



# The “Brilliant Teaching”

## Iranian Christians in Tang China and Their Identity

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**ABSTRACT** The last three decades or so have seen an increasing interest in the early history of Christianity in China, particularly in Christian communities in the Tang period. One of the pertinent questions asked—particularly by theologians—is whether the “Brilliant Teaching” (Jingjiao), as the religion called itself in Chinese, had a substantial number of Chinese converts, i.e. whether it was a proselytizing religion or rather an Iranian diaspora religion. While recent documents and new interpretations of existing sources has made it probable that we are indeed dealing with an “expat” religious community, the question of the cultural and religious identity of this community has not really been addressed: they were using Syriac as their liturgical and communal language, but were Persian, Sogdian and maybe even Bactrian in terms of origin and culture. This paper will summarize the data we can get from Chinese sources and discuss them in the light of religious and cultural identity.

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**KEYWORDS** Identity, Chinese Christianity, Tang, Iranian, Persian, Jingjiao

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## Introduction

In the year 1625, workers discovered a monumental, inscribed stone slab in the city of Xi’an 西安, the former capital of the Tang Empire Chang’an 長安. The text, dated to the year 781, traces the history of the Christian community, which labelled itself as adhering to and believing in the “Brilliant Teaching” (Jingjiao 景教) from the advent of a Christian priest Aluoben 阿羅本 in the Tang capital in the year 638 to its erection more than one hundred and fifty years later, in 781. Although the main part of the inscription is written in elegant classical Chinese, at the bottom and on its side it has passages and short blocks in the Estrangelo script and in the Syriac language, which immediately identifies the community referred to in the inscription as believers of the “(Apostolic) Church of the East,” often misnamed “Nestorians.” The inscription, although it referred to its origin in a region called Daqin 大秦, also has clear references to Bosi 波斯, i.e. Persia. [1]

The document, with the full title *Jingjiao-liuxing-zhongguo-bei* 景教流行中國碑, “Stele Inscription of the Brilliant Teaching’s Spread to the Middle Kingdom,” has not only lured Sinologists and not-so-much Sinologists into either delivering a translation of or commenting on the whole text or certain aspects of it.<sup>1</sup> The source also raises certain questions about the nature of the earliest Christian communities in China of the Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907). One of the ubiquitous questions scholars have pondered about—particularly those who came from a Christian theological background—was whether there were Chinese converts in the Christian communities in Tang China. While it is intriguingly difficult to answer this question with final certainty—I myself am rather inclined to suggest that there were no such converts, or if so, only very few—it is clear from the inscription and other sources about Christianity under the Tang that the main body of Christians were Iranians,<sup>2</sup> and that the Tang Christian church was predominantly a diaspora community of soldiers, merchants and administrators. This paper will address and discuss some aspects of how this community—while I am using this term in the singular, I am fully aware of the complex historical reality of a multi-cultural minority group in a centralized state like that of the Tang—attempted to cope with its specific socio-political situation and how this was expressed through a carefully defined self-identity which is reflected partly in the few sources of and about this community which have survived. [2]

## How “Persian” are the Christian Documents of the Tang Period?

Since its discovery in the early seventeenth century, the stele inscription of Xi’an, as it was called, was the only document to testify to the existence of Christian communities belonging to the Church of the East, with its centre in Ctesiphon-Seleukia in the Sasanian heartland and, later, in the first Islamic Caliphates. These Christians called their religion *Jingjiao* 景教, “Brilliant Teaching,” in Chinese and had, if we believe only part of the quite propagandistic and self-eulogizing content of the inscription, a continuous place in the religious landscape of the Tang Empire and, at times, quite a close relationship with the imperial court. More information came to light at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Chinese manuscripts of obviously Christian content were discovered in the famous library cave of Dunhuang 敦煌 and in Chinese private manuscript collections.<sup>3</sup> These texts, rather more compendia of Christian teachings than translations or historiographical works, do not really contribute to our understanding of the Tang church’s constitution and self-identity other than by the fact that most of the texts have the toponym *Daqin* 大秦 in the title, which I will discuss here in more detail. Some additional information was also recently provided by an inscribed octagonal *dhārānī* pillar, discovered in the year 2006 in the former Eastern capital of Luoyang 洛陽, which contains, apart from quoting one of the texts known from the extant manuscripts, information about the *Jingjiao* community in the eastern capital of Luoyang 洛陽 (see Tang and Winkler 2009). [3]

Nevertheless, the Xi’an stele delivers the bulk of data for reconstructing, if not necessarily the full history, at least the self-perception of the Church of the East in China of the Tang. Erica [4]

1 On the history of the stele after its re-discovery, see Keevak (2008).

2 On the image of the Iranians under the Tang, see Abramson (2008).

3 For an overview of these texts, see Riboud (2001), and Deeg (2015b). I should point out that I have only included secondary literature relevant to my argument and have not made full use of the many Chinese publications on *Jingjiao*, its history and sources, particularly those by Lin Wushu, Rong Xinjiang, and others; nor will I discuss the problematic translations and interpretations of Peter Yoshirō Saeki here. For a full bibliographical overview, see Nicolini-Zani (2006).

Hunter has analysed “the Persian contribution to Christianity in China” in the stele inscription and found “affirmation of the fundamentally ‘Persian’ character of the church which was directly linked with the patriarchate in Seleucia-Ctesiphon” (Hunter 2009, 71). Other scholars, like Samuel Lieu in his article with the slightly provoking title “The ‘Romanitas’ of the Xi’an Inscription,” have, indirectly at least, questioned the ‘Persian-ness’ of the Christian communities in Tang China (Lieu 2013).<sup>4</sup>

## Some Thoughts on “Identity” in the Context of the Christian Documents from the Tang

The observations that the family of the ‘author’ of the stele inscription, Jingjing 景淨, or Adam, hailed from Balkh—for which the Chinese part of the stele provides the name “City of Royal Residence” (*wangshe zhi cheng* 王舍之城) (Deeg 2015a)—in Bactria or Tokharistan, and that the community referred to in the so-called Luoyang *dhāraṇī* pillar inscription were, concluding from their names, predominantly Sogdians, raises the question of identity: they all were Christians and probably spoke Iranian languages like Persian, Sogdian or Bactrian—but to what extent did they share a cultural Iranian (?) identity—for instance in the sense of a real or, after the fall of the Sasanian Empire, an imagined Ērānšahr? In order to address this question—or rather: set of questions—I would like to apply the concept of multiple identities and identity markers.<sup>5</sup> By the latter, I understand any semiotically discernible feature expressing linguistic, ethnic, religious or other forms of cultural identity or belonging. This goes together with modern conceptualizations of identity as being rather an ongoing act than an unchangeable character of an individual or a community or social group.<sup>6</sup> It may also be appropriate to differentiate, in this context, between ascribed identity (German “zugeschriebene Identität”) and self-conscious (or self-constructed) identity (German “Eigenidentität”), as both need not necessarily be identical and may even change in specific contexts.<sup>7</sup>

We have to be careful not to confound these emic forms of identity too easily with linguistically and mostly constructed etic meta-identities such as “Iranian” (or, in other contexts, Germanic, Slavonic, Celtic, etc.; see Pohl, Gantner, and Payne 2012). From this observation, then, provocative questions like the following may arise: Was there something that allowed different social groups or individuals, particularly in a diaspora situation such as the one Persians—in the wider sense of the word—found themselves in Tang China, to have a common feeling of identity? Was this common identity due to the fact that they came from the same historically and culturally shaped imperial region, the Sasanian empire and its spheres

4 This tradition, mainly based on the identification of Daqin (see below) as referring to Syria and / or Rome, goes back to Hirth. The equation Daqin = Fulin 拂菻 (Rome) is first found in the *Jiu-Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Hirth 1885, 51).

5 “... because identification makes no sense outside relationships, whether between individuals or groups, there are hierarchies of scales of preference ...” (Jenkins 2008, 6).

6 “It is a process—*identification*—not a ‘thing’. It is not something one can *have*, or not; it is something that one *does*” (Jenkins 2008, 5).

7 I am using a twofold scheme of identity. The mediaevalist Walter Pohl has, with full justification, used a threefold one for identification: “1) a personal act of expressing allegiance to a social group; 2) the collective self-representation of a group through its speakers or as a collective; and 3) the classification of social groups by outsiders” (Pohl 2013, 3). In my particular context here, I would argue that Pohl’s 1) is hardly traceable in the sources available, while 2) and 3) are represented quite considerably.

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of influence,<sup>8</sup> and spoke (Iranian) languages which may (or may not) have been intercomprehensible? Or was it not rather a situational identity which played out in cases where we have references to such one? Do we have to conceptualize the different Christian communities in the different regions in Tang China as being separated according to their ethnic, linguistic and / or cultural belonging or did they have a common “religious” identity as Christians? Did, for instance, Sogdian Christians in the Eastern capital of Luoyang have the same Christian identity as the Persian Christian soldiers or administrators in the Western capital of Chang’an? Did they go to the same services but then go different social and cultural ways?

I certainly will not, and will not be able to, even attempt answering all these questions, but I think that it is useful to keep them in mind when dealing with such a complex historical situation as the one of the Christian community / communities in Tang China, observable over a period of almost two centuries from the first half of the seventh to the beginning of the ninth century. [7]

## Multiple Identity in the Xi’an Stele and Other Christian Documents?

The Xi’an stele expresses the ‘multiple identity’ referred to earlier quite visually, being Chinese in the major epigraphic part, and Christian through the symbol of the cross and the Syriac script. Visually, at least, there is no Persian or Iranian cultural element. But the list of non-Chinese names at the end of the stele, written in Estrangelo, which was analysed by Jean Dauvillier (in Pelliot 1984), Erica Hunter (2009) and others, shows a mix of Syriac-Christian and traditional Iranian elements. Without putting too much weight on onomastic evidence, such a pattern of names clearly reflects the embeddedness of the Christian community in Iranian or Persian culture, which was prevalent, as Richard Payne (2015) has observed, at least during the Sasanian period. Of seventy-odd names in the list, the majority of which are, of course, of Christian-Biblical origin, five are completely Iranian (Mahdadgūšnasp, Abay / Ābōy (?), Izadspās, Pūsay, Gīgōy / Gūgay (?)) and three are (hybrid) Syro-Iranian (Mšihā-dad, Īšō-dad 2x). And even though the ‘author’ or initiator of the stele inscription, Jingjing, has an *ur*-Christian name, Adam, his father’s name, Yisi 伊斯, is thoroughly Iranian: Yazbōzīd.<sup>9</sup> [8]

If we turn now to another epigraphic document, the newly discovered Christian *dhārānī* pillar from Luoyang, discovered in 2006, the community reflected in it obviously has a different linguistic-ethnic basis. The ethnonymic “family” names (An 安 = Bukhara, Mi 米 = Māymurgh-Panjikent, Kang 康 = Samarkand) given in the historical part of this documents reveal that their bearers were Central Asian Sogdians.<sup>10</sup> From the evidence gained so far, one could conclude that the community members in Luoyang were Sogdians<sup>11</sup> and the ones in Chang’an were from Persia proper and from Bactria. There is, however, evidence that Sogdi- [9]

8 On imperial identity in Rome, Sasanian Iran and China, see Canepa (2010). As will become clear from what follows, I do not agree with what I consider an over-emphasis on imperial ideology and agenda in relation to the Jingjiao community promoted by Godwin (2018).

9 On Yisi, see Deeg (2013).

10 尉亡妣安國氏太夫人神道及亡師伯和。尉亡妣安國氏太夫人神道及亡師伯和。大秦寺寺主法和玄應俗姓米，威儀大德玄慶俗姓米，九階大德志通俗姓康。 (toponyms set in bold by me). See also Nicolini-Zani (2013, 150–53), Ge (2013, 170–73), Chen (2009, 206). The most detailed study of the Sogdians is De la Vaissière (2005). On the use of the regional “surnames” in Chinese, see Skaff (2003, 478–81), and on Sogdian names, Yoshida (2003).

11 See the analysis of the foreign names in Luoyang between the seventh and the tenth century in Zhang (2013, 194).

ans were members of the Chang'an community, too: an epitaph of the high-ranking Sogdian Mi Jifen 米繼芬 (†805) mentions the deceased younger son who was a monk (*seng* 僧) named Siyuan 思圓 in the Daqin-monastery.<sup>12</sup> Even if this name is not found in the list of names on the stele's inscription, it shows that the community in Chang'an indeed consisted of members from different Iranian groups.

So, what was the identity of the Christian communities other than Christian? In order to begin answering this question, we will have to go back to the beginning of Christianity during the reign of emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 626–649) in the version of the Jingjiao community of Chang'an. The legendary first Christian priest arriving in the Tang capital of Chang'an in the year 635, Chin. Aluoben 阿羅本 (Early Middle Chinese \*ʔa-la-pən<sup>13</sup>), carries a Persian name—if my reconstruction is correct and this is a Chinese phonetic rendering of the Persian name Ardabān (see Deeg 2007, 416–17, 2009, 147–48). The stele describes his advent as follows:

The 'Cultivated' emperor *Taizong* (635–649) [made the realm] shine and prosper, made accessible the course of things [and] approached people as a brilliant and wise [ruler]. [At that time] there was a venerable one called *Aluoben* in the kingdom of *Daqin*. [After he] had interpreted the azure clouds and had loaded up the 'True *Sūtras*', had observed the 'Tunes of the Wind'<sup>14</sup> [and] thereby penetrated beyond the adversities [of the journey] he arrived in Chang'an in the ninth year of [the era] *Zhenguan* (635) nach *Chang'an*.<sup>15</sup>

## The Problem of Daqin and Bosi

The quoted text clearly states that Aluoben hailed from Daqin 大秦, and this toponym has created a *crux* for interpreters. Usually, Daqin is taken to refer either to Palestine / Syria or to Byzantium.<sup>16</sup> It has to be acknowledged, however, that the toponyms in texts such as the Tang Christian ones cannot be localized in absolute terms: while the stele clearly states that Jesus Christ was born in Daqin (see below), another Christian text, the Xuting-Mishihe-suo-jing 序聽迷詩所經, the so-called "Sūtra of the Messiah," states that he was born in the city of Jerusalem in Fulin 拂林 / EMC \*p<sup>h</sup>ut-lim, which normally refers to Rom / Byzantium.<sup>17</sup> Daqin, in a Tang-Christian context, seems to mean a wider and non-specified region which includes Persia: Aluoben very likely came from the heartland of his Church in Sasanian Mesopotamia,

12 公有二男，長曰國進，任右神威軍散將，寧遠將軍，守京兆府崇仁府折冲都尉同正。幼曰僧思圓，住大秦寺。 ("The lord had two sons, the eldest being called Guojin [who] holds the position of a Nominal General of the Powerful Army to the Right, general of Ningyuan, protecting the capital prefecture, equal to a commander repulsing the enemy of the Chongren prefecture. The younger [son] is called Monk Siyuan [and] lives in the Daqin-Monastery," see Ge and Nicolini-Zani 2004, 183–86).

13 I am using Pulleyblank's reconstruction of Early Middle Chinese (EMC) (Pulleyblank 1991).

14 The passage alludes to a report about a (fictive) mission of the Central Asian Yuezhi 月支 to the court of Han Wudi 漢武帝 in Dong Fangshuo's 東方朔 (154–93 BCE) Hainei-shizhou-ji 海內十洲記, "Report on the Ten Islands in the Ocean" (Deeg 2018, 111–114n90).

15 太宗文皇帝，光華啟運，明聖臨人，大秦國有上德，曰阿羅本，占青雲而載真經，望風律以馳艱險。貞關九祀，至於長安。 All translations from Chinese are my own unless indicated otherwise. For more details about the stele and its interpretation, see Deeg (2018).

16 See e.g. Leslie and Gardner (1982, 298) and Leslie and Gardiner (1996); Yu (2013); Lieu (2013). I disagree with the positivist approach of these authors, who take into account neither historical changes in the view and concept of Daqin nor the highly legendary and topical nature of it (although Lieu calls the reports on Daqin "utopistic").

17 This Fulin is different from the one mentioned in the epitaph of the Persian Tang official Aluohan 阿羅憾 and discussed in Forte (1996a) and Abramson (2008, 185–86). Hirth (1913, 199), in a fanciful interpretation of the name, even suggested it to be a transliteration of Bethlehem.



with its patriarch sitting in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and not from the Levant. This can further be substantiated by the description of Daqin in the stele inserted between the edict of Taizong discussed later and a very positive description of the rule of the Tang under Taizong and his son and successor Gaozong 高宗 (628–683; r. 649–683):

According to the ‘Illustrated Records of the Western Regions’ and the historical books of the Han and the Wei the kingdom of the Great Qin rules over the coral sea in the South, reaches as far as the jewel mountains in the North, looks at the regions of the immortals in the West and at the forest of flowers, [and] touches the ‘strong winds’ and the ‘weak water’ in the East. Its ground produces fire-washed cloth, incense [that] brings back the souls, bright lunar pearls and jewels shining in the night. Its customs are not felonious, [and] people [there] are happy. Only what is luminous can be followed as a law; only he can be in power who has virtue. The realm is vast, [and] the savants [there] are splendid.<sup>18</sup>

[13]

As far as the self-constructed identity of the Christian community (or communities) in the Empire is concerned, the importance of this passage, already highlighted by its position between the ruling periods of the first two Tang emperors, who allegedly supported Christianity, has been, as far as I can see, overlooked so far. It is not clear which “Illustrated Records of the Western Regions” (Xiyu-tu-ji 西域圖記), of the few we know to have existed, is meant, nor why the “Abridged [History] of the Wei”, Weilüe 魏略, compiled by Yu Huan 魚豢 between 239 and 265, is quoted. But a comparison of this passage with the description of Daqin in the Hou-Hanshu 後漢書 (compiled by Fan Ye 范曄 in the fifth century), which contains the first account of Daqin and consists of a lot of topical elements, is interesting. The passage contains traditional elements of Chinese ethno-geography linked to Daqin, but also clearly shows elements that suit Persia or a wider sphere of Iran better than the Syro-Palestinian region or Byzantium. In the schematic description of the borders of Daqin in the four cardinal directions, for instance, the “Coral Sea” as the southern border seems to refer to the Red Sea and/or the Arabian Sea, and the “Jewel Mountains” are situated in the North and are rather related to Persia than to Syria-Palestine or Byzantium. And while strange and miraculous goods like “the fire-washed cloth, incense [that] brings back the souls, bright lunar pearls and jewels shining in the night”<sup>19</sup> are indeed taken from the Hou-Hanshu (and repeated in later histori-

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18 案西域圖記及漢魏史策，大秦國，南統珊瑚之海，北極眾寶之山；西望仙境花林，東接長風弱水。其土出火浣布，返魂香，明月珠，夜光璧。俗無寇盜，人有樂康。法非景不行，主非德不立；土宇廣闊，文物昌明。This passage is discussed, amongst others, by Lieu (2016) and Lieu (2015, 8). On the details of this passage see Deeg (2018, 128n116). On the meaning “savants” of the term *wenwu* 文物 see Deeg (2018, 137n127); I am aware of recent scholarly discussions of Persian / Iranian influence on Tang China in areas such as astronomy, medicine and administration, but it is difficult to specify the impact of this on the self-identity of the Jingjiao community in the sources other than in the case of Yisi, which I have discussed in Deeg (2013).

19 The products listed in the Hou-Hanshu are more various: 土多金銀奇寶，有夜光璧、明月珠、駭雞犀、珊瑚、虎魄、琉璃、琅玕、朱丹、青碧。刺金縷繡，織成金縷罽、雜色綾。作黃金塗、火浣布。又有細布，或言水羊毳，野蠶繭所作也。合會諸香，煎其汁以為蘇合。（“The land produces gold, silver [and other] precious items; there are ‘jewels shining in the night’, ‘bright lunar pearls,’ *hajixi* (lit.: ‘cock-frightening rhinoceros’), corals, amber, crystals, pearl stones, vermillion, emerald; [they] split gold into threads [for] embroidery [which they] weave into gold-threaded cloth and into multi-coloured damask silk; [they make] a paste from gold and ‘fire-washed cloth’. There is also a fine cloth which some say is made of water sheep hair or wild silkworm cocoons. [They] mix all kinds of incense, [and when] its essence is simmered it becomes *suhe*[-incense],” see also Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 49–50.) It is clear that the borders of the kingdom in the stele text are partially constructed/extracted from this report: the Coral Sea and the Jewel Mountain. The ‘incense bringing back the souls’ (*fanhun-xiang* 返魂香) is already referred to in the “Record of the

ographies), the first item, the “fire-washed cloth,” referring to asbestos, was linked to Persia at the time of the Tang (Schafer 1963, 199–200; Laufer 1919, 498–501).<sup>20</sup>

It is obvious that the stele text uses the information from the Hou-Hanshu to construe Daqin’s confines in a more schematic way, which allows including Persian / Iranian territory in the realm of Daqin by inverting the position of the ‘weak water,’ placed at the extreme West of Daqin in the Hou-Hanshu, to the eastern border of Daqin.<sup>21</sup> The extended expression “strong winds and weak water” and earlier references to “weak water” being positioned between China and the Persian Empire leaves no doubt of such an intended reconceptualization of Daqin in the stele inscription.

The wider extension of Persia and some other points are also echoed in an entry in Huilin’s 慧琳 (737–820) Buddhist dictionary *Yiqiejing-yinyi* 一切經音義 (“Sounds and Meanings of All Sūtras”) on the name of the kingdom in the Abhidharmakośa(-śāstra) / Apidamo-jushe-lun 阿毘達磨俱舍論, which obviously locates the western border of Persia on the Mediterranean (*xihai* 西海, “Western Ocean”):

Bolasi: [*la* has] the *fan[qie] lan* + *ge*; also called Bosi or called Bosi;<sup>22</sup> this is the name of a kingdom; it is adjacent to the ‘Western Ocean’; it has plenty of rare jewels; the merchants of all kingdoms [come to] take [and] sell them because from the past [these jewels] were praised because of [their] supernatural, special power.<sup>23</sup>

## Persian Identity (Almost) Concealed

That there was a shift from a more Persian, i.e. Sasanian, identity to a more general and broader concept of origin from the early time of Christianity in the Tang Empire and the late eighth century becomes clear when we compare, based on Antonino Forte’s excellent analysis (Forte 1996a), the version of emperor Taizong’s edict regarding the treatment of Aluoben and the new religion on the stele with the one found in chapter 49 of the Tang-huiyao 唐會要 (“Collected Essential [Documents] of the Tang”) In the inscription the edict reads as follows:

The *bhadanta* (*dade* 大德) Aluoben from the kingdom of *Daqin* brought *sūtras* and statues from afar in order to present them in the Supreme Capital. [After] the essence of the teaching has been clarified [we acknowledged that it] is mysterious and subtle, reposed in itself. [After we] beheld their ancestor [we recognized that he] has yielded the means for the repulsion [of evil forces]. [As for] the words there are no superfluous explanations, [and] the principles contain the ‘Oblivion of

Ten Islands” (Shizhou-ji 十洲記) of the proto-Daoist 東方朔 (first century BCE?) and is called a “reviving mixture” (*suhe* 蘇合: storax) here and in later sources (see Laufer 1919, 456–60).

20 The gold-woven brocade mentioned before asbestos is also rather linked to Persia than to Syria-Palestine (Laufer 1919, 488).

21 或云其國西有弱水、流沙，近西王母所居處，幾於日所入也。“Some say that to the West of this kingdom there is the ‘weak water’ and the ‘flowing sands’ [which] are close to the place where the Queen-Mother of the West (Xiwang-mu 西王母) resides, almost at the place where the sun sets.”

22 *bolasi* 波刺私 / \**pa-lat-si*, is Xuanzang’s version of the name; *bosi* 波斯 / \**pa-si*. The second Bosi, identical in the text, originally was probably written as a phonetic variant 波私 / \**pa-si*, as found in T.1552.894a.12f., the \**Samyuktābhidharmahṛdaya-śāstra* / *Za-apitan-xin-lun* 雜阿毘曇心論 by Dharmatrāta / Fajiu 法救 and translated by Saṅghavarman (fl. 433-442)?

23 T.2128.766c.2f. 波刺私：闍葛反，亦言波斯，或云波斯，國名也。臨近西海，最饒奇寶，諸國賈人皆取其貨，斯以龍威殊力古者推焉耳。

the Weir<sup>24</sup>. [This teaching] salvages the living beings [and] benefits the people—it is appropriate to spread [it] in the realm. The respective institutions [are] to construct a Daqin-monastery in the Yining-district of the capital, [and] twenty-one monks are to be ordained.<sup>25</sup>

In the Tang-huiyao, which, according to Forte, preserved most of the original wording of the original edict, relevant passages consequently replace Bosi 波斯, “Persia,” with Daqin,<sup>26</sup> so that there is only a single but significant passage mentioning Bosi on the entire stele, which I will discuss below. [20]

The renaming of the “Persian teaching” and its institutional representation had clear advantages for the Christian communities in China as a name originally derived from Parthia (Persis), Bosi / EMC \**pa-si*, referring to the Sasanian Empire before its fall. This is clearly expressed, as Forte emphasizes, in another edict from the year 745 found in the Tang-huiyao: [21]

The text and teaching of Persia originated in Daqin, came after being transmitted and practiced [in Persia], and have long since circulated in China. Thus, it was when first the monasteries were built [in China], that they were accordingly named [Monasteries of Persia]. Wishing to show men that it is necessary to learn their origin, for the Monasteries of Persia in the two capital it is proper that their [name] is changed into Monasteries of Daqin. As for those established in the superior prefectures and commanderies of the Empire, they too should conform to this.<sup>27</sup> [22]

As mentioned before, there is only one interesting occurrence of Bosi in the stele text. It is found in the very short description of the birth of Jesus: [23]

Thereupon the divided body of our trinity, the luminous venerated Mishihe (Messiah), unfolding his true power, became like human [and] appeared in the world. Divine beings announced the joyful news [that] an unwed maiden in [the land] of Daqin had born a Saint. A brilliant star displayed the auspicious signs, and Persia, having seen the radiance, came to present [her] bounties.<sup>28</sup> [24]

It clearly was important to the ‘author’ of the stele to make a link between the place of birth of the Messiah in Daqin and Persia / Bosi: Christ was born in Daqin, but the message of his birth arrived in Persia, which sent its (semi-official?) envoys to venerate the saviour of the world—while the Christian textual tradition about the visit of the three *magi* (Matthew 2.1ff.) only gives a vague direction “from the East.” [25]

The only explanation for such an internal “inconsistency”—otherwise having deleted all references to Bosi and using Daqin instead—is that there was a strong feeling of identity on part of the community that the place of their home Church in former Sasanian Persia had [26]

24 *wangquan* 忘筌: This refers to the famous statement in the Zhuangzi 莊子 that one should abandon the tool as soon as one has achieved one’s goal, in this case the Dao (see Deeg 2018, 119–120n101).

25 大秦國大德阿羅本，遠將經像，來獻上京。詳其教旨，玄妙無為；觀其元宗，生成立要。詞無繁說，理有忘筌；濟物利人，宜行天下。所司即於京義寧坊，造大秦寺一所，度僧廿一人。

26 波斯僧阿羅本，遠將經教，來獻上京。詳其教旨，元妙無為；生成立要，濟物利人，宜行天下所司，即於義寧坊建寺一所，度僧廿一人。

27 波斯經教出自大秦，傳習而來，久行中國。爰初建寺，因以為名。將欲示人，必修其本。其兩京波斯寺宜改為大秦寺，天下諸府郡置者亦準此。(translation by Forte 1996b, 354)

28 久迷休復，於是 我三一分身，景尊彌施詞，戢隱真威，同人出代；神天宣慶，室女誕聖於大秦，景宿告祥，波斯伺耀以來貢。(see Deeg 2018, 88n49)



played a significant role in the soteriological story from the very beginning; the episode of Persia presenting gifts to the newborn saviour could not be left out, even though other major parts of the narrative were,<sup>29</sup> but there was also no way to call this region Daqin. In light of this self-perception, the parallelistic structure of the inscription seems to reflect this importance: as the star in the birth narrative of the Messiah attracted the Persian envoys to the place of birth, the ominous signs of the wind attracted the first Christian propagator Aluoben to China.<sup>30</sup> In this context, the underlying identity of the community comes to the fore: they were culturally Iranian (Persian), more or less integrated in their Chinese environment, and religiously Christian (Daqin)—like a medieval person may have been Franc (Carolingian Empire) culturally and linguistically but Christian (Rome, Jerusalem) religiously, or a Chinese Buddhist would be Chinese culturally but ‘Indian’ religiously.

After the fall of the Sasanian empire, it did not really make sense any more to refer to a polity (Bosi) that had already ceased to exist by the time the stele was erected. To replace it with the more inclusive and, in the Chinese context, connotationally preloaded toponym Daqin had some advantages: it reflected a coherent community of Christians, disregarding their linguistic, regional or cultural origin or affiliation such as Persian, Sogdian, Bactrian, etc., clearly demarcated Christianity from the Manichaeans. Daqin also enabled Christians to distance themselves from the pejorative notions that were connected to the name Bosī as reflected in Buddhist and historiographical sources; these notions included Persians to be violent, materialistic and without etiquette (*li* 禮) as well as to be committed to deviant practices such as abandoning the bodies of their dead and engaging in incestuous marriage (see Silk 2008, 2009, 82ff.; Deeg forthcoming).<sup>31</sup>

[27]

## Conclusion

The change of the identity of provenance from Bosī to Daqin probably was based on political

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29 The Mishihe-suo-jing mentions the star but has no reference to Persia, the presents or the envoys: 天尊在於天上，普著天地，當產移鼠·迷師訶。所在世間居，見明果在於天地，辛星居知在於天上，星大如車輪，明淨所天尊處。一爾前後生於拂林國，烏梨師劍城中，當生彌師訶。(“The Heavenly Worthy is residing up in Heaven, [and in order] to appear in Heaven and on earth [he] will generate Yishu (Jesus), the Mishihe (Messiah). [Through his] existence in the world as a result there was brightness in Heaven and on earth; the star was as big as a wagon wheel and brightly shone where the Heavenly Worthy resided. When thus it was the [appropriate] time [the Heavenly Worthy] caused Mishihe to be born in the kingdom of Fulin (Rome), in the city of Wulishilian (Jerusalem).”); my translation differs from Tang (2001, 154). Here Fulin obviously refers to the Levant as part of the East Roman Empire—a usage which is indirectly supported by a list of plant names in Duan Chengshi’s 段成式 Youyang-zazu 酉陽雜俎 (ca. 860), where the Syriac names are given in the “language of Fulin” (Takahashi, n.d., 8–9; see also already Laufer 1919, 435). The use of Fulin may point to the text’s origin before the issuing of the imperial edict changing Bosī to Daqin. In the Daqin-jingjiao-xuan-yuanzhiben-jing 大秦景教宣元至本經, “Sūtra of Propagating the Origin of Origin of the Jingjiao from Daqin,” the text also found on the Luoyang stele, the nomenclature fixed by the edict is kept: 時景通法王在大秦國那薩羅城。(“At that time the king of the Law Jingtong (‘Penetrating Radiance’) dwelled in the city of Nasaluo (Nazareth) in the kingdom of Daqin”).

30 This mediatory situation of Persia being situated between Daqin and China is also reflected in another Chinese Christian text, the Yishen-lun 一神論, “Treatise of One God,” where the omnipresence of God is compared with the fact that there is no real spatial or temporal boundary between these three realms: 喻如從此至波斯，亦如從波斯至拂林，無接界時節。(“... to be compared [with the situation that] from here (i.e. China) to Persia and also like from Persia to Fulin there are no [real] common boundaries [and no] time distance.”); see also Lieu 2015). This statement is interesting insofar as it seems to emphasize the soteriological links between the three realms, China—Persia—Rome / Byzantium.

31 Note also that this negative Chinese view may also have concerned the Sogdians: they are described very negatively by the famous traveller monk Xuanzang 玄奘 in his Datang-Xiyu-ji 大唐西域記, “Record of the Western Regions of the Great Tang” (submitted to the throne in the year 646).

calculation: at a time when the Persian (Sasanian) empire had ceased to exist, and with the increasingly sceptical attitude towards Iranians in Tang-China after the disastrous An Lushan 安祿山 rebellion (755–763),<sup>32</sup> such a shift to a more neutral but at the same time more positive self-identity combined of different elements (culture, religion, language, ethnicity) may have proved potentially helpful to claim a partial Chinese identity. Very likely, most Chinese *literati* were aware of the parallel drawn between the Daqin in the West and China—China’s first emperor’s dynasty bore this name, and it was still used as the title for imperial Tang princes: Qin-wang was the princely title of emperor Taizong. Such a parallel between China and Daqin, presented almost like an identification, is encountered first in the Hou-Hanshu, and then repeated in most of the later historiographical sources: “The people of [Daqin] are tall and [grown] straight and even and are of the same kind as [the people] of the Middle Kingdom, and this is why [the country] is called Daqin.”<sup>33</sup>

Adopting the identity marker Daqin not only allowed a higher degree of “sinification” for Iranian Christians in the Tang empire, but at the same time also allowed them to claim an origin from the wider region in which, according to their own tradition, their Messiah was born. In the context of the contemporary realm of the Abbasid caliphate, where the centre of their mother Church in Seleukia-Ctesiphon was located, this notion of a “wider” Daqin, comprising the former Sasanian empire and the Levant, even made sense politically, although this certainly was not of any concern for the Chinese authorities but rather for the Church herself. In China, the ambiguity and almost mythical vagueness of the topographical term Daqin allowed for both an integrated and at the same time more individual identity of a religious diaspora community than a claimed Persian (Bosi) origin would have been able to deliver.

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32 On the An Lushan rebellion and its impact, see Pulleyblank ([1976] 2018), and Forte (1999).  
 33 其人民皆長大平正，有類中國，故謂之大秦。

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