the Three Majesties of the Brilliant Teaching, through which Salvation is Obtained”), both translated by the team led by the cleric Jingjing/“Adam” (景淨).⁴⁴ Tang Xiaofeng (唐曉峰) notes that the most distinctive feature of Jingjing’s translations of *Jingjiao* scriptures mirrors those of Alopen—namely, their reliance on Buddhist concepts, structures, and even Buddhist ideas to articulate Christian doctrines and teachings (X. Tang 2021, pp. 16–22). Zhu Donghua notes that in translating the *Zun jing*, Jingjing used the Buddhist term “*nirmāṇa-kāya*” (Ch. *yingshen* 應身), which refers to the Buddha’s “response to the [potential] good in all living beings” (眾生機感), to describe the “received body” of the Messiah. This term emphasizes the Messiah’s response to the spiritual potential in all living beings (D. Zhu 2013, pp. 220–35; 2015, p. 210 and note 22; 2016, p. 423, 426–28; 2025, p. 103).

As “bishop” (法主) of the Church, Jingjing, also employed *geyi* (格義) as a method for introducing Christian doctrine (Takakusu 1896, pp. 589–91; Duan 2003, p. 436;

Q. Zhu 2014, p. 141; Lou 2002). He collaborated with the Buddhist monk from Kāpiśī (罽賓) Prajña (Banruo/re 般若, 733/34?–810?, arrived in Chang’an in 782) (Forte 1996c, pp. 442–43, note 31) to translate seven fascicles (*juan* 卷) of the Buddhist text *Dasheng liqu liu boluomiduo jing* 大乘理趣六波羅蜜多經 (Skt. *Mahāyāna-naya-ṣaṭ-pāramitā-sūtra*, “Sūtra of the Purport of the Mahāyāna and Six Perfections”) in the second year of the Zhenyuan 貞元 era (786), from an Iranian (or Sogdian) (or perhaps another Central Asian-language, i.e., *huben* 胡本)⁴⁵ language into Chinese.

The monk Yuanzhao (圓照, c. 613–696, fl. 794–800) of Ximing Monastery (西明寺) famously recorded this event in the *Da Tang Zhenyuan Xu Kaiyuan shi jiao lu* 大唐貞元續開元釋教錄 (Fascicle 1) in 794, observing the following:

Prajña was not proficient in the Syriac language and did not understand the Tang (i.e., Chinese, 唐言) language; Jingjing did not understand Sanskrit (*fanwen* 梵文) and was unfamiliar with Buddhist doctrine (*shijiao* 釋教). Although he assisted Prajña in translating the scripture, he failed to grasp lit. half of the jewels (of the Buddhist teaching) (i.e., its essence) ... Furthermore, the monks of the Da Qin Monastery live differently from Buddhist monks (in a *jialan*). Jingjing should spread the teachings of the Messiah (*mishihe jiao*), while the *śramaṇa* and Sakya-son (i.e., Buddhist monks) should propagate the Buddhist *sūtras*. Thus, (His Majesty wished) a clear distinction between the two traditions should be maintained so that people do not conflate the different paths. True and false teachings (should) remain different as the Jing and the Wei Rivers flow separately.

時爲般若，不嫻胡語，復未解唐言；景淨不識梵文，復未明釋教。雖稱傳譯，未獲半珠；圖竊虛名，匪位副理.... 且夫釋氏伽藍，大秦寺，居止既別，行法全乖。景淨應傳彌師訶教；沙門釋子，弘闡佛經。欲使教法區分，人無濫涉；正鄧異類，徑渭殊流。⁴⁶

The records above indicate that imperial authorities, even if not in the initial stages, actively administered and controlled the translation process (Sun 2019, pp. 62–69; Q. Zhu 2014). Similarly, early Christian missionaries likely recognized the necessity of learning and adapting to the already established linguistic and ritual frameworks of Buddhism—a flourishing foreign tradition in China at the time⁴⁷—to gain favor and support from the imperial power.⁴⁸ The text notes that Jingjing had to engage with Buddhist concepts to articulate Christian teachings, a process metaphorically described as putting on “Buddhist clothes”. (Takakusu 1896, pp. 589–91; Deeg 2006a, pp. 97–98; 2006b, pp. 121–23; 2009, p. 144; 2023, pp. 125–27; H. Chen 2006a, pp. 93–113).

Despite its eventual failure, this collaborative translation effort functioned as a form of cultural dialogue and integration, enabling different religious traditions to observe the partial acceptance and absorption of their doctrines within a shared framework. At the same time, this passage highlights the inherent tensions in cross-religious translation and the perceived need to assimilate while maintaining clear doctrinal distinctions between Buddhism and *Jingjiao* Christianity in Tang China.⁴⁹

Scholars such as Deeg (2006b) have identified key factors that distinguish *Jingjiao* texts from their Buddhist predecessors in China.

- (1) First, in contrast to early Buddhist texts that were translated from known Sanskrit or Central Asian origins, the existing *Jingjiao* texts were not derived from any identifiable “Syriac” original or other Christian texts in alternative languages, such as Iranian.⁵⁰ Instead, these texts were crafted to introduce the basics of Christianity to a Chinese-speaking audience, the specifics of which—such as size; composition; and social, ethnic, or religious background—are still unknown. It remains uncertain how many readers engaged with these texts and whether the audience was exclusively Chinese believers or included Iranian Christians, possibly even second or third-generation

Chinese Iranians after the fall of the Persian dynasty. Nevertheless, given that Chinese served as a *lingua franca*, it is plausible that the texts were intended for a broader audience.

- (2) Second, the absence of a Syriac, Iranian, or other Christian source text has significant implications for interpretation. While Buddhist scriptures can often be elucidated by referencing the extensive corpus of Sino-Buddhist terminology and its Indian or Tibetan counterparts, Tang-period *Jingjiao* texts frequently leave us without clear indications of their underlying content, terminology, or doctrinal references as they existed in known Syriac-Christian languages from the Near East or Central Asia.
- (3) Finally, rather than directly incorporating Syriac or Iranian Christian theological vocabulary, *Jingjiao* texts rely heavily on the established terminological frameworks of Buddhism, Daoism, and Ruism (commonly called Confucianism). Consequently, the meaning of individual words and phrases—their syntactical structures and compound formations—is often difficult to ascertain. At that time, Abrahamic and Greek concepts were not present in Chinese. Therefore, in many instances, only by situating these terms within the broader religious lexicon of Tang China, from which they were derived, can their intended meanings be fully understood.⁵¹

3. The Borrowing of Concepts from Iconic Buddhist Images After the Spread of the *Jingjiao* Church to China

The cultural hermeneutics in early dialogues between Buddhism and Christianity extend beyond textual sources and are also evident in visual materials. Some scholars refer to this phenomenon as “borrowing images” (Li 2023, pp. 116–21), suggesting that before the Buddhist visual tradition was firmly established, images used in the decoration of monasteries and *stūpas* were primarily drawn from longstanding cognitive traditions, ancient objects, and decorative patterns. Working in collaboration with monks, artisans incorporated these borrowed motifs into Buddhist monuments. Over time, as monks repeatedly explained these images to viewers, they gradually evolved into distinctive symbols of Buddhist iconography.

In the same way that Buddhist scholars have distinguished between “visual Buddhism” and “textual Buddhism” in Buddhist studies, a corresponding category of “visual Christianity” can be identified in the remains of *Jingjiao* in Tang China. According to the edict inscribed on the *Jingjiao bei* (景教碑), when Christian missionaries arrived in China, they were said to have brought “texts and images from afar as offerings to the supreme capital” (遠將經像, 來獻上京)⁵². However, the extent to which images played a role in their early missionary efforts remains unclear.

In Chinese Buddhism, visual representations—whether through teaching with images or image worship—were essential tools for disseminating doctrine and philosophy. This visual emphasis was so pronounced that Buddhism was initially known in China as the “Religion of Images” (*Xiangjiao* 像教) (Greene 2018, pp. 455–84).

Nevertheless, archaeological evidence reveals that *Jingjiao* iconography, both along the Silk Roads and after its integration into Tang China, was deeply influenced by Buddhism’s rich visual traditions.

One notable example is the use of the cross intertwined with a lotus flower (*padma*) motif, seen in both the *Jingjiao bei* (景教碑) (Figure 1) and the Tang Christian Octagonal Pillar (*Jingchuang* 經幢) from Luoyang bearing a more complete version of the text-inscription named *Daqin Jingjiao xuanyuan zhiben jing* (大秦景教宣元至本經) [The *Sūtra* of Proclamation of the Highest Origin of Origins of the Radiant Teaching from Da Qin]⁵³, which was erected between 814 and 815 CE and unearthed in 2006⁵⁴ (Figure 2). This motif, which

first emerged during the Mid-Tang period (中唐)⁵⁵ and persisted in later centuries⁵⁶, is generally regarded as a borrowing from Buddhist visual culture.⁵⁷

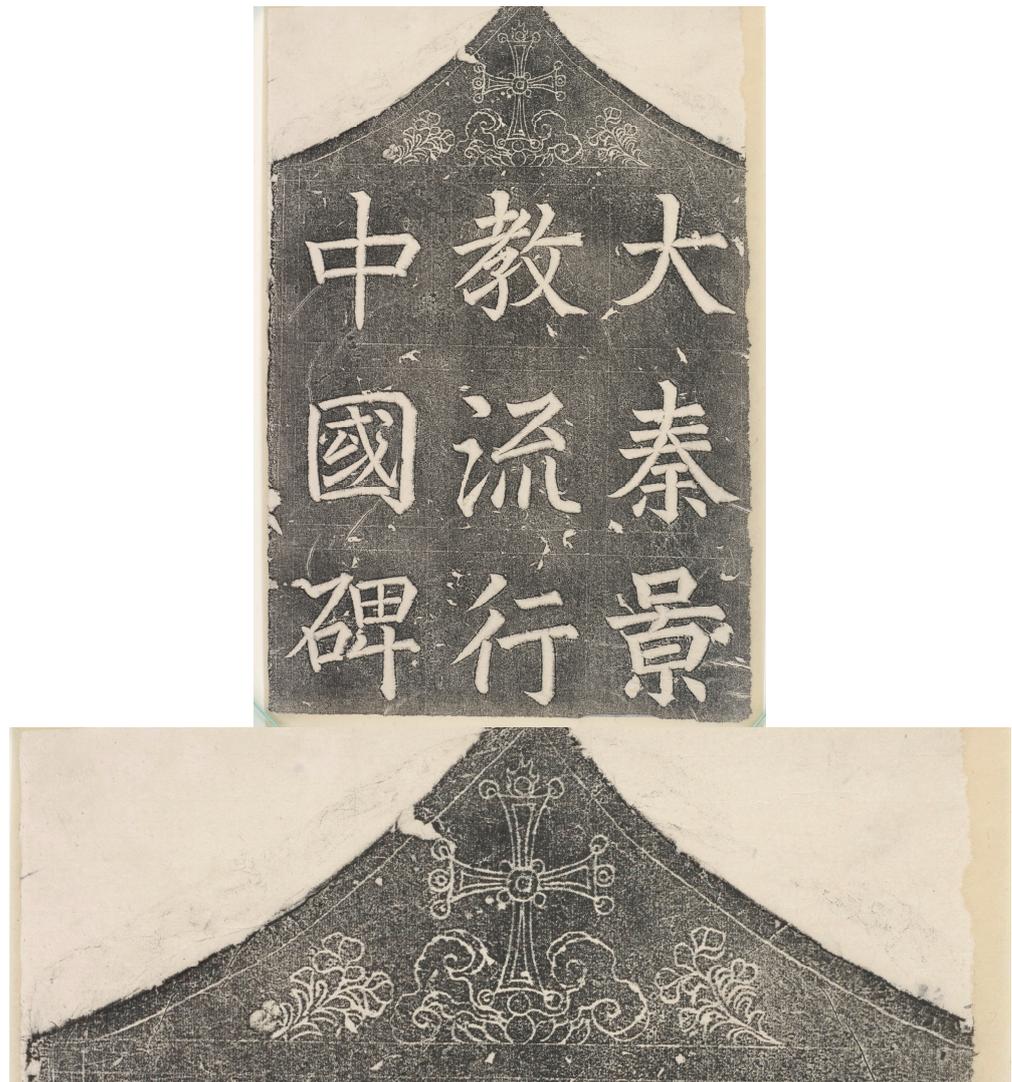


Figure 1. (Detail) *Da Qin jing jiao liuxing Zhongguo bei* 大秦景教流行中國碑 [Stele of the Diffusion of the Radiant Teaching of Da Qin (Rome) in China (the Middle Kingdom)], 781, detail of the title and the cross carved on the upper part, rubbing. Photo: Peking University Library Collection 北京大學圖書館; Xi'an Beilin Museum 西安碑林博物館.

A key artifact demonstrating this synthesis is the Gilt Copper Nestorian (*sic*) Plaque (景教金銅額, Kaikado No. 59), dated to the 8th–9th-century Tang dynasty. The plaque depicts a cross pattée slightly indented with arms narrowing toward the center, supported by an open, multi-petaled lotus blossom atop a three-tiered flared base, flanked by two descending male and female flying figures (possibly *apsaras*, Ch. 飛天 *feitian*)⁵⁸, each holding the lotus with both hands (Figure 3). Like the Octagonal Pillar, this plaque is one of the earliest surviving examples of the “cross-lotus” motif, confirming its integration into *Jingjiao* iconography during the Tang dynasty.⁵⁹



Figure 2. Octagonal pillar (front and back). China, Luoyang, dated 829, Luoyang Museum 洛陽博物館. Photo: authors. Rubbings of ‘upper relief carvings of the square images’ of (a) ‘front’, Sides I, II, III; (b) ‘back’, Sides V, VI, VII. After Ge (2009), Pl. 11 (圖板十一) and Pl. 12 (圖板十二), labeled as “經幢正/反面上部浮雕”.

Scholars have offered varying interpretations of this motif. Ruji Niu (2008) identifies the “cross-lotus” motif/pattern (十字蓮花) as a distinctive symbol of the *Jingjiao* Church (Niu 2008, 2017; Parry 2010, pp. 113–25; Halbertsma 2008, p. 160), while Chongxin Yao (2017) argues that the visual impact of this design within the church often surpassed that of its religious texts, even influencing *Jingjiao* architecture. Drawing from the Buddhist tradition of creating “thrones” or pedestals (座) for deities in religious art⁶⁰, *Jingjiao* incorporated the lotus seat into its sculptural works—at least until the late 8th century—placing the lotus beneath the cross (Chongxin Yao 2017, pp. 215–62). In the Buddhist tradition, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are frequently depicted seated on a lotus throne, symbolizing their birth and transformation from the lotus, a motif deeply embedded in Buddhist iconography. In this *Jingjiao* context, the aniconic cross replaces the traditional image of a Bodhisattva. (Klimkeit 1993, pp. 477–84). In contrast, Jian’guang Chen et al. (2010) and Hongyan Mu (2019) assert that the lotus motif present in *Jingjiao* ornamentation does not have a direct correlation with Buddhism. They contend that the appropriation of symbols

among religions transpired significantly later, that Christian artifacts adorned with a lotus-like motif predated interactions with Buddhism during the Tang dynasty, and that these motifs were most likely inherited from Persian traditions.⁶¹ However, the cross patterns in the Christian examples they cite seem to resemble “palm-leaf” designs rather than the upturned lotus (仰蓮) commonly found in *Jingjiao* artifacts.



Figure 3. Gilt Copper Nestorian Plaque 景教金銅額, height of 16.5 cm (6 1/2 in), width of 14.5 cm (5 3/4 in), Tang dynasty, 8th–9th century, showcasing cross pattée supported by an open lotus and three-tiered flaring base. Photo is courtesy of the *River of Stars* exhibition Archives, 2017, Item No. 59, © Kaikado Gallery 懷古堂, Pepekeo, HI, <https://www.kaikodo.com/exhibit/river-of-stars/page/8/> (accessed on 16 February 2025).

Moreover, most examples of the “cross-lotus” motif have been discovered in China, with very few—if any—cases found in other regions. Those discovered outside China are typically dated to much later, after the 11th century. This evidence suggests that the *Jingjiao* Church likely adopted the “cross-lotus” motif/pattern during its dissemination in China as a deliberate strategy (Halbertsma 2008, pp. 160–61), to align itself with local Buddhist iconography and enhance its visual appeal to Chinese audiences.

Secondly, regarding the representation of divine figures, the fragmentary large silk painting, dated to the 9th-century Tang dynasty⁶², was discovered in Cave 17 of the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang (敦煌莫高窟) by the Hungarian-born British archaeologist and geographer Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862–1943) between 1906 and 1908. It is now housed in the British Museum’s Asian Department (Registration No. 1919,0101,0.48) (Figure 4)⁶³.

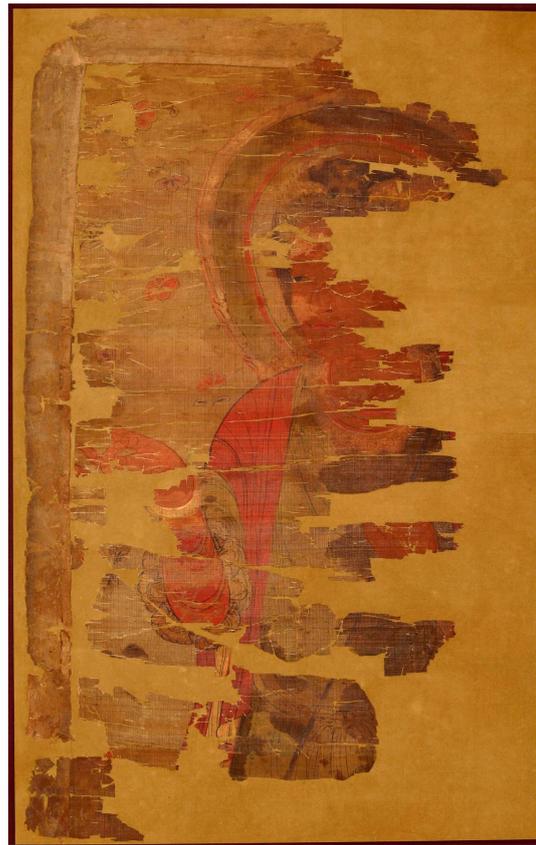


Figure 4. Fragmentary silk painting of standing (Christian) figure, Tang dynasty, c. 9th century, excavated by Sir Auriel Stein from Cave No. 17, Dunhuang in 1908⁶⁴. British Museum (No. 1919,0101,0.48) © The Trustees of the British Museum.

This nearly life-sized painting depicts a Christian holy figure (or possibly a saint?) standing in a three-quarter view, bearing a striking resemblance to a Buddhist bodhisattva. In their early descriptions, Stein and British Sinologist Arthur Waley (1889–1966) observed its close similarity to Kṣitigarbha (地藏). Stein classified it as an “unidentified bodhisattva”, while Waley noted its possible misidentification in the Dunhuang caves (Waley 1925, pp. 4–5; 1931, pp. 81–82; Stein 1921, pp. 1050–51). Stein’s original notes describe the figure as follows:

[The] Bodhisattva, approaching life-size, is standing slightly to [the] L[eft] with [its] head turned still further towards [the] same side; [The figure’s] R[ight] arm [is] raised from [the] elbow, and [its] hand held out palm uppermost, thumb and second finger joined; [the] L[eft] hand at [its] breast, [is] mostly broken away, but holding [a] long brown staff which [is] rested on [its] shoulder. This may have been [a] begging-staff, and [the] deity in that case might be Kṣitigarbha. [the] Dress and treatment of [the] fig[ure] are in some points unique, though [the] general style is ‘Chinese Buddhist’ [...] [the] Face [is] long and comparatively thin, finely drawn, with [a] high forehead, straight eye[s], [a] slightly aquiline nose, and [a] firm well-made mouth and chin.

[the] Eye[s] blue ([the] only instance of this in the Collection); [the] flesh yellowish pink outlined with dark red except [the] line of [the] eyelash[es], [the] corner of [the] nostril, and [the] dividing line of [the] lips, which are black. On [the] lip[s] and chin [the] moustache and beard seem to be painted in dark red (?), but this part is much discoloured. Details of [the] tiara and [the] top of [the] head are also much obscured, but [the] hair seems to be done in two low blue-black masses

dividing to [the] R[ight] and L[eft] behind [the] two wing-shaped ornaments on [the] tiara. [The] Latter has none of [the] usual jewels or streamers, but consists chiefly of these wing orn[ament]s with lotus orn[aments] (?) at their base, and a 'Maltese cross' standing up in [the] middle. Behind [the] latter is seen [the] dark brown centre of [a] halo; it is oval, and consists of this brown field surrounded by rings of white, crimson, green, and an outer border of [a] creeping flame. No hair is visible below, but a line of red and yellow scrolled circles appears over [the] R[ight] shoulder (perhaps [the] hair [is] miscoloured) [...]

[The] Jewellery comprises only [a] heavy necklace and bracelet, both [of which are] yellow [and] outlined with red. Small red flowers [are] scattered in [the] background. [The] Painting [is] much dimmed and discoloured, especially down [the] broken side.⁶⁵

In addition to Stein's description, a Japanese artist, Mr. Furuyama, who reportedly saw the painting shortly after it was brought to England, created a restoration sketch in 1908. Furuyama's sketch, included in Saeki's *Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (Figure 5), remains the most detailed visual reference available.⁶⁶ Despite the painting's fragmentary state, it is now widely regarded as a Christian image.⁶⁷ However, the fusion of Tang-period Buddhist and Christian elements is evident in the figure's posture, hand gestures, and the prominent cross pattée in the headdress, which rests on a lotus base (or possibly a throne [?]⁶⁸), as well as in the cross motifs on the collar and the pectoral cross. These details closely correspond to cross patterns on the *Jingjiao* Monument and the Luoyang pillar (see above).

As Stein and Waley noted, and as depicted in the Furuyama sketch, the figure appears to hold the staff of a processional cross in its left hand.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, its right hand is held open, with the thumb touching the tip of the second finger. The index and little fingers are extended, while the ring finger curves slightly inward, with the hand pointing upward.⁷⁰ This gesture, known as *Vitarka-mudrā* in Buddhist iconography, commonly seen in Central Asian Buddhist wall paintings at Dunhuang⁷¹, symbolizes the "transmission of Buddhist teaching". In Buddhist practice, *mudrās* communicate the specific nature and function of deities to practitioners, serving as divine manifestations. (Yan 2009, pp. 385–89; Ui 1986, p. 480). These hand gestures are also used by monks during spiritual exercises and ritual meditations, believed to generate forces that invoke the deity. The Buddha's gesture, with three extended fingers, symbolizes the "Three Jewels" (*triratna*) of Buddhism—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṃgha—as the foundation of religious practice.

In this figure's *mudrā*, the thumb and index finger of both hands touch to form a circle, like a representation of the Wheel of Dharma (*dharma-cakra*) in Buddhist iconography. Notably, a similar hand gesture appears in Judeo-Christian art, particularly in icons of Jesus Christ and other holy figures. In Christianity, the *Sign of Blessing* involves folding the ring and little fingers toward the palm while keeping the index and middle fingers upright. The thumb is typically held erect but can sometimes fold toward the ring finger (Sittl 1890, p. 304). Scholars note that Christian culture inherited an abstract vocabulary of gestures from antiquity, with many likely borrowed from Greek and Roman traditions of oratory and rhetoric (Schmitt 1990, p. 34). The hand gestures found in Orthodox Christian icons are closely linked to this heritage and are often used as a sign of benediction. In contrast, Buddhist hand gestures from China likely developed later than their Orthodox Christian counterparts (L. Tang 2020).



The tentative restoration of the original painting discovered by Sir Aurel Stein, Kt., at Tun-huang in 1908, by Mr. Furuyama, an artist

Figure 5. Schematic reconstruction of the painting by Mr. Furuyama, from c. 1908 (image: after Saeki [1937] 1951, p. 408).

Another example, like the Stein silk painting displaying a comparable hand gesture, is noted by Tang Li in the 13th-century icon of *Christ Pantocrator* from the Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos, Greece, attributed to an unknown Byzantine master (Figure 6) (L. Tang 2020)⁷².

Tang (idem, p. 249) observes that although such an image postdates the silk painting from Dunhuang, it may yet signify the continuity of an ancient tradition of Christian imagery. Furthermore, it is probable that many earlier icons were lost during the Iconoclastic Controversy in the Byzantine Empire during the 8th and 9th centuries.

However, it remains unclear how standardized such hand gestures were more than half a millennium earlier during the Tang dynasty. Like the case of *Jingjiao* textual evidence, which shows that collaboration and appropriation were used to produce those texts, the Buddhist elements in the silk painting likely stem from the fact that the artist was trained in painting Buddhist imagery at Dunhuang and might have even studied under Chinese artists. When tasked with depicting a Christian figure, the painter may have naturally employed techniques and styles commonly used for Buddhist figures—methods familiar to him. Consequently, the resulting silk painting combines a hybrid of Buddhist and Christian artistic elements and reflects the cross-cultural nature of early Christianity in Xinjiang, Dunhuang, Turfan, and other sites in the Northwestern regions of China.

Regarding the representations on religious objects and artifacts, the stone pillar discovered in Luoyang, adapted from the Buddhist *dhāraṇī/sūtra* pillar (經幢), features male and female flying figures often interpreted as “angels” flanking the cross. Their graceful, flowing forms likely draw inspiration from Buddhist *apsarās* (Ch. *feitian* 飛天 or celestial beings, *feixian* 飛仙), yet they display distinctly Sinicized attributes.⁷³



Figure 6. (Left) *Christ Pantocrator* Icon, Greece, Egg tempera and gold leaf on wood panel, Vatopedi Monastery, Mount Athos, Greece, attributed to an unknown Byzantine artist, 13th century. (Right) Detail of hand gesture (image source: Vatopedi Monastery).

According to the archaeological report on the *Jingjiao* monastery ruins from the Tang and Song dynasties west of modern Turfan (Turfan) City (吐魯番) in Xinjiang Autonomous Region (新疆), numerous nearby Buddhist sites show structural similarities to Buddhist monasteries in Central Asia (Ren and Meng 2024, pp. 45–55). Wang Jing (J. Wang 2024) and Chen Jichun (J. Chen 2008) examined a fragmentary mural unearthed from the *Jingjiao* monastery/church in the ancient city of Gaochang (高昌) (Le Coq [1928] 1985), Turfan, and now preserved in Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin. This mural depicts a “Palm Sunday” ceremony with a deacon and three worshippers conducted by the *Jingjiao* Church (J. Wang 2024, pp. 84–85; Parry 2016, p. 28 and Figure 3). The *Jingjiao* murals from Gaochang, portraying variations of this scene, exhibit distinct Tang-period Chinese painting features, such as flat compositions emphasizing central figures through density and rhythmic spatial arrangements and a use of suggestive, expressive *xieyi* (寫意) brushwork. Moreover, the attire of the women depicted resembles Tang dynasty *Shinu tu* 仕女圖 (paintings of court ladies) (J. Wang 2024).

It is plausible that the Buddhist art of the Tang dynasty influenced the paintings associated with *Jingjiao* at Dunhuang and Turfan. The incorporation of Buddhist imagery in these *Jingjiao* artifacts suggests that contemporary Christians intentionally adopted localized Buddhist iconography and aesthetics when collaborating with artisans. Chinese converts may have executed some of these paintings, though insufficient evidence exists to confirm this. Nevertheless, such cultural adaptation was likely aimed at enhancing the accessibility of *Jingjiao* teachings among local adherents rather than providing an exact theological representation. Iconographically and stylistically, this phenomenon reflects a characteristic of “borrowing pictures”.

4. Dialogues with Buddhism Accelerated the Localization of the *Jingjiao* Church

Alopen’s missionary strategy consisted of two key steps: translation and doctrinal explanation, both aimed at Emperor Taizong. He worked closely with two high-ranking ministers, the eminent statesmen Fang Xuanling (房玄齡, 579–648) and Zheng Weixuan (魏徵宣, 580–643), who acted as translators. This suggests that Alopen had a substantial connection with the court that allowed for effective communication with the emperor.⁷⁴ Once Taizong grasped the key teachings of the *Jingjiao* Church, he “specifically ordered that they be promulgated” (特令傳授)⁷⁵. This incident highlights the significance of presenting the translated scriptures to Emperor Taizong during their interactions.

The *Jingjiao* Stele (*Jingjiao bei* 景教碑):

When Emperor Taizong's reign (627–649 CE) began, he was wise in his relations with the people. In Da Qin, there was a 'man of great virtue' (a bishop), known as Aluoben [A-lo-pen] [XI]⁷⁶, who detected the intent of heaven and conveyed the true scripture here. He observed how the winds blew to travel through difficulties and perils, and in the ninth year of the Zhenguan era (635 CE), he reached Chang'an. The emperor dispatched an official, Fang Xuanling, as an envoy to the western outskirts to welcome the visitor, who translated the scriptures in the 'Academy of Scholars' (imperial library)⁷⁷. (The emperor) examined the doctrines [inside] the forbidden gates (i.e., the palace/his apartments) and reached a profound understanding of their truth. He specially ordered that they be promulgated 太宗文皇帝。光華啓運，明聖臨人，大秦國有上德，曰阿[XI]羅本。佔青雲而載真經，望風律以馳艱險。貞觀九祀，至於長安。[缺/璫]帝使宰臣房公玄齡，摠[總]⁷⁸仗西郊，賓迎入內。翻經書殿，問道禁闈；深知正真，特令傳授。⁷⁹

The three years Alopen translated the scriptures (635–638) marked a pivotal period in Emperor Taizong's reign. In 637 CE, Emperor Taizong issued an edict reflecting on life's fleeting nature and the deep wisdom of ancient sages:

Life is the great virtue of Heaven and Earth, and the lifespan is [but] a fleeting moment. Life, embodied in seven *chi* (one's body), is limited to a hundred years. It encompasses a unique spirit and energy inherent in [a] self-existing nature beyond external control. As the *Liji* (*Book of Rites*) declares, 'When a Ruler succeeds to his state, he makes his coffin (*bì* 椁),' Zhuang Zhou observes, '[Heaven and Earth], my life is spent in toil on it; at death I find rest in it.' Is this not the far-sighted wisdom of the Sages and the profound knowledge of the wise?" 夫生者，天地之大德，壽者，修短之一期。生有七尺之形，壽以百齡為限，含靈稟氣，莫不同焉，皆得之於自然，不可以分外企也。是以禮記雲：'君即位而為椁'。莊周雲：'勞我以形，息我以死。'豈非聖人遠鑒，通賢深識？⁸⁰

The edict reflects Emperor Taizong's profound contemplation on the eternal consciousness of the universe (Heaven and Earth), his lamentation over the fleeting nature of life, his deep attachment to the present world, and his melancholy about the irreconcilable tension between these contradictions. In response to these reflections, Taizong began preparing for succession by cultivating the crown prince, delegating administrative responsibilities to him, and assigning fiefs to the imperial princes. These actions reveal that the emperor had accepted the inevitability of death yet remained deeply fearful of it.

The *Jingjiao* doctrines preached by Alopen to Emperor Taizong, especially those concerning eternal life and salvation, alleviated the emperor's fear of death and his existential anxieties. The miraculous accounts of the birth of the Son of God, his overcoming of worldly tribulations, and his resurrection—narrated in the *Xuting Mishisuo jing*—were explained to Taizong in a manner that addressed his troubled state of mind. Alopen also emphasized the divine right of emperors in the early scriptures, declaring that God is the sole true deity. He proposed the following to Taizong:

The previous life of the August Ruler (Your Majesty) was blessed by God, and the 'Heaven-Honored One' (God)⁸¹ took over the position. Is it not possible that Your Majesty is the 'Heaven-Honored One' himself?

聖上前身福弘，天尊補任，亦無自乃天尊耶？⁸²

Alopen further expounded on the concept of eternal existence, stating the following:

Your Majesty is the emperor, and all living beings follow your progress and behavior. If anyone fails to respect the August Ruler's will or disobeys your orders, that person is a rebel among all living beings.

屬自作口聖上⁸³, 一切眾生皆取口聖上進止. 如有人不取聖上, 驅使不伏, 其人在於眾生, 即是叛逆.⁸⁴

He went on to provide a theological justification for the emperor's past actions, saying the following:

Your Majesty is a god born into this world. Although your parents are still alive, all beings possess wisdom and plans. You should revere both the Heaven-Honored One (God) and the August Ruler, as well as honor your parents. To accept the doctrine of the Heaven-Honored One means to uphold the precepts. [According to] what the Heaven-Honored One accepts, and if one embraces the Honored teaching, one must first renounce reverence to the gods and the buddhas worshipped by other living beings, for the buddhas endure suffering. Heaven and earth were established solely through the pure power of the Heaven-Honored One. Therefore, Your Majesty should strive to eliminate outdated customs and seek the divine palace through the wisdom of the buddhas. In doing so, Your Majesty will remain forever free.⁸⁵

聖上皆是神生, 今世雖有父母見存, 眾生有智計; 合怕天尊及聖上, 並怕父母. 好受天尊法教, 不合破戒. 天尊所受, 及受尊教, 先遣眾生禮諸天, 佛, 爲佛受苦. 置立天地, 只爲清淨威力, 因緣. 聖上唯須勤伽習後, 聖上宮殿, 於諸佛求得. 聖上身, 總是自由.⁸⁶

The passage emphasizes the personal freedom of the emperor's will and the belief that salvation can be achieved through the practice of merit, presenting *Jingjiao* teachings as the ultimate pathway. This foreign doctrine provided a justification for the existence of the Tang imperial authority and its claim to eternal legitimacy, even exonerating the violent acts committed in its name. Such a perspective resonated with local people and, to some extent, eased Emperor Taizong's psychological suffering.

Emperor Taizong readily accepted these teachings and religions like *Jingjiao*, which offered him a form of self-comfort in the face of life's impermanence. This acceptance is clearly reflected in the edict he issued to establish the "Persian Monastery" (波斯寺), later renamed Da Qin Monastery (大秦寺), allowing Alopen to preach his doctrines. The edict described these teachings as follows:

...mysterious and transcendent non-action, that establish the essentials of production and completion, and are of help to the beings and of profit to mankind.
玄妙無爲; 生成立要, 濟物利人.⁸⁷

Emperor Taizong was impressed by the mystical and non-intrusive nature of *Jingjiao* teachings, which posed no threat to political stability while offering practical benefits for the state, society, and its people. Consequently, he permitted their dissemination. Seizing this opportunity, *Jingjiao* monks built monasteries and recruited numerous followers, promoting the superiority of their religion primarily to serve the interests of the powerful.⁸⁸

5. The Historical Motivation for Christian–Buddhist Dialogue in China

The profound fusion of Buddhism and Christianity occurred primarily during the Tang dynasty in China. The following outlines the historical reasons behind this unique development.

The initial integration of Christianity and Buddhism was not a phenomenon that began in China. For example, the discovery of the *Gospel of Thomas* near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, which is considered "extra-canonical", led early 20th-century scholars to speculate that Buddhist scriptures might have influenced some aspects of intertextuality.⁸⁹ However, the specifics of these connections remain unverified and debated.⁹⁰

The missionary journey of Thomas in India, as described in the *Acts of Thomas*, can be corroborated by historical accounts. Furthermore, the *Gospel of Thomas* was discovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, and is thought to have been composed between 60 and 250 CE, a period during which many Buddhists lived in Alexandria, Egypt. In 2023, Buddha statues in the Gandhāran style unearthed at Berenike (or Baranis) in Egypt further support this claim (Sidebotham et al. 2023, pp. 13–28). Additionally, archaeological evidence indicates that Oxyrhynchus (Ancient Greek: Ὀξύρρυγχος, modern Al-Bahnasa) was a thriving city during Roman times and a significant center of early Christianity in Egypt. Notably, three Greek fragments from the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* have been identified which contain textual fragments of the *Gospel of Thomas* (Grenfell and Hunt 1897, p. 5).

5.1. The Silk Roads and the Deepening of Ancient Globalization

With advancements in production technology and the rise of superpowers, the increasingly frequent trade and exchanges between the Tang dynasty and other countries played a significant role in expanding globalization. The Silk Roads, which opened during the Han (漢) dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), became even more important during the Tang dynasty.⁹¹ Through these interactions, both China and the West experienced significant social changes, impacting the lives of their participants. Beyond merchants, missionaries also traveled along the Silk Roads, bringing with them religious traditions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Manichaeism. These diverse cultural and religious influences collided and merged within a relatively short period of time.

In the early Tang dynasty, many *Hu* (胡) merchants, particularly Sogdians, immigrated to China. Due to the strategic location of Sogdian merchants and their cultural tradition of commerce, they became key intermediaries in land trade between India, Persia, and Ancient China. The Sogdians practiced a variety of religious beliefs, including Buddhism and Christianity. Evidence from unearthed images and donor inscriptions shows that they could support the diverse religions they practiced, contributing materially to their spread.

5.2. The Cultural Gene of “Neutrality” in Chinese Civilization

The large-scale presence and development of foreign religions in China is a unique phenomenon among ancient civilizations, highlighting the characteristic of Chinese civilization that “greatness lies in the capacity (to accept or embrace)” (有容乃大) (Q. Liu 2023, pp. 92–93). Taking Buddhism as an example, prior to the Tang dynasty, Chinese Buddhists drew on Indian Buddhist thoughts and theories, interpreting and annotating the scriptures according to their own understanding, which led to the formation of various schools.

The period from the Sui (隋, 581–619) and Tang (618–907) dynasties to the Wu Zhou (武周, 690–705) period under Empress Wu Zetian (武則天, r. 683–705) marked a critical period of the imperial Sinicization of Indian Buddhism. Chinese Buddhist thought evolved to incorporate both “Mahāyāna” and “Hīnayāna” traditions, blending the concepts of “emptiness” (Ch. *kong* 空, Skt. *śūnyatā*) and “existence” (Ch. *you* 有) and giving rise to distinct Buddhist “sects” (Ch. *zong* 宗).

The success of the *Jingjiao* church in China can be attributed not only to the imperial support it received under Alopen’s leadership, which included active translation of scriptures and a gradual missionary strategy, but also to the church’s localized approach. By integrating Confucianism, Buddhism, and the teachings of Zhuangzi (莊子) and Laozi (老子), *Jingjiao* resonated with the social and cultural environment of the time. The localization of both Buddhism and Christianity in China demonstrates the inclusiveness of Chinese civilization. Additionally, there may be a political component as well. The church served as an important conduit between Western and Eastern Asia. Christianity introduced new

technologies into China, including medicine and seemingly astronomy/astrology. From the standpoint of leadership and diplomacy, it represented a valuable institution. ⁹²

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, upon the arrival of the *Jingjiao* Church in China, Alopen and his fellow *Jingjiao* monk-missionaries established their presence by appealing to the Tang emperor's quest for "eternal life". With backing from influential individuals, they successfully integrated into the region. When *Jingjiao* first emerged, Buddhism had reached its peak development. However, regarding identity, the prevailing foreign cultural landscape diminished *Jingjiao's* "discourse power". As a result, missionaries implemented a localized approach known as *geyi*, which combined Christian teachings with Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist concepts through collaborative translation and oral preaching, helping to effectively disseminate their beliefs. Techniques such as "matching concepts" and "borrowing images" play crucial roles in cultural hermeneutics, wherein missionaries engaged with local cultures and adapted to their environment. Nevertheless, Buddhism itself was also viewed as an "outsider", and this approach had drawbacks for the spread of *Jingjiao* (Z. Liu 2009). By incorporating Buddhist language and imagery, *Jingjiao* inadvertently created cognitive biases that affected recipients' understanding of their teachings. Consequently, during the Huichang Persecution of Buddhism, *Jingjiao* faced a devastating setback and nearly ceased its propagation in the Central Plains.

As Christianity was embraced in India and China, it gradually became more self-aware and independent while continuing its process of localization. The cases discussed above suggest that interreligious dialogue can foster exchange and integration. Analyzing missionary strategies within the context of historical Buddhist and Christian interactions provides insight into why Christianity gained acceptance among imperial authorities and spread in terms of material and religious culture during the Tang dynasty.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

T	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō</i> 大正新脩大藏經 [Buddhist Canon Compiled during the Taishō Era (1912–1926)]. 100 vols. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭 et al., eds. Tōkyō: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai 大正一切經刊行會, 1924–1934. Digitized in CBETA (https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/ , accessed on 16 February 2025) and SAT Daizōkyō Text Database (http://21dzk.l.u-Tōkyō.ac.jp/SAT/satdb2015.php , accessed on 16 February 2025).
X	<i>Xinbian xu zangjing</i> 新編卍字續藏經 [Man Extended Buddhist Canon]. 150 vols. Xin wenfeng chuban gongsi 新文豐出版公司, Taipei 臺北, 1968–1970. Reprint of Nakano Tatsue 中野達慧, et al., comps. Dai Nihon zoku zōkyō 大日本續藏經 [Extended Buddhist Canon of Great Japan], 120 cases. Kyoto: Zōkyō shoin 藏經書院, 1905–1912. Digitized in CBETA (https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/ , accessed on 16 February 2025).
B	<i>Da zangjing bubian</i> 大藏經補編 [Supplement to the Dazangjing]. Huayu chuban she 華宇出版社, Taipei 臺北, 1985. Ed. Lan Jifu 藍吉富.
Eccles and Lieu Trans. Project	Eccles, L. and S. Lieu. 2023. <i>Da Qin jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei</i> 大秦景教流行中國碑 “Stele on the Diffusion of Christianity (the Luminous Religion) from Da Qin (Rome) into China (the Middle Kingdom)”, “The Nestorian Monument”. Ongoing Project (last updated: 5 November 2023).
<i>Tonkō hikyū</i>	<i>Tonkō hikyū: keikyō kyōten yonshu</i> 敦煌秘笈: 景教經典四種 [Dunhuang Secret Scrolls: Four Jingjiao Scriptures]. Takeda kagaku shinkō zaidan kyōu shooku hen 武田科学振興財団杏雨書屋編. Osaka 大阪: Takeda kagaku shinkō zaidan 武田科学振興財団, 2020.
Pelliot INS 1996	Paul Pelliot, L’inscription nestorienne de Si-Ngan-Fou, edited with supplements by Antonino Forte. Epigraphical Series 2 (Kyoto: Scuola di Studi sull’Asia Orientale; Paris: Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1996). (Pelliot 1996)
JJB	<i>Jingjiaobei</i> 景教碑 = <i>Da Qin jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei</i> 大秦景教流行中國碑 [Stele of the Promulgation of the ‘Radiant Teaching’ of Da Qin in China, 781], in Pelliot INS (1996, pp. 497–503).
[I–XXXII]	Indicates lines of JJB, following Pelliot INS (1996, pp. 497–503)
HCC	<i>Handbook of Christianity in China, Volume One: 635–1800</i> . Edited by Standaert, Nicolas (Leiden: Brill, 2001).
P. 3847	Pelliot chinois No. 3847, conserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris
Kyo-U Li	Kyōu Shooku 杏雨書屋 Library in Osaka, Japan
Skt.	Sanskrit
Ch.	Chinese
J.	Japanese
EMC	Early Middle Chinese (following Pulleyblank 1991)
LMC	Late Middle Chinese (following Pulleyblank 1991)
j.	juan 卷
d.u.	Date unknown
*	Reconstructed

Notes

- See (Brock and Coakley 2011, pp. 99–100). *Jingjiao* (景教) is a term coined during the time of the clergyman Jingjing (景淨), known as ‘Adhām’ (Adam, fl. 8th to early 9th century), whose formal titles included priest, charespiscopus, and papas of China” in Syriac (Hunter 2009, p. 73) and who was a key figure in the creation of the JJB. The term was adopted by Christians in 745 (lunar month 9 of the 4th year of the Tianbao reign 天寶四載九月) possibly to prevent confusion with other ‘Persian’ groups in China, notably Zoroastrians and Manichaeans, or to distinguish Christianity’s origins (cf. Tang huiyao, j. 49. 10–11; Forte 1996b, pp. 353–56; Kotyk 2024, p. 124). Often paired with the toponym “Da Qin” (大秦), it appears in the JJB inscription (see below) and other surviving texts. The labels “Nestorian” (after Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople (reigned 428–431), who had been condemned as a heretic at the Council of Ephesus in 431) and “Chinese Nestorian”, once mistakenly applied to *Jingjiao*, are now considered misnomers when referring to the “Church of the East” (cf. Brock 1996; Nicolini-Zani 2006, p. 23; 2023, p. 3). Syriac scholars and Sinologists now widely prefer using transliteration instead (cf. Malek and Hofrichter 2006, pp. 12, 15–16; Takahashi 2008; Deeg 2006a, 2006b). For a detailed analysis of the term “Jingjiao 景教”, see (Ferreira 2014, pp. 210–11; L. Tang 2002, p. 130; Baum and Winkler 2006, pp. 228–57; Deeg 2006a, p. 92, note 4).
- Deeg (2006a, pp. 91–92, note 6; 2023, p. 124). In Chinese, the word *jing* 景, which is a cognate of *ying* 英 (meaning “bright/brilliant”) and *ying* 影 (meaning “shadow/emanation”), can refer to the “iridescent emanation” by which the gods illuminate the interior of a religious adept’s (Daoist) body (cf. Kaltenmark 1969). Other scholars have suggested that *jing* (景) might also be a

“calque” (or loan translation) for a word meaning “fear”, given that in Central Asia, Christians were historically known by the Middle Persian term *tarsāg* or New Persian *tarsā*, literally meaning “a (God) fearer” or “shaker”, which implied a “religion of fear/awe” (see [Lieu 2013](#)). The character 景 in the title is also written in a variant form with the top radical showing a “口” rather than a “日”.

- 3 “In the seventh month of the 12th year of the Zhenguan era (638 CE), the emperor said: ‘The Way has not a constant name, the Saints have not a constant mode; they establish the teaching to suit the region, that all living may be mysteriously save. The **Persian monk** Alopen, bringing **texts and teachings** from afar, has come to offer them to the ‘supreme capital.’ If we scrutinize their doctrinal purport, it is mysterious and transcendent non-action; it establishes the essentials of production and completion. As they are of help to the beings and of profit to men, it is proper to have time (texts and teachings) circulate ‘under the sky.’ Let the responsible authorities, therefore, in the Yining Quarter of the Capital, **build** one monastery, and ordain twenty-one persons” 貞觀十二年七月詔曰：道無常名，聖無常體；隨方設教，密濟群生。波斯僧阿羅本，遠將經教，來獻上京。詳其教旨，玄妙無爲；生成立要，濟物利人，宜行天下。所司即於義寧坊，建寺一所，度僧廿一人。 *Tang huiyao* 唐會要, j. 49, pp. 1011–12. Translation based on Pelliot *INS* 1996. For other translations, see ([Legge 1888](#); [Saeki 1911, 1916](#); [Eccles and Lieu 2023](#)). In addition to this recording, Du Huan 杜環, a war captive who was taken to Iraq c. 751, refers to Christianity as “the Law of Daqin” (大秦法). This account suggests that by the mid-eighth century, Christianity was also being recorded both officially at the state level and informally by the populace in connection with Daqin, See ([Kotyck 2024](#), p. 125).
- 4 The initial decades during which Zoroastrianism and Christianity established themselves in China coincided with the conquests of Iran and the displacement of certain members of their royalty to China. Throughout the years, it is probable that reports would have emerged alongside the arrival of refugees and firsthand witnesses. Nonetheless, motivations such as seeking refuge from exile are not explicitly documented in the official Chinese diplomatic records. (Cf. [Kotyck 2024](#), pp. 105–7; [Nicolini-Zani 2022](#), p. 9; [Thompson 2009](#)).
- 5 cf. (Pelliot *INS* 1996, pp. 175, 251–52, 497–503 (*JJB* lines X–XI), esp. p. 499 (lines XII–XIII); [Forte 1996b](#), p. 357; [Drake 1936–1937](#), p. 305).
- 6 Cf. Edict of Emperor Wuzong 武宗 (issued Huichang 5, 8th month: 845) recorded in the “Basic Annals of Wuzong” 武宗本紀 in the *Jiu Tang shu*, j. 18, pp. 604–6. For an investigation on the suppression, see ([Weinstein 1987](#), pp. 114–36). Various scenes of burning or banning Buddhist scriptures are depicted in Ennin’s 圓仁 (794–864) diary. See (*Ru Tang qiufu xunli xing ji* 入唐求法巡禮行記, p. 158; [Reischauer 1955](#), pp. 332–33, 382, 388, 390).
- 7 While most historians interpret the imperial edict as primarily targeting Buddhism, the persecution that followed had severe consequences for Christianity. More than three thousand Jingjiao and Zoroastrian priests were forced to return to “lay” status, with many of their monasteries/churches likely having been destroyed. The Muslim scholar al-Nadim (d. 998) reports that in 987, a Christian monk made a journey to see what had happened to the Christians in China but could not find any. On the suppression’s impact on non-Buddhist communities, cf. ([Weinstein 1987](#), pp. 89–93, 120–21, 133–34; [Deeg 2006a](#), pp. 105–7; [2018b](#), pp. 50–55).
- 8 The authors extend their gratitude to the anonymous reviewer for highlighting that, “there exists considerable interest (implying skepticism) among Chinese scholars regarding the so-called ‘hiatus’” attributed to the *Jingjiao* church following the Tang dynasty.
- 9 Now the oldest known Christian relic in China, the stele *inscription* includes the original text of an *edict* issued by Emperor Taizong, dated to the 7th month of the 12th year of the Zhenguan 貞觀 era (=15 August to 12 September, 638): “[XII]... 道無常名，聖無常體；隨方設教，密濟群生。大秦國大德[*波斯僧]阿羅本，遠將經像，來獻上京。詳其教旨，玄妙無爲；觀其元宗，生成立要。詞無繁說。理有忘筌；[XIII] 濟物利人，宜行天下。所司即於京義寧坊。造大秦[*波斯]寺一所。度僧廿一人。 [XII] ...The Way has not a constant name, the Saints have not a constant mode; they establish the teaching to suit the region, that all living may be mysteriously saved. The Da Qin (*Persian) monk Aluoben, bringing texts and images from afar, has come to offer them at the ‘supreme capital.’ If we scrutinize their doctrinal purport, it is mysterious and transcendent non-action; if we look at their fundamental principle, it establishes the essentials of production and completion; the words have no superfluous speech, the concepts have ‘the forgetting of the net.’ [XIII] As they are of help to beings and of profit to men, it is proper to have them (texts and images) circulate ‘under the sky.’ Let the responsible authorities, therefore, in the Yining Quarter of the Capital, build one Da Qin (*Persian) Monastery, and ordain as monks twenty-one persons.]” Concerning the edict’s reconstruction and explanation, cf. [Forte \(1996b](#), p. 349–57), with reconstruction marked (*) (see also Pelliot’s original notes in Pelliot *INS* 1996, esp. p. 175, and note below on the version of the edict recorded in the *Tang huiyao* 唐會要, j. 49).
- 10 *Da Qin* (大秦) is the Chinese term used in the *JJB* (781) to refer to the country from which East Syriac Christianity originated. In Chinese historical sources, it denotes the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire, see ([Saeki 1916](#), pp. 181–84; [Takahashi 2019](#), p. 625; [Pulleyblank 1999](#), pp. 71–79). However, according to [Forte \(1996b](#), p. 357), an imperial edict issued in 745 ordered all “Bosi” (波斯, i.e., “Persian”) monasteries and literature to be referred to as *Da Qin*; thus, the appearance of *Da Qin* in contemporary *Jingjiao* literature may have originally denoted “from Persia” (cf. the reconstructed 638 edict above). Scholar Nakata Mie suggests that the term “Bosi” as in *bosi seng* 波斯僧 indicated the Tocharian (*Tuholuo* 吐火羅) region at the time since the Persian Sasanian Empire had already fallen in the mid-seventh century. She thus proposes that some Christian missionaries probably came from

the Tocharian region; see (Nakata 2011, p. 176). From the Christian perspective, *Da Qin* might have referred to Byzantium or the Levant, the eastern part of the Mediterranean in this case (see Kotyk 2024, p. 106).

- 11 The stele is datable by its Chinese and Syriac colophones to Sunday, 4 February of the year 781 (Western calendar), the second year of the era Jianzhong 建中, first month (Taicu yue 太簇月), seventh day Da yaosenwen(-ri) 大耀森文(日), (cf. Pelliot *INS* 1996, pp. 308–9).
- 12 See (Pelliot *INS* 1996, pp. 5–57, 58–94, 147–66; Saeki 1916, pp. 2–4, 53–61; L. Tang 2002, pp. 17–25; Nicolini-Zani 2023, p. 1, 6–7, notes 19 and 20). For a comprehensive list of recent research, see also Morris and Cheng (2020) and (Wu 2015a, 2015b). Saeki (1935); see also (Saeki 1916, pp. 71–75, 118–61; 1936; [1937] 1951).
- 13 For a summary of the research undertaken by Japanese scholars, see (J. Zhang 1969; Deeg 2009, p. 143).
- 14 (H. Chen 2012). Chen’s study pointed out the parallelism in syntactic structure and terminology between the *sūtra* and the Trinitarian hymn, showing, among other things, that Christians used Buddhist literary models to transmit their teachings.
- 15 See also (Matsumoto 1938; Gong 1958, 1960a, 1960b; X. Luo 1966; Weng 1996; H. Chen 2006a, 2006b, 2015). For a more recent study, see (H. Chen 2006a, pp. 93–113).
- 16 See (Pelliot 1931, p. 370; Foster 1939, p. 112; L. Tang 2002, pp. 141–43; Deeg 2009, pp. 140–42; Zürcher 1980, pp. 84–147; Duan 2003, pp. 434–40).
- 17 See (Deeg 2004, pp. 155–56; 2006a; 2006b, p. 120; Nicolini-Zani 2023, pp. 12–17; Wickeri 2004, p. 49). Deeg sharply critiques early Western interpretations of *Jingjiao* texts, highlighting their biases toward Christian theological ideologies and significant lack of familiarity with classical Chinese and the religious terminology of the Tang period, leading to numerous misreadings. He further contends that most of these scholars demonstrate a superficial understanding of the religious vocabulary of Buddhism and Daoism, both of which had a clear and profound influence on the Sino-Christian terminology of the time (Deeg 2004, p. 156). For examples of so-called “Christianized” readings, see discussions by (Saeki 1916, pp. 71–75, 118–61; Moule 1930; L. Tang 2002); for “Daoist-Christian” ideas, see (Palmer 2001, pp. 129–41). See also the records in the *Datang zhenyuan xu Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 大唐貞元續開元釋教錄 T 55, no. 2156, p. 756a18–28 and the *Zhenyuan xinding Shijiao mulu* 貞元新定釋教目錄T 55, no. 2157, p. 892a8–16 (discussed below); and by (Takakusu 1896, pp. 589–91; Deeg 2006a, pp. 97–98; 2009, p. 144; 2023, pp. 125–27; H. Chen 2006a, pp. 93–113).
- 18 For further discussion, see (L. Tang 2002, pp. 20–24, 105–6; Y. Zhang 2018; Deeg 2023; Forte 1996b, pp. 353–54).
- 19 Haneda and Saeki suggest “A-lo-pen/Aluoben 阿羅本” (Pulleyblank 1991, pp. 23, 32, 203: EMC/LMC = *ʔa-la-pən’/*pun’/*A-la-pwonX) could be a Chinese transcription of “Abraham”. See (Saeki [1937] 1951, p. 85, note (10); 1935, pp. 510, 597; Pelliot *INS* 1996, p. 379). The name Alouben is likely a Chinese phonetic rendering of a foreign name. 牟 is an older variant of 本, cf. (Takahashi 2008, p. 639; Deeg 2004, p. 160; 2018a, p. 239; 2009, pp. 147–49) posits a Middle Iranian origin (*Aḏ(d)ābān = Ardabān). For the Chinese text of the inscription discussing Aluoben, see (Pelliot *INS* 1996, pp. 376, 497–503), *JJB* lines X–XI. Eccles and Lieu note, “[it] perhaps represents the Syriac name Yahballaha, ‘Gift of God’” (See Eccles and Lieu 2023, p. 65, note 49).
- 20 The *JJB* in *Tang huiyao* 唐會要, j. 49, pp. 1011–12. See also (Leslie 1981–1983, p. 282; Pelliot *INS* 1996, pp. 349–59).
- 21 *Chu Sanzang jiji* 出三藏記集, T no. 2145, vol. 55. Translation based on Liebenthal with amendments. Cf. (Liebenthal 1956, pp. 88–99).
- 22 See *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 T no. 2059, vol. 50 347a20–22. For further discussion, see (Itō 1996, pp. 65–91; Y. Chen 1933); English translation based on Zürcher ([1959] 2007, p. 184) with amendments.
- 23 Comparative Philosophy also notes the value of this methodology; see (S. Chen 2024; Cheng and Bunnin 2002, p. 354; Ouyang 2016, pp. 42–43).
- 24 These documents include the seven manuscripts on *Jingjiao* discovered at Dunhuang 敦煌 in the early 20th century (cf. Pelliot 1909, pp. 37–38; Saeki 1916, p. 65; [1937] 1951, pp. 125–319; Moule 1930, pp. 52–64), along with the stone pillar dating to the 8th day of the twelfth month of the 9th year of the Yuanhe 元和 era of the Tang dynasty (c. 814/15) excavated in Luoyang 洛陽 in 2006 (see below). The Dunhuang manuscripts, sometimes referred to as the “*corpus nestorianum sinicum*” (Sánchez 2019), include the following:
- (1) *Xuting mishi suo jing* 序聽迷詩所經 [Sūtra/Book of Hearing the (Preaching) of the Messiah/“Book of Jesus-Messiah”] (Takakusu document/Kyo-U Li);
 - (2) *Yishen lun* 一神論 [Discourse on (Treatise of) the “One God” (Monotheism)] (including the three parts *Yu di'er* 喻第二, *Yitian lun diyi* 一天論第一, and *Shizun bushi lun disan* 世尊布施論第三) (Tomioka document/Kyo-U Li);
 - (3) *Da Qin Jingjiao san wei meng du zan* 大秦景教三威蒙度讚 [Hymn in Praise of the Three Majesties (i.e., the Holy Trinity) of the Brilliant Teaching (of Da Qin), through which Salvation is Obtained] (P. 3847);
 - (4) *Zun jing* 尊經 [Sūtra/Book of Veneration [or “the Venerated”]/(list of) “Venerable” Books] (P. 3847);
 - (5) *Zhixuan anle jing* 志[至] 玄安樂經 [Sūtra/Book on Aspiring to [Attain] Profound Bliss] (Kyo-U Li);
 - (6) **Da Qin Jingjiao xuanyuan (zhi)ben jing* [大秦景教 宣元[* 至] 本經 (Part I, Part II) [Sūtra/Book/Primary Scripture of Proclamation of the Highest Origin of Origins of the Radiant Teaching from Da Qin/Explaining the Origins of the Da Qin Radiant Teaching] (I: Kyo-U Li, II: unknown);

- (7) **Da Qin Jingjiao dasheng tongzhen guifa zan* 大秦景教大聖通真歸法讚 [Hymn of Praise for the Transfiguration of the Great Saint/Great Holy/Our Lord] (unknown).

Scholars render these titles in various ways. Saeki ([1937] 1951) and L. Tang (2002) have published complete English translations with annotations, while Deeg has criticized several English interpretations (cf. Deeg 2004, pp. 153–56; 2006a, p. 93; 2006b, pp. 116–17; 2020b, pp. 112–16). The authenticity of these documents also remains a subject of controversy. Lin, Wushu 林悟殊 and Rong, Xinjiang 榮新江 have argued that titles (6) and (7) are modern forgeries created by book dealers (Lin and Rong 1992, p. 34; 1996, p. 13; Lin 2000, p. 81; Rong 2013, pp. 334–37; 2014, pp. 280–89)—a claim that H. Chen (1997) and Q. Feng (2007) also verified. The legitimacy of titles (1) and (2) has also been scrutinized. For an overview, see (Riboud 2001; Nicolini-Zani 2006, pp. 23–44; Yin 2024, pp. 158–62). For the purposes of this work, we refer to the titles as presented by Takahashi (2019, pp. 626–29), referencing some translations by Saeki (1916, [1937] 1951), L. Tang (2002), and Deeg (2006a, 2006b, 2009), with revisions.

26 Reproduced in Saeki ([1937] 1951, pp. 13–29). Saeki ([1937] 1951, p. 147) suggested that *Xuting* 序聽 is a Chinese approximation of “Ye-su” (Jesus); however, Deeg (2004, 2006a, 2006b) refutes this claim. Haneda (1918, 1958, vol. 2, p. 250) argues that *Mishisuo* 迷詩所 is a scribal error for *Mishihe* 迷詩訶 or “Messiah”. For a detailed early study, see Haneda (1958, pp. 240–69). See Palmer (2001, pp. 159–68) for an English translation.

27 Saeki ([1937] 1951, pp. 113–17) dates the text before 638; however, Deeg (2004) remains skeptical of dating.

28 Takakusu bought the original manuscript of this text from a Chinese seller in 1922. See (Q. Zhu [1993] 1997–1998, p. 118; Ferreira 2014, pp. 169–70) for a translation of the *JJB*, which cites the date (“the ninth year of the Zhenguan reign [i.e., 635]”).

29 See *Yishen lun* 一神論, *The Lord of the Universe’s Discourse on Alms-giving, Part III* (*Shizun bushi lun disan* 世尊佈施論第三). Translation based on (R. Huang 2023, p. 378), with amendments.

30 *Xu ting Mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所經, j. 1: T 54, no. 2142, p. 1286b14-15; and T 54, no. 2142. 1286c15–17: “There are living beings [who] have the need to think about the retribution of their own [actions, and] the Heaven-Honoured One welcomes hard efforts [to improve]. [When he] first created the living beings, the principles for living beings were not far from the buddhas: [he] created the human’s self with a will of his own, and good [actions] lead to good merit, [but] evil [actions] lead to bad karma 有眾生先須想自身果報, 天尊受許辛苦. 始立眾生, 眾生理佛不遠. 立人身自專: 善有善福, 惡有惡緣”. See also (L. Tang 2002, p. 131; Deeg 2023, pp. 133–36).

31 Cf. Deeg (2023, p. 136 note 61) on context.

32 *Xu ting Mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所經, j. 1, “事天尊之人, 為說經義, 並作此經. 一切事由, 大有歎處, 多有事節, 由緒少. ... 人合怕天尊, 每日諫誤, 一切眾生, 皆各怕天尊並縮攝, 諸眾生, 死活管帶, 縮攝渾神. ... 眾生, 若怕天尊, 亦合怕懼口聖上. 聖上前身福私, 天尊補任, 亦無自乃天尊耶? 屬自作口聖上, 一切眾生皆取口聖上進止. 第三, 須怕父母, 祇承父母, 將比天尊及口聖帝. 以若人先事天尊及口聖上及事父母不闕, 此人於天尊得福, 不多此三事. 一種先事天尊, 第二事口聖上, 第三事父母. ... T 54, no. 2142, pp. 1286c28-1287a1, a5-10, a16-20. In this context, the term “God” is rendered through the binomial term *Tian zun* 天尊, which Tam (2019, p. 5) characterizes as “that which is the highest” and “that which is supremely honored”. However, this Chinese expression has its origins in Buddhism, functioning as a translation of *deva* or *bhagavat* (Hirakawa 1997, p. 335), the latter being an epithet for the Buddha. The Christian interpretation may be understood as “Lord of Heaven”, as elucidated by Saeki ([1937] 1951, p. 167); nonetheless, the term was initially borrowed from Buddhist literature.

33 *Xu ting Mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所經, j. 1, T 54, no. 2142, p. 1286c4-7.?

34 *Xu ting Mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所經, j. 1, “何因? 眾生在於罪中, 自於見天尊.... 眾生無人敢近天尊, 善福善緣眾生, 然始得見天尊. 天尊說云: ‘所有眾生, 返諸惡等, 返逆於尊, 亦不是孝; 第二願者, 若孝父母, 并恭給所有眾生, 孝養父母, 恭承不闕, 臨命終之時, 乃得天道’. T 54, no. 2142, p. 1286c4-7, p. 1287a27-b1; Deeg (2023, pp. 133–36).

35 *Yishen lun* 一神論, j. 1, “*Yitian lun diyi* 一天論第一”, “..... 喻如魂魄五蔭不得成就, 此魂魄不得, 五蔭故不能成”. Cf. *Tonkō hikyū*, p. 32, lines 91–92.

36 *Yishen lun* 一神論, j. 2, “*Yu di’er* 喻第二”, “天下萬物盡一四色”. Cf. *Tonkō hikyū*, p. 28, line 60.

37 See (Saeki [1937] 1951, p. 148; L. Tang 2002, pp. 131–33). Wang Ding highlights evidence in the transcriptions of Jesus’s name that indicates at least at the beginning of the Christian mission in China, an organization in translating praxis was still lacking, and missionaries were indebted to working with the central government (D. Wang 2006, pp. 153–60).

38 *Chu sanzang ji ji*, j. 6, 46.2.19./Cf. *Chu sanzang ji ji*, j. 6, 46.3.3 (Kang Senghui’s 法鏡經序): 年在齟齬. 弘志聖業, but this refers to both An Xuan and Yan Fotiao. *Chu sanzang ji ji*, j. 13, “安玄. 安息國人也. 志性貞白深沈有理致. 為優婆塞. 秉持法戒豪釐弗虧. 博誦群經多所通習. 漢靈帝末. 遊賈洛陽有功. 號騎都尉. 性虛靜溫恭. 常以法事為己務. 漸練漢言, 志宣經典. 常與沙門講論道義. 世所謂都尉言也. 玄與沙門嚴佛調. 共出法鏡經. 玄口譯梵文. 佛調筆受. 理得音正. 盡經微旨郢匠之美, 見述後代”. T 55, no. 2145, p. 96a9-16; (Liang) Hui Jiao. *Gaoseng zhuan*, j. 4.//T. 2059, 324b25-c7. For an English translation of most of the biography see (Tsukamoto 1985, vol. 1, pp. 496–97, n. 15).

39 *Chu sanzang ji ji*, T 55, no. 2145, p. 96a9-16.

40 *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, j. 4, “時河南居士竺叔蘭, 本天竺人, 父世避難, 居于河南. 蘭少好遊獵, 後經暫死, 備見業果. 因改勵專精, 深崇正法, 博究眾音, 善於梵漢之語. 又有無羅叉比丘, 西域道士, 稽古多學, 乃手執梵本, 叔蘭譯為晉文, 稱為《放光波若》”. T 50, no.

2059, p. 346c1-6; *Chu sanzang ji ji*, j. 7, “放光于闐沙門無叉羅執胡竺. 叔蘭為譯言”. T 55, no. 2145, p. 48a6-9; (Zürcher [1959] 2007, p. 65).

41 According to Jingtai’s 靜泰 *Datang dongjing da’ai si yiqie jing lun mu xu* 大唐東京大敬愛寺一切經論目序 [Preface to the Catalogue for the Great Tang Eastern Capital Jingai Monastery’s complete Buddhist canon (or *Tripitaka*), Including all Scriptures and *Sāstras*], “In the years of the Xianqing reign (651–661), [based on Emperor Gaozong’s 高宗 decree] Ximing Monastery completed an imperial collection of Buddhist scriptures, and it was even more refined and sophisticated; organized to the utmost degree, and perfectly complete. The Vinaya Master Daoxuan 道宣 completed the Preface to the Catalog” 顯慶年際, 西明寺成御造藏經, 更令隱煉, 區格盡爾, 無所間然. 律師道宣又為錄序. *Zhongjing mulu* 眾經目錄, T no. 2148, vol. 55: 1.181a1-3./T55, no. 2148, p. 181a1-10.

42 *Chu sanzang ji ji*, j.12: “《皇帝勅諸僧抄經撰義翻胡音造錄立藏等記》第二”, T 55, no. 2145, p. 93b6-7.

43 Scholars Bai Yu (Bai 2023, p. 53, note 32) and Chen Huaiyu (H. Chen 2015, pp. 52–57) have noted that Jingjing’s engagement with particular Buddhist themes like “state protection” (守護國界) (on this concept, cf. (Tsukinowa 1956, pp. 435–38)) possibly reflects his strategy of aligning *Jingjiao* teachings with prevailing religious and political discourses. In this case, his integration of elements established by Tang-era esoteric Buddhist teachings, including certain *dhāraṇī* 陀羅尼 texts (Orzech 1998, pp. 135–67), already associated with state protection and governance, reinforced the legitimacy of *Jingjiao*’s text in Tang China.

44 Although the extent of Jingjing’s direct interaction with Prajñā remains uncertain, the similarities between their works suggest that such contact played a critical role in Jingjing’s adaptation of Buddhist elements (Bai 2023). The *Zhixuan anle jing* shares thematic and visual parallels with Prajñā’s *Dasheng bensheng xindi guan jing* 大乘本生心地觀經 (*Xindi guan jing*), raising the possibility that Jingjing drew inspiration from Prajñā’s text (Bai 2023, pp. 53–54). If this is the case, the composition of the *Zhixuan anle jing* would likely postdate the *Xindi guan jing*, and it is plausible that Jingjing participated in or was influenced by Prajñā’s process of textual synthesis drawing on various other Chinese Buddhist scriptures. Chen Huaiyu also points to the potential similarities between the *Xindi guan jing* and Jingjing’s other text, titled *San wei meng du zan* 三威蒙度讚, suggesting that the structure and language of the former may have inspired Jingjing’s composition (H. Chen 2006a, pp. 93–113).

45 According to Pelliot, *hu* 胡 could have meant “Sogdian” in this case, implying Jingjing came from Sogdiana. Forte, however, has objected to this by recalling that Jingjing is said to be a “Persian” monk and that during the Tang period, *hu* frequently referred to “Persian” (Iranian). Forte (1996c, pp. 442–49, esp. p. 446, note 43).

46 *Datang zhenyuan xu Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 大唐貞元續開元釋教錄 j. 1, T 55, no. 2156, p. 756a18-28 and the *Zhenyuan xinding Shijiao mulu* 貞元新定釋教目錄 j. 17, T 55, no. 2157, p. 892a8-16; cf. also (Takakusu 1896, pp. 589–91). Prajñā retranslated the text from Sanskrit in around 788/91. The original seven-fascicle version rendered by Jingjing and Prajñā is currently missing. The extant enlarged (ten-fascicle) later version of this *sūtra* (T 08, no. 261, p. 865a), dated to the 4th year of the Zhenyuan reign (c. 788; cf. Forte 1996a, pp. 442, 444, note 36), is now solely attributed to *tripitaka* Prajñā.

47 Contemporary accounts consistently record Buddhism’s dominance during this period. See, for example, the “Stele Inscription and Preface at Chongyan Monastery in Yongxing County, Ezhou” *Ezhou yongxing xian chongyan si beiming bing xu* 鄂州永興縣重岩寺碑銘並序 compiled during the Changqing 長慶 era (821–824) by Shu Yuanyu 舒元興, preserved in the *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 [Complete Tang Prose], j. 727, p. 7498. The use of Buddhist and other terminology illustrates that the early Christian mission aimed to convey its message effectively to establish a presence in the country. Moreover, as Kotyk (2024, p. 128) notes, Alopen was required to provide a comprehensive account of his teachings to the ruling authority. The urgency of this situation explains the short time frame of only about three years between his arrival and the presentation of the earliest versions of *Jingjiao* texts to the emperor. There was insufficient time to deliberate on vocabulary or to develop a distinct lexicon that would clearly differentiate Christian theological concepts from Buddhist ideas.

48 Cf. above (Bai 2023, p. 53 and note 32; H. Chen 2015, pp. 52–57).

49 See (Deeg 2023, pp. 127–28).

50 Some scholars have suggested that the books of the Bible were likely translated, but none still exist. The authors are grateful to Jeffrey Kotyk for bringing this detail to our attention.

51 Cf. (Deeg 2006b, pp. 121–30; Malek and Hofrichter 2006, p. 39).

52 (Pelliot *INS* 1996, p. 231, note 98; Forte 1996b, pp. 350, 351, 352, note 7). The original text of the 638 inscription on the *JJB* is reconstructed as follows: “The Persian Monk Alopen, bringing texts and images from afar, has come to offer them at the ‘supreme capital’” 波斯僧阿羅本, 遠將經像, 來獻上京. Moule (1930, p. 67), Forte (1996b, p. 354, note 13) note that *jing xiang* (經像) is preferred to *jing jiao* (經教) and that such an expression concerning religious texts and images brought by monks from abroad was normal and usual. See, for instance, Xuanzang’s 玄奘 biography, *Da Tang Da Ci’ensi sanzang fashi zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳 6.252b15. They posit that the version recorded in the *Tang huayao* (波斯僧阿羅本, 遠將經教, 來獻上京) initially omitted this sentence and was later modified. “It is possible that *xiang* 像 was corrected in *jiao* 教 on the basis of the text of the *Tang huayao*, which was itself already corrupt” (Forte 1996b, p. 354, note 13).

53 (Q. Feng 2007, pp. 28–31; Z. Luo 2007, p. 30; N. Zhang 2007, p. 65; Nicolini-Zani 2013, pp. 141–60). Sixteen high-quality photos of rubbings of the Pillar from Luoyang were published in Ge (2009, Pl. I–XII).

- 54 Nicolini-Zani (2009). “The Tang Christian Pillar from Luoyang and Its Jingjiao Inscription a Preliminary Study”. *Monumenta Serica*, vol. 57, pp. 99–140.
- 55 Ken Parry notes that such examples showcase “additional imagery not previously seen in Christian art of the Tang period. Although it is unclear when and where the motif developed, the iconography of two flying figures flanking the cross on a lotus is highly significant. Before the discovery of the pillar (c. 814/15), this feature was known only from the Yuan period...” See Parry (2016, p. 28).
- 56 See, for example, Quanzhou 泉州 carvings dated to the 13th and 14th centuries. Cf. (Foster 1954; Parry 2003, 2006).
- 57 This cross pattée depicted in the *JJB* and Pillar from Luoyang, characterized by its slightly indented arms narrowing toward the center, is adorned with gems (or pearl roundels), small flowers, or flame patterns, along with a central cluster of small dots forming a circle. These elements closely resemble crosses found on contemporaneous Nestorian Sogdian coins, indicating an influence from Sassanian Persian styles, including a mixture of Buddhist and Zoroastrian motifs (Cf. Zhou 2020, pp. 58–59, 81–83, 115; Yin and Zhang 2016, pp. 1–25; Nicolini-Zani 2009; Niu 2008, p. 2).
- 58 Similarly shaped flying figures or *apsara* can be seen in carvings of the Longmen 龍門 caves (outside Luoyang, in the same area where the pillar was found), but are also frequently represented in paintings of the Dunhuang caves. (Nicolini-Zani 2009, p. 106). Nevertheless, there remains ongoing debate regarding the accurate identification of these flying figures within *Jingjiao* iconography. Some scholars interpret them as “angels” (Ge 2014, pp. 1–8; L. Tang 2009, pp. 109–32), while others suggest they represent *devas* or *apsaras* from Indian and Central Asian traditions (cf. Z. Luo 2007, pp. 32–44; N. Zhang 2007, pp. 65–73). Given the uncertainty, this discussion will use the term “flying figures” for convenience.
- 59 A similar pattern appears in the 9th century Tang dynasty fragmentary *Jingjiao* silk painting of a Christian figure (possibly Jesus Christ) discovered by Aurel Stein in Cave No. 17 at Dunhuang. However, the details of the image remain unclear (see discussion below).
- 60 Scholars note that the lotus image was used in India before the emergence of Buddhism and may have even been influenced by ancient Persian and Egyptian iconography (Ward 1952, pp. 136–37). As Coomaraswamy (1935, p. 19) states, “All birth, all coming into existence is in fact a being established in the Waters, and to be established is to stand on any ground (*prthivi*) or platform of existence; he who stands or sits upon the lotus”. Nonetheless, Buddhist iconography redefined the lotus into a distinctive symbol of purity, transformation–rebirth, and ultimate enlightenment. In the Chinese context, depictions of Buddhas and celestial beings in the Dunhuang murals frequently reflect the concept of the “lotus in Heaven”, symbolizing birth through transformation from a lotus into a Buddha or celestial being (Yoshimura 2009, pp. 37, 40, 127).
- 61 Cf. (Chen et al. 2010, pp. 21–29; Mu 2019, pp. 51–57). Nonetheless, we do not seem to find lotuses on Sasanian silver, and it is important to note that Eastern Iran was less Persian and more reflective of its own cultural sphere, namely Indo-Iranian.
- 62 Regarding dating, see (R. Whitfield 1982, pl. 25, Figure 76).
- 63 See British Museum Collection: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1919-0101-0-48 (accessed on 16 February 2025).
- 64 Cf. (Stein 1921, p. 866 (note)). The picture is listed Serindia, II, p. 1050. Col. 2, with the identification number Ch. XLIX. 001.
- 65 (Stein 1921, pp. 1050–51). “[]” indicates amendments added by the authors for readability of text.
- 66 (L. Tang 2020, pp. 245–46). Tang notes, given that Cave No. 17 in Dunhuang was sealed off during the 11th century and the painting was produced after the 9th century, the only form of Christianity in China of that period was the *Jingjiao* Church (*idem* p. 252).
- 67 Cf. (Parry 1996, pp. 143–62; Whitfield and Farrer 1990, pp. 31–34; S. Whitfield 2004; L. Tang 2020).
- 68 Cf. (Matsumoto 1980, pp. 46–47).
- 69 The staff depicted in the image is highly fragmentary and uncharacteristic of traditional representations of Kṣitigarbha, who is typically shown holding a staff in his right hand and a *cintāmaṇi* (a “wish-granting jewel” 如意寶珠) in his left. In this image, however, the figure holds the staff in its left hand, suggesting that it may intend to represent a “non-Buddhist” figure possibly borrowing from Buddhist iconography. Cf. (L. Tang 2020, p. 248).
- 70 Cf. (Stein 1921, pp. 1050–51; R. Whitfield 1982, pl. 25, Figure 76; L. Tang 2020).
- 71 (Parry 1996, pp. 143–62; Ren and Meng 2024; Matsumoto 1980, pp. 46–47) argues that the figure is based on the paintings of Greek figures of the Sassan Dynasty.
- 72 See Maréva U (2024, pp. 112–14) for a detailed account of this Monastery’s icons’ original use in situ.
- 73 Cf. (Liang 2013, pp. 39–41).
- 74 In the postscript to the *Zun jing* 尊經, it states the following: “In the 9th year of the Zhenguan (635) reign, under Tang Emperor Taizong, the Great Venerable monk of the Western Regions, Alopen, arrived in China and addressed the throne in his native tongue/language. Fang Xuanling and Wei Zhang spoke as translators 唐太宗皇帝貞觀九年,西域太德僧阿羅本屆于中夏,並奏上本音,房玄齡,魏徵宣譯奏言. Cf.: T 54, no. 2143, p. 1288 c22–23; translation following (Kotyk 2024, pp. 122–23), with amendments.

- 75 JJB Line XI (Pelliot *INS* 1996, p. 489). The reason behind Emperor Taizong's decision to endorse the *Jingjiao* teachings is still
 76 uncertain. However, it might have been influenced by the perception of Alopen and other *Jingjiao* missionaries as refugees.
 77 [I–XXXII] Indicates lines of JJB, following Pelliot *INS* (1996).
 78 Cf. (Deeg 2023, p. 129 and note 16).
 79 JJB Line XI (Pelliot *INS* 1996, p. 489).
 80 Inscription text: following Pelliot *INS* (1996, pp. 497–503); English translation based on Eccles and Lieu (2023), with adjustments.
 81 “Basic Annals of Taizong” 太宗本紀 *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, j. 1. Translation by Author(s).
 82 *tianzun* (天尊), cf. (Deeg 2023, p. 131 and note 24, pp. 133–34).
 83 *Xu ting Mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所經, j. 1: T 54, no. 2142, p. 1287a8-9.
 84 Concerning the use of “□”, an “honorific space” placed before the address of *shengshang* “聖上”, cf. (Deeg 2023, p. 136, note 61).
 85 *Xu ting Mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所經, j. 1: T 54, no. 2142, p. 1287a9-11.
 The translation of the last two lines remains obscure and inconclusive, as they appear to contain corrupted phrases—*shengshang*
wei xu qinjia xiling, *shengshang gongdian yu zhufu qiu de* (聖上唯須動伽習倭, 聖上宮殿於諸佛求得). Deeg (2023) speculates that,
 given the text's overall pejorative tone toward buddhas, *jia* (加) should be corrected to *jia* (伽), and *qiu* (求) in the second phrase
 should be *jiu* (救), in this context, meaning “to hold back” or “to prevent”. However, this interpretation remains speculative, as
 some syntactical issues remain unresolved.
 86 *Xu ting Mishisuo jing*, T 54, no. 2142, p. 1287a23–26. The term “buddha(s)” (佛) referenced here is differentiated from the binom-
 inal *Tian zun* (天尊) “Heaven-Honored One” (God). As noted by Kotyk (2024, p. 127), these “buddhas” seem to imply ‘angels.’
 However, this represents an irregular application of the Chinese terminology. The notion that Christians might entertain could
 arise from a somewhat loose understanding of Mahāyāna. Buddhas, such as Śākyamuni in the current era and Amitābha in the
 realm of Sukhāvātī, are “emanation bodies” (Skt: *nirmāṇa-kāya*) of a superior transcendental body (*dharmakāya*). They inherently
 manifest in response to the suffering experienced by sentient beings. This prompts the inquiry regarding whether they possess
 free will or function automatically as “emanations,” in contrast to ordinary sentient beings, who perceive themselves and others
 as separate entities while making deliberate choices (Kotyk 2024, p. 127). Regardless of the interpretation, their designation in
 this context suggests a pejorative perspective, as they do not embody an “ultimate” source of assistance or a pathway to salvation.
 87 JJB Line XI (Pelliot *INS* 1996, p. 489).
 88 Tang scholar Wei Shu 韋述 (d.u.?–757) in 720, in his “New Records of the Two Capitals” (*Liangjing xin ji* 兩京新記), documents
 that there were “once/formerly Persian and Iranian monasteries” 舊波斯胡寺 on “the north of the Eastern Ten-character Street”
 十字街東之北, in the Yining Quarter 義寧坊; and on “the east of the Southern Ten-character Street” 十字街南之東, in the Liqun
 Quarter 禮泉坊 in Chang’an 長安. Cf. *Liangjing xin ji* 兩京新記 3. (6. p. 191n–192a); (Pelliot *INS* 1996, p. 451 and note 66).
 89 See, for example, (Thundy 1989, 1993; Chartrand-Burke 2008). These similarities are sometimes explained historically, with the
 suggestion that the stories were transmitted along trade routes from the East to the Greco-Roman world, or from Egypt to the
 north, and later adapted by early Christians to fit the life of Jesus. At other times, phenomenological explanations are proposed,
 viewing the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* as a parallel but independent development within other religious traditions.
 90 Some scholars remain skeptical about these connections while acknowledging the textual and narrative similarities between the
 portrayal of Jesus in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and that of the Buddha as a child. See Aasgaard (2009–2010, pp. 86–88; 2022,
 p. 86) and Chartrand-Burke (2001, pp. 81–82). For further details, see (ibid., pp. 37–40, 299–302). Regarding the discussions
 surrounding the similarities between Śākyamuni and Jesus as presented in the *Gospel of Thomas*, refer to (Brockman 2003).
 91 On Silk Roads, cf. (Litvinsky et al. 1996; Beckwith 2009; Hansen 2012; Deeg 2018a, p. 235).
 92 For instance, Wiesehöfer (2010, p. 132) observes that the Sasanians “used Christian dignitaries as ambassadors and advisers.”
 This aspect of diplomacy is also discussed by Kotyk (2024, pp. 106–8).

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