Li Tang

East Syriac Christianity in Mongol-Yuan China

2011

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

ISSN 0946-5065
ISBN 978-3-447-06580-1
Acknowledgement

This book is the outcome of my research project funded by the Austrian Science Fund (Fonds zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung, abbreviated as FWF) from May 2005 to April 2008. It could not be made possible without the vision of FWF in its support of researches and involvement in the international scientific community.

I take this opportunity to give my heartfelt thanks, first and foremost, to Prof. Dr. Peter Hofrichter who has developed a passion for the history of East Syrian Christianity in China and who invited me to come to Austria for this research. He and his wife Hilde, through their great hospitality, made my initial settling-in in Salzburg very pleasant and smooth.

My deep gratitude also goes to Prof. Dr. Dietmar W. Winkler who took over the leadership of this project and supervised the on-going process of the research out of his busy schedule and secured all the ways and means that facilitated this research project to achieve its goals.

A number of people to whom I am most grateful: to Prof. Stephen Gerö at Universität Tübingen who has supported me throughout the years through his interest in my work and expertise in the languages and cultures of the Christian East; to Prof. Geng Shimin at Chinese University of Nationalities, who gave me a series of lessons in Old Turkic and who always supported my research and fieldwork in China; to Prof. Hugiltu of University of Inner Mongolia, who helped me greatly during my fieldwork in Inner Mongolia.

Last but not least, my sincere thanks and appreciation go to Prof. Dr. Fred W. Norris who spent months of his time reading through this manuscript and who has saved me from many mistakes. His valuable suggestions, wise counsel and those countless exchanges of thoughts will be treasured in my memory for a long, long time.

Li Tang

April 2011, Salzburg, Austria
# Table of Contents

Maps and illustrations .................................................................................................................. IX

Preface ........................................................................................................................................ XI

1. On the Subject ......................................................................................................................... XI

2. On the term “Nestorian” or “Nestorianism” ........................................................................... XII

3. Transliteration of Turco-Mongolic and Chinese Words .......................................................... XIII

1. A Brief Political History of Inner Asia Up to the Mongol Conquest ........................................ 1

1.1. The Classical World of Inner Asia ...................................................................................... 1

1.2. Inner Asia and the Chinese Empire in Medieval Times (10th–13th Centuries) ..................... 4

1.3. The Mongol Conquest ...................................................................................................... 5

1.4. The Mongol Conquest of China – the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) ........................................ 8

1.5. Under the Mongol Empire – Pax Mongolica ..................................................................... 9

1.6. Medieval Travellers to the East ........................................................................................... 9

    1.6.1 John of Plano Carpini (Iohannes de Plano Carpini, 1180–1252) ....................................... 10

    1.6.2 William of Rubruck (Guillaume de Rubrouck, ca.1220–1293?) .................................. 11

    1.6.3 Marco Polo (1254–1324) ............................................................................................. 11

    1.6.4 Odoric of Pordenone (Odorich von Portenau, 1286–1331) ........................................... 13

    1.6.5 John of Montecorvino (1247–1328) ........................................................................... 13

    1.6.6 John of Marignolli (Giovanni de’ Marignolli, ca. 1290–???) ......................................... 14

1.7. Christianity in Inner Asia Up to the Mongol Conquest ....................................................... 14

2. Christian Nations and Tribes on the Steppe in Medieval Times ........................................... 17

2.1. The European Quest for the Kingdom of Prester John ....................................................... 19

    2.1.1 The Legend of Prester John .......................................................................................... 19

    2.1.2 East Asiatic Tribal Chiefs Labeled as Prester John ....................................................... 20

2.2. The Linguistic Elements of the Christian Groups on the Steppe ......................................... 23

2.3. Migration-Induced Cultural, Linguistic and Religious Interactions ...................................... 23
2.4. Land and People: Their Conversion to Christianity ............................................. 24
  2.4.1 The Kerait 克烈 ................................................................. 24
    2.4.1.1 The Kerait and Their Khan ........................................ 25
    2.4.1.1.1 The Kerait Tribe ............................................... 25
    2.4.1.1.2 Ong Khan: The King of the Kerait .......................... 27
    2.4.1.2 The Conversion of the Kerait to Christianity ............... 27
  2.4.2 The Naiman .................................................................................. 29
    2.4.2.1 Locating the Naiman .................................................... 29
    2.4.2.2 The Naiman as Nestorian Christians ............................ 30
  2.4.3 The Uighur .................................................................................. 32
    2.4.3.1 The Uighur in History ................................................... 32
    2.4.3.2 Uighur Nestorian Christians in Pre-Mongol Period ........ 34
    2.4.3.3 Uighur Nestorians during the Mongol Period ................. 36
    2.4.3.4 History of Yahballaha III and Rabban Sauma ................. 37
    2.4.3.5 The Identity of Rabban Sauma and Yahballaha III .. ... 38
      2.4.3.5.1 As Uighur ....................................................... 38
      2.4.3.5.2 Possibly Ongut ................................................. 39
      2.4.3.5.3 Surely Turk ..................................................... 40
  2.4.4 The Ongut (Öngüt, Wanggu, 汪古, 汪古惕, 雍古, etc.) .................. 41
    2.4.4.1 Description of the Ongut and Their Inhabited Area ........ 41
    2.4.4.2 Description of Olon-sume, the former Ongut Capital ...... 42
    2.4.4.3 The Land of the Ongut Mentioned by Medieval Travellers ............................................. 44
      2.4.4.3.1 Marco Polo’s Description: Tenduc ....................... 44
      2.4.4.3.2 John of Monte Corvino ..................................... 44
    2.4.4.4 The Nestorian Relics in Olon-Sume Investigated by Archaeologists of the 20th Century ........ 45
  2.4.5 The Merkit (Märkit, Merkid, etc.) .............................................. 46
    2.4.5.1 Mission of the East Syrian (“Nestorian”) Church ............ 47
    2.4.5.2 Mass and Individual Conversions ..................................... 48

3. Traces of East Syrian Christianity in Yuan-China ............................................. 51
  3.1. The Sources of the Two Designations for Christians during the Mongol-Yuan Period .................. 51
    3.1.1 The Term “Diexie” (Persian:Tarsā; 迪東) ................................ 52
    3.1.2 The Etymology of Yelikewen .............................................. 53
      3.1.2.1 Yelikewen: the blessed ......................................... 54
      3.1.2.2 The Arabic Origin .................................................... 54
      3.1.2.3 The Greek Origin .................................................... 54
      3.1.2.4 Further Comments on “Erkegün” ................................ 55
  3.2. Archaeological Evidences of Nestorian Presence in Yuan-China ...................................... 58
    3.2.1 Nestorian tombstones in Quanzhou ..................................... 58
      3.2.1.1 The Discovery of the Nestorian Tombstones .................... 58
Table of Contents

3.2.1.2 Translation of Some Nestorian Inscriptions .......... 60
3.2.2 Nestorian Relics in Inner Mongolia .............................................. 76
  3.2.2.1 Olon-Sume and Its Environs ....................................................... 77
  3.2.2.2 Wangmuliang Cemetery .............................................................. 78
  3.2.2.3 Muqur-Suburghan Cemetery 木胡兒索卜爾嘎 .... 79
  3.2.2.4 Scattered Tombstones in Inner Mongolia  ................................... 80
3.2.3 Nestorian Relics in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region ........ 81
  3.2.3.1 Turfan ........................................................................ 81
  3.2.3.2 Almaïq (Huocheng/Xinjiang) .............................................. 81

3.3. Historical literary Sources on the Traces of Nestorians in
China of the Mongol Period .............................................................. 82
  3.3.1 Chinese Sources ........................................................................ 82
    3.3.1.1 Standard Sources ................................................................. 82
    3.3.1.2 Institutional Code ................................................................. 83
    3.3.1.3 Local Gazeteer ................................................................. 83
    3.3.1.4 The Travelogue of the Taoist Monk Changchun ... 83
  3.3.2 Persian Sources ........................................................................ 83
  3.3.3 Syriac Sources .......................................................................... 84
  3.3.4 Medieval European Travelogues ................................................. 84

3.4. On the Literary and Archaeological Sources .................................... 85

4. East Syrian Christianity in China under the Mongol Empire:
A History Reconstructed ....................................................................... 87
  4.1. Christianity during of the Mongol-Yuan Period .................................. 87
    4.1.1 The Period of the Great Mongol Empire (1206–1260) ........ 87
      4.1.1.1 Christian Influence on the Khan’s Family ....................... 88
      4.1.1.2 Christian Communities ...................................................... 90
      4.1.1.3 Christians in the Service of the Khan: A Biography 91
    4.1.2 The Period of the Yuan Dynasty (1260–1368) ..................... 93
      4.1.3 Semuren 色目人 .............................................................. 96

4.2. Christian Population and Distribution in Yuan-China .................. 97
  4.2.1 The Turkic-Speaking Ongut Area .................................................. 98
    4.2.1.1 The Geographic Description ................................................ 98
    4.2.1.2 Prominent Ongut Christian Families ...................................... 100
      4.2.1.2.1 The Ala-gush Family ...................................................... 100
      4.2.1.2.2 The Ma Family .......................................................... 102
      4.2.1.2.3 The Yelü Family ......................................................... 104
      4.2.1.2.4 The Zhao Family ....................................................... 105
    4.2.2 The Uighur Christian Diaspora ............................................... 105
      4.2.2.1 The Hexi Corridor 河西走廊 ........................................ 105
      4.2.2.2 Turfan ........................................................................ 106
      4.2.2.3 Almaïq and the Ili Valley ................................................. 106
      4.2.2.4 Kashgar (Kashi) ............................................................ 107
      4.2.2.5 Cambalic (Peking/Beijing) ............................................... 107
    4.2.3 Christians In Yuan Commercial Centers ..................................... 108
      4.2.3.1 Quanzhou (Zaitun) Harbor ............................................. 108
Table of Contents

4.2.3.1 A Brief Business History of Quanzhou ....... 110
4.2.3.1.2 The Development of Maritime-Trade in Quanzhou ......................................................... 110
4.2.3.1.3 “Fan Ren”: Foreigners in Quanzhou .......... 111
4.2.3.1.4 Christians in Quanzhou in the Yuan Period .... 112
4.2.3.2 Christian Communities in Southeastern Coastal Areas: Yangzhou 扬州, Zhenjiang 镇江,
Hangzhou 杭州, Guangzhou 广州, Wenzhou and Other Cities ................................................ 113
4.2.3.2.1 Yangzhou 扬州 .............................................. 113
4.2.3.2.2 Zhenjiang 镇江 ............................................ 115
4.2.3.2.3 Hangzhou ..................................................... 117
4.2.3.2.4 Other Cities in the South ................................. 118
4.2.4 Causes of the Relocation of Christians ......................... 119
4.2.4.1 Mongol Appointment of Local Administrators .... 119
4.2.4.2 Deployment of Garrison Troops: “Tuntian 屯田” ......................................................... 121
4.2.4.3 Business Activities .................................................... 122
4.3. Religious Policy of the Mongol Rulers .......................................... 123
4.3.1 Mongol Religious Background ............................................. 123
4.3.2 Mongol Tolerance towards Religions ................................... 126
4.3.3 The Establishment of the Chongfusi (1289) .................. 128
4.3.4 Commercial and Military Rules Concerning Christians ... 129
4.4. The Spread of Christianity along the Silk Road ...................... 131
4.4.1 Sogdian Christians along the Silk Road ...................... 131
4.4.2 From the Steppe to the Mongol Capital Karakorum ....... 132
4.4.3 From Northern China to Southern and Southeastern China .................................................. 133
4.4.3.1 The Church in Samarkand as the “Mother Church” ......................................................... 133
4.4.3.2 The Missionary Mar Sargis and His Seven Monasteries ................................................... 135
4.4.4 Chinese and Mongol Converts ............................................ 138
4.4.5 The Religious Rituals ..................................................... 139
4.4.6 Relations to Catholicism and Other Religions .................. 141
4.4.6.1 Conflicts with the Franciscans .............................. 141
4.4.6.2 Relations with Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism .... 142
4.5. Christian Political Influence ............................................................ 144
4.6. Possible Reasons for the Decline of East Syrian Christianity in Yuan-China ........................................ 145
4.6.1 The Lost Christian Tribes – A Mystery ...................... 145
4.6.2 Where were the Uighur Christians? ...................... 146
4.6.3 Where were the Ongut Christians? ......................... 147
4.6.4 Other East Syrian Christians in China Proper ............. 148

Bibliography .................................................................................................. 151
Index ............................................................................................................... 163
Maps and illustrations

Map 1: Distribution of Nomadic Tribes on the Mongolian Steppe
10th–12th centuries ................................................................................................ 17

Map 2: Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China (highlighted area) .......... 76

Map 3: Geographic sketch of the Ongut area ...................................................... 98

Map 4: Map showing the location of Quanzhou ............................................... 108

Map 5: Southern Provinces of China: Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian & Guandong .... 113

Map 6: Jiangsu Province – Yangzhou ............................................................... 114

Map 7: Jiangsu Province – Zhenjiang ............................................................... 115

Map 8: Zhejiang Province – Hangzhou ............................................................. 117

Ill. 1: The Ruin of Olon Sume, the Former Ongut Capital –
Photo by Li Tang, 2006 ...................................................................................... 43

Ill. 2: Quanzhou Nestorian Headstone with an angel – from Wu Wengliang,
Quanzhou Zongjiao Shike, p. 27, plate 14 ...................................................... 58

Ill. 3: Two Angels on the Quanzhou Nestorian Tombstone – photo by courtesy of Jiang Yi, 2003 ............................................................... 59

Ill. 4: Mar Shilimen’s tombstone in Quanzhou – from Quanzhou Zongjiao Shike,
added edition 2005 by Wu Youxiong, p 396, B37 ............................................. 61

Ill. 5: Wang Fudao Stone – photo by courtesy of Jiang Yi .............................. 65


Ill. 7: Quanzhou Stone with a flower – from Quanzhou Zongjiao Shike,
edition 2005, p. 405, B40 .......................................................... 70

Ill. 8: Nestorian Stele with Chinese inscription unearthed in Quanzhou in 1984 –
from Quanzhou Zonjiao Shike, edition 2005, p.418, B51 .................................. 71

Ill. 9: Phags-pa-Inscription 1324 – from Quanzhou Zongjiao Shike, edition 2005,
p. 407, B42 .................................................................................. 74

Ill. 10: Sino-Phagspa Inscription 1314 – Photo by Yang Xinzhang in Zhu Qianzhi,
Zhongguo Jiangjiao. Plate14 ........................................................................... 75

Ill. 11: Trilingual Inscription – Photo by Li Tang, 2006 .................................... 77

Ill. 12: Two Nestorian Tombstones from Ongut Sume – Photo by Li Tang, 2006...
 .................................................................................................................. 78

Ill. 13: Tombstone from Wangmuliang – Photo from in Ge Shanlin,
Yinshan Wanggu, 1992. Plate No. 161/42 ...................................................... 79

Ill. 14: The Stele of Yelü Zicheng – Photo from Ge Shanlin, Yinshan Wanggu,
1992, plate No. 162 ..................................................................................... 79

Ill. 15: Nestorian Tomb Tablet from Chifeng, Inner Mongolia – photo by

Ill. 16: Nestorian Ruin in Turfan – photo by courtesy of Li Xiao, 2004 .......... 81

Ill. 17: Genealogical chart of Ala-gush Family ................................................ 101

Ill. 18: Chart of Ma Family tree ..................................................................... 103

Ill. 19: Chart of the Ongut Zhao Family Tree ................................................. 105

Ill. 20: The Citong Flower – photo by courtesy of Ying Tang ......................... 109
1. On the Subject

“Christianity in China” is such a topic that many find enthralling and some keep wrestling with the questions it poses. Contemporary theological and religious studies have always concentrated on the notable Catholic/Jesuit Mission (16th-mid 20th centuries) and the Protestant missionary endeavors undertaken in, what Kenneth Scott Latourrette called, “The Great Century” in church history (19th-mid 20th centuries). The stories about Matteo Ricci, Robert Morrison, Hudson Taylor and many others have been told repeatedly, whereas names such as Alopen, Jingjing, Sorkaktani Beki and Mar Sargis are just unfamiliar and sometimes hard-to-pronounce for many.

To better appreciate the situation of Christianity in China today, a retrospective study of its history is never irrelevant. The very beginning of Christian mission in China, as proven historical and archaeological evidences have demonstrated thus far, is traced back to the middle of the 7th century when Alopen, the first missionary from the Church of the East arrived in China from “the Land of Daqin” of what was then the Roman Orient roughly perceived by the Chinese. The arrival of Alopen in China not only marked the beginning of Christianity in China but also had a great significance in early East-West encounters. Christianity in its East Syrian (or East Syriac) form flourished in China in two historical phases respectively: first during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) for a period of 210 years from the arrival of Alopen in 635 A.D. to the religious persecution under Emperor Wuzong in 845 A.D.; and secondly during the Mongol-Yuan Dynasty in the 13th-14th centuries.

When it exists at all, the study of the history of East Syriac or East Syrian Christianity has remained a small discipline in the academic world. Some bigger universities in Europe and North America would place it under the section on Oriental Studies, whereas others, not all theological colleges and faculties would teach this part of the church history as a side dish. The historical and theological attention given to this subject weighs far less than the impact, which Syrian Christianity has had in history and the rich cultural-religious relics and heritage it has left behind.

Since many prominent Syriac and Patristic specialists have undertaken studies of Syriac Christianity, the following work focuses on East Syrian Christianity in the eastern part of Eurasia and especially in China during the Mongol period (12th-14th centuries). In regard to this geographic area, relatively more studies have concentrated on the ancient period, i.e. 7th-10th century. The aim of this investigation study is to reconstruct a history of East Syrian Christianity in Mongol-Yuan China within its political, social, economic, cultural and religious environments. It deals with the relevant histori-
cal backgrounds, the ethnic Christian groups involved, the philological and theological studies of the East Syrian Inscriptions, the Migration of Christian populations, the Mongol religious policies, as well as the missionary activities on the Mongolian Steppe and in China proper.

2. On the term “Nestorian” or “Nestorianism”

The term “the Nestorian Church” has been inappropriately employed in history books or in general to label the ancient Oriental Church, although it was called in the past “the Church of the East” by its own members. During the course of history, the Church of the East has borne many other names depending on the particular contexts and geographic locations, e.g. the “East Syrian Church”, the “Persian Church” (Persia and China), “Chaldean Syrian Church” (India), “Holy Apostolic Catholic Church of the East”, “Assyrian Church of the East”, etc.

“Nestorianism” is connected to the person Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople (428–731 A.D.). The origin of this term rests in the fifth century Christological debates within the Church. Nestorianism is the doctrine supposedly held by Nestorius that there are two separate persons in the Incarnate Christ, the one divine and the other human, as opposed to the orthodox doctrine that the Incarnate Christ was a single Person, at once God and man. The Nestorian controversy included also the debate over the Virgin Mary, whether she was the bearer of God (Theotokos) or better entitled, the bearer of Christ (Christotokos). Nestorius was condemned as heretical at the Third Ecumenical Council held in Ephesus in 431 A.D.. Twenty years later, the Fourth Ecumenical Council held at Chalcedon in 451 A.D., aiming to end all the dogmatic controversies over the natures of Christ that had arisen, produced a “final” dogmatic definition. However, this definition of faith was rejected by the Oriental Orthodox Churches.1

The Church of the East in Mesopotamia and Persia that had existed long before the Nestorian controversy had nothing to do with Nestorius, but did not object to be called “Nestorian”. On the contrary, in 486, at the Synod in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the Persian Church officially adopted the Nestorian confession of faith.2

However, this term has become more controversial, especially in recent years. Being labeled as “Nestorian” was regarded as “unjust” by some prominent figures in the Church of the East, for instance, the Metropolitan of Şoba (Nisibis) ‘Abdişo’ (†1318 A.D.) and the present Patriarch Mar Khana-nia Dinkha IV.3 It is seen as a Mainstream misconception about the Oriental Churches. Such being the case, it is advisable to avoid using this term. In

1 For the Christological debates in the early church, see ALOIS GRILLMEIER, Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche, Band I: Von der apostolischen Zeit bis zum Konzil von Chalcedon (451), Freiburg: Herder 1990.
3 Ibid., p. 35.
the following work, the author tries to employ the term “East Syriac Christianity” or “East Syrian Christianity” instead of “Nestorian Christianity”. The term “Nestorian” is only used with restraint and is written in quotation marks.

East Syrian Christianity in China was named differently in the Tang and the Mongol-Yuan periods. Early missionaries from the Church of the East reached imperial China in 635 A.D. and introduced for the first time Christianity to China. The religion was known in China from the 7th to the 10th century as “Jingjiao 景教” (meaning “the Luminous Religion”), the Persian Religion (since it came to China from Persia) or the Daqin Religion connected with the Roman Orient. Jingjiao enjoyed a two-century flourishing in ancient China, but its adherents were persecuted and expelled from China under the imperial edict in 845. In the 13th century, as the Mongols conquered China, East Syrian Christians mainly of Turkic-speaking origins migrated to different parts of China and therefore spread Christianity in the country. During this period, Christianity was called the Religion of Yelikewen (ärkägün/Erke’un).

Being aware of the controversy involved, I have tried to use “East Syrian” as an adjective in place of “Nestorian”. The word “Nestorian” is kept in some places within quotation marks when the use of the term is deemed unavoidable. It does not imply any theological positions.

3. Transliteration of Turco-Mongolic and Chinese Words

This book entails many names, titles and much jargon from different languages such as Turkic, Mongol, Syriac, Persian, Chinese and others. Of course, every language has its own way of transliterating foreign names. The situation is so garbled that even among scholarly efforts in the English language, there has been no standard way of transliterating “foreign”, especially Turco-Mongol names. For instance, the traditional and popular English rendering of the title of the Turco-Mongol ruler was “Khan”, yet, there have been, especially in recent scholarly work, different ways of rendering it, e.g., Qaqtan, Qaqan, Qaqhan Kaan, Han, etc. While quite aware of all these variant versions, I have decided to employ the most popular way of transliteration, i.e. Khan, for the main text. Other versions of transliteration are kept when they are cited. Complete consistency in transliteration is hard to claim or maintain. Instead, I have provided various alternative forms of both personal and place names in brackets.

For the Chinese terms, the Mandarin Pinyin system is used for transliteration. Chinese characters are provided as reference to important terms, personal and place names. Since this work deals with pre-modern history, the Chinese characters are given in the traditional form instead of the modern simplified form.

---