

A Question of Buddhist Syncretism or Authentic East Syrian Christianity in Li Tang's Translation of *The Book of Mysterious Peace and Joy*

Susan Gorin-Johnson

Since the discovery of the East Syrian Christian documents of Dunhuang in the early twentieth century, the subject matter of many of the texts has often been compared to Buddhist and Daoist writings and regarded as heavily influenced by these traditions, or perhaps even falling into some form of syncretism. An extreme example is that of the eighth-century document, *Book on Mysterious Peace and Joy*, attributed to the Church of the East missionary monk Jingjing or Adam. Throughout the work, parallels to Buddhist or Daoist concepts of stillness, non-action, and enlightenment are so striking that scholars such as the contemporary translator of the East Syrian texts, Li Tang, for example, question whether this particular text should even be considered a Christian work.¹ While there is no doubt that East Syrian texts such as *The Book on Mysterious Peace and Joy* share many similarities with Buddhist and Daoist texts and often borrow their terminologies, this does not rule out the very real possibility that the content could also be an authentic representation of East Syrian Christian traditions of inner prayer and asceticism whose similarities to Buddhism and Daoism have been put to use for the purpose of proselytization.

¹ Li Tang, *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China and its Literature in Chinese: Together with a New English Translation of the Dunhuang Nestorian Documents* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002), 142.

When East Syrian missionaries arrived in China during the eighth century, Buddhism had already been firmly established in the country, allowing numerous opportunities for the interaction of the two traditions. The Nestorian stele unearthed at Xi'an shows the disproportionate numbers of East Syrian and Buddhist monastic populations which "reveals the extent to which Buddhism had put down roots in China, in contrast with the monks from *Daqin* (Syria) and *Muhuba* (Persia), who are considered as foreigners. The text only mentions 3,000 monks of the Syrian Church of the East, compared with 260,000 Buddhist monks and nuns."² The conditions on which this Christian group was allowed into the Chinese kingdom were the same as those for Buddhists entering China almost a century before. This led to a mutual feeling of understanding between the two groups, since both went through the same trials of establishing a presence in the country and attempting to evangelize the population. Not only did the two share similar backgrounds in trying to begin a new life in China as followers of a foreign religion: they also had multiple opportunities for contact during their travels. According to Li Tang, the location where the East Syrian documents were found provided ample opportunities for religious collaboration and dialogue since "in the 7th century, Dunhuang played an important role in the Tang Dynasty ... as a meeting place [on the Silk Road] for merchants and religious groups from central and western Asia, India, and China ... making Dunhuang a flourishing religious as well as cultural center."³

This contact was not restricted to Dunhuang but continued throughout China all the way to the capital in Chang'an from the seventh to the ninth centuries. As a result, "Christian translations benefited from the collaboration of late Tang Buddhists, and perhaps others. This practice of cultural exchange and dialogue is evident in the *jingjiao* documents."⁴ For Mat-

² Jean Charbonnier, *Christians in China: A.D. 600 to 2000* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007), 67.

³ Tang, *History of Nestorian Christianity*, 104.

⁴ Matteo Nicolini-Zani, "Jesuit *Jingjiao*: The Appropriation of Tang Christianity by Jesuit Missionaries in the Seventeenth Century," in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in*

teo Nicolini-Zani and others, it is evident that once the East Syrian monks arrived they would need assistance in translating texts into Chinese from their native Syriac and Buddhists proved to be the ideal guides as Buddhism had been a relatively recent addition in China and had established strong roots in the country. The translation of Christian texts was something embedded in the missionary background of the Church of the East since its native Edessa had been a meeting point for various cultures and theological minds of the Middle East.⁵ Such a background in translation likely prepared the East Syrian missionaries in translating their work into Chinese but their knowledge of the language must have been weak in the mission's beginning. Baum and Winkler state that between 782 and 788, "an Indian scholar named Pradschna came to Xian, where, with the help of the 'Persian' monk Kingtsing (Adam) of the Ta-Tsin monastery, he translated texts from Uigher. It is said that he translated numerous Christian texts into Chinese."⁶ Baum and Winkler are not the only scholars to write of this particular encounter between the East Syrian monk Kingtsing (Jingjing) and Pradschna (Prajna), the Indian Buddhist monk. Tang also notes in his book that Prajna and Jingjing worked together to translate the Indian philosophical text *Satparamita Sutra* into Chinese.⁷ Such examples of literary collaborations proved that missionaries from Buddhism and Christianity were benefitting from this unique form of scholarly exchange to succeed in their own religious goals.

Partly as a result of these interactions during collaborative translations, many components of East Syrian texts, such as literary style and terminology, are indebted to Buddhist and Daoist terminology and concepts. Among sources relating to the East Syrian or Nestorian documents, there seems to be an overall agreement that the literary style and form of the writings were often modeled on those of the preceding Buddhist

China and Central Asia, ed. Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 47.

⁵ Tang, *History of Nestorian Christianity*, 59.

⁶ Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 49.

⁷ Tang, *History of Nestorian Christianity*, 111.