

The Christian Communities in Tang China: Between Adaptation and Religious Self-Identity

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the ‘strategies’ of self-representation of the Christian minority and diaspora community in Tang China (618–907, 唐) in the wider context of a society and culture dominated by strong religious competitors (Buddhism, Daoism) and state (court) regulation. The few preserved documents suggest that the community drew heavily on Buddhist terminology and inherited Chinese religio-cultural concepts when presenting their religion in Chinese (so-called Dunhuang documents) but used a strategy of court affinity and distinction from other religions when presenting itself in a semi-official way (e.g., in the stele inscription of Xi’an 西安).

1 Introduction

When I was asked to contribute a paper on early Chinese Christianity with the ‘task’ of tracing its impact (influence) on Buddhism, my first reflexive reaction was: “But there is none!”¹ After pondering for a while on what could be meaningfully said in the projected context of the conference, I thought that it may

1 As a footnote, I should mention the idea popularised by the Japanese ‘pioneer’ of Tang Christianity (Chin. Jingjiao 景教) studies, Peter Yoshirō Saeki, following the lead of the British Protestant missionary Timothy Richard, that the Chinese folk-religion “Teaching of the Golden Elixir” (Chin. Jindan jiao 金丹教)—which does not exist as an institutionalised religion but is a wider movement in the context of ‘precious scrolls’ (Chin. *baojuan* 寶卷), religiosity—has inherited and continued doctrines of the Tang Christians: Peter Yoshirō Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1916), 53–61; see Max Deeg, “Ways to Go and Not to Go in the Contextualisation of the Jingjiao-Documents of the Tang Period,” in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters. Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia, Proceedings of the Second Jingjiao Conference, University of Salzburg*, ed. Dietmar W. Winkler et al. (Berlin, Vienna: LIT, 2009), 143.

be helpful to take it from exactly there and ask the question: “Why is there no (evident) impact of Tang Christianity on Chinese Buddhism?”

Some parts or aspects of the answer are obvious but will have to be elaborated on. In the case of Christianity in Tang China (618–907, 唐), we have a clear case of non-influence on the host culture, and there are several reasons why this is the case:

(1) Christianity in the Tang Empire—called ‘Brilliant (or: Radiant) Teaching’ (Chin. Jingjiao 景教), in the religion’s own documents—was a late-comer on the religious stage in China. It arrived when the two other main religious traditions, Daoism and Buddhism, had already been well established. As a religion arriving from outside of the Sinitic cultural sphere, from an Oriental Christian and a Persian-Sasanian context, it had to adapt, at least to a certain extent, to the already existing structures and ways of communicating its religion to the wider Chinese society. The model for doing this by, for instance, producing religious texts was Buddhism with its sophisticated and ongoing improvement and development of translation techniques and religious terminology. Here, the impact clearly goes into the opposite direction: Christian authors took over concepts and vocabulary from the complex religio-cultural context in which they found themselves.

(2) Christianity was, as far as we can conclude from the sources available, a diaspora religion, a religion of merchants and exiles from the crumbling and eventually disappearing Sasanian Iranian Empire (224–651). Since it did not really proselytise (at least, there is no evidence for this), the need for religious texts in Chinese, either translations of canonical or liturgical texts or independently produced scriptures, was probably not very high; in other words, these texts were not produced so much for the literate Chinese population in general but probably more for Christian community members. The church language was Syriac (written in Estrangelo or Syriac script), and it can be assumed that this was the liturgical and ‘doctrinal’ language among religious specialists in the Christian communities in the Chinese Empire as well.²

2 This is underlined by the Syriac part of the stele inscription (see Erica Hunter, “The Persian Contribution to Christianity in China: Reflections in the Xi’an Fu Syriac Inscriptions,” in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters. Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, ed. Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang (Berlin, Vienna: LIT, 2009), 71–85) which gives the date of the erection of the stele, a short family tree over three generations of the person who initiated the erection of the stele (author?), Jingjing (景淨)/Adam, the origin of the family from Balkh in Bactria, and a list of names and titles of members of the community. An analysis of the onomastic material shows a mixture of Christian and Iranian elements. The Christian material in Sogdian from Central Asia may suggest that communities with an ethno-linguistic Sogdian majority, as for instance in Luoyang (洛陽), also used Sogdian for certain purposes.

(3) The religious policy of the Tang court and its administration attempted to control and to keep religious communities separate (distinct and discernible) from each other.

2 Religions and the Tang Court

An oft-quoted and oft-discussed example for the last point is an episode that involves two of the prominent religious players in the mid-Tang period, an Indian Buddhist monk and the ‘author’ of the most valuable source of Tang Christianity, the stele inscription of Xi’an (西安), Jingjing (景淨) a.k.a. Adam, and the Indian Buddhist monk Prajña (744–ca. 810, Chin. Banruo 般若). This episode, first detected and discussed by the Japanese Buddhologist Takakusu Junjirō,³ is found in a Tang-period catalogue of Buddhist scriptures, the *Datang zhenyuan xu kaiyuan shijiao lu* 大唐貞元續開元釋教錄 [Catalogue of the Teaching of the Śākya[muni] from the Kaiyuan [Era], Continued from the Zhenyuan [Era] of the Great Tang], compiled by Yuanzhao (fl. second half of 8th c., 圓照). It reports the ultimately unsuccessful collaboration between the Indian monk and Jingjing in order to translate the Buddhist *Liu boluomi jing* 六波羅蜜經 [Sūtra of the Six Perfections] (Skt. *Ṣaṭpāramitāsūtra*) (T. 2156:55):

In the 2nd [year] of the [era] Zhenyuan (786), [Prajña] met a relative from his home, the Commander [of the Army] of Emminent Strategy [(Chin. *shence shijiang* 袖策十將)], Luo Haoxin, who was the son of the maternal uncle of the Tripiṭaka Master Prajña. They were sad [because they were so far away from their homeland but also] pleased [to see each other] and consoled one another. They went into the house [of Luo who] paid [Prajña] much honour, had him stay very long and made donations to him. [Since Haoxin] was a fervent believer in the three jewels [(i.e., Buddhism)] [he asked Prajña] to translate Buddhist *sūtras*; thereupon, [Prajña] translated the *Ṣaṭpāramitā[sūtra]* in seven fascicles based on a version in a *hu*[-language], together with the Persian monk Jingjing from the Daqin-monastery. Because Prajña did not understand the *hu*-language at this time and also had not mastered the language of the Tang [(i.e., Chinese)], and Jingjing did not know Sanskrit [(Chin. *famwen* 梵文)] and did not understand the Buddhist teaching [(Chin. *shijiao* 釋教)] they did not grasp half of the jewels [of the Buddhist teaching]

3 Takakusu Junjirō, “The Name ‘Messiah’ Found in a Buddhist Book; the Nestorian Missionary Adam, Presbyter, Papas of China, Translating a Buddhist Sutra,” *Toung-Pao* 7 (1896): 589–591.

although they called [their work] a translation. They strived for superficial and empty honour but did not achieve merit. They made a petition to the throne to have [their translation] incorporated in the [official] catalogue [of Buddhist texts] and hoped that this would help to propagate [their work]. His Imperial Majesty with His austere wisdom and scholarship had seriously [studied] the Buddhist scriptures and realised after a meticulous inspection [of the translation] that the principles [of the *dharma*] had been obscured, and that [their] rendering was without context. Besides the living style in a Buddhist monastery [(Chin. *jialan* 伽藍)] and in a temple of Daqin are completely incompatible. Jingjing should teach the teaching of the Messiah [(Chin. *mishihe jiao* 彌尸訶教)], the *śramaṇa* and Śākya-son should propagate the Buddhist *sūtras*. [His Majesty] wished that the ways of teaching should be clearly discerned from each other so that the people would not be confused. True and false [teachings] should remain different like the river Jing and the river Wei flow separately.⁴

I have emphasised elsewhere⁵ the need to contextualise this report in the framework of the text and context in which it is given: it is found in a Buddhist

4 T. 2156.55, 756a18–28: 至貞元二祀，訪見鄉親袖策十將羅好心，即般若三藏舅氏之子也。悲喜相慰，將至家中，用展親親，遂留供養。既信重三寶，請譯佛經。乃與大秦寺波斯僧景淨，依胡本六波羅蜜，譯成七卷。時為般若不閑胡語，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，匪為福利，錄表聞奏，意望流行。聖上睿哲文明允恭釋典，察其所譯，理味詞疎。且夫釋氏伽藍，大秦僧寺居止既別，行法全乖。景淨應傳彌尸訶教，沙門釋子弘闡佛經。欲使教法區分，人無濫涉。正邪異類，涇渭殊流。 See Max Deeg, “The ‘Brilliant Teaching’. The Rise and Fall of ‘Nestorianism’ (Jingjiao) in Tang China,” *Japanese Religions* 31 (2006): 97–98; and Deeg, “Ways to Go and Not to Go,” 144. Recently, this passage has been discussed, among others, by Huaiyu Chen, “The Connection between Jingjiao and Buddhist Texts in Late Tang China,” in *Jingjiao: The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, ed. Roman Malek and Peter Hofrichter (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 2006), 93–113, and Tod Godwin, *Persians at the Christian Court: The Xī'an Stele and the Early Medieval Church of the East* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 141–142. For the historical context of this failed translation attempt see Nakata Mie 中田美絵, “Hasseiki ni okeru chūō-yūrashia no dōkō to Chōan-bukkyō-kai: Tokusō-ki-‘Daijō-rishu-roku-haramitta-kyō’-hon’yaku-sankasha-no-bunseki yori 八世紀における中央ユーラシアの動向と長安仏教界—徳宗朝『大乘理趣六波羅蜜多經』翻訳参加者の分析より [Trends in 8th-Century Eurasia and the Buddhist Environment of Chang’an—The Period of Dezong: From an Analysis of the Members of the Translation [Team] of the *Dasheng liqu liu boluomiduo jing*],” *Kansai daigaku tōzai gakujutsu kenkyūjo kiyō* 関西大学東西学術研究所紀要 [Bulletin of the Institute of Oriental and Occidental Studies, Kansai University] 44 (2011): 153–189.

5 Deeg, “Ways to Go and Not to Go,” 145.

catalogue which does, of course, represent an official Buddhist view and therefore subscribes to the imperial verdict (if it really existed in the way it is described) which requests the separation of both religions. Therefore, this is not, as Saeki and others have tried to claim, an example of a Jingjiao-influence on Buddhism but exactly the opposite: it emphasises, both from the side of the court and by the Buddhists, the differences between the two religions. The fact that the court which was responsible for giving Buddhist (and probably also other religious) translations its *imprimatur* and acceptance into the imperially regulated catalogues⁶ interfered with the translation project shows that religious agents in the Tang Empire were moving in a relatively restricted and prescribed space.

3 Religious Identity

The textual material already marks a division in content and genre, an aspect of Tang Christianity which one often fails to see in an (understandable) attempt to create a valid and as coherent a historical picture as possible from the scattered and rare sources we have.⁷ In another paper in the CERES conference series,⁸ I have focused on the Iranian identity of the Christian community in China, and the ideas and concepts of identity which I discussed in that article can well be applied to religious identity as well. In a way, the identity of the Christian communities in Tang China was defined by a combination of ethnic-cultural (Persian-Iranian⁹) and religious (Christian) markers, and it is the latter on which I would like to concentrate in the present paper.

A brief look at extant textual sources of Tang Christianity in Chinese already reveals the basic tension between adaptation to the social and religious context of the host culture and an attempt at coining a self-identity which was distinct from the other religions present in the Tang Empire, particularly from Buddhism and Daoism. To be sure: by tension I do not imply that this was a

6 On catalogues and censorship see Tania Storch, *The History of Chinese Buddhist Bibliography: Censorship and the Transformation of the Tripitaka* (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press, 2014).

7 For a new translation and discussion of the documents see Matteo Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East: Text and History of the First Encounter of Christianity with China* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

8 Max Deeg, "The 'Brilliant Teaching': Iranian Christians in Tang China and Their Identity," *Entangled Religions* 11.6 (2020).

9 I hesitate to use one specific term here since the Christian communities had members from different Iranian cultural-political backgrounds: Sasanian Persians, Sogdians, and Bactrians.

problem for the historical agents—the Christian communities and their members; I rather suggest that this is a question directed at the modern scholar to give an answer for. Identity is constructed, but it is indeed perceived as ‘real’ by those who accept it as their own (including the ‘constructors’) with a distinctive set of markers (language, religion, customs, etc.); for the historian or the Cultural Studies scholar, however, it is more important to deconstruct and critically discuss these markers after identifying them than speculating about the ‘truth’ behind them.

These principal deliberations have serious consequences for the topic of inter-religious exchange with its ancillary and related terms ‘influence’ and ‘impact’. We touch upon phenomena (or sometimes constructed pseudo-phenomena) such as syncretism, cultural adaption, integration, etc. In the Chinese context this is a complex field. Its complexity is shown in not only more recent scholarship on so-called Buddho-Daoism¹⁰ but also the discourse about Sinification or Sinicisation¹¹ of, for example, Buddhism in China.

For a similar setting as the one of Tang Christianity, namely that of Late Antique Antioch—three competing religious traditions in the same cultural environment—Isabella Sandwell has formulated the following, in our context quite useful definition of religious identity:

Religious identities do not have an objective existence that naturally arises out of an essential and distinctive package of religious traits. Rather, they result from boundaries that are constructed by human actors, who choose to identify themselves with some people and differentiate themselves from others.¹²

The few Christian manuscript texts in Chinese that have come down to us reflect more of an adaptation of Buddhist and, to a lesser degree, Daoist terminology and concepts than they do show an attempt to produce an independent religious Christian vocabulary in Chinese.¹³ This is, to a certain extent,

10 See, for instance, Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

11 See, for instance, Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 10–12.

12 Isabella Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.

13 Realistically, the philological analysis of the terminological ‘apparatus’ of the Jingjiao texts, as restricted and few as they are, is the only access to the ‘world of thinking’—I

understandable since the Iranian Christians started to be active in China at a time when Buddhist translation activities gained a new momentum through the court-supported translation ‘bureaus’ of the famous Buddhist traveller Xuanzang (600/602–664, 玄奘) during the reigning periods of the emperors Taizong (r. 626–649, 太宗) and Gaozong (r. 649–683, 高宗) and, a generation later, the translations of Xuanzang’s ‘successor’ Yijing (635–713, 義淨) and others.¹⁴ This may also be the reason that the stele inscription, in a kind of self-serving and self-aggrandising way, claims that the first ‘scriptures’ (Chin. *jing* 經) brought by the first Christian ‘missionary’ Aluoben (阿羅本)¹⁵ to the Chinese capital of Chang’an were translated, on the order of Emperor Taizong, in the ‘Academy of Scholars’ (Chin. Shudian 書殿),¹⁶ although this is an anachronistic statement¹⁷ and it is rather unlikely that the court supported the translation of newly arrived religious scriptures from a foreign empire, at that time still the Sasanian.¹⁸

am using this term instead of a simplifying and generalising concept of Jingjiao ‘theology’—of the Tang Christians. I have warned on several occasions against a too hasty ‘re-Christianisation’ of this ‘apparatus’ by reading Christian theological concepts into them—and have been criticised for it: see, e.g., Johan Ferreira, *Early Chinese Christianity: The Tang Christian Monument and Other Documents* (Strathfield: St. Pauls Publications, 2014), 150–151. I am aware that I thereby am rather aiming at a ‘reader-response’ interpretation of the texts (how were the texts understood by a Chinese reader who did not necessarily know much about Christian doctrine?) instead of searching for the ‘Christian’ meaning intended by the ‘author’ of such a text. While sometimes it is quite clear what a certain Buddhist term is meant to express in terms of Christian concepts, there are many cases where a Christian interpretation is quite speculative—at least more speculative when the Buddhist connotations of an originally Buddhist (or, more rarely, Daoist) term are not taken into account.

- 14 I do not subscribe to the ‘two-period’ theory of translations and the respective attribution of the preserved texts to one of these periods propagated since Saeki, i.e., an early period under the first ‘missionary’ Aluoben, and a later, more mature one led by Jingjing/Adam, the person responsible for the stele inscription. Philologically, there are no particular reasons to assume such a division.
- 15 Although there are other explanations of this name, I still think that Aluoben is a transliteration of the Iranian name Ardabān. Max Deeg, *Die Strahlende Lehre—Die Stele von Xi’an (Übersetzung und Kommentar)* (Vienna, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2018), 110–111, n. 89.
- 16 “[The emperor] had the scriptures translated in the Academy of Savants; [inside] the forbidden gates [(i.e., the palace)] [the emperor] asked [Aluoben] about the Way (Dao), [...]” (Chin. 翻經書殿, 問道禁闈, [...]).
- 17 If Shudian (書殿) stands for any real institution, then it is the ‘Academy of the Learned Worthies’ (Chin. Jixian dian shuyuan 集賢殿書院), which was not established before the beginning of the eighth century, see Deeg, *Die Strahlende Lehre*, 116–117, n. 95.
- 18 In reality, the few texts that have survived are no translations of Christian sources at all—the closest to translating a Christian text is the so-called *Jingjiao sanwei mengdu zan*

4 Terminological and Conceptual Adaptation and the Presence of Buddha(s) in a Christian Text

Let us look at one of the preserved texts to show the process of adaptation of Buddhist terminology in Jingjiao documents. I have chosen the text with the most mysterious name of all sources, the *Xuting mishi suo jing* 序聽迷詩所經,¹⁹ usually translated as or called (following Saeki) *Jesus Messiah Sūtra*. Already the beginning of the text reads like a Buddhist *sūtra* when the Messiah (Chin. Mishihe 彌師訶) starts delivering a sermon which has no obvious parallel in the gospels:²⁰

景教三威蒙度讚 [Gloria in Excelsis Deo], which again is more a paraphrase of the original Syriac than a straight translation: see Ferreira, *Early Chinese Christianity*, 260—but rather what I have called elsewhere “vademecums or anthologies intended to transmit the basic notion of the religion”: Max Deeg, “La littérature chrétienne orientale sous les Tang: un bref aperçu,” in *Le christianisme syriaque en Asie centrale et en Chine*, ed. Pier Giorgio Borbone and Pierre Marsone (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 2015), 206.

19 I have tried to resolve this problem on a philological level and suggested the reconstruction *Ting mi suo shuo jing* 聽迷所說經 [Sūtra of the One Preaching the Regulation of Errors]; for the philological details of this reconstruction see Max Deeg, “Messiah Rediscovered: Some Philological Notes on the so-called ‘Jesus the Messiah Sutra,’” in *The Church of the East in Central Asia and China*, ed. Samuel N. C. Lieu and Glen L. Thompson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 112–116.

20 To show the evident examples of Buddhist terminology I mark these in bold in my translation and explain their Buddhist meaning or connotation in the footnotes. It should be noted that syntactically the text is not without problems and that the translation depends very much on structuring the syntax—partly indicated by the punctuation—a process which itself has to rely on the wider contextual meaning ascribed to the text. I have used the version in the Buddhist canon (T. 2142.54, CBETA edition, based on Haneda Tōru’s edition) and checked it against the recently published excellent facsimile of the original manuscript in Takeda kagaku shinkōzaidan 武田科学振興財, ed., *Tonkō hikyū* 敦煌秘笈 [Dunhuang Treasure Box], vol. 6 (Osaka: Kyōu shoten 杏雨書店, 2009–2013), and added my own punctuation. I do not go into a detailed discussion and critique of earlier translations (Saeki, Li Tang) since they very much build on wild emendations (Saeki), speculation about the meaning of words and terms, and, in my view, wrong punctuation which is neither substantiated by a sound philological approach nor a stringent hermeneutical method. I have to admit that I was not able to consult the most recent study of the text by Victor Manuel Aguilar Sánchez (*Corpus Nestorianum Sinicum: Thus I Have Heard on the Listening of Mishihe (the Messiah) 序聽迷詩所經 and ‘Discourse on the One God’ 一神論. A Theological Approach with a Proposed Reading Structure and Translation* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 2019)) because of my restricted access to libraries and partly because of the price of the book (almost 200 Euros).

At that time,²¹ the Messiah expounded the law²² of the book²³ of the Heaven-Honoured One²⁴ as follows: “There are [quite] some false views.²⁵ Who is able to expound the meaning of the scriptures?²⁶ It is [so] difficult to settle differences.²⁷ Who is able to explain the Heaven-Honoured One?

- 21 *ershi* (尔时): this is an unspecified time indication since the text does not give more context as to when the Messiah is supposed to have delivered this sermon. As such, it reminds of the frequent use of this syntagma in Buddhist narrative literature.
- 22 *fa* (法): an early and established Buddhist translation term for Skt. *dharma*, the ‘law’ or teaching preached by the Buddha. There is no other way of understanding this term here than in the Buddhist way, since other Chinese meanings like ‘way (of)’, ‘juridical law’, etc. make no sense.
- 23 For a speculative but contextually sound interpretation of the obvious transliteration—interestingly not discussed in Hidemi Takahashi’s work—“On Some Transcriptions of Syriac Names in Chinese-Language Jingjiao Documents,” in *From the Oxus River to the Chinese Shores. Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, ed. Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang (Vienna, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013), 13–34; “Transcriptions of Syriac in Chinese and Chinese in Syriac Script in the Tang Period,” in *Scripts Beyond Borders: A Survey of Allographic Traditions in the Euro-Mediterranean World*, ed. Johannes den Heijer (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 329–249; Hidemi Takahashi, “Representation of the Syriac Language in Jingjiao and Yelikewen Documents,” in *The Church of the East in Central Asia and China*, ed. Samuel N. C. Lieu and Glen L. Thompson (Turnhout: Brepols Publisher, 2020), 23–92—on transliterations in the Chinese Jingjiao corpus—*xupo* (序婆) / *ziä’-ba, emended from *xusuo* (序娑) of the manuscript, as ‘book’ (Syr. *spr*), see Deeg, “The ‘Brilliant Teaching’: Iranian Christians in Tang China,” 116–117.
- 24 *tianzun* (天尊): *tianzun* is a translation term for Skt. *bhagavat*, ‘the Exalted One’, the most-used epithet of the Buddha (for a detailed discussion of this term see Max Deeg, “Bhagavat in Chinese Buddhist Translation: An Indirect Example in Oral Nirvacana in Buddhist Text Translations?,” in *Three Mountains and Seven Rivers. Prof. Musashi Tachikawa’s Felicitations Volume*, ed. Shoun Hino and Toshihiro Wada (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004), 153–167). I translate ‘Heaven-Honoured One’—i.e., the One venerated in Heaven (Chin. *tian* 天)—as this seems to be the intentional semantic twist of the Buddhist term which originally meant something like ‘the one honoured by the gods (*tian*): The choice of *tianzun* for God over the term *shizun* (世尊), ‘World-Honoured One’ (for *bhagavat*) much more frequently used in Buddhist texts is a ‘smart’ one from a contrastive-semantic perspective: while the Buddha is only venerated imminently, in the world (Chin. *shi* 世), the Christian God is venerated in the transcendence of Heaven.
- 25 *yijian* (異見): means different, false views in a Buddhist context, e.g., in the *Dīrghāgama* for the views of the *brāhmaṇas* (Chin. *poluomen* 婆羅門).
- 26 *jingyi* (經義): although *jing* is used for ‘authoritative scriptures of the past’ before the advent of Buddhism (*Shijing* 詩經 [Book of Songs]; *Yijing* 易經 [Book of Changes], *Daode jing* 道德經 [Book of the Way and the Power], etc.), it obtains the connotation of religious scriptures as a translation term for Skt. *sūtra*. The combination *jingyi*, ‘meaning of the *sūtras*’, is frequently found in the Buddhist canon.
- 27 *xishi* (息事): this term is, for instance, found in the Chinese translation of Aśvagoṣa’s *Buddhacarita* (T. 192.4, 21c4); the equivalent passage in the Sanskrit version does not show a direct parallel.

[Among] the **buddhas, non-humans,**²⁸ **judging deities,**²⁹ **arhats**³⁰—who is able to see that the Heaven-Honoured One is among the **living beings?**³¹ There is no human [who] can see the Heaven-Honoured One. Which man has the power to see the Heaven-Honoured One? Because the appearance of this Heaven-Honoured One resembles the Wind³²—and which man was [ever] able to see the Wind? For a long time, the Heaven-Honoured One has inspected [his] creation³³ of the **world;**³⁴ because of this, each human being dwells carrying the vital energy³⁵ of the Heaven-Honoured One [and] only then comes alive; thus [each human being] finds calmness in [his] house,³⁶ and the sense of a **perfect mind**³⁷ is achieved. Since the sun has risen, and the sun has set, [each human being in the realm] of living when realizing [one's own] thought and mind reaches [one's]

- 28 *feiren* (非人): Skt. *amanuṣya*, a collective term in Buddhism for 'species' of non-human beings like Skt. *kiṃnara*, *mahoraga*, *yakṣa*, etc.
- 29 *pingzhang tian* (平章天): this term is not attested in the Buddhist canon while *pingzhang* is found several times in the meaning of "to deliberate, to judge." Under the Tang, the term *pingzhang* is used for the highest ranks of officials (Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 385b, s.v. *p'ing-chang*). This does not really fit the present context with its clear hierarchy from Buddhas to *arhats*, and it may well be assumed that *pingzhang* is an error for *pingchang* (平常), 'common, ordinary', and the term **pingchang tian* (平常天) was coined to distinguish the Buddhist (and other) gods (*tian*) from the Christian God and position them like the *arhats* (see the following note) on a relatively low position on the projected hierarchy of superhuman beings.
- 30 Emend *aluomo* (阿羅漢) to *aluohan* (阿羅漢): Skt. *arhat* (nom.sg. *arhān*), a Buddhist saint.
- 31 *zhongsheng* (眾生) is the standard Buddhist term for living beings, Skt. *sattva* (or *prāṇin*, *jana*, etc.), including animals.
- 32 *feng* (風) here is the term for Hebrew *rûaḥ*, Syriac *rucha*.
- 33 *jubian* (居編): my translation of this *hapax legomenon* (as far as I can see) is tentative. It takes *ju* (居) as referring to the realm ('dwelling') of the living beings—in contrast to the deceased (*wang* 往: see *Hanyu dacidian* 漢語大詞典 [Great Dictionary of Chinese Characters] (used version: PLECO for android devices, s.v. *ju*, 14)—and *bian* (編) in the sense of "fabricated, created." Another possibility is to emend *bian* (編) to 遍 and to translate "[...] [the Heavenly-Honoured One] dwells everywhere."
- 34 *shijian* (世間): Skt. *loka*, '(immanent) world', or *laukika*, 'worldly, mundane'.
- 35 *qi* (氣): clearly meant as the breath of the creator which also brought the first human to life (Gen. 1.2.7). I translate 'vital energy' since this would probably be the connotation of a Chinese reader without knowledge of Christian cosmogony.
- 36 *zaijia* (在家): is this a reference to the body?
- 37 *zhixin* (至心): Skt. *adhyāśaya*, 'intention, determination, superior thought, will, etc.'

destination, [and] the body rests in luminous bliss, [and] being purified transcends to the peaceful dwelling in Heaven.”³⁸

As already emphasised, it is clear from the outset that this text is neither a translation nor a paraphrase of a gospel text. It is, at least in this first part, an eulogy on the transcendence of God (Chin. *tianzun* 天尊, ‘the Heaven-Honoured One’). Although it abounds in Buddhist terminology, the text is highly critical of Buddhism and tries to demonstrate the superiority of its own teaching and religion.

This critical and dismissive attitude towards other religions is already expressed in the list of ‘superhuman beings’ who are said to not be able to perceive the Christian God. Here and elsewhere (nine times in total) the first half of the document, which was probably an independent text, refers to the Buddha or the buddhas (Chin. *fo* 佛). The numerous and blunt use of this term in a Christian text³⁹ has puzzled translators and scholars. Peter Saeki’s odd comment on the list of superhuman beings in the passage translated above and starting with the buddhas reflects this consternation quite well:

These are very unusual expressions to be found in the Nestorian writings, but may throw some side light on the history of the very beginning of the Nestorian Church in China. Such expressions may show that the Nestorian author of this text was assisted by a Chinese Buddhist scholar in composing this sūtra, if not under the influence of Chinese Buddhism, as far as his phraseology and diction were concerned.⁴⁰

To smooth out the difficulty of having buddhas mentioned in the text, Saeki completely distorts the text in his translation:

38 T. 2142-54, 1286b5-15: 余時，彌師訶說天尊序娑法云：“異見多小，誰能說經義？難息事，誰能說天尊？在後顯，何在停止，在處其何？諸佛及非人，平章天，阿羅漢，誰見天尊在於眾生？無人得見天尊，何人有威得見天尊？為此天尊顏容似風，何人能得見風？天尊盈不少時巡歷世間居編，為此人人居帶天尊氣，始得存活。然始得在家安，至心義到，日出日沒已來，居見想心，去處皆到，身在明樂靜度，安居在天，皆諸佛為此風流轉，世間風流無處不到”。

39 In this respect, Christianity was different from Manichaeism where buddhas were an integral part of the original doctrinal-soteriological system: see David A. Scott, “Manichaean Views of Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 25.2 (1985): 99–115.

40 Peter Yoshirō Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (Tokyo: The Toho Bunkwa Gakuin, The Academy of Oriental Culture, Tokyo Institute, 1951), 148, n. 4.

All the buddhas as well as the Kinnaras and the Superintendent-*devas* (?Yama) and Arhâns can see the Lord of Heaven.⁴¹

Usually, it is assumed that *fō* in this text refers to supernatural beings, in some instances it is even taken as referring to the Christian God who is, however, clearly called *tianzun*, the 'Heaven-Honoured One', throughout the text. When taking a closer look at the passages where the Buddha or the buddhas occur, a pattern emerges: as in the list of superhuman beings translated above, all these passages show the inferiority of the buddha(s) in comparison with the Christian God, the 'Heaven-Honoured One'. This is achieved by either pointing to the immanence of the buddha(s) versus the transcendent status and power of God or by claiming that the buddha(s) have no real power and that the only world-creating and world-sustaining power is the one of the Christian God.

The immanence of the buddha(s) is emphasised again in the sentence immediately following the passage translated above:

All buddhas are revolving [in the circle of rebirth]⁴² because of the current of this [Divine] Wind, [and] there is no place in the world where the current of the [Divine] Wind does not reach to.⁴³

According to this sentence, the buddhas are, contrary to the basic teaching of Buddhism, caught in the circle of rebirth (Skt. *samsāra*) and immanence of the world (Chin. *shijian* 世間) and cannot escape it. Moreover, the force behind all this is the Divine Wind, i.e., the Holy Spirit; while, according to the next sentence, God resides in the realm of transcendence.⁴⁴

Another passage mentioning the buddha(s) emphasises the futility of counting or relying on the buddha(s):

When humans are in trouble, [they] often call the name of the buddhas. There are so many ignorant humans⁴⁵ [who] address the spir-

41 Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics*, 125; Li Tang, *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China and Its Literature in Chinese* (Frankfurt a.M., New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 145, does not comment on the term at all.

42 *zhuan* (轉) here either refers to the circle of rebirth—shortened for *zhuanliu* (轉流)?—or the sequence of the buddhas in different periods and times.

43 T. 2142.54, 1286b5–15: 皆諸佛為此風流轉, 世間風流無處不到。

44 T. 1286.54, 1286b14–15: “The Heaven-Honoured One always stays at the place of pure transcendence and happiness” (Chin. 天尊常在靜度快樂之處)。

45 *wuzhi zhi ren* (無知之人): the concept that knowledge (Skt. *vidyā*) and discerning knowledge (Skt. *prajñā*)—opposed to ignorance (Skt. *avidyā*) of a stupid individual

its in the same category as the Heaven-Honoured One, [or] also call [them] ‘Glorious Honoured Ones’ [or] ‘Glorious Bliss’. Each human speaks⁴⁶ according to [his] custom [as if saying]: ‘Ours is a different Heaven-Honoured One’. Many [humans] stay in [their] individual belief, [their] individual position. [But] the Heaven-Honoured One has given human plenty of will and wisdom. Who [could] **repay the grace**⁴⁷ of the buddhas?⁴⁸⁴⁹

In a further passage, the buddhas are almost equal to humans in that they are, again against Buddhist doctrine, entrenched in the karmic process of merit-building and retribution:

There are **living beings** [who] have the need to think about the **retribution of their own [actions]**,⁵⁰ and] the Heaven-Honoured One welcomes **hard efforts**⁵¹ [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**,⁵² [but] evil [actions] lead to **bad karma**.^{53 54}

When the text starts discussing the Christian commandments, it emphasises that, despite the similarity of the moral rules, followers of the Buddha will get it completely wrong because they do not worship God:

(Skt. *mūrkha*)—as a virtue (and soteriological *conditio sine qua non*) to reach liberation is essentially Buddhist and not Christian.

46 I am tempted to emend the odd *yushe* (語舌) to *yuhua* (語話).

47 *bao* (報) is the Buddhist term for karmic retribution (Skt. *vipāka*); *cīen* (慈恩) usually stands for the buddha’s compassion or kindness.

48 This question seems to indicate that it is fruitless to pay back the kindness of the buddhas with the implication that with their immanent status referred to before, they are not able to help humans.

49 T. 2142.54, 1286b20–24: 人急之時, 每稱佛名. 多有無知之人, 喚神比天尊之類, 亦喚作‘旨尊’, ‘旨樂’. 人人鄉俗語舌: ‘吾別天尊’. 多常在每信每居. 天尊與人意智不少. 誰報佛慈恩?

50 *guobao* (果報): Skt. *phalavipāka*.

51 *xinku* (辛苦): Skt. *śrama*, *ārta*, etc.

52 *shan* (善): Skt. *kuśala*; *fu* (福): Skt. *puṇya*.

53 *e* (惡): Skt. *pāpa*; *luan* (緣): Skt. *nidāna*, ‘karmic bonds’.

54 T. 2142.54, 1286c15–17: 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.

If someone has **received the precepts**⁵⁵ but does not fear the Heaven-Honoured One and solely **relies** on the *dharma* of the Buddha—then he has not successfully **received the precepts**, and he is a man who acts against [the precepts].^{56 57}

The last passage which contains the term *fo* is embedded in what seems to be a discussion of the first commandment and, once more, the reader is asked to give up veneration of the buddhas since they do not liberate from suffering:

To accept the **doctrine** of the Heaven-Honoured One [means one] should not **break the precepts**. [According to] what the Heaven-Honoured One accepts and [if one] accepts the Honoured teaching, [one] first [has] to give up paying reverence to the gods and the buddhas [as done by] the living beings⁵⁸ because the buddhas⁵⁹ accept **suffering**.⁶⁰ Heaven and earth were only established through the pure power [of the Heaven-Honoured One]. The August Ruler⁶¹ only has to strive to increase the passing of [old

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- 55 *shoujie* (受戒): in a Buddhist context laypeople take the five precepts (Skt. *śīla*) which, more or less, correspond to the last five commandments in the Christian Decalogue. Since the text discusses the commandments—later in the text called *yuan* (願), ‘vow’ (Skt. *pranidhāna*)—*shoujie* seems to refer to the keeping of the commandments.
- 56 I read *fanni* (返逆) where the manuscript has the variant character or *yitizi* (逆). The meaning is derived from the use in Buddhist texts, as for instance in the *Zhuanlun shengwang xiuxing jing* 轉輪聖王修行經 [Sūtra of the Practice of the Wheel-Turning King] of the *Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經 [Long Collection (of Sūtras)] (Skt. *Dīrghāgama*, T. 1.1, 41a): “[...] most respected are the ones who perverts in immorality (*wudao*)” (Chin. [...] 返逆無道者便得尊敬). See the Pāli parallel in the *Cakkavattisihanāda-suttanta* in the *Dīghanikāya* (edition Joseph Estlin Carpenter, *The Dīgha Nikāya*, Vol. III (London: The Pali Text Society, 1976), 72; translation Maurice Walshe, *Thus Have I Heard. The Long Discourses of the Buddha: Dīgha Nikāya* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 402) which is not an exact parallel but reflects the idea that in an age of decline any morale and societal order is inverted.
- 57 T. 2142.54, 1287a14–16: 如有人受戒, 及不怕天尊, 此人及一依佛法, 不成受戒之所, 即是返逆之人。
- 58 *zhutian* (諸天): Skt. *deva*.
- 59 Here, the text strangely juxtaposes the full and the simplified characters for *fo* (佛 and 仏).
- 60 *ku* (苦): Skt. *duḥkha*.
- 61 *shengshang* (聖上): obviously, in an attempt to make the Jingjiao teaching, particularly the Christian Decalogue with its uncompromising request to only venerate God, more palatable for the Chinese emperor and the court, the text constantly and flatteringly refers to the emperor and even leaves an honorific space before the term which is not granted the Jingjiao God (Chin. *tianzun* 天尊).

and wrong] customs and to keep away the buddhas from the palace of the August Ruler.^{62 63}

The use of the word *fó*, buddha(s), in the text demonstrates that the ‘authors’ of Jingjiao texts were quite conscious about the adaptation of Buddhist terminology and its potential function, and used it quite skilfully even while arguing polemically against Buddhism and claiming a clear distinctiveness from it.

5 The Construction of Jingjiao Self-Identity in the Stele of Xi’an

The statement put into the mouth of the emperor in the passage from the Buddhist catalogue quoted above—that the styles of living in a Buddhist and a Christian monastery are distinct and should stay so—obviously was taken seriously by the Christian community, at least in their own presentation in its most famous document, the stele inscription of Xi’an, the *Daqin jingjiao liuxing zhongguo bei* 大秦景教流行中國碑 [The Stele Inscription of the Radiant Teaching of Daqin Transmitted to the Middle Kingdom] from the year 781. Generally, this document represents a different self-understanding, one of a self-identity of the Jingjiao community with a strong link to the court and the Tang emperors from the advent of the religion in the year 635 to the time of the stele’s erection at the beginning of the ruling period of the Tang emperor, Dezong (r. 779–805, 德宗).

Although there are some traces of Buddhist terminology and concepts, the inscription tries to create a quite distinct religious identity by using more ‘classical’ Chinese terms and concepts.⁶⁴ After a cosmogonic-cosmological and theological introduction—the creation of the world and the advent of Christ—the specific features of the Christian monastics are outlined with a few strokes of the brush (or rather with the chisel). It is an interesting presentation of the

62 The translation of the last two difficult and obviously corrupted phrases—(*shengshang wei xu qinjia xiling, shengshang gongdian yu zhufu jiu de* 聖上唯須勤伽習倭, 聖上宮殿於諸佛救得)—is quite speculative and based on the dismissive approach to the buddhas reflected in the text. I read *jia* (加) for *jia* (伽) and take *jiu* (救) in the second phrase in the meaning of ‘to hold back, to prevent’. There are still quite some syntactical problems.

63 T. 2142.54, 1287a23–26: 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, 為仏受苦。置立天地, 只為清淨威力因緣。聖上唯須勤伽習倭, 聖上宮殿於諸佛救得。

64 See Max Deeg, “The Rhetoric of Antiquity: Politico-religious Propaganda in the Nestorian Stele of Chang’an,” *Journal of Late Antique Religion and Antiquity* 1 (2007): 17–30.

Church of the East's form of monasticism, which implicitly distinguishes it from its Daoist and particularly its Buddhist counterparts:

[Following their] Law [they] take a bath in water and wind [and thereby] wash off futile embellishment and purify [themselves to achieve] emptiness and stainlessness. As [their] seal [they] have the sign 'cross' [which] amalgamates the 'four radiant' [cardinal directions, but at the same time] unifies [them] without restriction. [They] beat the wood [and thereby] invoke the sound of humanity and compassion. [They] venerate the East [and thereby] incite the Way of 'Honour in Life'. [They] leave [their] beards growing because [they still] act in the world; [they] shave [the] crowns [of their heads] because [they] do not have any inner passions. [They] have no slaves and make no difference between men, [no matter if] of low or high status. [They] do not pile up wealth and demonstrate poverty towards themselves. [Their] fasting [customs consist in] the taming of the activities of the mind, [their] rules of conduct are solidified in calmness and attention. Seven times [a day they dedicate themselves] to veneration and praise [and thereby deliver] great protection for the living and the dead; every seventh day [they] purify [their] minds [and] return to simplicity.⁶⁵

This idealised description of monasticism in the Church of the East is an interesting documentation of the community's self-understanding and self-presentation. It presents its own specific features (baptism, cross), but also takes up concepts of (particularly) Buddhism and Daoism and distinguishes itself from these other religions (way of venerating, keeping of slaves, specific tonsure and fasting practices).

The passage about the life and conduct of Christian monks is presented in a clearly constructed way: the outer appearance and actions lead to 'spiritual' achievements. Structurally, it is divided into two groups of two 'features' which have a closer inner connection which may be called 'sacramental'⁶⁶ (baptism and the sign of the cross)⁶⁷ and 'ritual' (the beating of the semantron and the subsequent veneration in the eastern direction).

65 See Deeg, *Die Strahlende Lehre*, 57, ll. 19–24: 法浴水風，滌浮華而潔虛白；印持十字，融四照以合無教。擊木，震仁惠之音；東禮，趣生榮之路。存鬚所以有外行，削頂所以無內情。不畜臧獲，均貴賤於人；不聚貨財，示罄遺於我。齋以伏識而成，戒以靜慎為固。七時禮讚，大庇存亡；七日一薦洗心反素。

66 Called *fa* (法), '(holy) law' in Chinese.

67 On the connection between the sign of God's son ('Seal of God's Son') which finishes and emphasises the baptising rite and baptism itself see Hubert Jedin, ed., *Handbuch*

The passage starts with baptism as an outer symbol of religious belonging:⁶⁸ “take a bath in water and wind” (Chin. *fa yu shui feng* 法浴水風). Chinese *yu* (浴) normally means the washing or bathing of the whole body, either through submerging or by pouring water over the body: the rite described would therefore refer to the immersive baptism which was normal in the context of the Persian Church of the East.⁶⁹ The expression *shui feng* (水風), lit. ‘water-wind’, may reflect the idea that the concrete baptising with water is linked to that of the reception of the Holy Spirit (Chin. *feng* 風). The two elements can be found in the same order in John 3:5 (Jesus to Nikodemus): “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter in the kingdom of God.”⁷⁰ This connection of baptism with or in water and the reception of the Holy spirit clearly refers to the individual baptising of Jesus himself through John the Baptist,⁷¹ and baptism through Jesus.⁷²

That passage gives as the ‘purpose’ of baptism that “futile embellishment is washed off and one is purified [to achieve] emptiness and stainlessness.” The Chinese phrase *di fu hua er jie kong bai* (滌浮華而潔虛白) probably refers to the purification of the soul in the process of baptising, the abandoning and purification (exorcism) from (Satan’s) vain deception (Chin. *fuhua* 浮華, lit.

der Kirchengeschichte (Berlin: Digitale Bibliothek, 2000), 561–562 (Letter of Barnabas), and 933.

- 68 On baptism and its different symbolic aspects see Maxwell E. Johnson, *Images of Baptism* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2001).
- 69 For the baptism of the head Buddhist terms like *guanding* (灌頂), corresponding to Sanskrit (*mūrdha-*)*abhiṣeka*, could have been used.
- 70 *Amen amen dico tibi, nisi quis renatus fuerit ex aqua et Spiritu sancto* (Grk. ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος), *non potest introire in regnum Dei*. All translations from the Gospels are from the King James Bible, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 71 Matt. 3:16–17; Marc 1:9–10; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:32; Diatessaron 4:35–41 (James Hamlyn Hill, *The Earliest Life of Christ Ever Compiled from the Four Gospels, Being the Diatessaron of Tatian (Literally Translated from the Arabic Version and Containing the Four Gospels Woven into One Story)* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2001), 17).
- 72 Matt. 3:11: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance (*baptizo in aqua in peonitentiam*); but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, [...] He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire (Lat. *in Spiritu sancto et igni*, Grk. ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρὶ).” (see also Luke 3:16); John 1:33: “[...] but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost.” Diatessaron 4:36–41 (Hill, *The Earliest Life of Christ*, 17).

‘empty, vain embellishment’)⁷³ and to the forgiveness of sins (purification).⁷⁴ This passage, consequently picking up the term *shui feng*, could mean the abjuration of demonic forces⁷⁵ and fasting as taught in Christian catechisms.⁷⁶

The following sentence then makes the most obvious symbol of the religion, the cross, its main point of reference which the stele text combines with Chinese-cosmological ideas already elaborated on at the very beginning of the text. The term for cross in the Chinese is *shizi* (十字), lit. ‘the sign “ten” (十)’. Like in the earlier passage, the cross is positioned in a traditional Chinese context: *si zhao* (四照), “the four shining [directions],” is found in the most important literary model of the stele inscription, the fifth-century Buddhist Dhūta-inscription; the latter again takes up a *locus classicus* in the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 [Classics of Mountains and Seas]. Contrary to its classical models the Christian inscription focuses on the universally unifying and liberating (Chin. *wuju* 無拘) symbolism of the cross. Following the reference to baptism, the cross as a ‘seal’ (Chin. *yin* 印)⁷⁷ makes good sense: through it the baptised is accepted into the community of Christians.

The following part emphasises the peculiarities of Eastern Syrian monasticism, highlighting the beating of the semantron (Chin. *ji mu* 擊木, Grk. σήμαντρον, Pers. *nāqūs*). This, like the description of the specific way of treating hair and beard, is used to distinguish the Christian monastic community positively from other religious communities in China, particularly from the Buddhists. In the Buddhist context the semantron-like tool (Skt. *ganḍī*, Chin. *jianzhi* 鞞椎), was beaten on occasion of the fortnightly confession meetings (Skt. *upoṣatha*) of the *saṃgha* but also as a sign of the communal meals in the refectory of the monasteries. In the Tang period these tools were mostly made

73 The East-Syriac formula of renunciation during the baptising ritual also clearly points to the evil work of Satan: Timothy A. Curtin, “The Baptismal Liturgy of Theodore of Mopsuestia” (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, Washington DC, 1970), 178–180, quoting Theodore of Mopsuestia: “I renounce Satan, and his works, and his pomps and his service, and his angels, and his deceptions, and all things under him.” See also Curtin, “The Baptismal Liturgy,” 181 and 185.

74 See the *Acts* 2: 38: “The Peter said unto them, Repent, and baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of the sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

75 Compare Curtin, “The Baptismal Liturgy,” 112–115.

76 See Joseph Chalassery, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Initiation in the East Syrian Tradition* (Rome: Mar Thomas Yogam, 1995), 53.

77 One is reminded of the importance of the seal (Syr. *ḥātmā*) or the sign (Syr. *rūšmā*)—in most cases probably the sign of the cross (John Chrysostomus)—during the Syriac ritual of baptising: Curtin, “The Baptismal Liturgy,” 217–221; see also Johnson, *Images of Baptism*, 73–104.

of metal,⁷⁸ and the emphasis of the stele text may refer to the simplicity and modesty of the Christian community.

The following prayer, or more literally: greeting, venerating in eastern direction (Chin. *dong li* 東禮), is a specific marker of the Church of the East but is also found in the apostolic canon (Matt. 24:27): “For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.” The explicit mentioning of the veneration of the East in the Chinese context seems to express another concept as well. Through the travelogue of the famous Buddhist monk Xuanzang, the *Datang Xiyu ji* 大唐西域記 [Records of the Western Regions of the Great Tang Dynasty] (submitted to the throne in 646), the idea had been spread that the eastern region of the Buddhist continent Jambudvīpa (Chin. Zhanbu zhou 瞻部洲)—identified as China—would morally rank first among all empires of the four cardinal directions—including Persia as the Western empire. According to Xuanzang the Indians therefore venerated the East and its ruler.⁷⁹ It is well possible that the stele inscription took up this idea and emphasised the fact that the Christians (or Christian monks) venerated the East even when they were in the East.

Keeping a beard (Chin. *cun xu* 存鬚) and referring to the coronal tonsure (Chin. *xiao ding* 削頂) certainly were the most distinctive outer features of the monks of the Church of the East. This was also in accordance with the ethnographic pattern which the Tang Chinese had of Persians.⁸⁰ The coronal tonsure distinguished the Christian monks from the full tonsure of the Buddhists, but also from the Daoists and the Manichaeans who left their hair unshaved. The context shows the meaning of the two ‘virtues’ corresponding to beard and

78 There is evidence that the material in China changed more and more from the original wood to metal; this is suggested by references in the Song period Buddhist encyclopaedias like the *Shishi yaolan* 釋氏要覽 [Essential Display of the [Teaching] of the Buddha] 3 (T. 2127.54, 304a) or the *Fanyi mingyi ji* 翻譯名義集 [Collection of Translated Meanings] 7 (T. 2131.54, 1168b–1169c).

79 *Datang Xiyu ji* 1, T. 2087.51, 869b29–869c, 2: “In the customs of the three rulers [of the South, the North and the West] the East is highly revered. The doors of their residences are open in eastern [direction], and when the sun rises [they] turn east to venerate [it]. The land of the ruler of men [(i.e., China)] honours the southern direction” (Chin. 三主之俗，東方為上。其居室則東闢其戶，旦日則東向以拜。人主之地，南面為尊). For a discussion of this passage see Max Deeg, “Umgestaltung buddhistischer Kosmologie auf dem Weg von Indien nach China,” in *Religion im Wandel der Kosmologien*, ed. Dieter Zeller (Frankfurt a.M., Berlin, Bern, New York, Paris, Vienna: Peter Lang, 1999), 241–254.

80 Cf. Xuanzang’s description of the western empire (Persia) in the *Datang Xiyu ji* 1, T. 2087.51, 869b25–26: “[...] [they] cut [their] hair and «grow a beard»; [...]” (Chin. [...] 斷髮《長鬚》, [...]).

tonsure: *waixing* (外行), lit. ‘external action’, and *neiqing* (內情), lit. ‘inner feeling’, obviously refer to the two aspects of *vita activa* and *vita contemplative* of the Christian monks which are kind of middle path between strict asceticism which the Manichaeans *electi* followed and the luxury found in some Buddhist monasteries. The Christians here recommend themselves by positive social conduct without discrepancy between ideal and reality, trying to invalidate the usual catalogue of critical points against monastic religious communities.

The remark that Christian monks do not possess slaves (Chin. *zanghuo* 臧獲) is to be seen in a similar context. One should remember that the possession of slaves was one of main points of attack from the state even before the later great persecution of the Buddhists—but also to a lesser extent of the other ‘foreign’ religions like the Manichaeans and the Christians—by Emperor Wuzong (r. 840–846, 武宗) in the year 845. However, this point had already led to criticism from high court officials before, as representing an evident contradiction between the ascetic-monastic ideal of the Buddhist *saṃgha* and the economic practice.⁸¹ Earlier, under the rule of the second Tang emperor, Taizong, this had been regulated in the *Daoseng ge* 道僧格 [Rules for the Daoist [Clergy] and Buddhist Monks], which was part of the juridical codex *Zhenguan li* 貞觀律 [Law Code of the Zhenguang (Era)] from the year 637.⁸² This is probably also the reason that the ‘author’ of the stele uses the archaic and more pejorative term *zanghuo* (臧獲)⁸³ instead of the usual *nubi* (奴婢) for slaves: it expresses a critical position towards the issue of holding slaves.

The reference to a life without possession is followed by one to fasting. The term *zhai* (齋) in a Buddhist context, from which it was certainly adapted together with the term *jie* (戒), ‘precepts’, has a rather broad semantic range, and this has to be taken into account when trying to understand its potential meaning in the stele text. Originally, *zhai* was a translation for Sanskrit *poṣatha*, the fortnightly confession assemblies of the Buddhist *saṃgha* which

81 Cf. the rules in the *Moni guangfo jiaofa yilüe* 摩尼光佛教法儀略 [Chinese Manichaeans Compendium], T. 2141a54, 80c: “[The *electi*] only occupy ‘hearers’ [(i.e., the *auctores*, Manichaeans laypeople)] and are not supposed to keep slaves” (Chin. 唯使聽人, 勿畜奴婢); see also Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, “Das buddhistische Gewand des Manichäismus. Zur buddhistischen Terminologie in den chinesischen Manichaica,” in *Synkretismus in den Religionen Zentralasiens*, ed. Walter Heissig and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1987), 74.

82 Taizong referred to the instructions given by the Buddha before his *nirvāṇa* in the *Fochui banniepan lüeshuo jiaojie jing* 佛垂般涅槃略說教戒經 [Sūtra of the Abridged Explanation of the Precepts [at the Time] of the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha], where it says (T. 389.12, 110c): “Those who keep the pure precepts are not supposed [...] to keep humans, slaves [or] animals [...]” (Chin. 持淨戒者不得 [...] 畜養人民奴婢畜生, [...]).

83 For instance, in the *Xunzi* 荀子 [Xunzi] (see *Hanyu dacidian*, s.v.).

was combined, at least in China, with the practice of fasting. In the Tang period the originally rather individual and moderate events had developed into large feasts for a large number of monks, paid for by well-off laypeople. These grand events were the target of criticism by the opponents of Buddhism and were used to point out the corrupt situation of the Buddhist *saṃgha*.⁸⁴ By using the term *zhai* with its double meaning—ascetic fasting and luxurious feasts—the stele text seems to draw attention to the ideal lifestyle of Christian monks versus the boasting display of wealth of at least some Buddhist monasteries and some members of the *saṃgha*. The message is: contrary to these Buddhists, Christian monks do not accept lavish feasts but practise real penitence and individual fasting. The second phrase, which refers to the precepts (Chin. *jie* 戒, Skt. *śīla*) of the monks, has a similar contextual meaning. While Buddhist monks practise the formal recitation of the precepts or rules during the regular days of observances (Skt. *poṣatha*), but break them in practice—this, at least, is one of the criticisms of the opponents of Buddhism—Christian monks keep their rules without making a lot of fuss around them (i.e., they do not recite them during the liturgy).

The last reference in this passage is to the liturgic routine according to which the monks prayed seven times a day—more often than the services of their Buddhist counterparts—and the Sunday Eucharist (Syr. *ṛàzê*). Here, the argument seems to be one of quantity and regularity and may relate to the concept of the protection of the state which the ritual services of monks—usually Buddhist—was supposed to guarantee.

6 Conclusion

To emphasise the distinctive features of Christian monks in the general Chinese context around 781, when the stele was erected, the ‘author’ of the stele obviously and skilfully used terminology from the Chinese classical texts and from Buddhism. Since the whole stele text clearly has a propagandist intention of showing the idealised relationship of the Christian community with the Tang court and the emperors, the ‘description’ of Christian monasticism followed

84 See, for instance, in the first half of the Tang period the notoriously anti-Buddhist advisor of the first two Tang emperors Gaozu (r. 618–626, 高祖) and Taizong (r. 626–649, 太宗), Fu Yi (555–639, 傅奕), quoted in the *Guang hongming ji* 廣弘明記 [Great Collection of the Elucidation of the Dharma], T. 2103.52, 134c: “If the monks and nuns dressed in normal cloth [and] restricted themselves on the occasion of the feasts [(Chin. *zhai*)], the poor [would] not have to suffer hunger [and] the silkworms would not have to die in such a disastrous amount” (Chin. 僧尼衣布省齋, 則貧人不飢, 蠶無橫死者).

this intentional pattern as well. This fits well into the context of religious policy of the court around the time of the erection of the stele. In the year 779, Emperor Dezong ascended the throne. He immediately issued restrictions of, and measures against, the rich Buddhist monasteries and clergy and interdicted the construction of new monasteries and the ordination of new monks.⁸⁵ In the light of this situation, the text of the stele should not be read as a ‘description’ of a historical reality but as an apologetic-propagandist reaction to this situation. The depiction of the monasticism of the Church of the East fits nicely in this contextual framework and addresses most of the issues Dezong had with the Buddhist institutions—accumulation of wealth and land, keeping slaves, the display of luxury and neglect of normatively regulated practice. The passage skilfully combines generalities of good religious behaviour (spiritual purity and asceticism) with peculiarities of Christian monasticism to paint an idealised portrait of monastic communities. Thus, it sets itself apart from its competitors, particularly the Buddhists, through a set of distinctive identity markers. In a way, the adaptation of Buddhist terminology seen in the Jingjiao texts is reversed and turned into a strategy of othering: by referring to outer markers, ritual actions and symbols, which were partly shared with Buddhist monasticism, it creates an idealised and distinct religious self-identity. How successful this ‘strategy’ was in the short term is difficult to judge—in the long run, it did not save the Jingjiao communities from the consequences of the great persecution of Buddhism and other foreign religions (843 and 845) under Emperor Wuzong.⁸⁶

85 Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the Tang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 89–93.

86 Weinstein, *Buddhism under the Tang*, 114–136; Deeg, “The ‘Brilliant Teaching’. The Rise and Fall,” 105–107, and Deeg, *Die Strahlende Lehre*, 50–55.