BOOK REVIEWS

Li Tang. *East Syriac Christianity in Mongol-Yuan China*. Orientalia Biblica et Christiana 18. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011. xvi + 169 pp; €58.00.

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The study of Christianity in pre-modern China is a challenging field which is experiencing a surge of interest. Li Tang has been in the thick of this research, from her earlier volume primarily on Christianity in the Tang period,[1] to participating in all three conferences organized at Universität Salzburg on the theme, "Research on the Church of the East in China and Central Asia" (2003, 2006, 2009). Prof. Tang co-edited with Dietmar Winkler the volume of papers from the second conference,[2] while the volume presently under review extensively used the proceedings of the first conference.[3] As she remarks in the preface to the current volume, more studies have focused on Christianity in Tang China than under Mongol rule (xv), which makes the current volume all the more necessary and remarkable.

The importance of the present volume lies primarily in its presentation for the first time of portions of several Chinese-language sources in English translation. Historians of pre-modern China have traditionally been relatively stingy about translating into European languages. The presumption has been that if you wish to understand the history of the Middle Kingdom, you must engage with them on their terms. This is most keenly to be regretted for China under the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), when in fact the Chinese plains were only one part of a vast system of rule that extended to include Russia and Iraq, and parts of modern Turkey. No single scholar can hope to master the many languages (Chinese,

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[1] Li Tang, *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China and Its Literature in Chinese* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2002, 2nd ed., 2004).

[2] Dietmar Winkler and Li Tang, eds., *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia* (Vienna: Lit, 2009).

[3] Roman Malek and Peter Hofrichter, eds., *Jingjiao: The Church of the East in China and Central Asia* (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006).

Mongolian, Persian, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Russian, and Arabic, at least) in which the primary sources for the study of the Mongol Empire are found, to say nothing of additional scholarly languages. By providing her own translations of portions of Chinese literature which mention *Yelikewen* (the term for Christians used in the Yuan period), Li Tang has provided an invaluable service to the scholarly community interested in the study of Christianity in Mongol-ruled China.

The work is divided into four parts, with an analytic table of contents at the beginning. The rich contents of this book, however, have resulted in the chapter and section headings representing only a small portion of what is contained in each section, as additional sources and insights peek out in unexpected places. Unfortunately the index, containing only 91 entries, does not provide much help for finding all of the locations where this book discusses a given topic. Fortunately the volume is slim at 148 pages, so reading or at least skimming the entirety is recommended for gleaning the full benefit from the author's research on any of a number of topics. The first part, a sixteen page introduction bearing the overly narrow title "A Brief Political History of Inner Asia Up to the Mongol Conquest," orients the reader with a vast background account of relations between the Chinese and their northern nomadic neighbors since the early first millennium B.C., with additional sections presenting themes of Mongol rule in China, an introduction to Western European travelers to medieval China, and a summary history of Christian expansion into central Asia and the far East into the Mongol period. Unfortunately the book's evident lack of proof-reading has affected many of the dates, such as the dates for the "Pax Mongolica" given as 1127-1260; the later date is correctly the Mongol Civil War, while the earlier date is evidently an error for the death of Chinggis Khan in 1227. The result is that this part introduces useful themes, but precise details must be checked before citing this volume. For the pre-Mongol history of Central Asia, one might consult Peter Golden's new undergraduate text, *Central Asia in World History*,[4] while for themes of the Mongol Empire itself nothing yet surpasses David Morgan's classic *The Mongols*.[5] In addition, although the author alludes to the recent

[4] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

[5] 2nd ed.; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007.

debates concerning the authenticity of Marco Polo's travelogue, the length of time this book was in production apparently prevented her from citing the most definitive defense of Polo's work to date, Stephen G. Haw's excellent *Marco Polo's China*.[6]

The second part focuses on the Christian tribes on the steppes in the period leading up to Mongol rule, although of course overlapping into the Mongol period, to present a complete picture. The part begins with the European images of Prester John, the great Christian priest-king "of India" who (so crusaders hoped) would ally with the Latin Christians to crush Islam. Tang takes the sane approach of not identifying a "historical" Prester John but identifying the myth as European wishful thinking, which is necessarily dealt with in interpreting the evidence of the European travelers. The bulk of this part, however, deals with the Kerait, Naiman, Uighur, Öngüt, and Merkit tribes, assembling the evidence for conversions to Christianity in each group. Much of this evidence is familiar to students of Central Asian Christianity, but for that very reason this part can usefully serve as a place of first reference for the sources pertaining to any one of these tribes. The most contentious portion of the part will likely be where the author reviews the debate as to whether the two East Syrian monks from China, later known as Mar Yahballaha III and Rabban Sauma, were Uighur or Öngüt. She favors the Uighur interpretation, although she presents the dissenting view of no less a scholar than Paul Pelliot. The Öngüt thesis still finds support, however, for example in Pier Giorgio Borbone's recent study of the text and Italian translation, *Storia di Mar Yabballaha e di Rabban Sauma*, which is in the bibliography but not apparently cited in the text.[7] For the reader who does not know Chinese, it may be helpful to know that the Chinese travelogue cited on pp. 34 and 36 is one of the rare Chinese texts to have obtained an English translation.[8]

The third part surveys the evidence, both archaeological and literary, for Christianity in Yuan China. A lengthy discussion of the terminology for Christians in the period is followed by a summary account of the discovery of the East Syrian gravestones. The real

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[6] London: Routledge, 2006.

[7] Torino: Silvio Zamorani, 2000.

[8] Arthur Waley, *The Travels of an Alchemist: the journey of the Taoist, Ch'ang-Ch'un, from China to the Hindukush at the summons of Chingiz Khan* (London: Routledge, 1931).

treat of this part is a full transcription and translation of the Chinese, Syriac, Syro-Turkic, and Phags-pa texts on eight Christian tombstones representing a wide range of styles, all from Quanzhou (medieval Zaiton on the coast). Included is the famous tombstone of Mar Shleimun (dated 1313), East Syrian bishop and supervisor of the Manicheans and Christians of Jiangnan for the Mongol government, in Chinese and Syro-Turkic. Other gravestones included here are that of General Wang Fudao (dated 1349, in Chinese and Syro-Turkic); of the monastic priest Elisa Qitay (1312, Syro-Turkic); of a chief servant named Ke Cuncheng (undated, Chinese); of Abbot Anduonisi Wu (1306, Chinese); of Guo and Chen, two mothers of the Dai family (date problematic, but apparently 1277 or 1286, in Chinese); of Yi Liu (1324, in Chinese and Phags-pa script); and of perhaps a "Madam Yang, wife of Mr. Ye" (1314, in Chinese and Phags-pa). When using the inscriptions in Syriac script, it is unfortunately necessary to use the transliterations into Latin script rather than the Syriac transcription provided, since the typesetter seems to have been unfamiliar with Syriac, resulting in numerous visual errors (*k* for *b*, *ḥ* for *ny*, *q* for *m* or *w*, *'e* for *k*). For example, the beginning of the Syriac Trinitarian invocation at the head of two of the inscriptions (pp. 65, 68) becomes ܟܫܡ ܐܒܐ ܘܒܪܐ (for ܒܫܡ ܐܒܐ ܘܒܪܐ). On the other hand, the transliterations into Latin script seem to be almost entirely without typographical error, and therefore should be preferred over the Syriac script. References to alternate readings of the inscriptions would have been useful, however, for example in the cases of Mar Shleimun's and Elisa Qitay's epitaphs.[9] The many inscriptions from Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang are dealt with in very summary fashion, unfortunately often without citations of non-Chinese works from which one could find out more. Indeed, a work surveying the numerous publications of Christian grave stones from Central Asia and China remains a desideratum, although the bibliographies of two recent works on Central Asian

[9] Very different readings of key portions of these inscriptions are given in Lance Eccles, Majella Franzmann, and Samuel Lieu, "Observations on Select Christian Inscriptions in the Syriac Script from Zayton," in Iain Gardner, Samuel Lieu, and Ken Parry, eds., *From Palmyra to Zayton: Epigraphy and Iconography* (Silk Road Studies X; Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 264-267.

gravestones include many works between them.[10] In addition to the inscriptions which are the focus of the majority of this part, at the end the author briefly introduces the literary sources in Chinese and other languages.

The fourth and largest part then attempts to synthesize the literary and archaeological sources with the aim, as the introduction expressed it, "to reconstruct a history of East Syrian Christianity in Mongol-Yuan China within its political, social, economic, cultural and religious environments" (xv). This part explores Christian influence on the Mongol rulers, both through members of the royal family and through prominent officials whose biographies are given, as well as the geographical distribution of the Christian population, the Mongol policies of religious toleration, relations with Christian centers outside of China, and the causes of the decline of Christianity. Of these sections, the most developed is the geographical section, which includes genealogical charts of prominent Christian families based on literature and inscriptions. Unfortunately, these charts do not come with citations indicating precisely where this information came from, and they occasionally contradict the main text: for two examples, the text identifies Shide as the uncle of Ma Zuchang, but the accompanying chart presents him as Ma Zuchang's third cousin once removed (103), while the text names Anzhu'er as Zhao Shiyan's grandfather, while the chart shows him as the younger man's uncle (105). The text also identifies younger generations of some of these families (such as Yelü on 104, Zhao Shiyan on 105) as literary figures in Chinese; more information on their place in Chinese literature would have been helpful for readers (such as the current reviewer) who are not familiar with that history. The section on Mongol religious toleration also curiously refers to the *Yasa* of Chinggis Khan as if it were a unified code which once existed as a text, despite citing the critical scholarship which rejects precisely that proposition (126-127). Therefore this treatment of religious toleration is very old-

[10] Mark Dickens, "Syriac Gravestones in the Tashkent History Museum," in Winkler and Tang, eds., *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters*, 42-49; Tjalling Halbertsma, *Early Christian Remains of Inner Mongolia* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 337-51.

fashioned, and does not take into account recent scholarship that was available.[11]

But the most important and useful portions of this fourth part are the numerous translations into English of passages from Chinese literature which mention Christians. Several of these passages were translated by A. C. Moule in his landmark *Christians in China Before the Year 1550*,[12] but most are not found there, and even where overlap occurs, the rendering is often so different that both should be consulted. Unfortunately, this volume does not render Moule's work obsolete, since many more passages are translated in Moule that are omitted here. A volume bringing together translations of all of the relevant passages of Chinese literature would be most helpful (there remain passages which Moule lists in his footnotes but which have not been translated into English), but this volume translates passages of the *Yuanshi* (the Yuan dynastic history) on pp. 87-88, 93, 95, 121, 122, 128-130, as well as assorted other Chinese primary sources on pp. 53, 99, 118, and 134-138.

The many beautiful pictures make this book engaging and evocative, and the useful maps help orient the reader, although a few more maps (such as one of sites within Inner Mongolia) would have been helpful. There were certain other curious omissions in this volume. Among them, there was no substantive discussion of the Christian interactions with the Manichaeans, on which there is much scholarship. Citations were tantalizingly lacking for the repeatedly mentioned Temple of the Cross in Fangshan, in which (according to this author, but on what basis is unknown) Rabban Sauma lived as a monk (38-39, 108, 140).[13] The volume under review also did not address the question where and when there were ecclesiastical officials such as bishops and metropolitans.

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[11] For important recent contributions on the question of religious toleration and the *Yasa* of Chinggis Khan, respectively, see Peter Jackson, "The Mongols and the Faith of the Conquered," 245-90, and David O. Morgan, "The 'Great *Yasa* of Chinggis Khan' Revisited," 291-308, both in Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran, eds., *Mongols, Turks, and Others* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

[12] London: SPCK, 1930.

[13] On this site, see the more cautious conclusion of Pierre Marsone, "When was the Temple of the Cross at Fangshan a 'Christian Temple'?" in Winkler and Tang, *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters*, 215-223.

Finally, although the third part discusses the etymology of the term *Yelikewen*, the volume never addresses the scope of the term: did it refer to all Christians, only East Syrian Christians, or only clergy? Here we may be hampered more than helped by William of Rubruck's charge, which may be baseless, that the Nestorians ordain every male of any age as priest (cited on p. 90). Did its meaning adapt over the course of the dynasty? If it referred only to East Syrian Christians, what terms were used for other Christians? In any event, how does one know that the tombstones cited here are certainly from the Church of the East? It is to be hoped that the publisher will print a second edition, in which the numerous typographical and other minor errors, which were too numerous to list in this review, may be corrected, and some of these additional questions filled in. Nevertheless this volume will be indispensible to anyone interested in Christianity under Mongol rule or Christianity in China. It is hoped that it will be an inspiration to further studies, syntheses, and translations of the difficult and varied source material, so that this furthest corner of the history of pre-modern Syriac Christianity may be fully integrated into larger studies of the Mongol Empire and the history of Christianity.