Christianity’s Earliest Encounter with the Ancient Techno-Scientific China: Critical Lessons from Jingjiao’s Approach

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Abstract: This article investigates the earliest Christian encounter with ancient China through the missionaries of the Church of the East in the seventh century. In his monumental Science and Civilisation in China, Joseph Needham argues that China was then a country with one of the world’s most advanced science and technology. It was also a time when Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism contributed to a pluralistic society. The paper attempts to answer questions such as: How did the Christian missionaries, as representatives of a minority religion, engage with techno-scientific China theologically? Were their efforts successful? What critical lessons can we learn from their successes and/or failures? By studying the earliest Christian texts in China, the proposal argues that, being equipped with advanced Greek-Byzantine scientific knowledge and skills in medicine, architecture, astronomy, and mechanics, the Church of the East missionaries boldly engaged with the ancient techno-scientific and pluralistic China through their qi-tological, or creative pneumatological approach, which is closely intertwined with the Chinese metaphysical concept of qi (or Chi, breath, air). The article proposes that such an approach serves as a crucial bridge toward a constructive Chinese theology of science for the pluralistic world of the third millennium.

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**Keywords:** Church of the East; Jingjiao; qi-tological approach; techno-scientific China; theology and science

When the Church of the East sent its missionaries to China in the seventh century,\(^1\) in a sense, they faced a much more challenging situation than their colleagues of the Western churches. (Here, “mission” and “missionaries” are not used in their modern sense. Rather, this paper adopts Steve Cochrane’s definition in *Many Monks across the Sea*, where

\(^{1}\)Vince L. Bantu, *A Multitude of All Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity’s Global Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 202. This group is usually dismissed as “Nestorian” and therefore deemed heretical. However, Brock has strongly argued that the so-called Nestorian church has, in antiquity, preferred to self-describe itself as the “Church of the East.” The association between the Church of the East and Nestorius is “of a very tenuous nature,” and is “totally misleading and incorrect.” See Sebastian P. Brock, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A Lamentable Misnomer,” *Bulletin of John Rylands Library* 78:3 (1996): 23–35, at 35, DOI: 10.7227/BJRL.78.3.335. Lin Ying speculates that besides the Church of the East, another branch of Christianity also from Syria also sent their missionaries, the Fulin monks—or the Melkites—to China during the Tang dynasty. See Ying Lin 林英, “Fulin Seng: Guanyu Tangdai Jingjiao zhiwai de Jidujiao paibie ruhua de yige tuice 拂菻僧：关于唐代景教之外的基督教派别入华的一个推测” [*The Fulin Monks: Speculation concerning another Christian sect into China during the Tang Dynasty apart from the Jingjiao* *Studies in World Religions* 世界宗教研究 2 (2006): 107–116. There are many works on this topic, in Chinese, English, French, and Japanese. For a recent bibliography, see James Harry Morris and Cheng Chen, “A Select Bibliography of Chinese and Japanese Language Publications on Syriac Christianity: 2000–2019,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 23:2 (2020): 355–415. Regarding the physical location of *Daqin* and *Fulin*, Samuel Lieu argues that contrary to most popular views, the name *Daqin* was first used to designate not the Roman Empire but the Greek successor-states that flourished after the death of Alexander the Great in the Near East, the most important being the kingdom founded by Seleucus I Nicator in 312 BC. Long before Rome became a major power in the Near East under Trajan (r. 98–117), *Daqin* had been in use as the Chinese name for a major state west of Parthia. Moreover, *Daqin* was never used for Romans or the Roman Empire in Central Asian language. Regarding *Fulin*, it is attested in Manichaean texts in Parthian as *hrwm* and it is most likely this form of the name which was phonetically transcribed commonly as *Fulin* in Chinese. For Lieu, *Fulin* can only designate the whole of the Roman Empire and not merely the Roman East nor what post-Renaissance scholars would call “Byzantium.” See Samuel N. C. Lieu, “Daqin 大秦 and Fulin 拂林: The Chinese Names for Rome,” in *Between Rome and China: History, Religions and Material Culture of the Silk Road*, ed. Samuel N. C. Lieu and Gunner Mikkelsen, Silk Road studies 18 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016): 123–145, esp. 126–128.
mission entails elements of presence and encounter leading to an outward involvement in witness from the Church of the East to other communities.\(^2\) The Western missionaries expanded by supplanting theologically weak religions while spreading among illiterate peoples (e.g., in Germania and the British Isles) or by receiving help from civil authorities.\(^3\) On the contrary, China was already a highly developed civilisation that can be traced to 1,200 BC.\(^4\) According to McClellan and Dorn, “the medieval China was scientifically and technologically more developed than Europe in many fields.”\(^5\) In particular, the Tang dynasty is known for its warm welcome to strangers—such as the Arabs, Persians, and Syrians—to such an extent that its capital city of Chang’an became “an international meeting place.”\(^6\) As a result, “[n]ew foreign religions were imported: Zoroastrianism early in the sixth century, ... and Manichaeism from Persia at the close of the seventh century.”\(^7\) Compared to those newly imported religions, the Chinese indigenous religion Daojiao 道教 (religious Daoism)\(^8\) enjoyed the official status as

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4 According to William Boltz, if language as a determinative feature of cultural or civilisational identity takes on such preeminence, then we can only identify a “Chinese civilisation”—as opposed to “civilisation in China”—when we can identify the people of that civilisation as Chinese speakers. Thus, strictly speaking, we can only identify a Chinese civilisation from the time of the earliest palaeographic evidence of the Chinese language, i.e., about 1200 BC. See William G. Boltz, “Early Chinese Writing,” World Archaeology 17:3 (1986): 420–436, esp. 420, DOI: 10.1080/00438243.1986.9979980. Also see James E. McClellan, III and Harold Dorn, Science and Technology in World History: An Introduction, revised and updated ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 115.

5 McClellan and Dorn, Science and Technology, 156.


7 Needham and Ronan, Shorter Science and Civilisation, 1: 46.

8 In this paper, the Chinese words in the main texts are given in Pinyin system in italics, then, if necessary, the simplified Chinese character, followed by English translation in parenthesis, except words and phrases such as the name Watchman Nee, which are better known in the English-speaking world. The
the state religion during the Tang dynasty. Buddhism and Confucianism also had deep roots among the bureaucrats and the grassroots.

This paper seeks to address questions such as: How did the East Syrian missionaries engage with techno-scientific China theologically, while representing a minority religion? Were their efforts successful? What critical lessons can we learn from their successes and/or failures? By studying the earliest written records of Jingjiao (or the Luminous Religion/Teachings), I argue that—being equipped with advanced Greek-Byzantine scientific knowledge and skills in medicine, horology, architecture, astronomy, and mechanics—the Church of the East missionaries boldly engaged with the ancient techno-scientific and pluralistic China by their qi-tological, or creative, pneumatological message.

Concretely, I will first analyse the historical background of the Syrian monks in order to identify how they encountered China scientifically and technologically. Then I will study Jingjiao’s primary texts to determine the theological strategy by which they established their unique religious identity and promoted Christian teachings. Finally, I will extrapolate the outcomes of Jingjiao’s experience, especially its pneumatological dimension, for the encounter of Christian theology with the contemporary techno-scientific world.

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According to Timothy Barrett, Daoism enjoyed the status of state religion during the Tang dynasty due to a few reasons: first, it had been a Chinese indigenous religion; second, Daoist religion transcended the concepts of heaven, earth, and humanity of the Confucian classics, and assigned the emperors with a special status of Tian Zi (son of the heaven), thus regarded as intermediaries between heaven and humanity; third, by claiming Lao Zi, whose last name is Li, as the ancestor of the family, the emperors of the Tang dynasty with the same last name could claim legitimacy of their reigning. See Timothy Hugh Barrett, *Taoism under the T’ang: Religion and Empire during the Golden Age of Chinese History* (Warren, CT: Floating World, 2006), 20.
The Syrian Monks' Scientific and Technological Strategy

The Church of the East declared itself independent from the state church of the Roman Empire at the synod of 424. In 489, their centre at Edessa was shut down, and the Assyrian Christians of the Church of the East fled the Byzantine rule while bringing Greek learning with them. As a result, Persian cultural life was enriched with new elements. A significant translation project took place in Jundishapur, to render Greek texts into Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic). Texts deemed to contain useful knowledge were generally chosen for translation—mainly the medical arts, but also scientific subjects including Aristotle’s logical tracts, mathematics, and astronomy. Given their scientific expertise in general and medical knowledge in particular, certain Syriac-speaking Christians even became influential figures at the Persian court. They transmitted Greek, Syriac, Persian, and occasionally Indian medical traditions, and other forms of cultural and scientific knowledge to the Middle East, Central Asia, and beyond. They were known for their medical expertise in the East.

When Aluoben 阿罗本, most probably a monk or bishop named Yaballaha or Abraham, and the Assyrian missionaries of the Church of the East arrived at Chang’an in 635, they brought with them Greek medicine, medical skills, and practical treatments, which provided them

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11 McClellan and Dorn, *Science and Technology*, 120.
with opportunities for preaching.\textsuperscript{15} The famous 781 Xi’an Stele speaks of the monk Yisi 伊斯, the Persian Yazdbōzīd, priest and chorepiscopus, as the “Great Donor, Great Master of the Bright Prosperity [decorated] with Golden [Seal] and Purple [Ribbon],” whose “knowledge extended to all fields.”\textsuperscript{16} Such honorific words of praise might seem like an exaggeration, considering his generous donation to erect the Stele. However, Yisi’s biography indicates his excellent military combat and medical skills. Yisi became the “claw and tooth” of Duke Guo Ziyi 郭子仪 (697–781) and the “ear and eyes” of the army.\textsuperscript{17} In other words, Yisi served as the Duke’s think-tank and intelligence spy.\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, each year Yisi “gathered the monks of the four monasteries, served them with respect, and presented refined offerings for fifty days. [On that occasion] … the sick were cured and healed.”\textsuperscript{19} According to Nie Zhijun 聂志军, the description of Yisi on the Stele, namely, \textit{yibo shiquan} 艺博十全, literally means “ten sicknesses, ten healings” (\textit{zhibing shizhi shiyu}, 治病十治十愈), referring to his superb medical skills.\textsuperscript{20}

Another \textit{Jingjiao} believer known for his medical expertise is Chongyi 崇一,\textsuperscript{21} who healed the older brother of Tang emperor


\textsuperscript{16} Nicolini-Zani, \textit{Luminous Way}, 213.

\textsuperscript{17} Nicolini-Zani, \textit{Luminous Way}, 213.


\textsuperscript{19} Nicolini-Zani, \textit{Luminous Way}, 213.

\textsuperscript{20} Nie, “Jingjiao bei,” 124.

\textsuperscript{21} For the record of Chongyi in the ancient Chinese sources, see Xu Lu 刘昫, \textit{Jiu Tangshu} 旧唐书 [Book of Old Tang Dynasty], 214 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1975), 95: 3012; Ouyang Xiu and Qi Song (eds), \textit{Xin Tangshu} 新唐書, 248 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 81: 3598. Scholars are of different opinions regarding Chongyi’s membership in \textit{Jingjiao}. Chinese scholars such as Chen Yuan 陈垣, Wang Zhixin 王治心, Lin Wushu 林悟殊, and Zhang Xushan 张绪山 hold the majority opinion that Chongyi was a \textit{Jingjiao} believer, considering
Xuanzong 玄宗 in 740. Qin Minghe 秦鸣鹤 cured Emperor Gaozong 高宗’s eye problems through the use of a technique that involved bloodletting, or trepanning, which can be traced to the famous Greek doctor Hippocrates (c. 460–c. 375 BC).

Yin Xiaoping 殷小平 observes that historical studies on Jingjiao have primarily focused on the Greek medical traditions possessed by the East Syriac Christians in China, but have not concentrated on their


22 The ancient Chinese records (see note 21) show that the Tang emperor Xuanzong was sick and then healed by Chongyi in 740. See Xushan Zhang 张绪山, “Jingjiao dongjian ji chuanru Zhongguo de Xila-Baizhanting wenhua 景教东渐及传入中国的希腊—拜占庭文化” [Jingjiao’s Spreading Eastward and the Greek-Byzantine Culture’s Entrance into China], Shijie lishi 世界历史 6 (2005): 76–88, esp. 81. For ancient Chinese sources, see Lu, Jiu Tangshu [Book of Old Tang], Gaozong benji 高宗本纪, 5: 975. Also see Nicolini-Zani, Luminous Way, 100.

23 Zhang, “Jingjiao,” 82–83. Consensus has not yet been reached as to Qin’s origins and religious affiliation. For example, Nicolini-Zani reminds his readers that “[o]ne should also consider that from its earliest days in China, Buddhism was dedicated to finding cures for various illnesses, and Buddhist monks, together with Daoist priests, practiced medicine at the Chinese court to a far higher degree than Christians.” See Nicolini-Zani, Luminous Way, 100. However, Zhang’s argumentation based on the comparison of the Chinese historical records seems to be more convincing. Zhang Xushan argues that, compared with the record based on Datang xinyu and Xin Tangshu, which include both Zhang Wenzhong and Qin Minghe as physicians involved in the cure, Jiu Tangshu and Zizhi tongjian only document Qin as the physician. This implies that Qin played a dominant role in the healing of Gaozong’s eye disease. Qin’s name disappears in the later historical records, which is most likely because of the Huichang Persecution of Buddhism (841–845) and the official attitude towards Jingjiao afterwards. Moreover, the last name Qin indicates his ancestry could be traced to Daqin, namely, the Byzantine Empire in the Tang dynasty. See Zhang, “Jingjiao,” 83.
accomplishments in astronomy. The first example recorded in the 781 Xi’an Stele is Jihe 佶和, who is described as one “who, upon observing the stars turned in the direction of the Transformation, and keeping before his eyes the sun, went to pay homage to the Honoured One.”25 Zhang Xushan 張绪山 speculates that, most likely, Jihe was good at observing stars and other astronomical phenomena.26 Furthermore, Li Su 李素 (or Li Wenzhen, or Luke) was recruited as an officer in Sitian Tai 司天台 (the Bureau of Astronomy), which proves the advanced science and technology possessed by the Jingjiao believers.27 Li’s office was responsible for the compilation of the calendar. Later, he was appointed governor of Jinzhou in Hezhong Superior Prefecture (today’s Shanxi).28 Bill Mak makes the following observation regarding the political significance of his appointment to the Bureau of Astronomy:

The role foreigner astronomers played in the Tang court is noteworthy as it demonstrates the interest in foreign ideas within the multiethnic Tang society on one hand, as well as the special role the astral science played in Chinese politics on the other. [Li Su], like other skilled foreigners and Chinese with special talents, was recruited directly by the emperor and given special titles, bypassing the official imperial examination system. Due to the technical as well as the confidential nature of those working in the Bureau of Astronomy, who handled sensitive matters pertaining to state security, such arrangements, in particular with the foreigners who had fewer ties with the Chinese, would have been a political sound choice.29

26 Zhang, “Jingjiao,” 87.
28 Nicolini-Zani, Luminous Way, 103.
Other Greek-Byzantine technologies transmitted to China by the Jingjiao missionaries include bell-making techniques and architectural skills. As a result, Zhu Qianzhi 朱谦之 argues that

The “exotic, foreign, and delicate instruments” designed by the Jingjiao monk Jilie and Marine Trade Supervisor Zhou Qingli must have arrived at the high peak of mechanical science at the time. Like Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who offered the emperor a chiming clock, sundial, and map, the Jingjiao followers’ exotic and precious gifts must have been soul-stirring to the Tang emperor. No wonder Jilie secured the imperial favour. As a result, Jingjiao’s reputation was restored.

**Jingjiao’s Strategy in the Techno-Scientifically Advanced China**

I have shown how the Syriac-speaking Christians creatively engaged techno-scientific China. Although they faced enormous challenges from the highly civilised Tang society, they grasped unique opportunities by carrying out the following strategic moves: first, in addition to their political loyalty to the Tang court, they boldly demonstrated their medical, astral, and architectural knowledge and skills before royalty in order to secure legal standing in the religiously pluralistic country. Second, they also shared their medical expertise to the population in the form of Christian charity and hospitality by curing and healing the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and burying the dead. This charitable ministry of the Jingjiao followers facilitated the expansion of their influence, impressing the Chinese people. Third, their loyalty

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32 R. Todd Godwin argues that Jingjiao’s connection with the Tang court and the Church of the East’s connection with the Persian (Abbasid) court run much deeper than had been previously supported. See R. Todd Godwin, Persian Christians at the Chinese Court: The Xi’an Stele and the Early Medieval Church of the East (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018).
to the Tang dynasty and charity to its people stood the test of severe political rebellion and military onslaught. The An Lushan 安禄山 Rebellion (755–763) marked the turning point of the Tang dynasty from flourishing to decaying, during which Yisi served under the Chinese general and high official Guo Ziyi. Later, the Tang court granted him the title of “vice military commissioner of Shuofang, probationary director of the Palace Administration.”

The Jingjiao’s expertise in science and technology can be traced at least to their missionary activities in Central Asia. Here is what Nicolini-Zani remarks about the Christian community of Merv: “In ancient times Merv constituted a great center of study, which certainly attracted the Christians of the eastern regions of Iran and allowed them to be educated and formed in both theological and secular sciences.” At the gates of Asia, Merv, “due to its central geographical position, attracted the envoys of the world religions in a special manner,” including Buddhism, Manichaeanism, and Christianity. Therefore, before their missionary trips to China, the Jingjiao monks had also been trained to “deal with the adherents of a multiplicity of religious, intellectual, and cultural expressions,” and “to learn to dialogue with them, thereby progressively finding ways to define its [i.e., Jingjiao’s] particular identity within this pluralist milieu.”

One thing worth noting is that missionaries of Manichaeanism and Zoroastrianism traveled eastward to China even earlier. Though equally exposed to opportunities for scientific learning in Central

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34 Nicolini-Zani, Luminous Way, 88.
37 Ian Gilman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, Christians in Asia before 1500 (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), 206.
Asia, the Manichaeans and the Zoroastrians in China did not appear to resort to science and technology as much as the Syriac-speaking Christians. These three religions constitute sanyijiao 三夷教 (the three Persian religions). Their missional strategies were so different from each other that Cai Hongsheng 蔡鸿生 characterises them as follows: “the Manichaeans turned increasingly heretical, the Zoroastrians increasingly folkloric, and the Jingjiao increasingly dependent on technological skills.” Though Cai’s statement runs the risk of being overly reductionist, this sharp contrast points to Jingjiao missionaries’ scientific learning and cultivation of technological skills in order to establish a firm footing in the highly civilised Tang dynasty.

Having summarised their creative strategy in techno-scientifically advanced China, I now proceed to examine the source of their creativity.

**The East Syriac Monks’ Qī-tological Theology of Creation**

It is well known that in translating their religious texts, the Jingjiao monks adopted terminology from Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian texts in Chinese. Voluminous scholarly works on the Jingjiao texts have focused on identifying the source of specific terms, their interpretation,
and translations. However, there has been a lack of in-depth theological analysis of Jingjiao’s doctrine of creation beyond tracing the sources of terminology and general description of their theological features.\(^{43}\) A careful study of their doctrine of creation reveals its pneumatological nature and brings to the fore their theological creativity. Their theology of creation is exemplified in the first two lines of the Stele, which can be translated as follows:

Behold! [there is One who is] constant in truth and tranquility, prior to every beginning and without origin, profound in [creating] the universe, later than the latest, mysterious in calling nothing into being,\(^{44}\) who, grasping the key of mysteries, creates and transforms [everything], and enlightens many honoured beings as the Creator\(^{45}\)—is this not properly God, the transcendent person of our Three-One, True Lord without origin? Drawing a cross, he pacified the four areas of space; arousing the Spirit of God, he produced the two breaths. Darkness and emptiness were transformed, heaven and earth were separated; the sun and the moon began to rotate, the day and the night began to alternate.

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\(^{43}\) Tang Li mentioned creation only in passing in her discussion of Jingjiao’s doctrine of the Trinity, Christology, and contextualised theology; incidentally, she seems to have missed that their thoughts on the Trinity and Christology were also contextualised. See 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*, second rev. edn, European University Studies Series 27: Asian and African Studies 87 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), 134–144. Johan Ferreira does not fully expound Jingjiao’s theology of creation in his chapter on “The Theology of Tang Christianity.” Moreover, he relies too much on Saeki’s translation, which, for the most part, is outdated. See Johan Ferreira, *Early Chinese Christianity: The Tang Christian Monument and Other Documents*, Early Christian studies 17 (Brisbane: St Pauls, 2014), 316–354, esp. 336.


\(^{45}\) Wu Changxing regards *yuanzun* 元尊 as “the head of the Most High, referring to the Creator.” See Wu, *Daqin Jingjiao*, 9.
After having formed and completed all things, he created the first human being. Additionally, he endowed him with every good quality in a harmonious whole and gave him dominion over the myriad creatures.⁴⁶

A few theological observations are in order: first, Jingjiao’s theology of creation is distinctively Christian and trinitarian in its use of languages such as “Three-One,” “cross,” and the “Spirit of God,” even though, as Nicolini-Zani shows, “[t]he Chinese word used here, zaohua 造化, is a technical term that refers to a fundamental tenet of Daoist cosmology.”⁴⁷ Second, erqi 二气 (“the two breaths”) refers to yin 阴 and yang 阳,⁴⁸ which are the constituting elements in Chinese cosmology. Here, the author of the Stele integrates the Holy Spirit with the Chinese metaphysical concept of qi 气 (or Chi, breath, pneuma, spirit).⁴⁹ A further investigation of the word qi indicates that the word appears ten times in the entire Tang Jingjiao corpus.⁵⁰ Commenting on the Xi’an Stele, Max Deeg states:

[A] primordial situation of the cosmos before God begins to act, a situation which is very [much in] conformity with the traditional Chinese cosmological or cosmogonic scheme of chaos which has

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49 For Chinese Philosopher Zhang Dainian 张岱年 (1909–2004), qi is a basic concept in ancient Chinese philosophy that expresses what is said to be “material existence” in contemporary Chinese. Originally, qi refers to flowing and minute forms of existence, different from those that are liquid and solid. In the process of development of ancient thought, qi also refers to phenomena of objective reality that exist in independence of human consciousness. Since humans and other living things survive by breathing, the ancient people believed that qi is the source of life, even though qi on its own is not life. Therefore, qi is a concept used generally to refer to objective reality. See Dainian Zhang 张岱年, Zhongguo gudian zhexue gainian fanchou yaolun 中国古典哲学概念范畴要论 [Key Conceptual and Categorical Points in Chinese Ancient Philosophy], (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 2017), 35–38.
50 Once in the Xi’an Stele; four times in Yishen Lun (The Discourse on the One God); three times in Xuting mishisuo jing (Book of Righteous Mediator); twice in Zhixuan anle jing (Book on Profound and Mysterious Blessedness).
not yet developed into duality and not brought forth the concrete phenomena. The creative function of God then is first restricted to the extension of space in which the original energy, the \( \mathit{qi} \), is able to develop the two polar principles which are made concrete by the separation of heaven and earth.\(^{51}\)

Also pertinent to the discussion of \( \mathit{qi} \) in \textit{Jingjiao}'s theology of creation are occurrences of the word in \textit{Xuting mishisuojing} 序听迷诗所经 (Book of Righteous Meditator) and \textit{Zhixuan anle jing} 志玄安乐经 (Book on Profound and Mysterious Blessedness). The former finds its origin in Genesis 2:7 in that “everyone holds within herself the \( \mathit{qi} \) (breath) of the Honoured One of Heaven.” Here the physical and spiritual senses of \( \mathit{qi} \) are actively engaged in \textit{Jingjiao}'s theology of creation.\(^{52}\) In \textit{Zhixuan anle jing}, the word \( \mathit{qi} \) appears together with \( \textit{fanhun baoxiang} \) 返魂宝香 (a precious scent): “One breathes the wonderful breath of the precious scent that awakens the soul, then the dead will return to life and disease will be eradicated.”\(^{53}\) The \textit{Jingjiao} Christians are believed to be the “first medical missionaries ... from the Middle East who arrived in China” who introduced Western medical practice into China. Their medical fame preceded them if we remember that their immediate ancestors translated many Greek medical works into Arabic,\(^{54}\) and they were famous in Western Asia for their medical skills.\(^{55}\)


\(^{52}\) For Nicolini-Zani, physical and spiritual balance is given by the proper flow of \( \mathit{qi} \). Here it seems to indicate a sort of vital breath (that of Genesis 2:7?) with which God shares life with the first human being. See Nicolini-Zani, \textit{Luminous Way}, 266.

\(^{53}\) 若闻反魂宝香妙气，则死者反活，疾苦消纾. The allusion of this type of perfume is also present in the Stele, where it describes Daqin (corresponding to the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire), the land of origin of \textit{Jingjiao}. See Nicolini-Zani, \textit{Luminous Way}, 295. According to Zhou Jiazhou, the earliest Chinese record \( \textit{fanhun xiang} \) 返魂香 (Scent for Resuscitating the Soul) was a tribute from the Western Regions. See Jiazhou Zhou 周嘉胄, \textit{Xiangcheng} 香乘 [Encyclopedia on Scents] (Beijing: Jiuzhou chubanshe 九州出版社, 2014), 158.

\(^{54}\) Friedrich Hirth, \textit{China and the Roman Orient: Researches into Their Ancient and Mediaeval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records} (Leipzig: Georg Hirth, 1885), 40, 55, 59.

Jingjiao’s connection between medicine and qi is more interesting if we consider the usage of qi in the Tang era and even earlier. According to Elisabeth Hsu, qi tended to be related to the internal regulation of breaths and emotions in the late Warring States (476–221 BC) and early Han (202 BC–8 CE, 25–220 CE). Moreover, in pre-imperial China there was a close connection between feng 風/风 (wind) and gui 鬼 (ghosts), and between qi and shen 神 (spirits). In other words, feng and qi both connote the spirit world. This corresponds to the expressions in Xuting mishisuo jing, in which feng is used to describe the transcendence of God and also the spirit that inhabits humans, who is also transcendent because it is of divine nature:

The personal destiny of all living beings is determined by the spirit. At the moment life ceases to exist and their destiny approaches, the spirit abandons living beings. There is no spirit for the mind and thought, but they too are kept alive by the spirit. The moment the spirit abandons living beings is the moment of passage. But why do people not see the spirit depart? And what colour is the spirit? Red, green, or some other colour? It is not possible to see what the spirit is like.

Third, the Jingjiao text often treats the Spirit and wind synonymously. First, the theology of creation reflects the creation account in Genesis 1 in a way that can be likened to the missionaries sent to China in the late nineteenth century who were “disguised in Chinese dress.” Namely,
the Jingjiao authors used phrases from the state religion (Daoism) but endowed them with Christian meanings. For example, the Holy Spirit is referred to as yuanfeng (元风, literally “the primordial wind”) that correlates with the “spirit of God,” “wind of God,” that hovers over the waters in the primordial void (Genesis 1:2).\(^{59}\) Then, in line 5, jingfeng 净风 (pure wind), as the Pure Spirit of the Three-One, is the instrument of Messiah to establish the ineffable new teaching to shape virtuous practice through the right faith.\(^{60}\)

Then, in line 6, shuifeng 水风 (water and wind) appears in the Syriac baptismal ritual, in which water and the Spirit are closely working together and serve as the means of immersion required by the Messiah’s doctrine, resulting in humanity’s being cleansed from vanity and undergoing purification to recover their purity and whiteness.\(^{61}\) In the seventy-fourth of his Hymns on Faith, Ephrem speaks of the visible (water) and the invisible elements (the Spirit) in the baptismal ritual: “the Holy Spirit / who is mixed in the baptismal water / so that it may be for absolution.”\(^{62}\) The close association of feng 風 (wind) and the Spirit

\(^{59}\) Nicolini-Zani, Luminous Way, 198, n. 12. Other scholars interpret yuanfeng differently. For example, Manuel Diaz interprets it as “the primordial elements before all things were separated, namely, chaos according to the Chinese history.” See Manuel Diaz 阳玛诺, Tang Jingjiao bei song zhengquan 唐景教碑颂正诠 [Interpretation of the Jingjiao Stele in the Tang Dynasty] (Shanghai: Tushanwan yinshuguan 土山湾印书馆, 1927), 26, translation mine. Yang Rongzhi translates it as 太极 taichi. See Rongzhi Yang 楊榮緂, Jingjiao beiwen jishi kaozheng 景敎碑文紀事考正 [Textual Criticism of the Recording in the Jingjiao Stele], 3 vols, vol. 2 (Changsha: Hunan sixian shuju 湖南思贤书局, 1895, repr. 1901), 19. Lin Wushu examines the 7 references to feng 風 (lines 1–2, 6, 8–9, 11, 12, 20, 27) and concludes that “none refers to the Spirit of God.” See Wushu Lin 林悟殊, “Jingjiao ‘Jingfeng’ kao: Yijiao wendian ‘Feng’ zi yanjiu zhi yi 景敎‘净风’考：夷教文典‘风’字研究之一” [An Examination of Jingfeng in Jingjiao: The First Study on the Word ‘Feng’ in Western Religions], Xiyu yanjiu 西域研究 [The Western Regions Studies] 3 (2014): 50–64, esp. 54. However, such a view disregards the text’s close association with the creation account in Genesis 1, which is clearly referred to in this section.

\(^{60}\) Nicolini-Zani, Luminous Way, 200.


is also attested in other Jingjiao documents: liangfeng 凉风 (cold breeze) and fengliu 風流 (wind current) in the Xuting mishisuojing; jingfeng 净风 (pure wind) in the Yishen lun 一神論 (Discourse on the One God); jingfengwang 净风王 (the King of the Pure Wind) in the Daqin Jingjiao sanwei mengdu zan 大秦景教三威蒙度赞 (Hymn in Praise of the Salvation Achieved through the Three Majesties of the Luminous Teaching).63

Fourth, feng 風 (wind) is so closely tied to Jingjiao’s theology to the extent that the author of the Stele combines the word with jing 景 (line 11), namely, jingfeng dongshan 景风东扇 (the Luminous Breeze blew eastward). Nicolini-Zani argues that “t[he character jing 景, ‘light’ or ‘luminous,’ that appears here and in other subsequent phrases is undoubtedly a reference to jingjiao 景教, ‘Luminous Teaching.’”64 Semiotically, Tamaki Ogawa traces the usage of the phrase fengjing 風景 to the Southern Dynasty (420–502) and argues that the phrase means “light and atmosphere,” and that jing refers to the space and setting in which the light shines.65 The Poet Yin Zhongwen 殷仲文 (d. 407) of the Sixth Dynasty closely associated jing with qi 氣 (in jingqi 景气) as a synonym with feng (wind).66 The Poet Wang Bo 王勃 (648–675) in the Tang Dynasty used jing in place of feng.67 Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that, by the Tang dynasty, the word jing refers to light

64 Nicolini-Zani, Luminous Way, 205, n. 61.
66 Ogawa, Lun, 8.
67 Ogawa, Lun, 11.
and wind, great or universal, and “to venerate, admire,” and that the Syriac-speaking missionaries creatively took advantage of the multifaceted meaning of the word jìng and used it to name their religion. It can be further argued that such a strategic choice of the Chinese character to name their religion not only shows that Jingjiao brings the true light to people, but also demonstrates its strong pneumatological emphasis. For example, the various invocations to the Spirit have been found in the Syriac Acts of Thomas, which constitute the earliest extensive non-biblical Syriac text that survives, going back to about the third century. Specifically, in the Acts of Thomas, one probably finds the first attestation in Syriac of the identification of the ruḥā (Genesis 1:2) with the Holy Spirit. Moreover, celebrated as the “Harp of the Spirit” in Syriac traditions, the poet-deacon Ephrem (d. 373) played a foundational role in Syriac theology and biblical interpretation. Another authority in the School of Edessa that has deeply influenced the theology of the Assyrian Church of East, namely, Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428), was chosen to represent the Orthodox position at a discussion with the Macedonians over the full divinity of the Holy

68 Zhu Donghua suggests that the word jìng should be holistically understood both from an objective perspective as “shining” or “universal,” and from a subjective perspective as “venerating” or even “fearing (God).” It is undoubtedly important to expound the meaning of jìng in a dialectical relationship between the piety of believers with respect to the greatness of what is deemed the Sacred. See Donghua Zhu, “Chinese Jingjiao and the Antiochene Exegesis,” in The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in China, ed. K. K. Yeo (Oxford University Press, 2021), 47–62, esp. 50–51, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190909796.013.9.


In their commentaries on Genesis, both Ephrem and Theodore understand ruḥā as wind/air. Their authority in the School of Edessa ensured that this view became the dominant one among pupils of that school. Not surprisingly, this became the standard understanding in the later exegetical tradition of the Church of the East from the seventh century onwards. Jingjiao’s frequent references to feng (wind) might then be traced to Ephrem and Theodore’s exegetical influence.

Without a distinctive pneumatology in combination with Christology, Jingjiao could not distinguish themselves from their competitors, such as Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism, because the three are recognised in lump sum as sanyi jiao 三夷教 (the Three Persian Religions). Both the Manichaeans and the Zoroastrians emphasised the warfare between light and darkness. Xia Jinhua 夏金华 even goes as far as recognising the three Persian religions’ common characteristic of advocating “light.” If Xia is right, it also suggests that Jingjiao’s reason

74 Even though both Ephrem and Theodore (and Narsai, who is strongly under the influence of Theodore) are against interpreting the ruḥā (Gen 1:2) as the Holy Spirit, a case can be made that different exegetical traditions existed in the Church of the East. Besides the Acts of Thomas, mentioned earlier, the eastern recension of the Cave of Treasures identifies the ruḥā as the Holy Spirit. See Brock, “ruach elohim,” 330–334. While translating their theological concept into Chinese, the Jingjiao missionaries needed to weigh these different opinions to see which one(s) could be more appropriately conveyed to the Chinese audience. The dominant Chinese metaphysical concept of qi was most likely a convenient way for them to associate wind with the Holy Spirit.
77 Xia, “Zhong gu,” 122. Concerning Jingjiao, Johan Ferreira recognises its symbolism of light in continuity with the Syriac literature. See Ferreira, Early
for adopting *jing* as their name cannot depend solely on its meaning of “light.” Nor could it solely mean “universal,” since both Zoroastrianism and Manichaeanism were considered universal religions. Therefore, above all other rich meanings such as “light,” “grand,” and “veneration,” as suggested by Zhu Donghua 朱东华, I propose that *jing* also refers to the Holy Spirit and that Jingjiao adopts it as their sinicised name due to their strong emphasis on the Spirit. This fact can be seen not only from their theological roots in the School of Edessa (Ephrem and Theodore), but also by the Stele author’s emphasis on the role of the Spirit in their theology of creation, the Spirit’s production of the two breaths *yin* and *yang*, and the frequent references of *feng* to the Holy Spirit. Hence, in addition to the Luminous Religion/Teaching, Jingjiao can be rightly translated as the Religion/Teaching of the Spirit. Furthermore, their strong pneumatological approach to the theology of creation can be called *qi*-tological due to their creative, conceptual imagination by “dancing” around the Chinese metaphysical concept of *qi*.
After surveying the Jingjiao documents, Liu Zhenning observes the writers’ unparalleled preference for the word jing: Jingjiao 景教 refers to the teaching, jingmen 景门 to the church, jingfa 景法 to the religious ordinances, jingsi 景寺 to the religious building, jingzhong 景众 to the followers, jingli 景力, jingming 景命, or jingfu 景福 to the religious power and effect, and so on. Liu laments that we can hardly comprehend the ming 名 (name) of Jingjiao, let alone its shi 实 (reality). Its incomprehensibility partly arises due to the scholars’ relative insensitivity to Jingjiao’s pneumatology, and partly due to the obscurity of the documents’ transformational deployment of traditional linguistic features.

Arguably, Jingjiao authors’ creativity in their scientific and technological strategy and their qi-tological theology of creation can be traced to human intuition as a function of the human spirit, which is subject to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Like Welker and Nee, Wolfhart Pannenberg also expounds on the cause of evil spirits in that “when the self-centredness of a living process dominates over the dynamic of self-transcendence, so that the living being can no longer be a member of a larger spiritual integration, the dynamic of self-transcending integration itself becomes a principle of separation and opposition.” Pannenberg’s insight explains the nature of human spirit as a two-edged sword, in that on the one hand, “the self-centring of human egoism can turn against the life-giving working of the Spirit in an especially destructive way,” but, on the other hand, “the human being is shaped by a desire for fuller participation in the Spirit, which would satisfy its hunger for wholeness and identity and bring it peace

81 Liu, Shi yu, 102.
with all creation.”\textsuperscript{84} Pannenberg’s finding is crucial here in that human longing for scientific discovery and technological innovation is part of the human spirit’s hunger and longing, the fulfilment of which “is not given to the human being in the form of a definitive possession”; it can be accomplished “only in the ecstatic experience of faith and its hope, and in the creative love that is born of such faith.”\textsuperscript{85}

George Medley III applies Pannenberg’s mature theological science to inspiration. In light of Pannenberg’s later description of the Spirit in terms of a dynamic field, dubbed pneumatological panentheism, Medley detects the tension in Pannenberg’s understanding of inspiration when coupled with his description of the creative activity of the Spirit, namely, who is responsible for the presence (or absence) of creative beauty. Drawing on Pannenberg’s commitment to the contingency of creation while arguing that creation is moving towards a definite goal (such as the Omega point), Medley proposes that the existence of creative beauty, at least human creative beauty, be viewed not as the work of either humanity or God only, but as a partnership between God and humanity, while also pursued independently by God and humanity. Medley further applies this understanding to what we mean when we declare something to be “inspired.” Creative beauty of this sort, for Medley, “is fully the work of a human and fully the work of God, yet also the partnership between the two,” which is “true regardless of the conscious awareness on the part of the human artist/creation” “due to the panentheistic nature of the spirit.”\textsuperscript{86}

In sum, I have presented Jingjiao’s highly qi-tological theology of creation as a pneumatological approach closely intertwined with the Chinese cosmological concept of qi. Furthermore, their emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit’s internal operation through the human spirit contributes to their creativity in mastering Greek-Byzantine science and technology and boldly presenting their

\textsuperscript{84} Pannenberg, \textit{Historicity of Nature}, 118.
\textsuperscript{85} Pannenberg, \textit{Historicity of Nature}, 118.
scientific learning and technological skills before the Tang royalty. 

Next, this paper evaluates Jingjiao's approach, hopefully for the benefit of the contemporary global church and its worldwide mission.

**Critical Lessons from Jingjiao for the Third Millennium**

Having no precursors to follow, the Assyrian Church of the East missionaries certainly achieved a high degree of success in their missionary endeavours, which can be seen in their survival for more than two hundred years. A series of factors contributed to their historic accomplishment. First, they did not reject the secular sciences of their time; instead, they took advantage of the scientific learning provided by society. Moreover, they incorporated such comprehensive learning and technological expertise in their missionary endeavour and boldly engaged with the scientifically and technologically advanced Chinese civilisation. Their active engagement with science and technology is more meaningful when compared to the mainstream contemporary Chinese theology, which, by and large, rejects theological integration with evolutionary science.

Second, their qi-tological approach to the theology of creation results from their creative dialogue with the Chinese metaphysical concept of qi, a crucial concept in Chinese philosophy, religions, and medicine. By interacting with the idea of qi, they highlighted the ubiquitous, life-giving, and powerful nature of the Holy Spirit, and her power in intercultural and interreligious dialogues. They rightly emphasised the transcendent and immanent aspects of the Holy Spirit and the human spirit.

From the transcendent point of view, the Spirit is responsible for inspiring human intuition in both religion and science. With human

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87 Xu Xiaohong traced possible Christian activities in China to the pre-Tang era. However, due to lack of hard evidence, his proposal should be treated as speculation. See Xu, “Tangdai,” 25–28.

88 Elsewhere, I have observed a seventy-year gap between the Chinese theology of science and its Western counterpart. See Feng, “Addressing the Needham Question,” 314.
intuition as a common field of study, Christianity, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism all cultivate the “seeds” in their orientation toward the advancement of modern sciences. In their pursuit of truth, scientists, as spiritual beings, are motivated by their inner spirit. The creativity that scientists crave originates in their human intuition. From the immanent point of view, the Spirit is always at work when intuition is invoked, which results in each realisation of scientific creativity and innovation. In the universal and specific operations of the Spirit, Christ as the Word, logos, is indispensably at work. At the same time, D’Costa is insightful in reminding us of the Spirit’s call to “relational engagement” with the religious other: “If the Spirit is at work in the religions, then the gifts of the Spirit need to be discovered, fostered, and received into the church. If the church fails to be receptive, it may be unwittingly practising cultural and religious idolatry.”

A Chinese theology for the third millennium in particular, and Christian theology in general, will only do harm to itself by turning away from the pioneers of Jingjiao, who similarly lived in a techno-scientific and spirited world.

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