Samuel N.C. Lieu and Glen L. Thompson, eds., *The Church of the East in Central Asia and China* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020). Pp. xiii + 245; €75.00.

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The present volume contains eleven contributions from experts in the history of the Church of the East in China and Central Asia, the fruit of a 2015 international conference on the topic held in Hong Kong. The book is divided into three parts: The Church of the East in Central Asia, The Church of the East in Tang and Yuan China, and The Art and Iconography of the Church of the East. A Foreword by **Florian Knothe** of the University of Hong Kong introduces the volume, focusing specifically on the F.A. Nixon Collection of bronze "Nestorian" crosses kept at the University of Hong Kong. These items, one of which is featured on the cover, originated in the Ordos region (located in Inner Mongolia); they feature a mixture of Christian and Buddhist symbols (including animal shapes and geometric patterns) and were likely used as seals. The Foreword is accompanied by two images of these Ordos bronzes.

The initial section of the book, focussing on Central Asia, contains three chapters. The first, by **Erica Hunter**, concerns the fragmentary Syriac manuscript MIK III 45 from Turfan (in Xinjiang, China), now kept in Berlin and dated to the 8th/9th cent. The text, "the most intact manuscript that has been discovered to date at Turfan" (p. 2), contains various offices, rites and anthems of the Church of the East. After a brief discussion of the manuscript contents and possible place of origin (including the notion that it might have been produced somewhere in Central Asia, where the Church of the East had a number of metropolitan bishops), the author focusses on the

saints commemorated in MIK III 45: Mart Shir, Mar Bar Shabba and Zarvandukht, followed by Mar Sargis. All can be connected to Central Asia; the first three, according to legend, evangelized Merv (in modern-day Turkmenistan), while Mar Sargis (martyred together with Bacchus at Resafa, Syria) became a popular saint in Central Asia. Their connections with the broader region may thus explain why these particular saints were highlighted in the liturgy at Turfan. An image from the manuscript in question is appended to the chapter.

Chapter two, a discussion of Sogdian biblical manuscripts from Turfan, is by **Nicholas Sims-Williams** and focusses on the large number of biblical texts found at Turfan that were translated from Syriac into Sogdian, a Middle Iranian language spoken throughout Central Asia for many centuries. The author begins with an overview of the Turfan biblical fragments in all languages before concentrating on those that are in Sogdian, including bilingual (Syriac–Sogdian) lectionaries in Syriac script and Psalters in Sogdian script (among which are two fragments with Greek headlines). An extended and interesting examination of the evidence for Sogdian translation techniques – whether from the Peshitta or, more rarely, the Septuagint – is followed by a more in-depth discussion of "the best-preserved gospel lectionary E5 and the relationship of its text to the Peshitta" (p. 17), a discussion that those interested in grammar will particularly enjoy.

Hidemi Takahashi's contribution is the third chapter in Part One (although it might equally have been included in Part Two, given that it deals with Christian texts from both China and Central Asia). It focuses in particular on the degree to which Syriac was known and used by Christians in China and adjacent areas during the two eras when the faith flourished there, namely the Tang dynasty (7th–10th cent.) and the Mongol Yuan dynasty (13th–14th cent.). For the Tang period, when

Christianity was known as the religion of Jingjiao, the author gives a detailed examination of the Syriac and Iranian (Middle Persian and Sogdian) words underlying Chinese terms in 1) the Dunhuang Jingjiao texts (7th and 8th cent.), 2) the Xi'an Stele (8th cent.), 3) the Luoyang pillar (9th cent.), 4) a 9th-cent. funerary inscription, 5) the Manichaean texts from Fujian and 6) the Prayer of St. George, along with 7) the encyclopedic work *Youyang zazu* (which includes a number of plant names transliterated in Chinese that reflect underlying Syriac names). However, there is scant evidence to draw conclusions from the assembled data; although we may assume that ecclesiastics (including monks) of the Church of the East during this time "probably made up the bulk of the people capable of using Syriac in China… among the mass of the faithful there was probably only limited knowledge of Syriac at any time" (p. 39).

Turning to the Yuan dynasty, when Christians were referred to as Yelikewen, Takahashi considers the same question: to what extent was Syriac known and used? Sources consulted include 1) the gravestone inscriptions from Quanzhou, Yangzhou and Inner Mongolia (most of which are in Turkic), 2) graffiti found in the White Pagoda near Hohhot (Inner Mongolia) and the Yulin Grottoes near Dunhuang, 3) inscriptions from Fangshan (near Beijing) and Chifeng (Inner Mongolia), 4) the manuscript John Rylands Syriac 4, "the only Syriac manuscript in existence today which is known for sure to have been copied in the core area of China" (p. 53), 5) another Syriac manuscript consisting of four lost leaves and fifteen leaves preserved in Taiwan, 6) fragments of a lectionary and the *Ktaba da-qdam wad-batar* found at Dunhuang, 7) various Syriac manuscript fragments uncovered at Khara Khoto (Inner Mongolia), 8) statements by and about the Turkic Catholicos Yahbalāhā III, 9) a Syriac Gospel manuscript copied for the Turkic Öngüt princess Sara, and 10) Syriac rock inscriptions at

Ulaan Tolgoi (western Mongolia). From all this data, the author concludes that "in general only a limited knowledge of the Syriac language existed among the faithful," but that "at least some members of the clergy were not altogether incapable of understanding the meaning of the words they were pronouncing during the celebration of the liturgy" (p. 62).

Part Two of the volume commences with Chapter four, in which **Huaiyu Chen** discusses textual sharing between Buddhist, Christian and Daoist communities in Tang China. The author discusses the aforementioned Dunhuang Jingjiao texts, Xi'an Stele and Luoyang pillar, viewing them not within the context of Middle Eastern and Central Asian Christian texts, but rather "with reference to the religious, cultural and historical milieu of medieval China" (p. 93). Following discussions of the introduction of Buddhism and Christianity (and hence their literatures) to China, the identity of those who translated Christian texts into Chinese and the audience for these Christian texts, Chen presents the data from which conclusions can be drawn about language shared between Buddhist, Christian and Daoist texts of the period. The major themes investigated are protection of the state (reflecting the transactional relationship that religious traditions had with the Tang dynasty), references to "deity" as light and the nature of eternal life. Throughout, Chinese terms and phrases used in the Tang era literature of the three religious traditions are compared in order to show ways in which they influenced and were borrowed by each other.

Max Deeg's chapter on the *Xuting-mishi-suo-jing* (one of the Dunhuang Jingjiao texts) is the fifth in the volume. The well-argued essay (which concentrates on the title, content and terminology of the text in question) offers suggestions which are, in the author's words, "not the final word to settle this discussion but rather serve to revive what I consider to be a

worthwhile conversation" (p. 111). Deeg begins by approaching the Chinese title (likely corrupted) within the framework of the text, looking in the latter for clues regarding the original form and hence meaning of the title. In the process, as well as reworking the title into a more plausible reconstruction, he addresses the structure of the text, proposing its division into two parts (possibly indicating its origins in two separate texts): sections from the Sermon on the Mount and a synopsis of the Messiah's life, death, resurrection and ascension. The author concludes with an appeal for new editions, translations and commentaries of/on these Dunhuang Jingjiao texts which contextualize them in "their wider political and religious context… instead of trying to read as much Christian theology into them as scholars have typically done in the past" (p. 118).

Chapter six is co-editor **Samuel Lieu**'s keynote address at the conference, entitled "From Rome (Daqin 大秦) to China (Zhongguo 中國): the Xi'an 西安 (Nestorian) Monument as a Bilingual and Transcultural Document." The author begins with an extensive recounting of scholarship on the Xi'an Stele (noting in particular a persistent scholarly tendency to downplay the Syriac content on the monument), followed by discussions of the following terms connected to the stele text: Da Qin, Tarsāg, Zhongguo, Shangzuo and Fa(p)shi. Chinese *Da Qin* (the stele's term for the homeland of Christianity) represents a large state to the west of the Parthians, originally a reference to the Seleucid realm; although the chapter title seems to equate the term directly with Rome, in fact its meaning is more nuanced. Middle Persian *Tarsāg*, meaning "(God) fearer," appears on the stele in Chinese garb (*dasuo*) and was for centuries the preferred term for designating Christians in Persia and Central Asia; the author proposes that this term can be linked to the character *jing* in Jingjiao, usually translated as

"luminous religion," but perhaps better as "reverential religion."

The stele uses four words to designate China, including the standard Chinese term *Zhongguo*, literally "Middle Kingdom"; as Lieu notes, it is strange "to find a group of Christian monks from Central Asia addressing China [by this] name which contains an undisguised element of ethnocentricity" (p. 132). Also found in the Syriac text on the stele is a word of Persian or Sogdian origin: ܨܝܢܣܬܐ, pronounced *Činistan* in Iranian languages and meaning "the land of the Chin," i.e., the Chinese. After a long and interesting discussion on these terms, the author turns to two words found in the Syriac section of the stele that are transliterations from Chinese – a rather curious occurrence, given that the majority of those reading the stele would have been more familiar with the Chinese script than the Syriac – ܫܝ̈ܢܓܨܘ (*šy'ngtsw'*), representing Chinese *shangzuo*, "(on the) high seat" (referring to the office of an abbot) and the more enigmatic ܦܒܫܝ (*p'pšy*). An extended analysis of the latter, well worth the read, concludes that it was a Chinese term meaning "teacher of the Law," transmitted through its Central Asian form into Syriac transliteration.

Fellow editor **Glen Thompson** contributes the seventh chapter in the volume, an examination of how others have perceived Jingjiao (i.e., Tang dynasty) and Yelikewenjiao (i.e., Yuan dynasty) Christians, particularly through the dual lenses of "foreignness" and "heresy." The article is in fact an overview of scholarship on Tang and Yuan dynasty Christianity, beginning with the foreign elements in texts referring to Tang dynasty Christianity – such as "the imperial edict of 745 which mandated the group's name change from *Bosi* 波斯 (Persian) to *Daqin* 大秦 (Western)" (p. 144) – and proceeding to the Mongol era, when the "foreign" element that the many Turkic Christians of the time brought with them was compounded by

the views of Latin travellers to China that these Christians were primarily "Nestorians" and hence heretics (interestingly though, the Turkic monks Rabban Ṣauma and Marqos were not viewed this way when they travelled to the Middle East and Europe). The author's survey continues through the Ming and Qing dynasties (14th–20th cent.), from Chinese associates of Matteo Ricci to Athanasius Kircher (who famously connected the Xi'an stele to Coptic Christianity!) to others who inevitably referred to the stele as "the Nestorian monument."

In the early and mid-19th cent., fuelled in large part by China's gradual opening to the West, the Anglicans and other Protestants joined the ecumenical mix of scholars and missionaries interested in early Chinese Christianity. The early 20th century saw the beginning of an interest by Chinese and Japanese scholars (notably Peter Yoshiro Saeki) in the topic, a tendency that has grown in recent decades, particularly amongst Chinese academics. At the same time, the 20th century has also seen the intrusion of other agendas into the discussion, particularly the "crass subjectivity of [Martin Palmer's] *The Jesus Sutras*" with its tendency "to read modem notions of ecumenism into the Jingjiao documents" (p. 155), not to mention "many Christian scholars [who] want to read their own versions of Christian doctrine, history, and practice into the Jingjiao as well" (p. 156). The chapter ends with a consideration of the current state of scholarship on early Christianity in China.

David Wilmshurst gives us Chapter eight, simply titled "Interfaith Conflict in Yuan China," which begins with an account of the demise of Tang dynasty Christianity and its virtual absence (as far as we can tell) during the subsequent Song dynasty (10th–13th cent.). With the collapse of the Southern Song dynasty in 1279, the Church of the East returned to China in the company of the conquering Mongols. However, Christian

numbers were never large (perhaps no more than 30,000 total) and the mother church in the Middle East was reduced in the number of its dioceses and its influence. The author includes a helpful discussion of the two remaining metropolitan provinces of the Church of the East which existed during the Mongol era, namely, Tangut, and Katai and Ong. The earlier metropolitan see of Beth Sinaye had likely disappeared, despite its occurrence in the mid-14th-cent. list of metropolitan provinces by Ṣaliba ibn Yuḥanna. Wilmshurst then proceeds to give information on the relationship between "the Nestorians" and Latin Christians, Buddhists and Manichaeans. Regarding conflict with the Latins, he adduces evidence from Ricoldo da Monte Croce, William of Rubruck, John of Montecorvino and John of Cora; on tensions with Buddhists, he recounts how the behavior of Christians "was not always a good advertisement for their religion" (p. 173), with specific reference to Christian monasteries built by Mar Sargis from Samarkand on land confiscated from Buddhists. By contrast, a Christian gravestone discovered in Quanzhou gives evidence of cordial relations with the Manichaeans, with the Christian bishop Shlemon overseeing both religious communities in this part of southern China.

Part Three of the book, concentrating on matters of art and iconography, consists of the last three chapters, beginning with Chapter nine by **Niu Ruji**, who focuses on a bronze mirror discovered "recently" (we are given no specific date) in Inner Mongolia. The mirror features a cross on its reverse, with four Syriac words from Psalm 34:6, one in each quadrant:

ܚܘܪ ܠܘܬܗ (sic) ܣܒܪܘ ܒܗ

Look to him and trust in him.

The phrase has also been found on two other artifacts from northern China discussed by the author: a cornerstone from

Fanshan and a funerary tile from Chifeng. Niu expands his exploration of the topic with information on Christianity among the Kerait and Öngüt Turks, as well as a listing of places in China where archaeological artifacts have been unearthed. The chapter includes seven images of the various artifacts discussed.

The tenth chapter in the volume is **Ken Parry**'s essay on "Images in the Church of the East," a look at the evidence from textual sources and art history. The chapter, which covers more than just China and Central Asia, begins with references to the contemporary absence of any images or icons in the Church of the East, which has led some to consider the Church as "iconophobic or aniconic." The author traces the positive view of images (particularly icons) in the Church of the East, beginning with the famous *mandylion* mentioned in the *Teaching of Addai* and continuing on through to the fourteenth century, with reference to Gabriel of Qatar, Abraham of Bēt Ḥālē, Išoʿ bar Nun, Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq, Išoʿyahb bar Malkon, Ṣaliba ibn Yuḥanna, Yahbalāhā III and the aforementioned churches built by Mar Sargis from Samarkand. The few instances of disapproval of icons (e.g., Elias of Nisibis) seem to be in part influenced by the overall context of Islam's negative view of images, with authors either criticizing overuse of icons or comparing Christian use of them with Muslim veneration of the Qurʾan or the Kaʿbah.

These references in sources from within the Church of the East are complemented by medieval Western sources which indicate use of images by the "Nestorians," particularly in Asia (William of Rubruck, John Marignolli, John of Cora). There is then a long gap in the sources until the observations of Protestant missionaries to the Middle East in the early 19th cent., all of which indicate that the "Assyrian" Christians were by then "unaware of their own history and the tradition that

supported the veneration of images" (p. 195). As Parry notes, the strongly-held Protestant position of these missionaries undoubtedly played a role in the observations they made on Assyrian views of images. The final section of the chapter concerns what we can learn from archeological and art historical sources, especially related to church architecture and adornment (or lack thereof). After acknowledging some of the hurdles to be overcome in addressing the relevant data, the author reviews the actual art historical evidence for the Church of the East in China and Central Asia, contrasting it with the South Asian situation (more iconophile for the former, less so for the latter). The chapter concludes with eighteen images of Syriac churches, both modern and ancient.

The book concludes with Chapter eleven by **Patrick Taveirne** on the *status quaestionis* of research on the aforementioned "Nestorian" bronze crosses. The author begins with a discussion of the mysterious nature of these items, noting that "almost nothing is known about their exact date and place of origin, function, typology and symbolic meaning" (p. 213). Indeed, the thorough and helpful overview of scholarship on them clearly shows the lack of any consensus on what they are, where they originate, how they were used or indeed who used them. Individual features of the bronzes noted in the chapter include the *svastika*, bird images and Turkic *tamghas* (identifying marks used by Eurasian steppe nomads). This is followed by a consideration of the "growing doubts and debate on the concept of Nestorian crosses," in which the Ordos crosses are compared with Bronze Age stamp seals from Iran and Central Asia, with generic Yuan seals and with Bronze Age items from Armenia.

Given their similarity with bronzes found elsewhere, many scholars have questioned the supposed Christian origin of the Ordos crosses (especially in light of the widespread occurrence

of cross shapes in pre-historic artifacts). The author gives an extensive discussion of the following topics (with particular reference to universal archetypal symbols): Eurasian religious iconography, the *svastika*, the bird images and the cross shape (in proto-historic, Manichaean and Christian iterations). The chapter ends with a short study on different types of crosses used in the Church of the East and the function of the cross in the Asian context of the Church (as cosmic sign, sign of the glorified Christ and amulet/charm), finishing with the lotus cross featured on the Xi'an Stele. In the end, as the author concludes, "we still lack solid archaeological data… and documentary source material [for determining the origin, function and meaning of the bronzes]. The archaeological context…is lost indeed" (p. 229). Five images accompany the chapter.

This volume will be of interest not only to scholars who follow the history of the Church of the East in China and Central Asia, but also to those who deal with Chinese literature (and art history) from the Tang and Yuan dynasties. As is typical of conference proceedings, rather than addressing the overall story of Christianity in the regions covered, the articles discussed here are mostly snapshots of discrete pieces of evidence, many of which are the basic building blocks from which we are able to reconstruct that larger story. Nevertheless, one broad (and very pertinent) theme can be observed: the issue of foreignness versus indigeneity in the mission of the Church of the East. Indeed, several authors note the "foreign" aspect of the Church of the East's sojourn in China, from the Syriac and Sogdian biblical and liturgical texts discussed by Hunter and Sims-Williams to the Syriac text on the Xi'an Stele highlighted by Lieu and the overall notion of foreignness that features in Thompson's title, not to mention the many Syriac words and phrases from Tang and Yuan dynasty Christian texts and inscriptions that are catalogued by Takahashi.

In contrast, other authors (notably Chen, Deeg and Taveirne) focus their primary attention on the need to interpret either the Jingjiao texts or the Ordos bronzes within their Chinese (or broader Eurasian) context, paying close attention to how the texts and artifacts reflect and are influenced by the social, political and religious milieu in which they were created. In truth, both viewpoints are valid and need to be affirmed when considering missionary religions like Christianity, which has persistently grappled with how to remain faithful to its core tenets while adapting its message to the changing cultural contexts it finds itself in. The Church of the East, spread out along the Silk Road network from the Middle East to China, arguably exemplifies this dynamic tension between tradition and adaptation as well as any church has thus far.

There are a few minor issues with the volume. One concerns the use of the adjective "Nestorian" without quotation marks (and apart from understandable references to its use in earlier publications) in several chapters. Although this was common usage in the past, one need only read Sebastian Brock's "The 'Nestorian' Church: a Lamentable Misnomer" to realize that there is no longer justification for using this problematic term (with all its dismissive connotations of heresy and "otherness"). It would have been helpful to have had this clarified somewhere in the book's forematter; although it is addressed briefly by Chen (p. 93, n. 1), Thompson (pp. 146–47) and Taveirne (p. 213, n. 2), nowhere is there a prominent explanation of why this term (convenient though it may be) is so unhelpful in describing the Church of the East.

Another possible oversight is the relatively few reference to the Christian texts found at Turfan, outside of the first two chapters by Hunter and Sims-Williams. For instance, one would have thought that Takahashi's chapter, with its inclusion of areas peripheral to China proper (e.g., Dunhuang),

would have included more data from Turfan than that which is referenced in footnotes (although it was likely for reasons of space that such data was not included). Parry's chapter on images could also have benefited from bringing Turfan into the equation; the wall paintings from the church in Qocho (in the Turfan oasis), about which the author has written elsewhere, would have helped strengthen his argument even more. On the topic of Turfan, Chen's statement that "few of these [Turfan] texts consisted of direct translations from the Bible" (p. 94) is unclear. It is true that most of the biblical texts (whether in Syriac, Sogdian, Middle Persian or New Persian) discovered at Turfan are contained in Psalters and lectionaries, but their appearance in books specifically designed for liturgical use does not make them any less "translations" than if they were complete texts of the New Testament or Old Testament.

I found the main arguments in several of the chapters hard to follow; this was particularly true for Chen's chapter (the conclusion of which was not particularly strong), some aspects of Deeg's chapter (which will be a challenge for those not trained in the Chinese language), and Taveirne's chapter (which covers so much ground that it can be difficult to remember what the main points are). It is perhaps not a coincidence that these three chapters were the most "theory-heavy" in the whole volume, requiring more intense concentration on the part of the reader than the chapters that are more "data-driven."

Niu Ruji's chapter was particularly problematic for me, beginning with an overly simplistic and reductionist summary of how the "Nestorian" Church got its name (p. 177). Several statements also seem questionable to me, including "Jing [景, as in "Jingjiao"] might be a phonetic imitation of Jesus" (p. 177: I am not aware of any other scholar who has made such a suggestion) and "with the circle symbolizing heaven and the cross

symbolizing earth" (p. 180) in reference to the Ordos bronze crosses, again an idea I have not run across elsewhere; this latter view is offered with no reference to sources (indeed, the whole chapter is rather thin on footnotes). The author's translation of *ärkägün-ning xadunï marda tärim* as "wife of a Nestorian, Princess Martha" (p. 177) is also problematic, as the Turkic word *ärkägün* ("Yelikewen" in Chinese) merely means "Christian" during the Mongol era ("Nestorian" is not part of the essential meaning here); its general use also rules out the author's interpretation of it as a reference to "archpriest," a term not found in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church of the East (in contrast to, e.g., "archdeacon," which occurs frequently in Central Asian Syriac script gravestones).

Finally, a few miscellaneous points I encountered in the volume. In Lieu's chapter, ܨܝܢܣܛ݂ܢ and ܒܬ ܨܝܢܝ are transliterated as *zynst'n* and *bt zyny'* respectively, instead of *ṣynst'n* and *bt ṣyny'* (p. 131); in fact, given that the monks associated with the mission to China were Persian or Sogdian speakers, the first term, an Iranian word, would have been pronounced as *čynst'n* (when used to transliterate Iranian languages, ܨ represents the sound /č/). Thompson's chapter is laudable in its efforts to integrate insights from the field of religious studies, but it might have been helped by more references to the role that imperialism and colonialism played in 19th-century scholarship on early Syriac Christianity (pp. 150–54). Finally, I would have liked more source details on the duplication of metropolitan province names mentioned in Wilmshurst's chapter (p. 168); there is indeed a reference to the author's book *Martyred Church*, but the latter sadly includes no footnotes.

Having said all that, I nonetheless heartily recommend this volume for anyone who is interested in interactions between Syriac Christianity and the cultures of Central and East Asia.