

Li Tang and Dietmar W. Winkler, eds., *From the Oxus River to the Chinese Shores: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*. *Orientalia – Patristica – Oecumenica* 5. (Zürich: Lit, 2013). Pp. 472; €44.90.

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Nowhere is the common misconception that Christianity is an exclusively “Western” religion more clearly falsified than in pre-modern China, where Christians composed theological treatises, obtained imperial patronage, and erected monuments during the Tang and Yuan dynasties (618–907 and 1271–1368, respectively). Scholarly neglect of this phenomenon may be said to be at an end, thanks to the conferences organized by Dietmar Winkler and Li Tang at Universität Salzburg on the theme “Research on the Church of the East in China and Central Asia.” The volume under review contains the papers from the third conference (2009), and like the proceedings of the earlier conferences¹ it is an indispensable work for any scholar interested in Christianity in Asia or the diversity of Chinese and Central Asian societies in the periods under discussion.

The twenty-nine articles in this volume are organized in four sections. The first section, “Manuscripts and Inscriptions,” contains eight textual studies in Syriac, Chinese, Sogdian, and Syro-Turkic. The second and longest section, “History and Archaeological Excavations,” is divided into two subsections, with five articles on the Tang period and seven on the Mongol-Yuan period. Two essays comprise a section for silk route connections, although their topics are somewhat surprising in this volume. The remaining seven articles address liturgical, theological, and broadly cultural topics regarding the place of East Asia within East Syriac Christianity. Prominent among the articles are several analyses (by Max Deeg, Matteo Nicolini-Zani, Ge Chengyong, and Zhang Naizhu) of the newly discovered Luoyang inscription, which was unearthed in

¹ Roman Malek with Peter Hofrichter, eds., *Jingjiao: The Church of the East in China and Central Asia* (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006); Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang, eds., *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia* (Vienna: Lit, 2009).

2006, so this is the first Salzburg conference which was able to address the inscription in any detail.²

In the first section, three studies (those by Hidemi Takahashi, William J. Pittard and Nicholas Sims-Williams, and Peter Zieme) propose new readings for texts which have been edited elsewhere. Takahashi's article proposes alternate identifications of Syriac names contained in multiple different texts from the Tang period, while Pittard and Sims-Williams identify the gospel texts in Sogdian lectionaries from Turfan. Zieme's essay not only proposes new readings but also a new folio order for a Turkic text in Syriac script discovered in Khara-Khoto. Erica Hunter's article edits and translates a prayer-amulet, while three more essays (by Pier Giorgio Borbone, Majella Franzmann, and Niu Ruji) analyze inscriptions. Margherita Farina's contribution shows the potential for doing large-scale analysis of computer databases of inscriptions, and it is hoped that some of the desiderata which she identifies may be under development. On the whole, these articles make important advances in scholars' understanding of the still very sparse evidence for Syriac Christianity in Central and Eastern Asia, and they should be consulted by all who wish to cite the sources they discuss, but there is little discussion of the significance of these new readings and new texts. The chapters which propose emendations to previously edited texts are also challenging to read without an edition of the text at hand, which reminds readers that this is not an introductory volume. While this is a sign of the maturity of the field, it also means that newcomers should consult the bibliography in order to get their bearings.

The second section ("History and Archaeological Excavations") is divided between the Tang and Mongol-Yuan periods. For the former period, two articles address the Xi'an stele, with Max Deeg reading the text as a work of self-aggrandizement by "a belligerent priest," as he titled his contribution, and Samuel N. C. Lieu analyzing the cultural background which may explain why the term used for the Roman Empire on the stele was *Da Qin*, a name used by Taoists for a utopian empire west of the Parthians, rather than the phonetic transcription *Fulin*. These two contributions also

² The 2006 conference contained only a "preliminary report" on the discovery: Li Tang, "A Preliminary Study on the *Jingjiao* Inscription of Luoyang: Text Analysis, Commentary and English Translation," in *Hidden Treasures*, 109–132.

problematize two aspects that have been taken for granted in most studies of Christianity in Tang China. Deeg challenges the presumption that the purpose of the monastery was for converting the Chinese, and suggests that the stele's purpose was to secure state support. Lieu proposes that *Jingjiao* might have originally meant "teaching of reverence [for God]" rather than the usual translation "the luminous religion." Unfortunately, these proposals have not had an impact on other contributions to the volume, such as Ge Chengyong's sparingly footnoted and sparsely argued narrative in his contribution. Matteo Nicolini-Zani gives a close analysis of the ecclesiastical titles in the Luoyang inscription, while Zhang Naizhu's contribution situates the Luoyang inscription in the context of other Tang dynasty funeral inscriptions and the countryside around Luoyang with extensive documentation. Zhang's translations, especially of the Luoyang inscription itself, do not always clearly signify which parts are supplemented by the translator for lacunae in the original, which is a challenge for readers, such as the present reviewer, who cannot read the Chinese.

The Mongol-Yuan sub-section of the historical section includes six new contributions and a reprint of Pierre Marsone's earlier essay, "When Was the Temple of the Cross at Fangshan a 'Christian Temple'?"³ Three of these articles (a new essay by Pierre Marsone as well as articles by Maurizio Paolillo and Li Tang) address the Önggüt Turks. Pierre Marsone's new contribution compares the biographical details about King George given by John of Montecorvino and the Yuanshi, providing a full translation and edition of the relevant sections of both texts, to argue that lack of mention of Christianity in Chinese texts does not indicate an absence of Christianity, while Li Tang's article argues that a recent archaeological excavation in Hebei province has probably discovered King George's tomb. Maurizio Paolillo's essay brings together evidence for the pre-Chinggisid background of the Önggüt in order to discern when Christianity became prominent among them; he concludes that they were a relatively new group, composed of Turkic, Uyghur, and Sogdian elements, and were certainly Christian by the early twelfth century. This reviewer would have liked more engagement with the methodological difficulties of any such historical

³ The essay was originally published in Winkler and Tang, *Hidden Treasures*, 215–223.

ethnology. The article by Xu Bin and Xie Bizhen provides an overview of the Quanzhou region of southeastern China, and suggests that Christianity declined rapidly there in the late Yuan period. In addition to the oft-cited reasons such as failure to convert Han Chinese and resistance from Buddhists and Taoists, the authors propose looking specifically to the anti-foreign sentiment following the failed revolts of the final decade of Yuan rule, and the Ming patronage for Muslims among Westerners. Wang Yuanyuan's article (more about the Tang dynasty than the Yuan) presents an *a fortiori* plausibility case that Christianity was not wiped out by the proscription of the year 845, as is often assumed, although the author carefully indicates the uncertainties surrounding possible evidence of Christianity in China after 845 and before the Yuan dynasty. The contribution of Mehmet Tezcan and Asiye Bayindir raises the question of religion and gender among the Mongol ruling elite, thus supplementing Peter Jackson's 2005 publication on the ruling Mongol men in his article "The Mongols and the Faith of the Conquered." This new study, however, evinces none of Jackson's careful criticism of the sources.⁴ In particular, Jackson made the important point that Christian and Muslim authors were at great pains to identify this or that elite Mongol as Muslim or Christian, but the conflicting evidence may suggest that the medieval Mongol elite, much like many modern Chinese today, did not regard these religious identifications as exclusive.⁵

The two articles in the section "Syriac Christianity Along the Silk Routes" are both very useful, but their place in this volume is unclear. Baby Varghese's article provides a full English translation of two important sources for Syriac Christianity in India at the start of the 16th century, and continues by synthesizing the evidence for

⁴ Peter Jackson, "Mongols and the Faith of the Conquered," in *Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran, Brill's Inner Asian Library 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 245–290. Tezcan and Bayindir cite Jackson, but only in their initial identification of earlier studies, so it is impossible to know what they took from Jackson's study. This essay's first footnote also seriously misrepresents Nestorius's belief (Nestorianism) as the "view that Christ cannot be the God" [*sic*]!

⁵ Jackson, "Mongols," 254–255.

various bishops in India over the course of the century.⁶ Jasmine Dum-Tragut studies the contemporary Assyrians in Armenia, with a summary of their history stretching back to the 1820s and a comprehensive report on the religious and educational organizations among the four villages known as Assyrian. Both articles are clear and will be very useful, and perhaps in the context of the study of "East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia," they can be read as comparative studies for how outposts of the Church of the East deal with other cultures and foreign governments.

Seven studies comprise the concluding section of the volume, "Liturgical Traditions and Theological Reflections." Mark Dickens provides a summary of the ubiquity of the psalms in East Syrian liturgy, together with a list of the Psalm manuscripts from Turfan. His article also helpfully provides a list of scribal errors, which give evidence for inter-linguistic interference (Sogdian and Uyghur) on Syriac scribes. The articles by Daniel H. Williams, Garry Moon Yuen Pang, and Glen L. Thompson primarily concern the Tang period, or scholars' interpretation of artifacts from that period, while Shinichi Muto's and Anthony J. Watson's essays take us to the Yuan dynasty, and Martin Tamcke's concluding chapter analyzes the *Nachleben* of the East Syrian mission to China into the 21st century.

The study by Daniel H. Williams of the adoption of the Nicene Creed mostly focuses on the messy process by which diverging versions of the creed of the council of Nicea in 325 proliferated and were adopted in the Persian Empire in the fifth and sixth century. There is little about China or Central Asia in this chapter, although at the end he indicates that the opening lines of the Nicene Creed find some echo in one text from Tang China. Garry Moon Yuen Pang's article provides a thematic summary of Tang-era Christian theological emphases in Chinese texts, with a notable focus on harmonious society. He argues that Christian theology improved social harmony in Tang China, but perhaps the study is insufficiently critical of the propagandistic claims for Christianity's benefits, as recounted in Christian sources. Glen L. Thompson ar-

⁶ The reviewer might call attention to Murre-van den Berg's suggestion that the date of the initial visit be emended to 1811 A.G. (1499/1500 C.E.) rather than 1801 A.G. (1489/1490 C.E.): Heleen L. Murre-van den Berg, "The Patriarchs of the Church of the East from the Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries," *Hugoye* 2, no. 2 (1999), 241.

gues that the term “Nestorian” was not exclusively pejorative or exclusively western, but he traces the uses of the term “Nestorian” in Western Europe from late antiquity through the 1625 discovery of the Xi’an Stele in order to clarify the connotations of identifying the *Jingjiao* monument as “Nestorian,” and to challenge scholars to move beyond the false starts embodied in that identification.⁷

The articles for later periods open up new avenues of approach to the theology of Eastern Christianity. Shinichi Muto gives the first English translation of a Trinitarian Syriac text found in Khara-Khoto in the early 1980s, a text which he suggests is liturgical, although this reviewer suspects it may have served a para-liturgical function (to call it “magical” would be needlessly prejudicial). Further discussion of how the text might have been used, especially with what sounds like an unusual layout (no image is provided, regrettably), would have been useful. Anthony J. Watson provides a theological analysis of the *History of Rabban Sawma and Mar Yabballaha* with respect to the virtue theory of Evagrius of Pontus; the result is a sketch of the terms used for what might be called the cosmological drama of virtue in Syriac Christianity, although whether this drama is distinctively “Evagrian” was not persuasively argued. Finally, Martin Tamcke’s article explores references, which he acknowledges to be few, to the history of the Church of the East in China within modern East Syrian literature from the 20th (and in one case 21st) century. He focuses on the poetry of Sargon

⁷ Curiously, Thompson’s quotation of the *Book of the Pearl* by ‘Abdisho’ of Nisibis preserves Badger’s misleading translation “two Persons,” and he asserts that ‘Abdisho’ did not contest the theological accuracy of the label “Nestorian.” A more accurate translation of the same passage is now given in Nikolai N. Seleznyov, “Nestorius of Constantinople: Condemnation, Suppression, Veneration, with Special Reference to the Role of His Name in East-Syriac Christianity,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 62 (2010), 185. One must question how precisely ‘Abdisho’ knew Nestorius’s theology. On this question I respectfully disagree with Seleznyov, since the traditional “Nestorian” formula of “two *qnōmē* and one “*parṣōpā*” expounded by ‘Abdisho’ disagrees with the “two *parṣōpē*” proposed by Nestorius himself: Nestorius, *The “Book of Heraclides of Damascus”*: *The Theological Apologia of Mar Nestorius = Le Livre d’Héraclide*, ed. Paul Bedjan (Leipzig, 1910; reprint Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2007), 304–305. In any event, the *ecclesiological* implication of being labeled by a name other than Christ’s was as unacceptable to ‘Abdisho’ of Nisibis as it was for Martin Luther.

Boulos, Mar Bawai Soro's *The Church of the East: Apostolic and Orthodox* (2007), Mar Aprem's *Western Missions among Assyrians* (1982), and the efforts of the remaining traditionalist Church of the East, those who had refused union with the Russian Orthodox Church, to purchase a new church building in Urmia in 1911.

Together, these essays comprise a formidable volume which is an essential reference for all students of Asian Christianity and religious diversity. The editors, who are also the conference organizers, should be congratulated for stimulating such a quantity of research into an area of the past which has long lain neglected, and for bringing together representatives of different scholarly traditions which all too rarely compare notes, including scholars from China, Japan, India, Europe, and North America. Moving forward, it will be important for scholars of Christianity in China and Central Asia to adopt a more critical stance toward their primary sources than some studies have done heretofore, and the new readings in the first section of the volume need to be incorporated into future synthetic scholarship. A critical attitude is also necessary toward the scholarship of preceding generations, which was inconsistent in its rigor, in order to root out earlier misunderstandings. Tang and Winkler, by convening these conferences and publishing the papers, have stimulated excellent new scholarship in a difficult domain of inquiry. We look forward to learning from many future volumes of invaluable studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia.