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Artistic Syncretism Along the Silk Road: Christian Art in China Before the Jesuit Missions.

Rui Oliveira Lopes

University of Brunei Darussalam. Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Abstract

In the seventh century, missionaries of the Church of the East expanded their missionary activities across Central Asia, particularly in Nisibis (Turkey), Arabia, India and China. Known in China as Jingjiao, literally Luminous Religion, these early Christian missionaries were well received by the Tang emperors and obtained the consent to translate Christian texts and erect places of worship in several locations within the Chinese empire.

A few centuries later, when Franciscan missionaries as well as European travelers and traders resumed diplomatic relations and trade with the new-established Yuan rulers in China, they found evidence of earlier Christian missionary activity and initiated a new episode of Christianity in China under the support of the Catholic Church.

In both cases, the use of Christian imagery was an important instrument for the transmission of doctrine and religious teachings as the missionaries recognized the eloquent power of images in religious syncretism and interreligious dialogue.

This paper discusses how images were used as a form of convenience exploring the proximity and similarity of forms and meanings between Christian and Buddhist art in China, from the Tang to the Yuan dynasties.

Keywords: *Jingjiao*; Buddhism; Christian Art; Religious Syncretism

Introduction

The theological debate over the true nature of God initiated the discussion between Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and Cyril of Alexandria. During the First Ecumenical Council of Ephesus, in 431, Cyril of Alexandria accused Nestorius of heresy and excommunicated anyone who followed his teachings.[1] In the sequence of these events, the Church of the East established in Nisibis (Turkey), next to the border of Syria and Iraq at the heart of the Silk Road. From there the Church of the East lead missionary activities throughout Central Asia, Arabia, India, and China, where they introduced the *Jingjiao* (Luminous Religion) during the early decades of the seventh century.[2] This means that Christianity arrived at China still during the seventh century, after the falling of the Sassanid Empire over the series of invasions from the Arab Caliphate.

Around 1623−1625, a monumental stele was found by Jesuit missionaries. The stele, originally carved on stone, presented a long inscription celebrating the introduction of Christianity in China in 635 and described how the Church of the East was welcomed by Taizong emperor, who consented the translation of the first Christian texts into Chinese. Known today as the *Nestorian Stele* or *Monument of Xi'an*, the stele was erected in 781 and the Sino-Syriac inscription was written by Jingjing, a Persian monk and missionary of the Church of the East, also known as Adam. He accredited as the author and translator of the so-called *Jingjiao Documents*, a collection of Chinese Christian doctrinal and liturgical texts.[3] The inscription describes the establishment of Christianity in China through the efforts of a missionary called Aluoben, who probably originated from the Sassanid Empire or Syria. Although Christianity was not massively embraced by the Chinese, its popularity, followed by periods of religious tolerance, allowed the Church of the East to establish churches and monasteries, and flourished modestly in China from the seventh to the tenth century, particularly in the Chengdu province and other regions in Western China.

The influence and growth of the Church of the East was compromised with the act of proscription issued by Wuzong emperor, whose reign is mostly known for his fervent devotion to Daoism and persecution to other religious groups, as he believed that religious organisations were draining the empire's economy.[4] The persecution edicts of 842 and 845 were mostly targeting Buddhist temples and

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[1] Susan Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy: The Making of a Saint and of a Heretic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Mark Smith, *The Idea of Nicaea in the Early Church Councils, Ad 431–451* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[2] Nicolas Standaert, ed., *The Handbook of Christianity in China*, vol. 1, *635−1800* (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 2001).

[3] Paul Pelliot, *L'inscription Nestorienne de Si-ngan-fou* (Kyoto: Scuola di studi sull' Asia Orientale; Paris: Collége de France; institute des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1996); Michael Keevak, *The Story of a Stele: China's Nestorian Monument and its Reception in the West (1625−1916)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008); Dingjian Xie, "Christianity in Tang China. Database of Religious History," The Database of Religious History, October 18, 2021, accessed December 8, 2021, http://hdl.handle.net/2429/80356.

[4] Timothy Barrett, "The Madness of Emperor Wuzong," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 14 (2004): 173−86.

monasteries, but it was extended to the Church of the East and the other two religious groups, Zoroastrians and Manichaeans. These three religious groups were known in China as the Three Persian Religions and persecuted with the purpose of curbing foreign influence. The fall of the Church of the East in China coincided with the collapse of the Tang dynasty and the political unveil and divisions that emerged in the Central Plains, from 907 to the establishment of the Song dynasty in 960 and the subsequent reunification of China under the rule of Taizu emperor.

Obviously, the presence of Christians and the missionary activities in China did not eclipse, but its structures were severely damaged and left adrift with no leadership until the revival under the great Khans and the establishment of the Yuan dynasty in the mid-thirteenth century.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christian imagery related to the Church of the East has been found not only in Xi'an, but also in Dunhuang, Turfan, Inner Mongolia, Beijing, and Quanzhou in the South Province of Fujian. The imagery of the Church of the East in China visible on the famous stele, in gravestones, and in the silk scroll paintings found in the Mogao Caves, in Dunhuang, demonstrate the merging of iconography, symbolic meanings, and artistic styles with local religious Chinese traditions, especially with Buddhism.[5] This is also evidence of intensive religious syncretism not only between Buddhism and Christianity but also between Christianity and Zoroastrianism and Manicheism.

This essay aims to demonstrate how Christianity, using imagery, illustrates the true meaning of the *Jingjiao Da Qin* (Western Luminous Religion) in order to facilitate the translations of symbols, accommodate doctrinal standards, and convey religious teachings. The paper analyses the notions of religious appropriation and accommodation in Christian art as a result of the contact with traditional compositions of the sacred in Buddhism and the resemblance of the symbols between Christ and Buddha.

The paper presents a new iconographic and iconological interpretation on the ornamentation on the top of the *Monument of Xi'an*, which combines the cross, the lotus, and two dragons; the silk paintings of a so-called *Christian Figure*, from the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, at collections of the British Museum; and the thirteenth century gravestones found in Quanzhou, Fujian, which introduces the depicting of angels in Medieval iconography in China.

[5] Ken Parry, "Images in the Church of the East: The Evidence from Central Asia and China," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78, no. 3 (1996): 143−62; Ken Parry, "The Iconography of the Christian tombstones from Zayton," in *From Palmyra to Zayton: Epigraphy and Iconography*, ed. Ken Parry, Samuel Lieu and Iain Gardner (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 229−46; Ken Parry, "The Art of the Church of the East in China," in *Jingjiao. The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, ed. Roman Malek (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006), 321−39; Xiaojing Yan, "The Confluence of East and West in Nestorian Art in China. Studies on Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia," in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters*, ed. Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang (Wien: Lit Verlag, 2009): 383−92.

In the first section, this paper examines the Xi'an stele and establishes connections to the intrinsic meaning of the Chinese motif of the two dragons and the pearl as an auspicious representation of unity, harmony and tolerance which are required for the preservation of light and knowledge.

In the second section, we discuss the concepts of pictorial and formalistic convenience, the proximity and juxtaposition of symbols and meanings that are noticeable in one scroll painting of what we argue to be a representation of Christ.

Lastly, the paper analyses the processes of conceptual and formalistic accommodation and similitude between the cults of *Guanshiyin* or Guanyin and the Virgin Mary in the context of the Franciscan missions in China during the late Yuan dynasty.

The Xi'an Stele

In 1623-1625, a stele was found near Xi'an, in the compound of the Zongren Temple. Three years later, following the interest of Portuguese Jesuit Álvaro Semedo, perhaps aroused by the cross engraved in the top of the stele, the inscriptions were translated and published in Europe by Priest Nicolas Trigault.[6]

The stele was composed on February 4, 781 by a Persian Christian monk named Jingjing (Adam), who describes himself as Priest of the (Western) *Da Qin* Monastery. Weighing about two tons, two and a half meters high and one meter wide, it contains an inscription with 32 vertical lines, totalling 1,800 Chinese characters. In the lower margin there are still 23 lines in old Syriac and a further 70 lines in Chinese and Syriac on the lateral margins. In the top of the stele, sided by two figures, there is an inscription with nine characters which may be translated by "the monument which commemorates the expansion of Western Luminous Religion in China."

The text firstly presents a doctrinal statement narrating some episodes from the gospel referring to the Messiah as the God that appears as a Man and to the Virgin who gave birth to the Saviour in the West and that a star announced the moment of his birth.[7] Besides the doctrinal narrative, which uses a common language, vocabulary, and doctrine to that of Daoism and Buddhism, it also tells the story of the introduction of Christianity in China, presenting what we argue to be a form of

[6] Álvaro Semedo, *Imperio de la China i Cultura Evangelica en èl por los Religios de la Compañia de IESVS* (Madrid: Iuan Sanchez, 1642).
[7] Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar Winkler, *The Church of the East. A Concise History* (London; New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003); Jürgen Tubach, "Deuteronomistic Theology in the Text of the Stele of Xi'an," in *Jingjiao. The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, ed. Roman Malek (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006), 181−96; Donghua Zhu, "Chinese Jingjiao and the Antiochene Exegesis", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in China*, ed. Khiok-Khng Yeo (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1−16.

re-enactment or Jungian synchronicity of the biblical event. The principle of synchronicity, as defined by Carl Jung, aims to "describe circumstances that appear meaningfully related yet lack a causal connection."[8] In the case of the biblical episode of the annunciation described in the stele, it seems circumstantially related to the proclamation of Christianity to the Chinese emperor, although these two episodes have no causal connection.

The text refers to Aluoben as being the first missionary from the kingdom of *Da Qin*[9] to arrive at Xi'an in 635.[10] He was welcomed by Taizong emperor who permitted the elevation of a monastery and the translation of the first Christian texts brought by Aluoben and other missionaries at the Imperial Library. The emperor himself became interested by the *Jingjiao* studying the translated texts and ordering that they should be publicized throughout the Empire. In the text, Jingjing refers to an imperial decree of 638, where the emperor states that these teachings are "helpful to all creatures, and profitable to men. Let it have free course throughout the empire."[11]

The missionaries were permitted to build a monastery in the capital and, after the death of Taizong emperor, his successor, Gaozong authorized the construction of monasteries in other cities of the empire.[12] The text continues describing how, during the transition period between the seventh and the eighth centuries, first the Buddhist, then the Daoists, slandered Christianity, but despite all these circumstances, the Church of the East regained the imperial support after 705. Although the stele does not offer any detail about the moment when the *Jingjiao* suffered a setback, we know today that it has to do with the period of the Regency of Empress Wu, consort of the Emperors Taizong, Gaozong and her own son, Emperor Zhongzong, who became the *de facto* ruler of China between 690 and 705. Soon after seating on the throne, empress Wu elevated the status of Buddhist sects and supported Daoism as a form to reinforce Chinese education, culture, and knowledge.[13]

Towards the end of the inscription, Jingjing offers praise to the stele's commissioner, Yisi (Tazdbozed), who is described as one of the most important imperial officers, general during the reign of Taizong, and who donated a good part of his assets to the reconstruction of *Jingjiao*'s monasteries in China. The

[8] Carl Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1960).
[9] Literally translated as "great Qin", referring to the Roman Empire and particularly to its territorial influence in the Near East, such as in Syria.
[10] Glen Thompson, "Was Alopen a Missionary," in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters*, ed. Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang (Wien: Lit Verlag, 2009): 267−78.
[11] 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* (New York, NY: Paragon Book Reprint, 1966), 11.
[12] Standaert, *The Handbook of Christianity in China*.
[13] Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009); Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, "Silk Road Christians and the Translation of Culture in Tang China," *Studies in Church History* 53 (2017): 15–38.

inscription ends with a celebration of the "Truth of the Luminous Religion" and a glorification to the prosperity of the Tang dynasty emperors who adopted it, pretentiously assuming that Chinese emperors of the Tang dynasty converted to the Church of the East.[14] In Syriac, in the stele's margins, are the names of bishops, priests and monks who disseminated Christianity in China between 635 and 781.

The discourse of the stele at a vocabulary level entails a highly accentuated religious syncretism and cultural exchange, particularly noticeable in the combination of Confucianism and Daoist's theological concepts.[15] Aluoben, whose name can be translated as Abraham, is suggested by Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar Winkler[16] as being Sogdian, a Persian people who lived in the Bactrian Region, in one of the most important trading posts of the Silk Route which served as commercial hub between China and Central Asia. The Silk Route was equally the means of dissemination of Buddhism during the second century with a significant concentration in Dunhuang, where, at the end of the fourth century, a Buddhist monk had a vision, inspiring the excavation of rock temples throughout the region. The Caves of Mogao became a place of pilgrimage, reclusion, and meditation, preserving for centuries numerous sutras, silk roll painting, murals, Confucian and Daoists' texts and a collection of Christian texts.

The fact remains that the stele's inscription establishes a conceptual and theological parallelism as it uses the word *Dao* in order to introduce the *Jingjiao* and using the word *sutras* when it refers to Christian texts which Aluoben brought with him and that were translated in the imperial library.[17] The stele, as well as in the *Jingjiao* documents, denote an intentional use of theological and soteriological concepts common to Christianity, Daoism and Mahāyāna Buddhism.[18] It is important to mention that Tang Daoism shared similar views with Buddhism, particularly on the pursuit of a pure original nature that is in unity with the eternal expressed in the universal *Dao* and in the Buddhist term *dharmakāya* (the unmanifested truth of a Buddha as a path of salvation). According to Stephen Eskildsen, these Buddho-Daoist "conceptions of multi-personal yet unitary, compassionately active godhead" seem to have opened an avenue to establish links with the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity.[19] As an example, Eskildsen refers the *Sūtra on Mysterious Rest and Joy*, which describes how Jesus explains to Cenwen Sengqie (probably Simon Peter) the idea of salvation as a form of

[14] Keevak, *The Story of a Stele*.
[15] Stephen Eskildsen, "Parallel Themes in Chinese Nestorianism and Medieval Daoist Religion," in *Jingjiao. The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, ed. Roman Malek (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006), 57−91.
[16] Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar Winkler, *The Church of the East*.
[17] Pelliot, *L'inscription Nestorienne*.
[18] R. Todd Godwin, "Sacred Sovereigns across the Silk Road: The Church of the East's Gift of Buddhist-Christian Icons to the Chinese Emperor in 781, and Its Relevance to Buddhist-Christian Studies," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 38 (2018): 203–16; Max Deeg, "The 'Brilliant Teaching': Iranian Christians in Tang China and Their Identity". *Entangled Religions* 11, no. 6 (2020): 1−13.
[19] Eskildsen, "Parallel Themes in Chinese Nestorianism and Medieval Daoist Religion."

enlightenment, proclaiming that the way of salvation goes through the elimination of desire and detachment from material things.

This reaffirms the linguistic and doctrinal syncretism that would facilitate the reception of Christianity among the Chinese scholars. The Christian missionaries of the sixth to the ninth centuries strategically make use of symbolic and conceptual parallels to make it easier for the understanding of Christianity based on the image and terminology typically used in Daoism and Buddhism. With the absence of a direct relation which would demand on its own a previous knowledge to convey a particular content, it is necessary to create that starting point based on a formal or symbolic resemblance or correspondence as a representation of things meaningfully related.

The combination and juxtaposition of symbols and meanings of different religious settings is also visible from the artistic viewpoint of the Xi'an stele, particularly, in the upper decoration, beside the nine characters of the title. On the top of the stele, the nine characters are located under a cross which, in turn, is placed over a lotus flower and other floral elements (*amaryllis*) engraved in the stone. Around the inscription, the cross, and the lotus, there are two grotesque figures apparently winged, as suggested by some historians, and supported by their front paws and one of their rear paws. The other rear paw holds a flaming globe over the inscription and the cross. It is interesting to note that the cross itself has a small flame in the upper part which we argue is related to the flame of Buddha, representing his knowledge and transcendence (awakening), in the same way that the cross of Christ represents his resurrection, Divine nature and liberated form. Similarly, the globe over the cross, held by the figures, is also surrounded by a flame which represents the dissemination of the light and knowledge over the world. In fact, the flaming globe and the two figures are an integration of the traditional Chinese depiction of *two dragons playing with a pearl*.

In China the image of the dragon goes back to Neolithic pig dragons of the Hongshan culture, as a symbol of the heavenly powerful being. As far as we know, the most ancient object with a dragon and a pearl is a ladle with a handle in the shape of a dragon's head from the Three Kingdoms Period (221−80 BCE), which is kept in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the same Museum, there is a sword dated from about 600 CE, which was found in the imperial tomb near Luoyang, Henan Province, presenting a similar theme. The sword pommel is decorated with two confronting dragons with a flaming pearl between them.

The theme of the two dragons playing with a flaming pearl is a result of a stylistic evolution deeply connected to sacred rituals and filial piety towards spiritual ancestors. The dragons represent the strength needed to conquer, control and govern, that is why it becomes the symbol of the Emperor.[20] The flaming pearl is the symbol of the duality of the Sun and Moon, the Light and the Dark, the *Yin* and

[20] Helmut Nickel, "The Dragon and the Pearl," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Journal* 26 (1991): 139−46.

Yang, the balance of Cosmos. Based on this idea, the confronting dragons in the sword's pommel could mean the confronting of its owner against his enemy.[21]

In *Xi'an Stele* the dragons are depicted in pleasant or harmonious composition, coiled in each other and both are holding the flaming pearl. From our point of view, this means the encounter of two different cultural backgrounds which shares the same spiritual source and the way of virtue. The stele's ornamentation conveys the idea of a harmonious co-existence and dialogue between Christianity, Daoism and Buddhism during the time of Taizong emperor.

The Christian paintings of Dunhuang

In the beginning of the twentieth century, a Daoist monk named Wang Yuanlu discovered the immeasurable cache of paintings, manuscripts, textiles, and artefacts in the Caves of Mogao, in Dunhuang, active from the fifth to the eleventh centuries. Wang Yuanlu sold most of these documents to the Hungarian archaeologist Aurel Stein, who had already undertaken some expeditions in Central Asia. From 1910 onwards several expeditions were conducted by Aurel Stein, Paul Pelliot, Otani Kozui, and Sergei Oldenburg, leading to the dispersion of documents and eventually forgeries.[22]

Among more than 4,000 documents found, were at least nine Christian texts of doctrinal and liturgical content, which are today known as the *Jingjiao Documents*, although many other texts and images existed in Tang China. Four of these texts could have been attributed to Aluoben. The oldest of these documents is the *Sutra of Jesus the Messiah* (Xuting Mishisuo jing 序聽迷詩所經), dated by Saeki between 635 and 638.[23] Other texts attributed to Aluoben are *Discourse on Monotheism* (Yishen lun 一神論) and *Sutra of Veneration* (Zunjing 尊經), perhaps written around 641. In 1908, Paul Pelliot discovered a group of five texts in the caves of Dunhuang, four of which dated from the eighth century and, presumably, authored by Bishop Cyryac (Hymn of the Qin Luminous Religion in Adoration of the Holy Trinity (Da Qin Jingjiao Sanwei mengdu zan 大秦景教三威蒙度讚); Hymn of the Transfiguration (Da Qin Jingjiao Dasheng tongzhen guifa zan 大秦景教大聖通真歸法讚); Sutra on the Origins of Origin (Da Qin Jingjiao Xuanyuan zhiben jing 大秦景

[21] Ibid.
[22] Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*.
[23] Peter Yoshiro Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (Tokyo: The Academy of Oriental Culture; Tokyo Institute, 1951); Martin Palmer, *Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity* (New York: Ballantine, 2001). Although these are generally accepted dates, the chronology and authorship of the documents remain conclusive and has been contested by some scholars. Jianqiang Sun, "The Earliest Statements of Christian Faith in China? A Critique of the Conventional Chronology of The Messiah Sutra and On One God", *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 18, no. 2 (2018): 133−52.

教宣元 至本經) and Sutra to achieve Peace and Rest (Zhixuan anle jing 志玄安樂經)). The *Book of Honour*, probably from the tenth century, name the author of the Xi'an stele, Jingjing, and perhaps was one of the last texts written before the caves were sealed by the Tibetans in 1036, following the conquest of Dunhuang by Li Yuanhao of the Tangut Empire (Western Xia).[24] This last text proves that, even after the publication of the imperial edict forbidding Christianity, Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism in China, in 842, the caves in Dunhuang were still being used as a religious centre by Buddhists and Christians during the early decades of the eleventh century.

Not only were these documents found in the caves of Dunhuang, but also some scroll paintings, among which remains a good example a vertical silk roll depicting a figure posing like a *bodhisattva* and wearing the typical attire.[25] The figure is depicted with a cross-shaped pole in the left hand, a cross in the chest and the cross over the lotus. These images, one of which we know only through the drawing of Aurel Stein, are, in our opinion, a representation of Christ and not of an ordinary Christian individual or a religious man, taken from the models of Buddhist art. The paintings connect the figure of *Bodhisattva* or of *Avalokitesvara*, as guides of the souls, with the archetype of Christ Saviour of the World. The body language, in particular the blessing with the right hand, the presence of the cross in the place of the *Enlightened Buda* which characterizes *Avalokitesvara* and, still, the replacement of the flag by the cross-shaped pole are presented as an equivalent and syncretism of the soteriological doctrine that allow us to identify the representation of Christ resurrected. The cross-shaped pole and the body covered by a tunic is precisely one of the attributes of the Resurrected Christ, as symbol of his sacred condition and of his triumph over death.[26]

Christianity and the Pax Mongolica

Following to the religious persecution by emperor Wuzong during the decline of the Tang dynasty, the Buddhist and Christian monks settled in the region of the Uyghur, Xinjiang and the Tarim Basin.[27]

Near Turfan, a mural painting in the caves in Qocho, known as *Psalm Sunday*, represents three figures carrying a branch in front of a deacon holding a chalice in

[24] Standaert, *The Handbook of Christianity in China*.
[25] Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).
[26] Rui Oliveira Lopes, "Arte e alteridade: confluências da arte cristã na Índia, na China e no Japão, séc. XVI a XVIII" (PhD Diss., University of Lisbon, 2011).
[27] Liangxiao Zhou, "Chinese Nestorianism in the Jin and Yuan Dynasties," in *Jingjiao. The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, ed. Roman Malek (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006), 197−207.

his right hand while swinging a thurible in his left hand.[28] The three figures are represented wearing traditional Chinese Uyghur garments commonly seen in other painting in the caves of Bezeklik in Turfan. The deacon is visibly a non-Chinese individual, judging by his clothes, as well as the distinctive facial features. The presence of these paintings proves the continuity of Christianity in China and, most important of all, that the Chinese Christians disseminated Christianity in Quanzhou, in South China, during the Yuan dynasty.[29]

The Mongol empire engulfed a vast cultural diversity, adopting and incorporating the existing cultural structures. Genghis Khan, as his son Ogödei and his grandson, Kublai Khan, maintained several Chinese Uyghur scholars and advisors from Central Asia in their court, to ensure the union of the empire through a well-defined system of vassalage. Upon this religious and cultural tolerance, Christianity widened its area of influence through the privileged position of the Uyghur within the Mongol court throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Since the late-nineteenth century, several tombs with the cross and the lotus have been discovered in Almaliq, Xinjiang province, and Inner Mongolia, but also in the city of Quanzhou, in the Fujian Province, where more than thirty tombs were found, along with Islamic, Manichaean, and Hindu tombs.[30]

Most particularly, Quanzhou became, still during the Tang dynasty, an international trading post, continental as well as maritime, which served the commerce of the Persians, Arabians, and Hindus. Christianity arrived at Quanzhou even during the Tang dynasty, as well as Islam, Manichaeism and Hinduism, albeit the fact that during the Wuzong's policy of religious intolerance foreign religions lost their influence.[31]

During the seventeenth century, the Jesuit Manuel Dias discovered the Christian tombs of Quanzhou and published in Europe engravings of the inscriptions and respective ornaments of the tombstones. The funerary steles and the Christian tombs found in Quanzhou contain inscriptions in Chinese and in Turk-Syriac revealing that these Christians presumably descended from the Christian communities in Turfan.

The ornamentation of the Christian tomb steles in Quanzhou, not only included the conventional cross on the top the lotus flower but also evolved to even more complex compositions with the introduction of angels holding the cross, as symbol of the victory of Christ over death. The representation of angels in the Christian

[28] Parry, "The Art of the Church of the East in China."
[29] Zhou, "Chinese Nestorianism."
[30] Tjalling Halbertsma, "Some Notes on Past and Present Field Research on Gravestones and Related Stone Materials of the Church of the East in Inner Mongolia, China," in *Jingjiao. The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, ed. Roman Malek (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006), 303−319; Ruji Niu, "Nestorian Inscriptions from China (13th−14th Centuries)," in *Jingjiao. The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, ed. Roman Malek (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006), 209−242.
[31] Bizhen Xie, "The History of Quanzhou Nestorianism," in *Jingjiao. The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, ed. Roman Malek (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006), 257−76.

imagery has its roots in Greco-Roman and Persian traditions. However, the presence of angels in Quanzhou's tombstones may be related to the proximity to other religious imagery during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

In Buddhism and Hinduism, the *apsaras* are celestial beings who transport the dead into the realms of the heavens. The temple of Kuaiyuan, the largest Buddhist temple in Quanzhou, dated from 686, conveys a confluence of Chinese and Indian artistic styles. The interior the main hall contains six figures of the golden Buddha and in the ceiling *apsaras* are represented to reveal the illumination of the Buddha.

In Islam, the Hamalat al-'Arsh are the angels carrying the throne of God. On the other hand, the profile of the tomb steles denotes an Islamic style in the outline of the arches that are also visible in the Mosque of Quanzhou, dated from the thirteenth century. These evidence of Christian imagery in Quanzhou still have a Buddhist lexicon not only in the presence of a canopy over the cross, characteristic of Buddhist imagery, but also in the position of a winged crowned figure, seated in position of meditation over some clouds and with a cross between its hands.

Between 1250 and 1350, Franciscan missionaries arrived in China during a prosperous moment of cultural and commercial exchange during the so-called *Pax Mongolica*. The confreres of Saint Francis of Assisi established a bridge between Europe and the vast Yuan Empire, bringing to one and the other, all kinds of goods and knowledge. With the diplomatic efforts, the missionaries sought after permission for the continuation of the missions inside the Chinese empire.[32]

In May 1253, the Franciscan missionary William of Rubruck left Constantinople with the purpose of converting the Tartars and to seal an alliance with the Mongol Emperor against the Saracens. On his return, in 1255, he delivered to King Louis IX the register of the voyage entitled *Itinerarium fratris Willielmi de Rubruquis de ordine fratrum Minorum, Galli, Anno gratia 1253. ad partes Orientales*.[33] In his report, William of Rubruck mentions the existence of local Christians and that these were respected above all the others (religious men). He also claims that these Nestorians co-habit with the Saracens everywhere in China, in more than fifteen cities. Rubruck claimed that they had an Episcopal See in Segin, but nonetheless he considers them to be idolatrous because of their religious insularity and perhaps permeability to other religions. They used sacred texts in Syriac, however they are not familiar either with the language as with catholic Christian faith. They are polygamists like the Tartars and execute rituals identical to the Saracens. When he visited the emperor's court, Rubruck was received by a local Christian official and saw an altar and next to this a vestment with the images of Christ, Virgin Mary, Saint John Baptist and two angels. He spoke with the court Christians about their

[32] Lauren Arnold, *Princely Gifts and Papal Treasures. The Franciscan Mission to China and its Influence on the Art of the West, 1250−1350* (San Francisco: Desiderate Press, 1999); Standaert, *The Handbook of Christianity in China*; Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the West: 1221-1410* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[33] W. W. Rockhill (trad.), *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World 1253−1255 with Two Accounts of the Earlier Journey of John of Pian de Carpine* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1998).

intentions and referred an image of the *Nativity* at the entrance of the imperial quarters. Rubruck's statements allow us to understand the role of remanent Church of the East Christians in the Yuan's court, considering that Sorghagahtani Beki, mother to Mongke Khan and his brother and successor, Kublai Khan, said to be converted to Christianity.[34] Very likely she had exerted influence for religious tolerance and the presence of Daoists, Buddhists, Syriac Christians, Muslims, and Catholics in the imperial court.

During the reign of Kublai Khan, the catholic missions in China and Central Asia continued with the support of Pope Nicholas IV. The Franciscan John of Montecorvino arrived at the maritime port of Quanzhou in late 1293 and from there he departed to the capital in Beijing, where, eventually, he arrived soon after the death of Kublai Khan, in February 1294. Despite the hostilities from local Christians, who accused him of espionage, John of Montecorvino obtained, in 1298, authorization to build the first catholic church in Beijing.

From the Church of Beijing, John of Montecorvino coordinated the catholic missions in the South, particularly in Guangzhou (Canton), Quanzhou, Hangzhou and Yuangzhou. In these prosperous maritime cities in South China, European merchants and missionaries exchanged information and traded all kind of exotic commodities. It is very likely that they brought with them portable items of personal devotion very common in Medieval Europe, like breviaries, portable ivory triptychs, gospels and illustrated legends of the saints or other types of catholic iconography.[35]

The growth of Catholic Christianity in Quanzhou led John of Montecorvino to establish an Episcopal See and to nominate Andreas de Perugia Bishop of Quanzhou in 1322. However, it is important to underline that the tombstone of Andreas de Perugia is decorated with Syriac Christian iconography, as the tombstone shows two angels holding a cross over the lotus as this was considered the typical representation of religious identity by local artists. However, it was in Yuangzhou that another two tombstones with catholic iconography were found, dated from 1342 and 1344. The tombstones of Katerina Vilionis and Antonio Vilionis, daughter, and son of a Genovese merchant, Dominico Vilionis, are, respectively, decorated with scenes of the life of Saint Catharine of Alexandria and Saint Anthony of Padua.

Katerina de Vilionis' tombstone has a representation of the Virgin and the Child, enshrouded in a mantle over a Chinese bench positioned on top centre of the tombstone. Over the inscription, at a central area, the martyrdom of Saint Catherine is represented with the martyrdom of the wheel on the left side, the decapitation at the centre, and over this, the placement at the tomb in Mount Sinai.

[34] Arnold, *Princely Gifts and Papal Treasures*.
[35] Pacifico Sella, *Il Vangelo in Oriente. Giovanni da Montecorvino, frate minore e primo vescovo in terra di Cina (1247−1328)* (Assisi: Edizioni Porziuncola, 2008).

On the right side there is a male figure with a child on the lap, which Lauren Arnold interpreted as being the delivery of the soul, as a child, by a Franciscan friar.[36]

Following the study on this tombstone, Lauren Arnold establishes a connection between the evolutions of the *Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara* into the popular goddess Guanyin with the Virgin Mary devotion of the Franciscan missionaries.[37] In the caves of Dunhuang, Guanyin is represented leading the souls to Amitabha's paradise. Additionally, we argue that the Virgin depicted in the Katerina de Villionis' tombstone is clearly a Virgin of Humility, who profoundly resembles the formal representation of Guanyin in following centuries, particularly in the popularized ivory figures and in the *Blanc de Chine* highly valued among collectors in China and in Europe.[38]

The first references to *Guanshiyin* are to be found in the caves of Mogao in Dunhuang, referring to the *Bodhisattva* which 'looks after the sons of the World' as protector of all souls. During the twelfth century, the devotion of Guanyin has reached South China, which became extremely popular in Huangzhou as a symbol of maternal and divine protection developed under the Marian devotion disseminated by the Franciscans. After the arrival of the Franciscans during the 13th and 14th centuries, the values of piety and chastity are represented through the convenient symbolic confluence between Guanyin and the Virgin of Humility. During the 14th century, Guanyin becomes represented just like the Virgin of Humility, with a child on her lap, certainly through the influence of the Marian devotion and the portable images of the Franciscan missionaries in south China.[39]

Besides these pertinent proposals, there are still two different aspects which are important to hold on to. It is important to understand the origin of the *Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara* transformation into goddess Guanyin and why the devotion to Guanyin became popular in South China before the arrival of John of Montecorvino and the Franciscan missionaries.

In Dunhuang, were found eight hundred and sixty copies of the Sutra of the Lotus, dated between the ninth and the tenth centuries.[40] This collection of teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism was firstly translated in China during the fourth century and became some of the most important sacred texts from the sixth century for the dissemination of Mahāyāna Buddhism in China. One of the details of Mahāyāna Buddhism is the introduction of a pantheon of Buddhas and Bodhisattva which became prominent through a profusion of images of Amitabha Buddha (Western Buddha), Maitreya Buddha (Buddha of the Future) and Avalokitesvara (Buddha of Compassion), this last one known in China as Guanshiyin or Guanyin. The Sutra of the Lotus has a chapter fully dedicated to

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Lauren Arnold, "Guadalupe and Guanyin: Images of the Madonna in Mexico and China," *The Ricci Institute. Public Lecture Series* (2005): 1−6, accessed January 5, 2010, http://www.usfca.edu/ricci/events/lauren.pdf.
[39] Arnold, *Princely Gifts and Papal Treasures*.
[40] Susan Witfield, *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith* (London: British Library, 2004).

Avalokitesvara, which became so popular that it was spread separately during the and became some of the most important sacred texts from the sixth century for the dissemination of Mahāyāna Buddhism in China. One of the details of Mahāyāna Buddhism is the introduction of a pantheon of Buddhas and *Bodhisattva* which became prominent through a profusion of images of Amitabha Buddha (Western Buddha), Maitreya Buddha (Buddha of the Future) and *Avalokitesvara* (Buddha of Compassion), this last one known in China as *Guanshiyin* or Guanyin.[41] The *Sutra of the Lotus* has a chapter fully dedicated to *Avalokitesvara*, which became so popular that it was spread separately during the early fifth century, under the designation of *Sutra of Guanshiyin (Pumen pi)*.[42] In Dunhuang alone more than 128 copies of chapter XXV of the Sutra of the Lotus were found, demonstrating the popularity of *Avalokitesvara* during the Sui and Tang Dynasties. This text was certainly one of the most important sources for the representation of the *Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara* in its different manifestations and didactic narratives.

In that text there is a reference to the powers of intercession of *Avalokitesvara*, in which we can read: "If a woman wishes to give birth to a male child, she should offer obeisance and alms to Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds and then she will bear a son blessed with merit, virtue, and wisdom. And if she wishes to bear a daughter, she will bear one with all the marks of comeliness, one who in the past planted the roots of virtue and is loved and respected by many persons."[43] In one of the manuscripts of this sutra found in Dunhuang, dated from the ninth or tenth century, on this passage, there is an illustration which represents, in one of the pages, a couple in prayers facing *Avalokitesvara* and, in the following page, we see the fulfilment of their prayers, with the birth of their child.[44]

Guanshiyin's child-given powers allow us to make an immediate connection with Virgin Mary, not only at the level of compassion and intersection, but also at the level of maternity and protection. It is interesting to note that *Guanshiyin* means, literally, "look after the sons of the world," thus attributing her status of motherhood and simultaneously of progenitor of humanity.

Facing the brief moments of religious intolerance and rivalry with Daoism, as previously mentioned, we must consider that the feminine nature of Guanyin is closely connected with Xi Wang Mu (Queen Mother of the West), one of the main Daoist Goddess who saved men and women from their difficulties.[45] Xi Wang Mu became very popular during the Tang dynasty through poetry where her protection is praised, particularly as guardian of women. This compassion and relation of proximity with women will serve as basis to this process of religious otherness and

[41] Wilt Idema, (trans.), *Personal Salvation and Filial Piety. Two Precious Scroll Narratives of Guanyin and Her Acolytes* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2008).
[42] Jacques Pimpaneau, *Mémoires de la Cour Céleste. Mythologie Populaire Chinoise* (Paris: Éditions Kwok On, 1997); Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).
[43] Burton Watson (trans.), *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
[44] Witfield, *The Silk Road*.
[45] Pimpaneau, *Mémoires de la Cour Céleste*.

syncretism between two deities of distinct religious systems. During the Song dynasty and the religious tolerance of the Yuan emperors a path is paved to a proliferation of Guanyin's representation as a Mother Goddess.

As stated earlier, the devotion of Guanyin is very popular in south China, namely in the Fujian province. In this south China's coastal area, the goddess is known as the Guanyin of the South Sea, probably in relation to the devotion to Mazu, a Daoist Goddess, protector of the fishermen and their wives. The legend states that Lin Moniang was the daughter of Lin Yuan, a fisherman who lived in the island of Meizhou, in Fujian during the end of the tenth century. According to the accounts, one day a typhoon near the island threatened the fishermen who were at sea and Lin Moniang entered a kind of trance while praying for all to be saved. When she awakes, her mother tells her that her father died at sea. Desperate Mazu sails off in a boat to find her father and throws herself to the sea where she remained for three days, fruitlessly, searching for her father's body. Faced with such sadness she left for a hill and there she stood alone forever, where she would become famous for her protection over the seafaring men and, like Guanyin, would become a model of compassion and piety.[46] Mazu is known in Macau as A-Ma and is suggested as the origin of the name of the *Amagao* isthmus.

The symbiosis between Guanyin and Mazu is quite evident in several Buddhist temples, given rise inclusively to a legend that Mazu's parents prayed to Guanyin to have one more son and that Guanyin granted them a daughter, which would be the reincarnation of Guanyin on Earth.[47]

Despite the essential and unavoidable influence of Christianity and the Franciscan missionaries in South China during the Yuan dynasty, we argue that it is narrow-minded to confine ourselves to this perspective, ignoring the power of popular cultures and religions with which not only Buddhism, but also Christianity merged giving origin to a new religious language and imagery.[48]

Conclusion

The reopening of the Silk Route during the Tang dynasty rule became one of the most transformative causes for the dissemination of commodities and unprecedented exchange between across Eurasia. The political environment and prosperity in the early years of the Tang dynasty turned the newly established imperial capital in Chang'an a cosmopolitan epicentre attracting merchants, travellers and missionaries from Persia, Central Asia, India, Tibet, and East Asia. Chang'an rapidly became a cultural, artistic, and religious melting pot, resulting in a

[46] Ibid.; Roderich Ptak, *O Culto de Mazu. Uma Visão Histórica (da Dinastia Song ao Início da Dinastia Qing)* (Lisbon: Centro Científico e Cultural de Macau, 2012).
[47] Lee Irwin, "The Great Goddesses of China," *Asian Folklore Studies* 49, no. 1 (1990): 53−68.
[48] Lopes, "Arte e alteridade."

process of cultural transformation through mutual assimilation, appropriation and merging of cultural elements. In this transcultural phenomenon, the dissemination of religious knowledge, liturgical practices, and doctrinal explanations, the use of text and images became valuable assets for their rhetorical discourse. The process of textual and visual translation of exegetical and doctrinal theologies required the use of analogical contextualisation through the identification of conceptual and formalistic similitudes with existing knowledge.

The material culture and texts that resulted from the missionary activities of the Church of the East and the early Franciscan missions in China are clear evidence of not only religious syncretism, but more importantly, of an epistemological missionary strategy that required an understanding of beliefs, knowledge, and discourses within a given time and space.