

Description and Significance of the Nestorian Stele, “A Monument Commemorating the Propagation of the Da Qin Luminous Religion in the Middle Kingdom”
(大秦景教流行中國碑)

The limestone monument known in the West as the Nestorian Stele, Tablet, or Monument is arguably one of the most important documents in the history of Christianity and East-West relations. This engraved stone monument, now housed in the Forest of Steles Museum (西安碑林博物館) in Xi'an (西安), the capital city of Shaanxi Province in central-northwestern China, eulogizes the history of the Assyrian Church of the East in China between 635 C.E., the year this branch of Christianity arrived there, and 781 C.E., the year the stele was erected. The *jingjiaobei* (景教碑), as the stele is called in Mandarin Chinese (漢語), stands just over 9 feet high by over 3 feet wide and is slightly less than one foot thick.¹ The text eloquently conveys its narrative using nearly 1,900 inscribed Chinese characters and approximately 70 words and 70 personal names in Syriac, the latter appearing mostly along the bottom of the face and on the two sides of the monument.²

As stated in the stele's inscription, the composer of the text was a Christian priest named Jingjing (景淨), or Adam in Syriac, and the calligrapher was Lu Xiuyan (呂秀巖).³ The text consists of three sections. The introduction is primarily doctrinal. It relates how a supreme, triune, creator Being responded to the disobedience of humanity by being born to a virgin in Da Qin (大秦), a name that loosely refers to the Roman Empire.⁴ The inscription summarizes the life and mission of this Son, or Messiah (彌施訶), and states that works of scripture were preserved. In addition, it describes the way of life and liturgical practice of his followers in China, who named this doctrine *Jingjiao* (景教), the Luminous Religion or the Religion of Light.⁵ The second section of the inscription relates the history of the first 146 years of the Church in China. In the year 635 C.E. (early Tang Dynasty, 618-907 C.E.), a priest named Alopen (阿羅本) traveled from Da Qin (most likely Syria) to Chang'an (長安), then the capital of China and now named Xi'an, and met with Emperor Taizong (太宗). This tradition's scriptures were translated into Chinese, and after studying them the emperor issued an imperial edict in 638 endorsing the dissemination of the religion throughout China. Monasteries were built in Chang'an and many other cities, monks served the needs of the poor and the sick, and the *Jingjiao* community enjoyed imperial gifts and support. With thanksgiving for the success of the Luminous Religion in China, the writer concludes with a celebratory poem. The inscription then documents that the stele was unveiled on February 4, 781, and subsequently lists approximately 70 names of Christian clergy, written in both Syriac and Chinese.⁶

It is not clear where the monument was originally erected. It is believed that it was

¹ P.Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1928), 12; Michael Keevak, *The Story of a Stele: China's Nestorian Monument and Its Reception in the West, 1625-1916* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 8.

² P.Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (Tokyo: The Maruzen Co., 1951), 41-2; Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 14-5.

³ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 162-180, 245.

⁴ Keevak, 8-9; Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 162-180, 207.

⁵ Keevak, 5, 8-9; Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity* (New York: Ballantine Wellspring, 2001), 43.

⁶ Keevak, 8-9; Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 35, 162-180, 207.

placed on a spot between Chang'an and the nearby town of Zhouzhi (整屋), where it may have stood for a relatively brief time. It was buried at some point between 781 and 1064, an event that permitted the stone to be preserved exceptionally well over the ensuing centuries. Most scholars believe that it was buried, perhaps by Christians who wished to protect it, following the issuance of the Imperial Edict of 845. Through this law the emperor Wuzong (武宗) reacted against the perceived power of the large Buddhist community by confiscating thousands of monasteries and mandating that all practitioners of Buddhism and other foreign religions return to lay life. These foreign religious included between 2000 and 3000 Christian monks and Muslims.⁷ As a result of this persecution, most foreign Christian missionaries likely retreated westward, and native Chinese Christians may have integrated with Chinese Muslims or survived among the Uyghur and Mongol people of the north.⁸ The monument was discovered in 1623 or 1625, and between that time and the year 1907 the monument is known to have stood behind the Buddhist Chongren Temple (崇仁寺). In 1907 the stele made its final move to the museum where it now resides.⁹

The West has long called these Christians Nestorians, a term that refers to Nestorius of Antioch, Patriarch of Constantinople in the fifth century. In an early schism with the Roman Church, Nestorius and his followers were accused of heresy for his alleged belief that there existed two separate natures—human and divine—in the Messiah and that they did not share the same essence or person.¹⁰ His most ardent opponent, Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria, argued in a letter that these two natures of Christ, while distinct, are united in one person.¹¹ At the Council of Ephesus in the year 431, Nestorius and his followers were excommunicated from the Roman Church; they subsequently formed a separate church, the Church of the East.¹² A later theologian of this Church who formalized its present-day Christology, Babai the Great (551-628), wrote that the two natures of Christ are united without mixture or confusion in one person.¹³ In part because this perspective is so similar to that held by the Roman Catholic Church, the two churches agreed upon a Christological understanding in 1994.¹⁴ The Assyrian Church of the East continues today, its leadership located in Chicago, Illinois, and its adherents in the year 2000 numbering 35,118 within the United States alone.¹⁵

An area of intense study in regard to the Nestorian stele is the philology of the inscription and the intercultural exchange that it reveals. The monument's Chinese calligraphy, read vertically downward and from right to left, has been described as an extraordinarily beautiful

⁷ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 22, 26, 83, 86-9; A.C. Moule, *Christians in China before the Year 1550* (New York: Octagon Books, 1977), 33.

⁸ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 48; Leonard M. Outerbridge, *The Lost Churches of China* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), 47.

⁹ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 6-7, 19-21.

¹⁰ Brian Moynahan, *The Faith: A History of Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 125.

¹¹ "Second Letter of Cyril of Alexandria to Nestorius," in *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. Jacques Dupuis, 7th revised and enlarged ed. (New York: Alba House, 2001), 221.

¹² Moynahan, 126.

¹³ Geevarghese Chediath, *The Christology of Mar Babai the Great* (Kottayam, India: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 1982), 4, 145-8.

¹⁴ "Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, 11 November 1994," in Dupuis, 277-278.

¹⁵ Aziz S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, enlarged and updated (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd. and University of Notre Dame Press, 1968; reprint, Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus Reprint, 1980), 286 (page citations are to the reprint edition); Mar Aprem, *Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV: The Man and His Message* (Trichur, India: Mar Narsai Press, 2004), 258; "2000 Religion Report," in *Social Explorer* [database on-line], accessed August 7, 2008 from <<http://socialexplorer.com>>.

model of good penmanship and an exquisite example of the Chinese literature of the Tang era.¹⁶ The presence of Syriac in the inscription is indicative of the clergy's origin in the Syrian Christian tradition, whose literature and liturgy have standardly employed this language. Syriac, an alphabetic language of the Aramaic Semitic language group, is read from right to left or occasionally from top to bottom as seen in the stele.¹⁷

The monument communicates its Christian concepts and historical events through Chinese phonetization of several Syriac, Persian, and Sanskrit words as well as through expressions native to Mahayana Buddhism and Daoism, religions that flourished in China at this time.¹⁸ A philological analysis of the text suggests that these missionaries were well versed in these two religious traditions and made frequent use of terminology and concepts from both in order to facilitate communication with the native Chinese. For example, the Chinese word the author chose to represent God, Aluohe (阿羅訶), is a phonetization of the Syriac word for God, Aloha, equivalent to the Hebrew Eloah, while the specific characters employed are the same as those used in Buddhist scriptures to represent Arhat, the fruit of Buddha.¹⁹ Similarly, the characters chosen to represent Satan, or Suodan (娑殫), and Messiah, or Mishihe (弥施訶), are likewise phonetizations of their Syriac names.²⁰ Adam, the author of the inscription, also chose to use standard Buddhist terms for such concepts as monk (僧) and scriptures, this latter represented by the character for sutra (經).²¹ When Adam presents the name of this religion, he follows a form and terminology that mirror the work of Laozi in *Dao De Jing* (道德經), in which is written, "I do not know its name, so I call it 'Tao' / Forced to name it further I call it 'The greatness of all things.'" ²² This sentence from a familiar Chinese classic, according to some scholars, likely provides the form for the statement in the stele's text, "This ever True and Unchanging Way (道) is mysterious, and is almost impossible to name. But...we make an effort and call it by the name of "The Luminous Religion." Throughout the inscription, Christian practice is frequently termed "The Way" or the Dao (道).²³

Religious pluralism and diverse cultural symbolism are also observed in the artwork that adorns the top of the stele. Above the Christian cross that precedes the title of the inscription is an ornate engraving that portrays twin creatures—perhaps dragons or beings called "Kumbhira"—whose tails meet in the center holding a large pearl, which in Christianity symbolizes a thing of great value. Supporting the cross are two clouds, possibly the "flying cloud" or "white cloud" that may represent a traditional symbol of Daoism as well as of Islam. Also beneath the cross is a lotus flower, a symbol frequently employed in Buddhism.²⁴

While the stele's inscription states that the Luminous Religion spread to all ten provinces

¹⁶ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 23, 33, 56-7.

¹⁷ J.B. Chabot, "Syriac Language and Literature," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1912); accessed August 8, 2008 from New Advent <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14408a.htm>>; "Syriac Alphabet," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* (2008), accessed August 13, 2008 from <<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-9070771>>.

¹⁸ Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents*, 42, 47; Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 120; Keevak, 31.

¹⁹ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 15, 132-3, 152.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 189, 191; James Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an Fu in Shen-hsi, China* (London: Trubner & Co., 1888; reprint, New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1966), 5 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

²¹ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 132.

²² Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 202; Lao Tzu, trans. and commentary by Jonathan Star, *Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2001), chap. 25.

²³ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 165-6. James Legge concurs with this parallel in his translation, 9.

²⁴ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 12-5; Keevak, 7-8.

that comprised China during the Tang Dynasty, external evidence of the Church's existence and character has only recently arisen. Since 1908 a significant number of this Church's documents has been discovered in China, even as far away as the caves near the remote northwestern town of Dunhuang (敦煌), located on the Silk Road by which many early Christian missionaries traveled to China.²⁵ These manuscripts include detailed Christian teachings, hymns of praise, and components of the Church's liturgy. Of greatest significance to the Nestorian monument is the fact that four seventh-century documents are attributed to Alopen, the very same Syrian priest who is documented in the Nestorian stele as the original Christian missionary to China.²⁶ One of Alopen's documents in particular, the Jesus-Messiah Sutra (序聽迷詩所經), is suspected to have been written between 635 and 638 for the specific purpose of explaining to Emperor Taizong the essential tenets of Christianity. Composed prior to the Imperial Edict of 638, this document may be the text that Alopen wrote upon his arrival in Chang'an and which the emperor studied before formally approving of the religion as described in the stele.²⁷ Among other evidence of the Luminous Religion, a remnant of one of its original monasteries has been found in Zhouzhi near Xi'an. Built perhaps as early as 638, the Da Qin Temple—now manifesting itself primarily as a remaining pagoda (大秦塔)—has since belonged to Daoist and Buddhist communities.²⁸

One respected sinologist attributes the rapid success of these missionaries to their ethical and practical theology as well as their medical knowledge.²⁹ The missionaries arrived at a time in Chinese history that is generally characterized by liberal-minded emperors who welcomed this variety of practical thinking.³⁰ Theories abound, however, to explain why the Luminous Religion, once so strong and geographically dispersed, failed to survive the persecution that followed the Imperial Edict of 845. It is generally agreed that the Church of the East in China relied too heavily on imperial favor, a strategy that helped the missionaries initially but made the Church vulnerable in 845 when the emperor's policies turned against them.³¹ It also seems apparent that the foreign missionaries neglected to create a Christian community dominated by native Chinese; the clerical leadership, at the very least, remained primarily foreign as indicated by the names on the sides of the stele.³² Despite their use of numerous words native to Buddhism and Daoism, the Christians continued to use Chinese phonetizations of Syriac terms for the essential concepts of God and Messiah rather than to adopt more familiar words for these entities drawn from the writings of Confucius and other Chinese thinkers. These qualities together marked this religion as foreign at a time when alien religions were driven from China.³³ Furthermore, with the rise of Islam in the regions between Syria and Persia in the West and China in the East following the tenth century and possibly with the decline of the trade route through the Gobi Desert, these Christians lost communication and support from their home Church and subsequent reinforcements of missionaries proved difficult. This was exacerbated by the fact that Persia itself—a center for the Church of the East—lost political influence after

²⁵ Palmer, 1-2, 241; Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents*, 5-9.

²⁶ Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents*, 113, 124.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 116-7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 354, 381, 392; Palmer, 18, 23.

²⁹ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 112.

³⁰ Outerbridge, 36; Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 166.

³¹ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 160; Outerbridge, 47.

³² Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 159.

³³ Outerbridge, 43.

Muslims gained power in Central Asia.³⁴ Finally, it has been suggested that this Christian community's syncretistic tendencies, as evidenced by the increase in Buddhist and Daoist concepts within their seventh- and eighth-century writings, may have sufficiently weakened their original Christian message and thereby led to the degeneration of their community as a distinct religious entity.³⁵

Following its discovery, the stele in many ways became the cornerstone of sinological research for the West.³⁶ While the Chinese initially showed only moderate interest in the monument, Europe became nearly obsessed with it shortly after the discovery was publicized. Many in the West responded with incredulity toward the idea that Christianity was present so early in China, and some researchers suspected that the stele was a forgery.³⁷ More recently, however, scholars in both the East and the West have come to appreciate the monument's significance and assert its importance. Most obviously, the stele reveals that an established Christian community existed in central China over 600 years before the religion was formerly believed by Christian historians to have arrived with the Catholic Franciscan missions in the late thirteenth century and more notably with the Jesuits in the late sixteenth century.³⁸ The monument additionally provides the contemporary Assyrian Church of the East with a valuable chapter of its past, a history previously obscured by partial loss of records and archives.³⁹ The inscription, read in the context of Chinese philosophy and literature, may help to reveal the influence of these Christians on Chinese thought. For example, one sinologist has noted that the Chinese idea of Heaven gradually became transformed into that of a personal God after the seventh century, a change that bridges Christian theology and the ancient Chinese heritage of moral precepts as described by Confucius and Laozi.⁴⁰ Examination of the stele also assists scholars of interreligious and cross-cultural exchange, as the text reveals how these early Christians expressed their foreign theology using terminology borrowed from China's own literary and philosophical traditions. One scholar places great emphasis on this interreligious dialog and views the monument as a harmonious blending of Christianity and components of two great Asian religious traditions.⁴¹ Recognition of this nature is particularly relevant today, as these three religions are more frequently engaged in dialog with one another.⁴² The inscription similarly serves as a rich resource for philologists and linguists who wish to understand the interaction of Syriac and Chinese within this Church's Chinese documents and to determine the place of this work within the vast bodies of both Tang and Christian literature. Due to the union of Christian theology and Chinese philosophy and the use of two distinct languages within this single literary monument, the Nestorian Stele can serve as the basis for further study of East-West interaction both historically and in the future.

³⁴ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 90-1, 159-60; Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents*, 450; Zhu Qianzhi [朱謙之], *Zhongguo Jing jiao* [中國景教, *The Nestorian religion of China*] (Beijing, China: Dongfang chu ban she [東方出版社], 1993).

³⁵ Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents*, 448-450.

³⁶ Keevak, 7, 30.

³⁷ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 30; Keevak, 36, 48.

³⁸ Outerbridge, 59; Moule, 1.

³⁹ Atiya, 241-2.

⁴⁰ Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument*, 155-8; Outerbridge, 20-4.

⁴¹ Palmer, 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 253.

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