

Buddhism, Taoism and the eighth-century Chinese term for Christianity: a response to recent work by A. Forte and others

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Although the presence of Nestorian Christianity in China under the Tang dynasty is a familiar enough matter to students of religion, many scholars in Chinese studies were until very recently reluctant to undertake substantial research into this topic, for the very good reason that they had been expecting the appearance of posthumous work on one of our main sources for this episode by Paul Pelliot (1878–1945), who was probably the greatest Asianist of the twentieth century.¹ In 1984 Pelliot's translation of the source in question, the 'Nestorian stele of Xian', originally erected in 781 but first rediscovered in the seventeenth century, was actually published as part of a posthumous publication by another scholar, J. Dauvillier, who had been concerned primarily with the Syriac portions of the stele inscription. Since, however, Dauvillier's volume did not include any of Pelliot's copious notes to his translation, sinological scholarship was not substantially advanced by the appearance of this monograph.²

At last, however, Antonino Forte, who had initiated a series of epigraphic monographs at the Italian School of East Asian Studies in Kyoto, succeeded in 1996 in bringing Pelliot's complex manuscript, with its many scrawled marginal annotations, to publication, an endeavour which clearly involved a great deal of editorial work, for all the assistance that is generously acknowledged.³ Not unnaturally, this remarkable achievement formed the main contribution of recent date to the Tang section of the subsequent *Handbook of Christianity in China*, Vol. I, published under the editorship of N. Standaert in 2001, though most recently another volume, by Martin Palmer, has appeared which has unfortunately not consulted either Forte's work or the review of the state of the field in the *Handbook*.⁴ Of course, some compromises were necessary in retrieving Pelliot's study—no one, it seems, was prepared to undertake the work of producing a general index for such a complex volume, nor yet a general bibliography. Forte's own contributions, by contrast, are scrupulously provided with individual bibliographies throughout.

For by discovering the extent of Pelliot's researches—virtually definitive on the history of Chinese and Western studies of the stele up to Pelliot's time, but only preliminary or even missing on some other topics mentioned, such as the Prester John question—Forte has been able in areas of particular personal

¹ In evidence we may now cite Hartmut Walravens, *Paul Pelliot (1878–1945): his life and works—a bibliography* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 2001).

² Paul Pelliot, *Recherches sur les chrétiens d'Asie centrale et d'Extrême-Orient*, vol. II. 1, *La stèle de Si-ngan-fou* (Oeuvres posthumes de Paul Pelliot éditées par la fondation Singer-Polignac, présentées et commentées par J. Dauvillier). Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1984.

³ Paul Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne de Si-ngan-fou* (Edited with Supplements by Antonino Forte), Kyoto: Scuola di Studi sull'Asia Orientale; and Paris: Collège de France/Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1996.

⁴ N. Standaert, *Handbook of Christianity in China*, Volume One: 635–1800 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001). Pp. 1–42, cover the Tang; the detailed table of contents appended to the work assigns the responsibility for this very useful survey to Pénélope Riboud. Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras: rediscovering the lost religion of Taoist Christianity* (London: Piatkus, 2001), is aimed at a more general readership than the academic studies otherwise used here, and so must be credited at least with having brought Tang Christianity back to wider public notice.

interest to enlarge upon Pelliot's results, notably through an examination of the 638 edict on Christianity; a reconsideration of the foreign dignitary Aluohan active during the time of the Empress Wu and involved in the erection of an 'Axis of the Sky' in her capital; an investigation of the Chongfu Monastery and its relations to Nestorianism; and finally a study of the literary model for the stele, since it was based of course on a prototype in the *Wenxuan* anthology.

The following remarks for their part take up a fairly restricted and trivial instance where some expansion of Forte's research has in turn proved possible. They are offered in the hope that others will feel encouraged to absorb the excellent scholarship of both Forte and Pelliot and to use it to pursue more substantial studies of this early phase in the history of East–West contacts. For, as Palmer's work is the most recent to attest, the Nestorian episode has exercised a persistent fascination in both Asia and Europe for almost four centuries.

Throughout the volume he has edited Forte touches from place to place on an edict of 745 which did not attract particular attention from Pelliot, since it is not mentioned in the recapitulatory history of Christianity in China contained in the stele, but which is none the less quite important to its interpretation, since it concerns a change of nomenclature for the religion which entailed the rewriting of earlier documents, to say nothing of providing the key term in the title of the stele itself. As Forte is at pains to demonstrate, before 745 Christianity was always known as 'Bose jiao', the 'Persian teaching', but thereafter it became 'Da Qin jiao', the 'Teaching of Great Qin', adopting a geographical term already centuries old used to label our own classical world of Greece and Rome as it appeared to Chinese eyes.⁵

His own explanation for this change is assuredly not inaccurate: he simply states: 'The decision of 745 may have been adopted just because by that time official Persian backing of the religion had already ceased. That was quite normal given the collapse of the country and the loss of any hope that the Sassanian dynasty would be restored'.⁶ Similar reasons—or at least reasons connected to international diplomacy, and the need to seek Christian co-operation in the face of the loss of Persia to the Arabs—have indeed been offered by other scholars over the years, but no one has yet examined the full range of implications of the move.⁷

It is, of course, true that the notion that states might be doomed by a

⁵ Exactly which parts of our classical world were in view seems to have varied from time to time, and at any particular time turn out to be, as we shall see, often rather hard to determine with any exactitude. The most recent survey of the matter is D. D. Leslie and K. J. H. Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese sources* (Rome: Bardi Editore, 1996), though this does not take into account the rather different conclusions of another major survey, Michael S. Kordosis, 'China and the Greek world: an introduction to Greek–Chinese studies with special reference to the Chinese sources', *Historicogeographica* 3 (1989–90; published Thessalonike, 1991), pp. 143–279.

⁶ Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne*, p. 364.

⁷ Samuel Lieu, on p. 54 of his recent survey of East–West relations at the time, 'Byzantium, Persia and China: interstate relations on the eve of the Islamic conquest', in David Christian and Craig Benjamin (ed.), *Silk Road studies IV, Realms of the Silk Roads: ancient and modern* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2000), pp. 47–65, agrees with Forte in stressing the need to sever any association with the defeated Sassanids, as does Donald Daniel Leslie, 'Persian temples in T'ang China', *Monumenta Serica* 35 (1981–1983), pp. 275–303; Qi Sihe, in his *Zhongguo he Baizhanting diguo de guanxi* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1956), pp. 35–6, while endorsing the earlier expression of this view, points out that the link between Christianity and Palestine—another area now in Arab hands—was deliberately obscured in favour of asserting the link between Nestorius and Byzantium: David Wilmshurst, on pp. 56–8 of his article 'The "Syrian Brilliant Teaching"', *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 30 (1990, published 1993), pp. 44–74, suspects rather an anti-Arab move to assert Chinese links with subject Christian populations in the Middle East under Muslim rule; Ian Gilman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), p. 270, highlight the need to distinguish Christianity from other 'Persian' religions such as Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism, though if this was an issue it was one that had long antedated the 740s.

decadent culture which might then go on to infect other states is a very ancient one in China, as the dramatic story in the *Han Fei Zi* of the ghostly, corrupting sounds of Shang dynasty music attests.⁸ But during the Tang this belief had become a polemical issue in the criticism of foreign religions because at the start of the dynasty the deleterious effect of Buddhism on the stability of Chinese government had been argued by the court official Fu Yi from the unstable history of the conspicuously devout regimes of the preceding centuries.⁹ We know that at least some of the polemical literature generated by the debates prompted by Fu at the start of the dynasty continued in mass circulation in the eighth century.¹⁰ We also know that Xuanzong (r. 712–56), the emperor who was persuaded to issue the decree changing the name of Christianity, had earlier established a tough reputation for curbing the power of Buddhism.¹¹ It would seem therefore quite likely that at least part of the motivation for Nestorian Christianity distancing itself from any association with the fallen power of Persia related to contemporary inter-religious polemical concerns.

But the same concerns may also be detected in the choice of alternative name, since by 745 the religion that Xuanzong was quite overtly promoting to new levels of integration with government was Taoism, the supposed founder of which, Laozi, was deemed to have been an ancestor to the Tang imperial line.¹² The biography of Laozi, in the form in which it was officially recognized by this point, in particular provides the link drawing together both domestic polemical issues and matters of international diplomacy. For from almost a millennium earlier it seems to have been accepted that Laozi was last seen leaving China travelling westwards into Inner Asia, and the arrival of Buddhism from the same direction two or three centuries later perhaps naturally prompted the thought that the new religion must have had something to do with Laozi's later activities.¹³ Eventually for the adherents of Taoism it became an article of faith that in fact Buddhism had originated from the preaching of Laozi, but that he had modified his message to suit the dull intellectual state of his barbarous audience, something which of course Buddhists denied strenuously. Indeed, bickering over this point had marked several polemical controversies during the reigns of Xuanzong's predecessors.¹⁴

And what has hitherto been insufficiently appreciated is that the country of Da Qin had in due course also been involved in these debates. Experts on Sino–Western relations are not unanimous in seeing early Chinese accounts of the Graeco–Roman world as tinged with utopian dreams of the existence a possible better society, but, as Henri Maspero discovered many years ago, Da Qin is mentioned in Taoist literature before the Tang precisely to provide an

⁸ Burton Watson, *Han Fei Tzu: basic writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 53–6.

⁹ This argument is summarized on p. 119 of A. F. Wright, 'Fu I and the rejection of Buddhism', as reprinted in his *Studies in Chinese Buddhism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 112–23.

¹⁰ See p. 22 of T. H. Barrett, 'Shinto and Taoism in early Japan', in John Breen and Mark Teeuwen (ed.), *Shinto in history* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), pp. 13–31.

¹¹ His actions are the subject of a detailed study by Tonami Mamoru, 'Policy towards the Buddhist church in the reign of T'ang Hsüan-tsung', *Acta Asiatica* 55 (1988), pp. 27–47.

¹² Details in T. H. Barrett, *Taoism under the T'ang* (London: Wellsweep, 1996), especially pp. 54–73.

¹³ A substantial monograph by Livia Kohn, *God of the Dao: Lord Lao in history and myth* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1998), has been devoted to the biography of Laozi; of particular relevance to the controversies touched upon here is the survey in ch. xii. The origins of the speculation concerning Laozi and the Buddha are expertly traced by Ofuchi Ninji, *Shoki no Dōkyō* (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1991), pp. 469–84.

¹⁴ Outlined in Barrett, *Taoism under the T'ang*, pp. 32, 33, 35, 46.

example of a specifically Taoist utopia.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, therefore, it turns out that by the Tang it was widely held that Da Qin had benefited from having been on Laozi's itinerary as well as India. It may be that this belief went back some way, since mention of it occurs today in the text of the *Liexian zhuan*, a work which, while not as old as its traditional attribution to a figure of the Former Han dynasty, still seems to have been in existence—though perhaps not in the same form as we now have it—before the end of the Later Han.¹⁶ It is in any case clear that the particular portion of text in its current state that mentions Da Qin existed in Tang times, since it is cited in a controversy over Laozi and the Buddha which took place at court in 696.¹⁷ That this visit to Da Qin had already come to be recognized in Tang times as part of the imperial ancestor's official itinerary may further be established from a work entitled the *Taishang hunyuan zhenlu*, which has been identified as reflecting a lost official biography from over a decade earlier than that.¹⁸

The connection thus cunningly established between Christianity and the hagiography of the divine ancestor of the Taoist emperor is further illustrated by the choice of site for the best-known Nestorian monastery outside the capital, a site first positively identified by Xiang Da in 1933 and now enthusiastically promoted by Martin Palmer.¹⁹ For it was built in very close proximity to the famous Taoist monastery known as the 'Louguan', the legendary starting point of Laozi's farewell journey from China and site of the earliest observances celebrating the link between the Tang dynasty and the immortal sage.²⁰ In the light of the evidence cited concerning Laozi and Da Qin, it would seem that this juxtaposition could hardly have been coincidental, especially if, as has been suggested by Gillman and Klimkeit, the monastery was not on a regular international trade route.²¹

Admittedly it is not until after the Tang, in 1086, that we find a biography of Laozi which asserts that he was responsible during his travels for converting, along with adherents of 95 other faiths, believers in the 'Messiah religion', using a Nestorian term, though the presumption is that this assertion dates back to the Tang period, since in the China of 1086 there is no sign of a

¹⁵ Note the recapitulation of earlier scholarship in Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese sources*, pp. 116–18.

¹⁶ Max Kaltenmark, *Le Lie-sien tchouan: biographies légendaires des immortels taoïstes de l'antiquité* (Peking and Paris: Publications du Centre d'Etudes Sinologiques de Peking, 1953), p. 61 and n. 9 on p. 64, translates and discusses this passage, though on p. 66 he warns that it may be interpolated in the original text, the overall transmission of which he discusses on pp. 3–4. The passage may be found in the current text, *Liexian zhuan* 1.4b (*Daozang* edition, Schipper no. 294).

¹⁷ This reference is preserved in Xie Shouhao, *Hunyuan sheng ji* 8.10a (*Daozang* edition, Schipper no. 770), which work of 1191 is dealt with by Kohn, *God of the Dao*, pp. 31–2. That Xie is here drawing ultimately on a genuine Tang source is confirmed by the note in the well-known Buddhist history, *Fozu tongji* 39, p. 370b (*Taishō Canon*, text no. 2035, in vol. XLIX).

¹⁸ For the *Taishang hunyuan zhenlu* and its relationship to official hagiography, see Kohn, *God of the Dao*, p. 23, summarizing the work of Kusuyama Haruki. The reference to Da Qin is in *Taishang hunyuan zhenlu* 19b (*Daozang* edition, Schipper no. 954).

¹⁹ Xiang Da's report is included in his *Tangdai Changan yu Xiyu wenming* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1979 reprint of 1957), pp. 110–17; Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras*, Ch. i, is devoted to 'The lost monastery'. A. C. Moule, *Nestorians in China* (London: The China Society, 1940), pp. 12–13, was not convinced that this was a Nestorian institution at all: he cites the *Fozu tongji* 39, p. 364a, for a Zoroastrian institution carrying the name Da Qin in 631, though the passage in question, the derivation of which is unclear, may well be misleading, especially judging from the pattern of terminology revealed in Donald Leslie, 'Persian temples in Tang China'.

²⁰ Barrett, 'Shinto and Taoism in early Japan', p. 21 and n. 27, explains the significance of the 'Louguan' in Tang times.

²¹ Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia*, p. 270. Even today, however, the area is far from inaccessible: for an account of a recent visit somewhat before that of Martin Palmer, see Bill Porter, *Road to Heaven: encounters with Chinese hermits* (London: Rider, 1994), Ch. iv. For the Tang period in particular the assertion in Gillman and Klimkeit would seem to be more than questionable.

Nestorian presence.²² Unfortunately a full consideration of this passage would involve comparison with similar mentions of Christianity amongst other heresies in Buddhist sources, a task of some complexity that I must defer for the moment.²³ But this inclusion of Christianity amongst the faiths rendered subject to Taoism by Laozi does put it in the same category not simply as Buddhism but as Manichaeism too, and in the case of that religion scholars have been forced to weigh up quite carefully whether this was the result of Taoist propaganda or of a Manichaean desire to appear to conform to an officially approved Chinese religion; Samuel Lieu, after examining the arguments, feels that the latter explanation is the more likely.²⁴ Is it possible that Christianity was, by adopting the name 'religion of Da Qin', following the same route?

The other possibility is, of course, that the name 'Da Qin' was used because it referred to somewhere real, with which the Nestorians wished to claim a useful connection. The obvious candidate is Byzantium, and that is the identification made much later in the hagiography of Laozi when proof is required that he went to Da Qin: envoys in caps and boots had arrived thence in Tang times, paid their respects to an image of Laozi, donated money to repair a monastery, and returned with a copy of Xuanzong's commentary on the *Daode jing*.²⁵ So if there is any truth in this, then the date implied must be after the emperor composed his commentary, in 732.²⁶ At the start of this tale a Tang encyclopedia, the *Tong dian*, compiled by Du You (735–812) in 801, is quoted to affirm the identity of Da Qin and Fulin, the Tang term for Byzantium.²⁷ Some have already suspected that, despite their theoretical status as heretics, the Nestorians in China were in contact with the Byzantines, who may well have appreciated the value of Nestorian local knowledge to their own aim of seeking a Chinese alliance against the Arabs.²⁸ Exactly when Da Qin and Byzantium (which was known to the Chinese from the early seventh century) came to be identified is unfortunately not a matter upon which precise information would appear to survive, though it would obviously have been to the advantage also of the Byzantines at the Tang court to claim to come from the continuation of an ancient Taoist utopia.

There is indeed some information about Byzantine embassies that tends to suggest that they actually tried to foster this image. For there were certain fabulous products of the West, which were originally associated primarily with a cycle of stories about the great Emperor Wu of the Former Han, that had achieved a certain prominence by the end of the third century.²⁹ Thereafter the entire cycle in which they featured became absorbed into a Taoist religious

²² Jia Shanxiang, *Youlong zhuan*, 4.8a (*Daozang* edition, Schipper no. 774), a work which is described in Kohn, *God of the Dao*, pp. 30–31. The total of 'ninety-six heresies' is an Indian one that arrived in China with Buddhism: see John P. Keenan, *How Master Mou removes our doubts* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 148.

²³ I have in mind the issues raised concerning the combined mention of Christianity and Manichaeism in various Buddhist sources studied most recently by Rong Xinjiang, *Zhongguo Zhongguo yu wailai wenming* (Beijing: Sanlian, 2001), pp. 343–68.

²⁴ Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the later Roman Empire and medieval China* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 213–17.

²⁵ Xie, *Hunyuan sheng ji*, 4.5a.

²⁶ Xuanzong's involvement in the interpretation of the *Daode jing* is covered in Barrett, *Taoism under the Tang*, pp. 55–6.

²⁷ The current text of Du You, *Tong dian* 193 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), pp. 5264–6, does not contain the straightforward identification made by Xie's work, but it does append an account of the West according to Du Huan, a relative of Du You who was captured by the Arabs in Central Asia, and this account (which cannot have circulated earlier than his return to China after 762) does clearly identify Da Qin and Fulin.

²⁸ Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras*, p. 215, follows Xinru Liu in pointing to a concept of the canon in Chinese Nestorianism suggesting some contact with Byzantine Orthodoxy, and in noting Byzantine embassies in 719 and 742.

²⁹ Zhang Hua, ed. Fan Ning, *Bowuzhi* 2 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), pp. 25–6.

context, so that by Tang times these marvels from the West took on specifically Taoist overtones.³⁰ Prominent amongst them, and clearly labelled as a product of Da Qin in the inscription of 781 studied by Pelliot, is a type of incense said to be capable of restoring life to the dead.³¹ The Byzantines, for their part, were including in their ambassadorial gifts as early as 667 the remarkable cure-all known as far back as the time of Pliny under the name of theriac.³² Indeed, Yang Xianyi has shown from a citation in a medical work preserved in Korea that rumours of the existence of this miracle substance had already reached China by the early seventh century.³³ Early Tang rulers—if not all Tang rulers—were always looking for exotic substances which might cause them to live for ever, and bothering travellers to procure them.³⁴ But theriac in particular seems to have made a considerable impression, for it passed into the traditional Chinese pharmacopoeia, and is therefore duly listed in the standard *Bencao gangmu* of Li Shizhen (1518–93).³⁵

So it would seem quite possible that the Byzantines, seasoned international diplomats that they were, were practising a culturally sensitive diplomacy in Asia of a sort now long extinct amongst European powers.³⁶ If they felt any stake in the use of the name Da Qin, then it is possible that its use by Nestorians formed part of a deal for information in exchange for protection that could easily have been brokered in advance of the Christians' securing the edict of 745 by the Byzantine mission to China of 742, which certainly included an important cleric, according to the Chinese record.³⁷ Even so, the evidence for the international diplomatic background playing a strong role in the adoption of the new name (as opposed to the jettisoning of the old one, where the fall of Persia must have been a factor) is not as clear as the evidence for a background in the polemical disputes of the day in China. The inscription of 781 betrays an acute awareness of rivalry with Buddhism, whereas Taoism, the imperial faith, is not criticized.³⁸ Calling Christianity the 'Religion of Da Qin' shows that the Nestorians of the Tang undeniably possessed a sensitive awareness of their political environment within China, and probably internationally as well, and moved with considerable acumen to secure the best possible position for themselves within it.

³⁰ The Taoicization of the Han Wudi material was first studied by K. M. Schipper, *L'Empereur Wou des Han dans la légende Taoïste* (Paris: EFEO, 1965) and subsequently in an as yet unpublished doctorate by Thomas E. Smith (Michigan, 1992); Smith's work is summarized in Robert F. Campany, *Strange writing: anomaly accounts in early medieval China* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 318–21.

³¹ Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne*, p. 176 and n. 125, pp. 248–9; cf. *Shizhou ji*, pp. 6b–9a (*Daozang* edition, Schipper no. 598).

³² Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 184.

³³ Yang Xianyi, *Lingmo xinjian* (Taipei: Mingwen shuju, 1985, expanded edition), pp. 243–5. Unlike Schafer (preceding note), who does not assume that opiates were included in the composition of the medicine at this date (though he admits that they were used as ingredients later on), Yang sees the Tang importation of theriac as the start of the opium trade between the West and China.

³⁴ Thus Arthur Waley, *The real Tripitaka and other pieces* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1952), mentions on p. 95 a magician skilled in concocting the Elixir of Long Life conveyed from India by Wang Xuance's daring trans-Himalayan expedition of 648, and on p. 112 a Buddhist missionary from India who was packed off to search for medicinal herbs in South-East Asia in 656.

³⁵ Li Shizhen, *Bencao gangmu* 50 (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1967 reprint of 1930 Wanyou wenku edition), pp. 24.99–100.

³⁶ Something of the world of diplomacy in which the Byzantines were operating may be gleaned from the references to their activities in Denis Sinor, 'Diplomatic practices in medieval Inner Asia', in C. E. Bosworth, C. Issawi, R. Savory and A. L. Udovitch (ed.), *Essays in honor of Bernard Lewis: the Islamic World from classical to modern times* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1988), pp. 337–55.

³⁷ Wang Qinruo (comp.), *(Song ben) Cefu yuangui* 971.10a (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989). The cleric is given a Buddhist title, but foreign ecclesiastical dignitaries had to put up with the use of Buddhist nomenclature to describe them: cf. the Nestorian cleric accompanying the Persian embassy mentioned *ibid.*, 971.6a, dated to 732, who reappears with the same title in the 781 inscription, as Pelliot notes in his commentary (*L'inscription nestorienne*, p. 255, n. 150).

³⁸ Note the passage translated in Pelliot, *ibid.*, p. 176, in particular.