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TRANSLATING BIBLICAL TEXTS INTO CHINESE:
The Pioneer Venture of the Nestorian Missionaries

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The history of early Nestorian missionary activity in China during the Tang Dynasty (618-906 C.E.)ⁱ remains little known to western audiences. An even lesser known fact is that the Nestorians had ventured on the task of translating Christian concepts and biblical texts into Chinese. Based on historical documents, this essay offers an in-depth investigation of the Nestorian missionaries’ active involvement in translating the Bible into Chinese.

The Nestorian Stele

Bible translation into Chinese languages began in the seventh century C.E. A reliable source that can support the evidence of the introduction of the Christian faith is the Nestorian Stele² from the eighth century. Nestorians were members of

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² The Nestorian Stele is also referred to as the Nestorian Monument, Nestorian Stone, Nestorian Inscription, or in its original Chinese title, Diǎqín jīngjiào liúxíng Zhōngguó bēi 大秦景教流行中國碑, literally “Memorial of the Propagation in China of the Luminous Religion from Daqin.” For monograph-length treatments of the Nestorian Stele, see Frits Vilhelm Holm, Paul Carus, and Alexander Wylie, The Nestorian Monument: An Ancient Record of Christianity in China (Chicago: Open Court, 1909); P. Y. Saeki, 柏達克, The Nestorian Monument in China (London: SPCK, 1916); P’an Shen 潘景, Jing jiao bei wen zhu shi《景教碑文註釋》= The Nestorian Tablet at Sian Shensi: Text and Commentary by P’an Shen, a Scholar of the Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui (Shanghai: Sheng Kung Hui, 1925-1926); Feng Chengjun 冯承均, Jing jiao bei kao《景教碑考》= Nestorian Stele (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1935; repr., Taipei: Commercial Press, 1962); Paul Pelliot, L’inscription nestorienne de Si-ngan-fou (Ed. with supplements by Antonino Forte; Italian School of East Asian Studies Epigraphical Series 2; Kyoto: Scuola di studi sull’Asia
a Christian sect that originated in Asia Minor and Syria and were later condemned as heretics by the Council of Ephesus in 431. This monument was erected in Chang’an (modern-day Xi’an) to commemorate the propagation of the Christian faith during the Tang Dynasty in 781. It was composed by a Nestorian monk named Adam (also known as Jingjing 景淨) in Chinese but with a few lines in Syriac. Adam recounts the event when Bishop Alopên arrived in Chang’an in 635 with 530 religious documents in Syriac. Strong evidence suggests that early Nestorian missionaries probably had begun translating at least parts of the Bible into Chinese almost immediately upon their arrival in the mid-seventh century.

**Evidence of the Nestorians’ biblical translation activities**

**List of biblical books**

To support the claim that the Nestorians were actively involved in translating the Bible into Chinese, one has to examine the internal evidence from the Stele as well as ancient documents directly related to the Nestorian missionary work in China. First, the most apparent clues of possible existing translations of the Bible in Chinese can be found in the ancient Nestorian documents dated to the early eighth century. Although none of the biblical texts has been preserved from the Tang Dynasty, there are translated titles of canonical books into Chinese that were discovered in the last century. In 1908, Paul Pelliot discovered over eleven Chinese documents and fragments at Dunhuang Stone Cave in Shazhou, an ancient town 100 miles off the present caravan road to Chang’an. Among these documents is an anonymous piece of work of the early tenth century entitled the *Zunjing* 《尊經》 or the *Diptychs*. The *Diptychs* mentions God, the Holy Trinity, and names of saints (including David, Hosea, the four Gospel writers, Peter, and Paul). It also contains a list of several canonical writings as well as apostolic and early ecclesiastical/theological teachings, called jīng 经 or “sūtras.” The identification of these sūtras remains highly conjectural; however, several of them, such as the Book of Moses《牟世法王經》, Zechariah《刪河律經》, the Epistle(s) of St. Paul《寶路法王經》,
and Revelation《啟真經》⁹ are clearly canonical. Other sūtras appear to be early church rules and catechism. These may include the Apostles’ Creed《師利海經》,¹⁰ Ceremony and Rule Book《儀則律經》，Catechism《述略經》，and Doctrine of the Cross《慈利波經》.¹²

Mention of a total number of twenty-seven books on the Nestorian Stele (經留二十七部，v. 25) is likely to be merely coincidental to that of the NT writings. Both P. Y. Saeki and James Legge argue with great conviction that the twenty-seven books mentioned on the Stele are the canonical books in the New Testament.¹³ If one accepts their conclusion, the question must be raised concerning the fact that Nestorian Christians only considered a total of twenty-two books of the NT writings as canonical.

Evidence from the Nestorian documents
Second, the supporting evidence for the Nestorians’ involvement in Bible translation into Chinese comes from the Stele where the actual activities are mentioned: Fǎn jìng jiàn sì. Cún-mò zhōu hàng（翻經建寺。存沒舟航） (“With the translation of the Scriptures and the building of convents, we see the living and the dead. All sailing in one Ship of Mercy.”).¹⁴

It is significant that the author of the Diptychs refers to the gospel evangelists as fǎwáng（“catholicos” or “saint,” lit. “law-king”) or fǎzhǔ（“law-lord”）, the title reserved strictly for the chief priests of a Buddhist sect in China.¹⁵ Nestorian missionaries in China also employed Buddhist terms such as sēng僧 (“Buddhist monk,” e.g., on the Nestorian Stele) for Christian monks, sēngjiā僧伽 (“sangha”) for Apostles, dàdé大德 (“bhadanta”) for bishops, and sì寺（“Buddhist temple”） for Christian congregations and monasteries.¹⁶ With a few exceptions, it is clear that the Nestorians’ involvement in Bible translation and the building of convents, we see the living and the dead.

Footnotes:
⁹ Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 68-70; Saeki, Nestorian Documents, 274-5. See also Chiu Wai Boon 趙維本, Sheng jing su yuan—xian dai wu da Zhong wen sheng jing fan yi shi—《聖經溯源—現代五大中文聖經翻譯史》= Tracing Bible Translation: A History of the Translation of Five Modern Chinese Versions of the Bible (Hong Kong: China Graduate School of Theology, 1993), 9-10. Chu’s list of biblical books in the Diptychs is derived from secondary sources, which often take great liberty and thus erroneously identify several sûtras to be canonical. One example is Ephraim-sûtra《普門禪經》，which Chu erroneously identifies as Ephesians. See Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 70.
¹⁰ Shílìhǎi 師利海 is the Chinese transliteration of the Syriac word ܣܘܪܝܐ, meaning “apostle.” See Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 69. In ancient Chinese it may have been pronounced as [, si li: ’yāi], as Karlgren suggests. Bernhard Karlgren, Analytic Dictionary of Chinese and Sino-Japanese (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1923), s.v.
¹² Cílìpō 慈利波 is the transliteration of the Syriac word ܟܝܠܝܦܐ, meaning “cross.” In ancient Chinese, it could have been pronounced as [, dz’i li’ ,puä]. Karlgren, Dictionary, s.v. See also Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 70; James Legge, The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an Fi in Shen-Hsi, China, Related to the Diffusion of Christianity in China in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries: with the Chinese Text of the Inscription, a Translation, and Notes, and a Lecture on the Monument with a Sketch of Subsequent Christian Missions in China and Their Present State (London: Trübner, 1888; repr., Paragon, 1966), 7 n.10.
¹³ Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 196.
¹⁴ Nestorian Stele, v. 88. English translation is from Saeki. See Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 172. Saeki reports that Jingjing cooperated with the Kashmir monk Prajña 婆若 to prepare a Chinese translation of the Shatparamita Sūtra《波羅密經》in the late eighth century. See Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 72-75, 135, 186. See also Drake, “Nestorian,” 617. Drake, however, holds a conservative attitude towards the actual translation and literary work undertaken by the Nestorians.
¹⁵ Saeki, Nestorian Documents, 278. Saeki prefers the term “catholicos” for fǎwáng instead of “saint.” See Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 68.
¹⁶ Sangha (samgha) refers to an assembly, company, or society in Sanskrit. In Buddhism, it denotes the corporate assembly of (at least four) priests. See William Edward Soothill, Lewis Hodous, Shih Sheng-
however, all subsequent Christian missionaries and Bible translators in China rejected the usage of Buddhist terms and other current religious terms (including those of Taoism and Confucianism) in the Christian context.17 An example of such exceptions would be the Nestorian usage of the term jīng 经 (lit. “text,” “text,” “classics” of the original Chinese works as opposed to “sūtra” which was later used to refer to translated works of Buddhist scriptures) which is retained by Chinese Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, to refer to the Bible, Shèngjing 《聖經》 (“sacred classics”).18

Further evidence

Third, the fact that Buddhist terms were employed on the Stele and other ancient Nestorian documents in Chinese suggests that the Assyrian missionaries may have begun from a very early stage upon their first arrival in Chang’an to translate Buddhist texts into Chinese.19 Whether or not the Assyrians knew enough Sanskrit or Pali to complete the task is another matter to consider, but it clearly indicates that the missionaries were at least well acquainted with Buddhist scriptures in Chinese translations. One could argue that this may also be indicative that they saw translating Buddhist texts as a starting point toward their ultimate goal of translating biblical texts.20

Contextualizing the Christian message in the Chinese language

Nestorian missionaries in China during the seventh and eighth centuries not only heavily employed terms from Buddhist traditions, a foreign religion introduced to China in the early first century C.E., but also borrowed extensively from indigenous religious traditions in China, especially Taoism. This particularly open and tolerant attitude toward non-Christian religions with regard to biblical translation, as we shall see, was, unfortunately, rarely shared by later missionary translators of the nineteenth century. Some of the examples of employing Buddhist and Taoist terms in Christian contexts are shown below. The most noticeable terms adopted were those referring to the Three Persons in the Holy Trinity in Chinese. Unfortunately, with rare exceptions, the Nestorians’ innovative efforts at indigenizing Christian concepts by means of employing existing religious terms in Chinese were altogether rejected by later missionaries and Bible translators.

Naming the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity in Chinese

The Nestorians explored many innovative ways to render the Holy Trinity in Chinese. The most commonly found Nestorian Christian terminologies are examined here:

**God**

- *Huángfù Āluóhē* 皇父阿羅訶 ("Imperial-Father Alāhā"): Āluóhē is the Chinese transliteration of Ḥāluḥē, the Syriac word to render God (אַלוהָם). In ancient Chinese, 阿羅訶 could have been pronounced as [ɐ́ lɑ́ ɣɑ́]. It appeared on the Nestorian Stele and the Diptychs of the eighth century. Āluóhē was used also to transliterate an essential figure in Buddhism, Arhat (or “Arhan”), meaning “the Fruit of Buddha” (fōguǒ 佛果).

- *Fó 佛* ("Buddha"): used exclusively by Bishop Alopēn in the *Hsü-T'ing Messiah Sūtra* or the *Jesus-Messiah Sūtra* in the beginning of the seventh century. Fó is an indigenous word in Chinese meaning “to resemble” (e.g., as in fāngfú 仿佛, “similar to”). In Chinese Buddhism, however, it is generally understood as “completely conscious, enlightened.”

It could be argued that the Buddhist missionaries deliberately picked this particular Chinese character to introduce the new concept of Buddha on the basis of its etymology. The character fó 佛 is formed by the radical 亻 (“man” or “human”) and 佛 (“not”) and therefore fits nicely with the Buddhist teaching of one’s denying and dismissing human passions and desire. While this conclusion may seem possible and illuminating, many standard Chinese lexicons have supported the etymology that the character 佛 is used simply to give the pronunciation of the word rather than anything else.

Alopēn also uses the term zhūfó 諸佛 ("Buddhas") to refer to the “saints and angels” in the *Jesus-Messiah Sūtra*. In Buddhism, zhūfójiā 諸佛家 ("all
Buddhas’ home”) refers to the home of all Buddhas, that is, the “Pure Land.”

On the Nestorian Stele, on the other hand, the term miàozhòngshèng 妙眾聖 (“mysteriously giving existence to multitudinous sages”) was clearly an adoption of a Taoist term that frequently appeared in the I-Ching to refer to deified folk heroes, “all the gods.”

- **Tiānzūn 天尊** (“celestial being,” “god,” or “heavenly-reverend”): a common Taoist term adopted by Bishop Alopên to refer to “heavenly Father” in the Discourse on the Oneness of the Ruler of the Universe (《一神論》) in the beginning of the seventh century. Today, Chinese Christians prefer the term Tiānfù 天父 (“heavenly father”).

- **Zhēnzhǔ 真主** (“true lord”): a Taoist term used by Adam on the Nestorian Stele.

- **Shìzūn 世尊** (“universal-reverend”): used by Bishop Alopên to refer to the Lord Jesus Christ in the Discourse on the Oneness of the Ruler of the Universe (《一神論》) at the beginning of the seventh century. Shìzūn 世尊 is one of the ten and last of the “epithets of the Buddha,” Buddha-bhagavat or Lokanātha, meaning the “enlightened one who is honored by the people of the world.” A similar term pǔzūn 普尊 (“universal-reverend”) appeared in Bishop Cyriacus’ document of the early eighth century in China called the Nestorian Motwa Hymn in Adoration of Trinity (《大秦景教三威蒙度讚》). *Yìngshēn Huángzǐ Míshīhē 應身皇子彌施訶* (“incarnated-royal son-Messiah”) appeared in the Diptychs. Míshīhē is the Chinese transliteration for the Syriac ﺛﺎم� ﺗَأِوْحَا or for the Hebrew חישמ. In ancient Chinese, 彌施訶 could

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Chinese text is also found in Kung, Christian Religion, 110-22.

29 Soothill et al., Dictionary, 450.
30 Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 187.
31 Miào zhòngshèng yǐ yuán zūn zhě 妙眾聖以元尊者. Saeki translates it “bestowing existence on all the Holy Ones.” Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 187. Legge’s translation reads: “by His spirit to give existence to all the Holy ones, Himself the great adorable.” Legge, Nestorian Monument, 3.
32 For an English translation, see Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 174-93. For comments on Tiānzūn and its relationship to other terms for God, see Haneda, “Jesus-Messiah Sûtra,” 441-4. The Discourse on the Oneness of the Ruler of the Universe is now in the possession of the Japanese curator Tomeoka Kenzo (富岡謙藏 1871-1918) and is given the date 641 C.E. by Saeki. See Saeki, Nestorian Documents, 114, 121, 124. See also Haneda, “Remarks on the Discourse,” vol. 2, 225-39. Tomeoka is also cited as “Tomioka” by Moule in A. C. Moule, Christians in China before the Year 1550 (London: SPCK, 1930), 58 n.67. See also Drake, “Nestorian,” 681-5.
33 神若。常然真寂。先先而無元。常然真寂。光後而妙有。想玄悟而造化。妙眾聖以元尊者。其唯一妙為元尊真主阿羅訶耶。為一妙為元尊真主阿羅訶耶。("Behold! There is One who is true and firm, who is ever incomprehensible and Invisible, yet ever mysterious existing to the last of the lasts; who, holding the Secret Source of Origin, created all things, and who, bestowing existence on all the Holy ones, is the only unoriginated Lord of the Universe—is not this our Aloha the Tribune, mysterious Person, the unbegotten and true Lord?"). “Zaohua” 造化 is a Taoist term adopted by Adam to refer to the act of creation by God. Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 162. See also Drake, “Nestorian,” 614-7; Yang 楊森富, “Christianity,” 45-46.
34 Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 162.
36 Saeki, Nestorian Documents, 258; text and trans., 66-68.
37 For Chinese text, see Saeki, Nestorian Documents, 74. An alternative transliteration of “Messiah” in Chinese, 迷師訶, also appears in the Jesus-Messiah Sûtra.
have been pronounced as [ˌmǐə ˌshè ˌxà]. Yingshēn is a Buddhist term used to translate Sanskrit nirmānakāya, meaning “any incarnation of Buddha.”

The Nestorian Stele uses a similar expression to refer to Jesus:

Where one Person of our Trinity, the Messiah, who is the Luminous Lord of the Universe, folding up himself and concealing his true Majesty, appeared upon the earth as a man. Angels proclaimed the Glad Tidings. A virgin gave birth to the Holy One in Ta’chin. A bright Star announced the blessed event. Persians saw the splendor and came forth with their tribute.

Holy Spirit

- Yuánfēng 元風 or Xuánfēng 玄風 (lit. “original/abstruse wind”): a Taoist term used by Bishop Alopèn to refer to the Third Person of the Holy Trinity in the Discourse on the Oneness of the Ruler of the Universe. This term disappeared from Christian literature soon after the great persecution of the Nestorian missions in China in the mid-ninth century. Today, Chinese Christians prefer the term Shènglíng 圣灵 (“Holy Ghost”).

- Jìngfēng 淨風 (“pure wind”): a Buddhist term appeared on the Nestorian Stele. The adjective jìng was used to translate the Buddhist word vimala which means “clean and pure.” As a noun it refers to “the place of cleansing, the latrine, etc.”

An earlier term, liángfēng 涼風 (“cool wind”), which was a neutral term unconnected to any religious tradition in China at the time, was used by Alopèn in the early seventh century. An alternative term for the Holy Spirit also found in ancient Nestorian documents is Lúhé 虔訝, which in ancient Chinese would have been pronounced as [ˌluo ˌxà ˌnièng ˌkuʻ ŝā]. It is a transliteration of Holy Spirit, the Syriac rendering of the Hebrew שֶׁרֶץ, meaning the “Holy Spirit.” Its abbreviated form, Luhé 虔訝, appeared in Bishop Cyriacus’ Sūtra Aiming at Mysterious Rest and Joy 《志玄安樂經》 in the beginning of the eighth century.

Other borrowed religious terms to express Christian concepts

There are several key expressions that the Nestorians borrowed from indigenous Chinese religions. Bishop Cyriacus employed the Taoist term wúwéi 无不 (lit. “non-action”) in his Sūtra Aiming at Mysterious Rest and Joy to refer to the virtue of performing charitable deeds in secret (e.g., Matt 6.4). Interestingly, early

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38 Karlsgren, Dictionary, s.v.
39 Soothill et al., Dictionary, 458.
40 English translation is from Saeki, Nestorian Documents, 54-55.
41 Soothill et al., Dictionary, s.v.
42 Saeki, Nestorian Documents, 259.
43 Karlsgren, Dictionary, s.v.
44 Saeki, Nestorian Documents, 8-9, 258-9.
Buddhist missionaries in China also adopted it to explain the concept of Nirvāṇa. As Buddhist missionaries later introduced the technique of transliteration, Nirvāṇa (nirvāṇa, lit. “separation from life and death,” i.e., exemption from transmigration or “extinction”) became more commonly referred to by its transliterated form Nièpán/Níhuán 涅槃/泥洹.45

New technique of transliteration
In addition to borrowing terms from the existing terms in China during the Tang Dynasty, the Nestorian missionaries also adopted the new technique of transliteration from their Buddhist predecessors in order to introduce new religious concepts to the Chinese in their native tongue. Examples include Yǐshū/Yishù for “Jesus” 移胡/脢呂, Mishīhē 彌施訶 for “Messiah” (see above), Shādàn/Shāduōnā 莊彈/娑多那 for “Satan” which appeared in Alopēn’s documents.47 Perhaps due to its practice in an experimental stage, standard orthography of such transliterated words did not exist. “Apostle Paul,” for example, was rendered Bǎolíng 寶靈 (lit. “treasured spirit”) on the Nestorian Stele but Bǎolù 寶路 (lit. “treasured path”) in the Diptychs. Inconsistency in transliterating proper names may have caused confusion among the new converts, and presented a challenge not just to the Nestorians, but also to the Manichaeans, who first arrived in China near the end of the seventh century, and to Catholic and Protestant translators in the modern period.48

End of the Nestorian Missions
The Nestorians’ Christian influences in China came to an abrupt end after an Imperial Edict of 845 began to take effect to forcefully shut down all Christian missionary activities. Without the imperial protection from the Chinese court which was enjoyed in the previous two centuries, Christianity in China practically disappeared by the end of the tenth century. As Saeki and others have pointed out,

47 For a survey of Chinese transliterations of “Jesus,” see Jost Oliver Zetzsche, “Indigenizing the ‘Name above All Names’: Chinese Transliterations of Jesus Christ.” In *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ* (Ed. by Roman Malek; Sankt Augustin: Jointly published by Institut Monumenta Serica and China-Zentrum, 2002), 141-55.
the Nestorians’ failure was largely due to their lack of native Chinese leadership and their isolation from the mainstream of the Church. This was certainly not the case for the other foreign religions contemporary to the Nestorians’ missionary activities in China, namely, Buddhism, Islam, Manichaeanism, and Zoroastrianism, all of which also endured a series of severe persecutions. Buddhism, and to a certain extent Islam, not only survived the persecutions, but flourished and grew steadily with large numbers of native adherents throughout China.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Nestorians’ impressive and unprecedented ventures into translating Christian concepts and biblical texts into Chinese deserve our recognition, despite their failure in carrying on their mission in China after the tenth century. It would take nearly three centuries before another Christian mission would reach China and resume the activities of Bible translation into the languages of China. Despite the mission’s abrupt end, the legacy of the Nestorians’ approaches in contextualizing the Christian message will live on as an encouraging inspiration to future generations who engage in the task of translating the Bible into Chinese.

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49 Saeki, Nestorian Monument, 159. See also Zetzschke, Bible in China, 25; Hubert W. Spillett, A Catalogue of Scriptures in the Languages of China and the Republic of China (London: BFBS, 1975), x.