

Dietmar W. Winkler, Li Tang (Eds.)

Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters

Studies on East Syriac Christianity
in China and Central Asia



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THE CONFLUENCE OF EAST AND WEST IN NESTORIAN ART IN CHINA

Xiaojing YAN

Nestorianism spread into Persia and Central Asia, and further into China after its adherents were persecuted in the Byzantine Empire. Nestorianism was the first Christian tradition to reach China. In the year 638 A.D, the Emperor Taizong gave permission for Nestorians to practice their religion, which Taizong officially named Daqin Jiao (大秦教), because for many centuries, the Chinese knew the geographical area where the Nestorians came from as Daqin (大秦). Nestorians called their religion Jingjiao, the Luminous Religion.¹

While Nestorianism spread widely over Central Asia and China and won many scattered groups of converts, Nestorians were always under rulers of another faith, and so continued to be minorities, never attaining political dominance. Meanwhile, the centuries during which the Nestorian Church existed in China were the very centuries during which Buddhists were spreading their teaching over very much the same area.

Nestorians followed an eclectic method in order to spread their religion and culture. They combined their teaching with Chinese Daoist, Confucian, Buddhist and Christian ideas. In the manuscript “大秦景教宣元本经 [Sutras on the Origin of Origins of Daqin Luminous Religion]”², “善来法众，至至無来” is a Buddhist concept, and “如了無元，嚙碎散，即宣玄匠帝真常旨。無元、無言、無道、無缘，妙有非有” reflects the Daoist concept.³ Combining western and eastern ideas and symbols, Nestorian art is also eclectic. This paper will discuss the confluence of the West and the East in Nestorian monuments, paintings, gravestones and bronze crosses as a visual strategy to create an identity in a new cultural context in order to attract converts to the new religion.

During the Tang dynasty (618 A.D.-907A.D.), the Nestorian Monument was erected to commemorate the diffusion of Christianity in China. The Nestorian Monument is a black limestone tablet, over 9 feet in height and 3 1/3 feet in width, and a little under a foot thick (figure 1). A relief consisting of two drag-

¹ LUO 1966, 164

² This manuscript《大秦景教宣元本经》was found in No. 17 grotto at Dunhuang in 1908. Now it is in France's National Library.

³ GILLMAN - KLIMKEIT translated by LIN 1995, 113

ons holding a big pearl with their claws decorates the top of the tablet. On the apex is a cross over a cloud beneath which lies a lotus flower. The inscription on the monument contains about 1756 Chinese characters in length and a few lines in Syriac (70 words). It mentions the early activities of Christianity in China and the Christian doctrine. The inscription consists of all of 67 names, including 1 bishop, 28 presbyters and 38 others. The monument rests on top of a black stone tortoise.

The dragon and pearl are Daoist symbols. Some scholars interpreted the pearl as a Chinese variation on the universal motif of the thunderstone.⁴ According to legend, thunderstones fall from the sky during thunderstorms or battles between gods. Other scholars interpreted the pearl as the Sun or The Moon.⁵ All these interpretations are related to light and the pearl also has flames on the top. Nestorians may have used the pearl to refer to Jingjiao – luminous religion. It actually proved in the inscription on the Nestorian Monument.⁶ The translation "...and heaven and earth were opened out; the sun and moon revolved,..." and "...he suspended the bright sun to invade the chambers of darkness, ..." all suggests the signification of the pearl.

The dragon existed in Chinese legend long time before Buddhism was widespread. Taoist dragons symbolize the search for wisdom, happiness, and immortality. Additionally, the heavenly dragon (Tian-long 天龙) was the celestial guardian who protected the heavens, supporting the mansions of the gods, shielding them from decay. The dragon was often used on imperial architecture - on the roofs, beams, pillars and doors of palaces. The dragon also appears on the entrance to the Chengchengwan Stupa in Dunhuang, which housed Buddha's remains (figure 2).⁷ Borrowed from Daoism, the dragon functioned as a protector in all these contexts.

Myriad legends discuss that the Dragon symbolizes benevolence, greatness, goodness and blessings while Chinese mythology gives dragons control over the rain, rivers, lakes, and seas. These are the powers that belong to God. Perhaps the dragon was adapted on the Nestorian Monument to represent protection, immortality and God's power over all creation.

Signs of confluence between East and West can also be seen in Nestorian paintings. The Dunhuang caves of western China contains over 2,000 manuscripts, including some Christian ones.⁸ In the cave was a silkscreen painting of a robed man wearing a crown with a gold cross, with another cross on his chest, holding a bishop's rod, dated to before 1000 A.D. (figure 3). It is a painting of the first Nestorian missionary to China, a bishop named Aluoben.

⁴ See VAN DER SLUIJS 2004.

⁵ SCHAFER 1978 in *History of Religions*, Vol. 17, No. 3/4, (Feb. - May, 1978), 387-398

⁶ HORNE 1917, 381-392

⁷ 俄藏敦煌艺术品 III, 上海古籍出版社1997, 103

⁸ See ATIYA 1968.

In the painting, the bishop's costume is similar to some of Buddha's costumes in Dunhuang paintings and sculptures. For example, the bowknot of the waistband ties on the front of the lower waist, and the loose-fitting protective outer robe leaves wide open was the popular style of that time. Furthermore, in Buddhist Dunhuang paintings, the depiction of figures was standardized. For example, the figure is shown in three quarter profile and the lines are pronounced. A comparison between the tentative restoration of the original painting of the Bishop at Dunhuang and No. 401 cave with the Buddhist painting Gongyangpusa (供养菩萨), which portrays a Bodhisattva,⁹ yields strong similarities (figure 4). Both figures are slightly sideways, with one hand in the same mudra. Following the Chinese style, the painting of the bishop is executed with terse and orderly lines and exquisite and delicate coloration. The beneficent and amiable expression of the bishop was also depicted in a Buddhist way.

Another Nestorian wall painting was discovered at Gaochang (高昌) (figure 5)¹⁰. The picture depicts a Palm Sunday procession.¹¹ The painting style is very similar to other paintings found in Dunhuang¹². The hairstyle and clothing of the various participants are carefully delineated (figure 6) and the women with the pulled-back, clipped-up coiffures were depicted in similar postures as the ones in Dunhuang.

An important question is who did the Nestorian paintings in Dunhuang, the local Chinese laity, a Nestorian foreigner, or a Chinese convert? Scholars have suggested that probably the Dunhuang artist accepted the commission from a deacon or other Nestorian, and executed the painting based on the deacon's or other Nestorian's requirements. Perhaps the artist just followed the standard style of that period, or maybe the Nestorian patron wanted the style to follow Chinese examples in order to appeal to converts. Indeed, before the painting of the Palm Sunday Procession was discovered, it was worshiped as a Buddhist painting¹³. This is strong proof of the similarities between the Nestorian paintings in Dunhuang and Buddhist works.

Another significant aspect of the painting of the bishop is the shape of the halo, which is not a perfect circle like a Christian nimbus. The halo around the bishop is egg-shaped, bigger on the top and narrower on the bottom. This shape appears very often in Buddhist paintings. Usually in Buddhist paintings, if Buddha and Bodhisattva appear together, Buddha always has a big round or a peach-shaped halo, which is pointed on the top (figure 3) In Chinese, these big halos are called Beiguang (背光) or Shengguang (身光). The Bodhisattva usually only has a oval or round halo, which is called Xiangguang (项光) or

⁹ 供养菩萨 is a Buddhist painting at Dunhuang.

¹⁰ Zhu 1970 (in Chinese), 202

¹¹ SAEKI 1937.

¹² The Painting 《都督夫人礼佛图》 No. 130 grotto, Dunhuang, Tang dynasty

¹³ LIN 2003 (in Chinese), 69

Touguang (头光). Less important characters wear small round halos. It appears that in Buddhist painting, the shape of the halo indicates status. If this is the case, then the Nestorian painting from Dunhuang is a bishop.

Flames are inscribed on the bottom of the bishop's halo. Flame patterns are common in halos from the fifth to the eighth centuries in Buddhist images in China. Flames represent an explosion of energy. Such energy flames often accompanied Chinese deities in order to show their divine quality. According to Buddhist and Daoist thought, ordinary mortals can achieve divine status through enlightenment. The appropriation of this divine symbol expresses Buddhist and Daoist ideas in a Christian context.

The bishop's right hand is held up with the thumb touching the tip of the second finger; the index finger and little fingers are extended, but the ring finger is curved inward slightly, with the right hand pointing up. This gesture is called a Vitarka Mudra and, generally, indicates the transmission of Buddhist teaching. Mudras indicate to the faithful in a simple way the nature and function of deities, and are thus gestures, which evoke divine manifestation. Mudras are also used by monks in their spiritual exercises and ritual meditations, and are believed to generate forces that invoke the deity.

The core of Buddhism is made up of three pillars: Buddha, the Dharma (his teachings) and the Sangha (monks and nuns). The Buddha is the Awakened One. The Dharma is the teachings or law as expounded by the Buddha. The Sangha are the individuals comprising the two classes: noble Sangha, who possess some degree of enlightenment, and the ordinary Sangha, who are the community of people practicing the Dharma. The three pillars are also called the Triple Gem, and are usually represented as three jewels. In Buddha's gesture, the three extended fingers symbolize the Three Jewels of Buddhism as the foundation of one's religious practice. In the bishop's mudra, the thumb and index finger of both hands touch at their tips to form a circle, which represents the Wheel of Dharma.¹⁴

The Nestorians were well known for their fondness for symbols. The bishop's hand gesture with a triangle formed by thumb and finger and the remaining three fingers pointing upwards may evoke the Trinity. Although I don't have enough evidence to prove this point, I believe that for the Nestorians the three jewels could evoke the Trinity.

Although this mudra is one of Buddha's teaching mudras, consisting of two hands together, the mudra with only one hand is called Jixiangyin (吉祥印) in Chinese, which means mudra of the auspiciousness of wisdom. (figure 3) According to legend, when Shakyamuni Buddha was born, flowers called Tianyu-

¹⁴ The Wheel of Dharma, or the Wheel of the Teaching, is the translation of the Sanskrit word, "Dharma cakra" (dharma-chakra). It is a Buddhist emblem of Hindu origin. Similar to the wheel of a cart that keeps revolving, it symbolizes the Buddha's teaching as it continues to be spread widely and endlessly.

hua (天雨花) in Chinese, descended from the sky. The fluttering flowers represented an auspicious sign and a celebration. The flowers fluttering around the bishop are undoubtedly borrowed from Buddhist art. So in this painting, the mudra together with the flowers seems to depict a happy and auspicious event or moment.

Flowers were offerings in Buddhist practices because they smell sweet. Making offerings is a very common practice in Buddhism. Every offering has a specific meaning; flowers signify the practice of generosity and open the heart. There is a similar offering of scent in Christianity. The early medieval church not only employed incense to communicate with God, but also regarded sweet smells as God's way of communicating the holiness of his ministers. Offering good smells was used in the Nestorian Palm Sunday ritual. In the Palm Sunday procession painting from Gaochang, the deacon or sub-deacon, proceeding from the left hand side to the right, is carrying an incense box in his right hand whilst what may be called purifying smoke arises from the incense burner carried in his left hand. The other three men and woman are carrying red willow-like branches. The incense in this painting is another proof that the offering of sweet odors is a favorite scene in Nestorian painting. Obviously, the painting of the bishop borrowed the Buddhist idea of offering flowers with their sweet odors to communicate with God.

A third example of the confluence between Eastern and Western ideas can be found on Nestorian gravestones. Many Chinese gravestones show crosses on lotus flowers or on clouds (figure 7, 8). The lotus is a symbol of enlightenment and mental purity because it has its roots in mud but blossoms into a beautiful flower. Specifically, in China, the lotus is one of Buddhism's most significant symbols and very often appears in Buddhist paintings. Depicting an object on a lotus is to show not only respect for the object, but also to mark it divine. Similarly, cloud patterns are employed in Daoist art to mark divinity. Usually in Chinese art, when a man becomes a deity, he is depicted on a cloud to demonstrate his deified status and people's veneration for him. Was this one of the reasons why the Nestorians use the lotus and cloud together with the cross? The cross represents Christ's human nature while the lotus and clouds may refer to Jesus' divinity. Putting a cross on lotus or clouds emphasizes the two natures of Christ expressed in a combination of Eastern and Western symbols.

Not all Nestorian gravestones have crosses combined with lotus or cloud. Some gravestones only have a cross (figure 10). Some of these gravestones were made later than the ones combining both cross and cloud. One way to explain this discrepancy is that the gravestones inscribed with crosses may have belonged to Christians and the gravestones with crosses, lotuses or clouds, belonged to Chinese Nestorians or converts.

Other very important Nestorian artifacts are bronze crosses. More than 1,000 bronze crosses, mostly from the Yuan Dynasty, were found in Suiyuan (绥远) and other places in China. The biggest one is 2.6 inches and the smallest one is

1 inch. Most are cross-shaped, and some consist of shapes such as birds derived from crosses. Such bronze crosses were often used as seals. When used as seals, Chinese characters appear usually abstracted into patterns. Among these crosses, the Swastika, also called Wan in Chinese, is the most often used pattern (figure 11). The Swastika is a well-known good luck symbol from India. With the spread of Buddhism, it passed into the iconography of China where it was used to denote plurality, abundance, prosperity and long life. It is described as “the accumulation of lucky signs possessing ten thousand effigies.”¹⁵ In Buddhist tradition, the swastika symbolizes revolving sun or fire. The Nestorian religion was known in Chinese as Jingjiao which means light or luminous religion. The luminous connotation of the swastika can be one of the reasons why swastika symbol appears so frequently in Nestorian art.

As a Buddhist symbol, the swastika is also regarded as the seal of Buddha's heart. It is believed to contain the Buddha consciousness. Often in Chinese art, the swastika is placed on the chest, forehead, palm or foot of Buddha unlike in Indian, where the swastika never appears on Buddha's chest. For instance, the Buddha figure in Tieta Park (铁塔公园) in Kaifeng (开封) was cast in bronze in the Song dynasty (960-1276). The Buddha stands on a lotus flower with bare feet. On his chest, there is a swastika sign (figure 12).

Chinese Nestorians commonly wore a cross on their chests. History records that Nestorians drew crosses in their rooms and halls, and wore them on their heads and chest.¹⁶ The bishop in the Nestorian silkscreen painting had three crosses: on his chest, head and his rod. Because only in Chinese and Japanese art Buddha wears the swastika symbol on his chest, I believe that the appearance of the swastika on Buddha's chest may have been influenced by the wearing of the cross by Nestorians.

When Nestorians came along the Silk Road, their contact with the religions of China must have altered their world view dramatically. When they came to render the sacred God, they combined the Christian cross with Buddhist lotus and Daoist clouds to reveal the double yet separate nature of the Christian God. They used Buddhist Mudras to evoke the Trinity of the Christian God. They employed Buddhist flower images to evoke the offering of sweet odors to God. Pearls and swastika were used to signify their religion – Luminous Religion (Jingjiao). They suggested the potential divinity of individuals by combining halos with flame patterns. Perhaps these appropriations indicate that Nestorians accepted Buddhist and Daoist ideas that ordinary mortals can achieve divine status through enlightenment. Nestorian art portrays the encounter of Nestorians with the Chinese beliefs, which transfigured the expression of the Christian belief, recorded in the artwork.

¹⁵ <http://www.buddhamuseum.com/shakyamuni-lotus-bronze.html>

¹⁶ “十字者，取像人身，揭与屋，绘于殿，冠于首，佩于胸”，See LUO1966, 罗香林《唐元二代之景教》，69.

After having been encouraged for two centuries by the Imperial Court, foreign traders who, as has been suggested, probably made up the bulk of the membership must have left the country. After two centuries, the first introduction of Christianity to China failed. Many artifacts record Nestorian's presence in China and speak the real history of Nestorian China. They show us one of the many causes of the decline and fall of the Chinese Nestorian Church.

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Annex: Figures



Figure 1
Nestorian monument



Figure 2
Cheng-cheng-wan Stupa (城成穹塔婆)
Tang Dynasty, at Dun-huang



Figure 3
A restoration of the original silk painting of a missionary bishop of the Church of the East who was the first missionary named Aleben, came to China.



Figure 4
Gongyangpusa (供养菩萨)
Tang dynasty , Dun-huang



Figure 5
Palm Sunday, Khocho, Nestorian Temple,
683-770 CE. Wall painting



Figure 6
Restoration of 《都督夫人礼佛图》
No.130 grotto , Dun-huang, Tang dynasty



Figure 7
2-八思巴文 元代



Figure 9
1946年泉州,元代



Figure 10
新羅城 元代

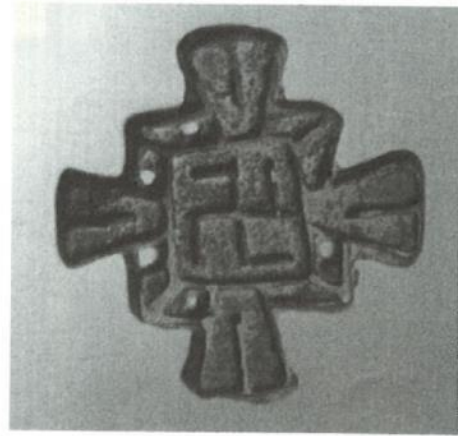


Figure 11
Yuan dynasty



Figure 12
Tie-ta Park (铁塔公园), Kai-feng (开封), Song
dynasty (960-1276 A.D.)