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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.)¹ 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 Based on historical documents, this essay offers an in-depth investigation of the Nestorian missionaries' active involvement in translating the Bible into Chinese.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

1 This essay is a revision of a paper originally presented (with the same title) at the SBL/AAR/ASOR 2007 Upper Midwest Regional Meeting held at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, April 13-14, 2007.

2 The Nestorian Stele is also referred to as the Nestorian Monument, Nestorian Stone, Nestorian Inscription, or in its original Chinese title, *Dàqin Jingjiào 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 佐伯好郎, *The Nestorian Monument in China* (London: SPCK, 1916); P'an Shen 潘紳, *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 馮承均, *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 431.³ 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 Jǐngjìng 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.⁴ 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.⁵ Among these documents is an anonymous piece of work of the early tenth century entitled the *Zunjing* 《尊經》 or the *Diptychs*.⁶

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* 經 or "sūtras."⁷ 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》,⁸

orientale, 1996). See also various essays in F. S. Drake, "Nestorian Literature of the T'ang Dynasty," *Chinese Recorder* 66 (1935): 609-14; P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (2nd ed.; Tokyo: Academy of Oriental Culture, 1951), 7, 11, 27-31, 360-2; Kung Tien Min 龔天民, *Tang chao ji du jiao zhi yan jiu* 《唐朝基督教之研究》 = *Christian Religion in the Tang Dynasty* (Hong Kong: CCLOC, 1960), 16-23.

3 The original Nestorians were identified with the Assyrians. Some believe that their presence in China was from around the seventh to tenth centuries. In 1898 modern Nestorians in Iraq were received in the communion of the Russian Orthodox Church. See Holm, Carus, and Wylie, *Nestorian Monument*, 35-38.

4 Alopên is known only by his Chinese name "Aluoben" 阿羅本. Saeki suggests it might be the Chinese translation of "Abraham." See Saeki, *Nestorian Documents*, 258.

5 Paul Pelliot, *La mission Pelliot en Asie centrale* (Annale de la Société de géographie commerciale [section indochinoise], fasc. 4; Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1909), 37-38; Saeki, *Nestorian Monument*, 65.

6 According to Saeki, the *Zunjing* is "a list of living benefactors, as well as of the dead who were commemorated in the Divine Liturgy, and whose names were inscribed on the two-leaved ivory tablets." He suggests the English titles such as "Praise-sūtra" or "Nestorian Book of Praise, dedicated to the Living and the Dead." See Saeki, *Nestorian Documents*, 258.

7 For a comprehensive list of Nestorian documents, see *Catalogue of the Nestorian Literature and Relics* = *Keikyō bunken oyobi ibutsu mokuroku* 『景教文獻及遺物目錄』 (2nd ed.; Tokyo: Maruzen, 1950).

8 In Chinese there is no distinction between plural and singular nouns.

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》 (lit. the "Sūtra of Definition") and Baptismal Hymn 《三威讚經》,¹¹ 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: *Fān jīng jiàn sì. Cún-mò zhōu háng* 翻經建寺。存歿舟航。 ("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 *fāwáng* 法王 ("catholicos" or "saint," lit. "law-king") or *fāzhǔ* 法主 ("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,

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. Chiu's list of biblical books in the *Diptychs* is derived from secondary sources, which often take great liberty and thus erroneously identify several sūtras to be canonical. One example is Ephraim-sūtra 《過拂林經》, which Chiu erroneously identifies as Ephesians. See Saeki, *Nestorian Monument*, 70.

¹⁰ *Shīlǐhǎi* 師利海 is the Chinese transliteration of the Syriac word ܫܠܝܗܐ, meaning "apostle." See Saeki, *Nestorian Monument*, 69. In ancient Chinese it may have been pronounced as [ʃi lǐ] ʃǎi, as Karlgren suggests. Bernhard Karlgren, *Analytic Dictionary of Chinese and Sino-Japanese* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1923), s.v.

¹¹ Or "Three-baptismal-hymn." See Saeki, *Nestorian Monument*, 69-70.

¹² *Cīlībō* 慈利波 is the transliteration of the Syriac word ܥܠܝܒܐ, meaning "cross." In ancient Chinese, it could have been pronounced as [dz'i lji] puà. Karlgren, *Dictionary*, s.v. See also Saeki, *Nestorian Monument*, 70; James Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an Fu in Shen-Hsi, China, Relating 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 馨若 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 *fāwáng* 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* 經 (lit. “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, *Shèngjīng* 《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.

kang 聖剛法師, Lii Wu-jong (*sic*) 李武忠, and Tseng Lai-ting 曾萊火定, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* 《中英佛學辭典》: *With Sanskrit and English Equivalents, a Chinese Index & a Sanskrit-Pali Index* 梵英詮釋附中梵巴文檢字索引 (Kaohsiung, Taiwan: Buddhist Culture Service, 1962), 420; Ernest John Eitel and K. Takakuwa, *Handbook of Chinese Buddhism, Being a Sanskrit-Chinese Dictionary with Vocabularies of Buddhist Terms in Pali, Singhalese, Siamese, Burmese, Tibetan, Mongolian and Japanese* (2nd rev. and enl. ed. with a Chinese Index; Tokyo: Sanshusha, 1904; repr., Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1970), 142. *Bhadanta* denotes “most virtuous” in Sanskrit. In Hinayana Buddhism, it is a title of honor given to priests. See Soothill et al., *Dictionary*, 88; Eitel and Takakuwa, *Handbook*, 29.

17 “Taoism” refers to “*Daojiao*” 道教 in Chinese, and is more often spelled “*Daoism*” in literature appearing in the last twenty years.

18 Ricci has used *Tiānzhūjīng* 天主經 (“Classics of the Lord of Heaven”) to refer to the Bible. See Matteo Ricci 利瑪竇, *T’ien-chu Shih-i* 《天主實義》 = *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (Tr. with introduction and notes by Edward J. Malatesta, Douglas Lancashire, and Peter Kuo-chen Hu 胡國楨; Variétés sinologiques-nouvelle série 72; St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985), 454, line 594.

19 Saeki, *Nestorian Monument*, 74.

20 Marshall Broomhall reasons with Saeki that “if the Assyrian monks could spare time to translate Buddhist works as well as their own literature, how much more time must they have given to Bible translation!” Marshall Broomhall, *The Bible in China* (London: China Inland Mission, 1934), 20.

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 ܐܠܗܐ, the Syriac word to render God (אלהים). In ancient Chinese, 阿羅訶 could have been pronounced as [iːˈɑ̃ lɑ̃ ɣɑ̃].²¹ It appeared on the Nestorian Stele and the *Diptychs* of the eighth century.²² *Āluóhē* was used also to transliterate an essential figure in Buddhism, Arhat²³ (or “Arhan”), meaning “the Fruit of Buddha” (*fóguǒ* 佛果).²⁴
- *Fó* 佛 (“Buddha”): used exclusively by Bishop Alopên in the *Hsü-T’ing Messiah Sūtra* or the *Jesus-Messiah Sūtra* 《序聽迷詩所經》 in the beginning of the seventh century.²⁵ *Fó* is an indigenous word in Chinese meaning “to resemble” (e.g., as in *fāngfú* 仿佛/彷彿, “similar to”). In Chinese Buddhism, however, it is generally understood as “completely conscious, enlightened.”²⁶

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 弗 (“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 弗 is used simply to give the pronunciation of the word rather than anything else.²⁷

Alopên also uses the term *zhūfó* 諸佛 (“Buddhas”) to refer to the “saints and angels” in the *Jesus-Messiah Sūtra*.²⁸ In Buddhism, *zhūfójiā* 諸佛家 (“all

21 Karlgren, *Dictionary*, s.v.

22 See Saeki, *Nestorian Documents*, 42.

23 Arhat is more commonly referred to as “luohan” 羅漢 in Chinese as well as Japanese. Eitel and Takakuwa define Arhat 阿羅漢 as “one who deserves oblations” which is “explained by 佛果.” An arhat is someone who is exempt from birth 不生 (i.e., from transmigration), or “conquers all passions” 殺賊, or “deserves worship” 應供. See Eitel and Takakuwa, *Handbook*, 16.

24 Saeki, *Nestorian Monument*, 133; Kung, *Christian Religion*, 54-57.

25 Saeki, *Nestorian Documents*, 119; Haneda Toru 羽田亨, “Keikyo keiten Isshinron kaisetsu 「景教經典一神論解説」 = Remarks on the Discourse on the Oneness of the Ruler of the Universe of the Nestorian Documents.” In *Haneda Hakushi shigaku rombun shu* 『羽田博士史學論文集』 = *Recueil des œuvres posthumes de Toru Haneda* (Vol. 2; Kyoto: University of Kyoto Press, 1957-1958), 240-69; Haneda Toru, “Jing jiao jing dian xu ting mi shi suo jing kao shi 「景教經典序 聽迷詩所經考釋」 = The *Jesus-Messiah Sūtra* of the Nestorian Documents (Tr. into Chinese by Qian Daosun 錢稻孫),” *Beiping Beihai tu shu guan yue kan* 《北平北海圖書館月刊》 = *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Library* 1.6 (1928): 433-56; Drake, “Nestorian,” 677-81; Kung, *Christian Religion*, 54-55. The *Jesus-Messiah Sūtra* is in the possession of Takakusu Junjiro 高楠順次郎 (Professor of Sanskrit and Pali, University of Tokyo), and is given the date 635-638 C.E. by Saeki. See Saeki, *Nestorian Documents*, 124; 114-24.

26 Soothill et al., *Dictionary*, 225.

27 See for example, Duan Yucui 段玉裁, and Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuo wen jie zi zhu* 《說文解字注》 = *Chinese Etymology* (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publisher, 1981), 370.

28 Yang Senfu 楊森富, “Tang Yuan liang dai ji du jiao xing shuai yuan yin zhi yan jiu 「唐元兩代基督教興衰原因之研究」 = Notes on Christianity in the Tang and Yuan Dynasties.” In *Ji du jiao ru hua bai qi shi nian ji nian ji* 《基督教入華百七十年紀念集》 = *One Hundred and Seventieth Anniversary of the Arrival of Christianity in China* (Ed. by Lin Zhiping 林志平; Taipei: Cosmic Light, 1977), 48. For the Chinese text with an English translation, see Saeki, *Nestorian Monument*, 125-46; Appendix 13-29. The

Buddhas' home") refers to the home of all Buddhas, that is, the "Pure Land."²⁹ On the Nestorian Stele, on the other hand, the term *miàozhōngshèng* 妙眾聖 ("mysteriously giving existence to multitudinous sages")³⁰ was clearly an adoption of a Taoist term that frequently appeared in the *I-Ching* to refer to deified folk heroes, "all the gods."³¹

- *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.³² Today, Chinese Christians prefer the term *Tiānfù* 天父 ("heavenly father").
- *Zhēnzǔ* 真主 ("true lord"): a Taoist term used by Adam on the Nestorian Stele.³³

Jesus/Messiah

- *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.³⁴
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."³⁵ 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》.³⁶
- *Yīngshēn Huángzǐ Mishīhē* 應身皇子彌施訶 ("Incarnated-royal son-Messiah"): appeared in the *Diptychs*.³⁷ *Mishīhē* is the Chinese transliteration for the Syriac ܡܫܝܚܐ or for the Hebrew משיח. In ancient Chinese, 彌施訶 could

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

29 Soothill et al., *Dictionary*, 450.

30 Saeki, *Nestorian Monument*, 187.

31 *Miào zhōngshèng yì 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 Sūtra," 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 粵若。常然真寂。先先而無元。竅然靈虛。後後而妙有。愬玄摳而造化。妙眾聖以元尊者。其唯我三一妙身無元真主阿羅訶歟判。 ("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.

35 *Japanese-English Buddhist Dictionary* (Tokyo: Daitou, 1965), s.v.

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 Sūtra*.

have been pronounced as [ǰ mjie ǰ się ǰ χâ].³⁸ *Yingshēn* is a Buddhist term used to translate Sanskrit *nirmāṇakāya*, meaning “any incarnation of Buddha.”³⁹

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

我三一分身景尊彌施訶。戢隱真威。同人出代。神天宣慶。室女誕聖。
於大秦景宿告祥。波斯瞻耀以來貢。

Wǒ sān yī fēnshēn jǐngzūn Míshīhē. Jí yǐn zhēn wēi. Tóng rén chū dài. Shén tiān xuān qìng. Shì nǚ dànshèng. Yú Dàqín jǐng sù gào xiáng. Bōsī dū yào yǐ lái gòng.

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.⁴⁰

Holy Spirit

- *Yuánfēng* 元風 or *Xuánfēng* 玄風 (lit. “original/abstruse wind”): a Taoist term used by Bishop Alopên 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* 聖靈 (“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.”⁴¹

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 Alopên in the early seventh century.⁴² An alternative term for the Holy Spirit also found in ancient Nestorian documents is *Lúhéningjùshā* 盧訶寧俱沙, which in ancient Chinese would have been pronounced as [ǰ luo ǰ χâ ǰ nieng ǰ kju ǰ ša].⁴³ It is a transliteration of ܠܘܚܘܢܐܢܝܩܘܫܐ, the Syriac rendering of the Hebrew קדוה הרוח, meaning the “Holy Spirit.” Its abbreviated form, *Lúhé* 盧訶, appeared in Bishop Cyriacus’ *Sūtra Aiming at Mysterious Rest and Joy* 《志玄安樂經》 in the beginning of the eighth century.⁴⁴

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* 无爲 (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

38 Karlgren, *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 Karlgren, *Dictionary*, s.v.

44 Saeki, *Nestorian Documents*, 8-9, 258-9.

Buddhist missionaries in China also adopted it to explain the concept of *Nirvāṇa*.⁴⁵ As Buddhist missionaries later introduced the technique of transliteration, *Nirvana* (*nirvāṇa*, lit. “separation from life and death,” i.e., exemption from transmigration or “extinction”) became more commonly referred to by its transliterated form *Nièpán/Nihuán* 涅槃/泥洹.⁴⁶

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 *Yishū/Yishù* for “Jesus” 移鼠/翳數, *Mishihē* 彌施訶 for “Messiah” (see above), *Shādàn/Shāduōnà* 裳彈/裳多那 for “Satan” which appeared in Alopên’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 *Bǎoling* 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,

45 Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 36; Yang 楊森富, “Christianity,” 46.

46 Eitel and Takakuwa, *Handbook*, 109; Soothill et al., *Dictionary*, s.v.; *Japanese-English Buddhist Dictionary*, s.v.

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.

48 The Manichaeans are not treated in detail in this study mainly due to the fact that none of the three extant texts dating from the early ninth to tenth centuries—the *Incomplete Religious Scripture of a Persian Religion* 《波斯教殘經》, the *Lower section: Hymnscroll* 《下部讚》 or the *Compendium of the Doctrines and Styles of the Teaching of Mani, the Buddha of Light* 《摩尼光佛教法儀略》—contains any canonical biblical translations in Chinese. However, the Manichaean transliterations of biblical proper names such as the three persons of the Holy Trinity will be consulted here. The original Chinese texts can be found in Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉, ed., *Dun huang shi shi yi shu* 《敦煌石室遺書》 = *Lost Books from a Stone Chamber of Dunhuang* (4 vols.; Beijing: Songfenshi, 1909), vol. 3; Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉, ed., *Shi shi mi bao* 《石室祕寶》 = *Rare Treasures from a Stone Chamber* (2 vols.; Shanghai: Youzheng Bookstore, 1910), vol. 2; Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡邊海旭, *Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo* 『大正新修大藏經』 = *The Tripitaka in Chinese* (Vol. 54; Tokyo: Taisho Issai-kyo Kanko kai, 1922-1933), 1270-86. For the Chinese texts with French translation, see E. Chavannes and Paul Pelliot, “Deuxième partie,” *Journal asiatique* (1913): 261-394; E. Chavannes and Paul Pelliot, “Un traité manichéen retrouvé en Chine,” *Journal asiatique* (1913): 499-617; Chavannes and Pelliot, “Un traité manichéen retrouvé,” 99-199. For studies of Manichaean terminology, see Yoshida Yutaka 吉田豊, “Manichaean Aramaic in the Chinese Hymnscroll,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 46.2 (1983): 326-31; Peter Bryder, *The Chinese Transformation of Manichaeism: A Study of Chinese Manichaean Terminology* (Löberöd: Bokförlaget Plus Ultra, 1985).

the Nestorians' failure was largely due to their lack of native Chinese leadership and their isolation from the mainstream of the Church.⁴⁹ This was certainly not the case for the other foreign religions contemporary to the Nestorians' missionary activities in China, namely, Buddhism, Islam, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism, all of which also endured a series of severe persecutions.⁵⁰ 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.

LOURENS DE VRIES

LANGUAGE AND BIBLE TRANSLATION IN CLAN-BASED SPEECH COMMUNITIES

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Introduction

Not so long ago, all languages were spoken in contexts where small clans or bands of people, related by kinship and marriage, formed the highest unit of social and political organization. There was no state or tribal leadership to unite these small autonomous, egalitarian groups in bigger units. Archaeological evidence suggests that chiefdoms that integrated clans into higher political units first arose around 5500 B.C. in the Fertile Crescent and around 1000 B.C. in Mesoamerica and the Andes (Diamond 1998, 273).

But band- and clan-based communities are not just a thing of the past; they exist not only in the interior of New Guinea but also in other parts of the world, usually in remote jungle or desert areas where nation-states have either

49 Saeki, *Nestorian Monument*, 159. See also Zetzsche, *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.

50 For historical surveys of Manichaeism in China, see, for example, Chen Yuan 陳垣, "Mo ni si jiao ru Zhongguo kao 「摩尼教入中國考」 = A Study of the Entry of Manichaeism into China," *Guo xue ji kan 《國學季刊》* = *Journal of Sinological Studies* 1.2 (1923): 203-39; Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 45; Leiden: Brill, 1998); Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Polemics against Manichaeism as a Subversive Cult in Sung China (A.D. C. 960-C. 1200)* (Manchester: John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 1979). On Zoroastrianism in China, see Chen Yuan 陳垣, "Huo xian jiao ru Zhongguo kao 「火祆教入中國考」 = A Study of the Entry of Zoroastrianism into China," *Guo xue ji kan 《國學季刊》* = *Journal of Sinological Studies* 1.1 (1923): 27-46. For a general introduction to Zoroastrianism, see Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices; London: Routledge, 2001).