

The introduction of *Jingjiao* to China: A new paradigm of interculturality between Christianity and China

Conference paper for the 2024 Xi'an International *Jingjiao* Forum, Institute of Silk Road Studies, Northwest University, Xi'an, China, July 5-7, 2024

Abstract: This paper aims to clarify three concepts: First, the Jingjiao Stele of Xi'an should not be called the Nestorian Stele. In recent years, many Chinese and foreign scholars have proved that the Daqin Jingjiao Stele has often been misnamed as the Nestorian Stele while the term Nestorian was never mentioned there. The term Daqin referred broadly to the Roman Empire and the East Syriac Church, and Jingjiao (the Luminous Religion) was the Christian religion introduced to China through the Silk Road at that time. Second, the introduction of Christianity to China should not be seen as a unidirectional process of "inculturation," but rather a two-way process of "interculturality." Pope Francis in recent years has emphasized the "culture of encounter," and President Xi Jinping last year proposed the Global International Initiative to deepen mutual learning of civilizations for a shared bright future. Third, in the history of the encounter between Christianity and China, the introduction of Jingjiao to China was a positive experience of inculturation. It was a relatively successful experience judging from historical materials and the testimony inscribed on the stele. It may also serve as an inspiration and reference for the dialogue and exchange between Christianity and Chinese culture.

Introduction and methodology

This paper aims to clarify three concepts: First, the Jingjiao Stele of Xi'an should not be called the Nestorian Stele. Second, the introduction of Christianity to China should not be seen as a unidirectional process of "inculturation," but rather a two-way process of "interculturality." Third, the introduction of Jingjiao to China was a relatively successful experience in the history of the encounter between Christianity and China, and it may serve as an inspiration and reference for dialogue today. The methodology of this paper takes an interdisciplinary approach to history, theology, and cross-cultural and inter-religious studies.

I. The Jingjiao Stele of Xi'an should not be called the Nestorian Stele.

When was Christianity first introduced to China? The famous Christian stele recorded the arrival of a missionary Alopen in 635 CE, from Daqin, Persia, to the Chinese capital of present-day Xi'an during the Tang Dynasty. It was a testimony that marked the very moment in history. the entrance into China of Jingjiao, "the Religion of Light." The Jingjiao Stele was erected in the year 781 and was unearthed four hundred years ago in 1625. Alopen and a group of missionaries of the Eastern Syriac Church reached China through the Silk Road.

The inscription not only recorded this period of history but also showed the remarkable fact that these missionaries tried to use Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist elements of Chinese culture adapting them to Christian terminologies. The era of the Tang Dynasty in China was characterized by frequent commercial exchanges between East and West, as well as by cultural and religious plurality. Every religion within the Empire was expected to integrate itself

harmoniously into the established order. The missionaries of the East Syriac Church were people of extraordinary culture and they came to China at that time alongside Buddhist missionaries.¹

In recent years, many scholars, Chinese foreign alike, have argued that the Jingjiao Stele should not be called the Nestorian Stele. Matteo Nicolini-Zani affirmed that Christianity during the Tang dynasty was misnamed as Nestorian, though the nature of the East Syriac Church and the theological content of the Chinese texts left behind were not unequivocally identifiable as such.² Another scholar Glen Thompson also pointed out in his new book on Jingjiao³ published this year that Nestorius was, from 428 to 431 for three years, a Patriarch of Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Council of Ephesus in 431 affirmed that Christ is one person with two natures, human and divine, while Nestorius allegedly taught of the human and divine persons of Christ, calling Mary only the mother of Christ instead of the title *Theotokos*, Mother of God. Many of his followers later integrated into the Eastern Syrian Church, but there is no evidence that they ever adopted his heretical Christology.

The Council aimed to avoid schism and maintain the unity of the Church. Nestorianism is a derogatory term for Jingjiao, and it is inaccurate and wrong to consider the Eastern Syrian Church to be Nestorian. In fact, from a doctrinal point of view, the inscription has no mention of Nestorianism, nor does it have heretical teachings. The reason why it is called Jingjiao is explained in the inscription: "The true and eternal way, it is wonderful but difficult to name. Its meritorious operations obvious, by trying our best to express, calling it Jingjiao (the luminous teaching)."⁴

As the name of the stele literally suggests, it is a historical record of Jingjiao from Daqin popularly spread in China. Daqin means the Great Qin which was the ancient Chinese name for the Roman Empire. When the Silk Road frequently travelled, Rome was the western final destination. In 97 CE, Ban Chao of China sent his subordinates to the Roman Empire, it was called Daqin. Commerce groups from Daqin came to China several times reaching Luoyang to maintain trade exchanges. The last trip was in 284 CE without further record in Chinese history thereafter. The Jingjiao Stele recorded the period when the Eastern Roman Empire moved its capital to Constantinople. The word Daqin appears six times in the inscription. One of them describes the territory of the Great Qin State in the north, south, east, and west. It talks about the people from the Great Qin State. The missionary built a church called "Daqin Monastery". Another story tells that Maria became pregnant and gave birth to a child in "Daqin". We can conclude that Daqin broadly refers to the original Roman Empire and the Persian region where missionaries came from during the Eastern Roman period, including Palestine, the birthplace of Jesus Christ.

¹ Jesus Lopez-Gay, *Storia delle missioni*, 2000, 45

² Matteo Nicolini-Zani, *La via radiosa per l'Oriente*, 2006, 76

³ Glen Thompson, "Jingjiao—Not Nestorian," *China Source Website*, April 23, 2024.

⁴ Adapting it from various translations of the original Chinese text: “粤若。常然真寂。先先而无元。窅然灵虚。后后而妙有。总玄枢而造化。妙众圣以元尊者。其唯我三一妙身无元真主阿罗诃欤。判十字以定四方。鼓元风而生二气。暗空易而天地开。”

Giovanni Montecorvino was a Franciscan priest sent as a Papal envoy to China via an ocean voyage since the way through central Asia was blocked by Muslim control. He arrived in China by sea at Quanzhou in 1294 during the Yuan Dynasty. He then reached the Hanbali capital, which is today's Beijing. He was well received at court by Emperor Khan. It was the period of the Mongol-established Yuan Dynasty in China. Soon Montecorvino built a church near the imperial Palace. He was able to preach at the capital, and finally even established an early diocese and became a bishop. The Christian message he preached was called "Yelikewen" in the Mongolian language, which means children of God. Later, the religion brought by Montecorvino and the Jingjiao of the Tang Dynasty were both called Yelikeewen during the Yuan Dynasty. It was only during the time of Matteo Ricci in China (1598-1610) that the Chinese term Tianzhu (Lord of Heaven) was adopted for God, and the name Tianzhu Jiao (the religion of Tianzhu) referring to Catholicism or the Roman Catholic Church until nowadays. While the Orthodox Church emphasizes orthodoxy, Catholic means universal, which emphasizes the Catholicity of the Church. Therefore, whether it is Jingjiao introduced in the Tang Dynasty, Yelikewenjiao in the Yuan Dynasty, or Tianzhujiao introduced in the late Ming Dynasty, their origins are one and the same as the universal Catholic Church.

II. The introduction of Jingjiao to China should not be seen as a unidirectional process of inculturation, but rather a two-way process of interculturality

Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) for the first time last year at a high-level meeting in dialogue with world political parties. It was also the 10th anniversary of Xi's initiative of building a community with a shared future for mankind and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The GCI enriches the contents of the BRI. It contributes Chinese Approach and Chinese Wisdom to promote the exchanges and mutual learning of culture and the progress of human civilization.

The first part of this article briefly describes the history of the introduction of Christianity into China. In different eras of the Tang, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, missionaries used different names to introduce Christianity to China. As President Xi said, in contrast to the claims of superiority of certain civilizations and clash of civilizations, China calls for upholding the principles of equality, mutual learning, dialogue and inclusiveness among civilizations. The initiative emphasizes the importance of cultural exchanges transcending estrangement, mutual learning transcending clashes, and coexistence transcending feelings of superiority.

Apart from the deviation in the modern colonial period, the introduction of Christianity to China should be seen not as a unidirectional process of Inculturation or Sinicization, but a two-way process of interculturality. In this regard, the three recent popes expressed the following.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, when speaking to Asian bishops in Hong Kong about the mission of the Church, said, "We should no longer speak of inculturation but of the meeting of cultures or 'interculturality'" He coined this new term to express more precisely "the meeting of cultures" that takes place when the culture of Christian faith encounters other cultures. "Only if all cultures are potentially universal and open to each

other can interculturality lead to flourishing new forms.”⁵ He wanted to promote the encounter of cultures as reciprocal enrichment.

Pope John Paul II spoke openly of the desire for dialogue between China and the whole Catholic Church which will be to the benefit of the whole human family. In an international conference held at the Pontifical Gregorian University commemorating the 400th anniversary of Matteo Ricci’s arrival in Beijing, he said: “I hope and pray that the path opened by Father Matteo Ricci between East and West, between Christianity and Chinese culture, will give rise to new instances of dialogue and reciprocal human and spiritual enrichment.”⁶

In contrast to the culture of indifference, Pope Francis in recent years advocates a “culture of encounter”. He dreams of a Church that is going out for her mission rather than self-preservation.⁷ People live in a culturally diverse world with many challenges, but there are also many opportunities. For Pope Francis, Christians are constantly challenged by the presence of people of other religions and cultures. The Christian identity lies in opening up to others, creating a relationship with those who are different opening up oneself to dialogue with others who are different for an encounter.

III. The experience of the encounter between Christianity and China through the introduction of Jingjiao could serve as an inspiration and reference for dialogue today.

The spread of Jingjiao in China as a cultural exchange experience offers us something to learn from. Historian René Laurentin has praised the spontaneous approach of the Christian missionaries of the Tang Dynasty in introducing Christianity using Chinese language and categories in a natural and spontaneous way.⁸ Jean Pierre Charbonnier has pointed out the fact that this first Christian mission in China became successful because the Syrian missionaries from Persia with humility had been able to adapt to a situation where Christianity was not the dominant religion.⁹ Archaeological discoveries over the years have proven that there are many sites and ruins in China with Jingjiao symbols. Such sites have been found in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Beijing, Jiangsu, Yangzhou, Fujian, and Quanzhou in considerable quantities.

If we analyze the contents of the Jingjiao Stele of Xi'an, we find a cross on top of the tablet as the main element seated over lotus pedestals, with cloud patterns engraved around. These motifs and patterns often appear on many Jingjiao steles, ruin sites and tombstones. The lotus motif itself has a symbolism of holiness, and stands for elegance, pureness and transcendence in Chinese culture. The cloud pattern is also a common auspicious sign in China, expressing the

⁵ Joseph Card. Ratzinger, “Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures” meeting with the Doctrinal Commissions in Asia, Hong Kong, March 3, 1993.

⁶ John Paul II, Message to participants of the International Conference Commemorating the Fourth Centenary of the Arrival in Beijing of Fr. Matteo Ricci, Vatican, 24 October 2001, 7

⁷ Francis, Evan, apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Rome, November 24, 2013. 27.

⁸ René Laurentin, *Cina e cristianesimo*, 1981, 217

⁹ Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China*, 2007, 43; D. HICKLEY, *An outline history and some considerations concerning the Nestorians in China during the Tang Dynasty*, 1980, 31-33

desire for happiness, beauty and yearning for life. Both Jingjiao and Buddhism entered China along the Silk Road in the Tang period. Buddhism has successfully been enculturated in China; the lotus symbol is widely used in Chinese Buddhism, but the lotus pattern is not unique to Buddhism. In a similar manner that Buddhism integrated into the Chinese environment, Jingjiao was actually attempting the same process of enculturating directly into the Chinese culture.

Analyzing the original text inscribed on the Xi'an Stele, taking the first few sentences as an example, the inscription starts by giving attribution to God with Taoist terms of permanence (常), truth (真), and silence (寂靜), and describing God as "First without origin, whose lasts mysterious being forever ". The author of the inscription also used the terms Being (有), Non-being (无), and Spirit (气) to describe the mystical Triune God of creation called Elohim (阿罗诃 Chinese transliteration from Hebrew). The inscription continues: "Judgment of the cross determines reaching out all four corners of the earth. The original wind is blown to produce two-fold vital energy (气). The somber void was changing, and heaven and earth opened out." In this way, the relationship of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is expressed as the Spirit of Void (灵虚) between Being (有) and Non-Being (无). These expressions somehow reflected the Chinese category of thoughts Being and Non-Being generate one another (有无相生) coming from the *Daodejing*. It is not easy to describe the Trinity with the Chinese category of thoughts, but the author of the inscription succeeded beautifully. It is a very good example of how Eastern philosophy could enrich the understanding of the mystery of the Trinity as interpreted by the scholastic philosophy of the West. Cultural and inter-religion exchanges could enhance mutual learning among different nations and civilizations and promote world peace. and as a consequence, to help tackle common issues in politics, economy, and ecology.

The discovery of the Xi'an Jingjiao Stele offers a historical record of the heyday of the Tang Dynasty in China, which reflects the flourishing exchanges and mutual learnings among ancient civilizations of the East and the West. Throughout history, China has continuously absorbed and integrated the outstanding achievements of human civilization, characterized by being the oldest continuous civilization up till today. To realize the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and to contribute to the initiative of world civilization, I wish the younger generation all the best to shoulder their responsibilities and make this noble dream come true.

Bio

Kin Sheung Chiaretto Yan 甄健湘,

Prof. Yan holds a doctorate degree in philosophy from the Sophia University Institute (Florence), a doctorate in practical theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University (Rome), and an M.A. in oriental religions and cultures from the University of Santo Tomas (Manila). He is a visiting professor at the University of Saint Joseph Macau, the National Seminary of China in Beijing, and various seminaries in China. Publications include *My Chinese Dream: Bridging East and West – hopes, challenges and opportunities* (2023), *Season for Relationships: Youth in China and church mission* (2018), *Il Vangelo oltre la Grande Muraglia* (2015), and *Evangelization in China* (Orbis 2014).