

# 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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When the Church of the East sent its missionaries to China in the seventh century,<sup>1</sup> 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

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- 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.<sup>2</sup>) 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.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, China was already a highly developed civilisation that can be traced to 1,200 BC.<sup>4</sup> According to McClellan and Dorn, “the medieval China was scientifically and technologically more developed than Europe in many fields.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> Compared to those newly imported religions, the Chinese indigenous religion Daojiao 道教 (religious Daoism)<sup>8</sup> enjoyed the official status as

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- 2 See Steve Cochrane, *Many Monks across the Sea: Church of the East Monastic Mission in Ninth-Century Asia*, Regnum studies in mission (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2017), 11.
  - 3 Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 187.
  - 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.
  - 6 Joseph Needham and Colin A. Ronan, *The Shorter Science and Civilisation in China: An Abridgement of Joseph Needham’s Original Text*, 2 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1978), 1: 46.
  - 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.<sup>9</sup> 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* 景教 (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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9 names of people and places in Chinese Pinyin will be given in regular font. 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> They were known for their medical expertise in the East.<sup>13</sup>

When Aluoben 阿罗本, most probably a monk or bishop named Yaballaha or Abraham,<sup>14</sup> 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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- 10 Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 81.
- 11 McClellan and Dorn, *Science and Technology*, 120.
- 12 Matteo Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East: Texts and History of the First Encounter of Christianity with China* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 102.
- 13 Henry Yule and Henri Cordier H. 裕尔 and H. 考迪埃, *Dongyu jicheng lucong 东域纪程录丛* [Cathay and the Way Thither, Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China], trans. Xushan Zhang (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe 云南人民出版社, 2002), 84; Friedrich Hirth 夏德, *Daqin guo quanlu 大秦国全录* [China and the Roman Orient], trans. Jieqin Zhu, *Daxiang xueshu yicong* (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe 大象出版社, 2009), 303.
- 14 H. Takahashi, "Transcribed Proper Names in Chinese Syriac Christian documents," in *Maiphono w-Rabo d-Malphone*, ed. G. A. Kiraz, *Studies in Honor of S. P. Brock* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2008): 631–662, esp. 639.

with opportunities for preaching.<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> In other words, Yisi served as the Duke's think-tank and intelligence spy.<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup> According to Nie Zhijun 聂志军, the description of Yisi on the Stele, namely, *yibo shiquan* 艺博十全, literally means “ten sicknesses, ten healings” (*zhibing shizhi shiyu*, 治病十治十愈), referring to his superb medical skills.<sup>20</sup>

Another *Jingjiao* believer known for his medical expertise is Chongyi 崇一,<sup>21</sup> who healed the older brother of Tang emperor

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- 15 E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Monks of Kùblâi Khân, Emperor of China: Or, The History of the Life and Travels of Rabban Šâwmâ, Envoy and Plenipotentiary of the Mongol Khâns to the Kings of Europe, and Markôs Who as Mâr Yahbh-Allâhâ III Became Patriarch of the Nestorian Church in Asia* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1928), 37; quoted in Qianzhi Zhu 朱谦之, *Zhongguo Jingjiao: Zhongguo gudai Jidujiao yanjiu* 中国景教: 中国古代基督教研究 [Chinese *Jingjiao*: Research of Ancient Christianity in China] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe 东方出版社, 1993), 69.
- 16 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 213.
- 17 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 213.
- 18 Zhijun Nie 聂志军, “Jingjiaobei zhong ‘Yisi’ yeshi Jingyi kao 景教碑中‘伊斯’也是景医考” [An Investigation of Yisi as a Medical Doctor in the *Jingjiao* Stele] *Dunhuangxue jikan* 敦煌学辑刊 3 (2008): 119–127, at 120.
- 19 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 213.
- 20 Nie, “Jingjiao bei,” 124.
- 21 For the record of Chongyi in the ancient Chinese sources, see Xu Lu 刘昉, *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), *Xin Tangshu* 新唐书, 248 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 81: 3598. Scholars are of different opinions regarding Chongyi's membership in *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 *Jingjiao* believer, considering

Xuanzong 玄宗 in 740.<sup>22</sup> Qin Minghe 秦鸣鹤 cured Emperor Gaozong 高宗's eye problems through the use of a technique that involved bloodletting,<sup>23</sup> or trepanning, which can be traced to the famous Greek doctor Hippocrates (c. 460–c. 375 BC).<sup>24</sup>

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

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all available factors in a comprehensive manner. See Yuan Chen 陈垣, *Chen Yuan xueshu lunwenji* (Di Er Ji) 陈垣学术论文集 (第二集) [A Collection of Chen Yuan's Scholarly Work (2)] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1982), 1: 85, 97; Zhixin Wang 王治心, *Zhongguo Jidujiao Shigang* 中国基督教史纲 [A Historical Sketch of Chinese Christianity] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhai chubanshe 上海文海出版社, 1940), 41; Wushu Lin 林悟殊, "Jingjiao zai Tangdai Zhongguo chuanbo chengbai zhi wojian 景教在唐代中国传播成败之我见" [My Opinion on *Jingjiao*'s Success and Failure in Its Spread in China in the Tang Dynasty] *Huaxue* 华学 3 (1998): 83–95, esp. 88. Others such as Cao Shibang and Matteo Nicolini-Zani think otherwise. See Shibang Cao 曹仕邦, "Tangdai de Chongyi fashi shi 'Jingjiao seng' ma? Zeng Chen Shou'an xiansheng de lunshuo 唐代的崇一法师是'景教僧'吗? 证陈授蕃先生的论说" [Was Chongyi, Master of the Law in the Tang Dynasty, a Monk of the Luminous Teaching? A Discussion with Mr. Chen Shou'an], *Xiang gang fo jiao* 香港佛教 [Buddhism in Hong Kong] 292 (1984): 16–20; Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 99.

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.

23 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.

24 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."<sup>25</sup> Zhang Xushan 张绪山 speculates that, most likely, Jihe was good at observing stars and other astronomical phenomena.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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).<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

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25 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 209.

26 Zhang, "Jingjiao," 87.

27 Another example is Aixue (爱薛, Ngai-Sie, 1227–1308) in the Yuan Dynasty, who was responsible for the calendar system of the Western Religion (xiyu 西域). See Lian Song, *Yuanshi* 元史, Dianjiao ed., 210 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1976), 134: 3248–3249, quoted in Xiaoping Yin 殷小平, "Tang Yuan *Jingjiao* guanxi kaoshu 唐元景教关系考述" [A Study on the Nestorian in the Tang and Yuan Dynasties], *Xiyu yanjiu* 西域研究 [*The Western Regions Studies*] 2 (2013): 51–59, at 53.

28 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 103.

29 Bill M. Mak, "Astral Science of the East Syriac Christians in China during the Late First Millennium," *Mediterranean Archaeology & Archaeometry* 16:4 (2016): 87–92, esp. 89, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.220904; quoted in Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 103.



Other Greek-Byzantine technologies transmitted to China by the *Jingjiao* missionaries include bell-making techniques and architectural skills.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

### ***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,<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> Third, their loyalty

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30 Zhang, “*Jingjiao*,” 85–87.

31 Zhu, *Zhongguo Jingjiao*, 71–72 (translation mine).

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).

33 Xiaohong Xu 徐晓鸿, “Tangdai *Jingjiao* renwu kaolue 唐代景教人物考略” [A Concise Examination of the Persons of *Jingjiao* in Tang Dynasty], *Jinling shenxue zhi* 金陵神学志 [Nanjing Theological Review] 67:2 (2006): 25–53, at 45.

to the Tang dynasty and charity to its people stood the test of severe political rebellion and military onslaught. The An Lushan 安祿山 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.”<sup>34</sup>

The *Jingjiao*'s expertise in science and technology can be traced at least to their missionary activities in Central Asia.<sup>35</sup> 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.”<sup>36</sup> At the gates of Asia, Merv, “due to its central geographical position, attracted the envoys of the world religions in a special manner,”<sup>37</sup> including Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Christianity.<sup>38</sup> 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.”<sup>39</sup>

One thing worth noting is that missionaries of Manichaeism 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.

35 The Church of the East's engagement with science and technology can be further traced to their homeland in Mesopotamia, including the school of Edessa and the school of Nisibis. See Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2003), 11, 21; Anonymous, “The School of Edessa,” N/A, [http://nestorian.org/the\\_school\\_of\\_edessa.html](http://nestorian.org/the_school_of_edessa.html) (accessed 8 May 2023); Arthur Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis* (Leuven: Peeters, 1985).

36 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 48.

37 Ian Gilman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), 206.

38 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 47–48.

39 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 48.

Asia, the Manichaeans and the Zoroastrians in China did not appear to resort to science and technology as much as the Syriac-speaking Christians.<sup>40</sup> 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.”<sup>41</sup> 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’ Qi-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.<sup>42</sup> Voluminous scholarly works on the *Jingjiao* texts have focused on identifying the source of specific terms, their interpretation,

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- 40 Chengyong Ge, “Jingjiao zai Tangdai de xingshuai yu liuchan wenming mingyun 景教在唐代的兴衰与流产文明命运” [The Rising and Decaying of *Jingjiao* during the Tang Dynasty and the Destiny of Miscarried Civilisation], Pushi shehui kexue yanjiu wang 普世社会科学研究网 [Pu Shi Institute for Social Science], updated 7 July 2022, <http://www.pacilution.com/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=12501> (accessed 22 November 2022).
- 41 Hongsheng Cai 蔡鸿生, “Xuyan 序言,” [Preface] in *Tangdai Jingjiao zaiyanjiu* 唐代景教再研究 [Reexamination of *Jingjiao* in the Tang Dynasty], ed. Wushu Lin (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社, 2003): 1–4, esp. 4. Cai’s hypothesis is further expounded by Lin Wushu. See Wushu Lin 林悟殊, “Tangdai sanyijiao de shehui zouxiang 唐代三夷教的社会走向” [Social Orientation of the Three Persian Religions in the Tang Dynasty], in *Tangdai Zongjiao Xinyang yu Shehui* 唐代宗教信仰与社会, ed. Xinjiang Rong (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe 上海辞书出版社, 2003): 359–384.
- 42 See, for example, Chen, Huaiyu 陈怀宇, “Tangdai Jingjiao yu Fo Dao guanxi xinlun 唐代景教与佛道关系新论” [New Discussions on the Relationship between *Jingjiao* and Buddhism-Taoism in the Tang Dynasty], *Shijie zongjiao Yanjiu* 世界宗教研究 [Studies in World Religions] 5 (2015): 51–61.

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.<sup>43</sup> 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,<sup>44</sup> who, grasping the key of mysteries, creates and transforms [everything], and enlightens many honoured beings as the Creator<sup>45</sup>—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.
- 44 According to Wu Changxing, *lingxu* (灵虚) means *taixu*, *yuzhou* (太虚, 宇宙), namely, the universe; *houhou* means “existing after thousands of generations, until an unending future”; *miaoyou* means “the mystery of [creation] from nothing into being.” See Changxing Wu 吴昶兴, *Daqin Jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei: Daqin Jingjiao wenxian shiyi* 大秦景教流行中国碑: 大秦景教文献释义 [The Stele of the Diffusion of the Luminous Teaching in China: Expounding on the *Jingjiao* Literature], (Xinbei: Ganlan chuban youxian gongsi 橄椈出版有限公司 [Olive Publishing], 2015), 9.
- 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.<sup>46</sup>

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.”<sup>47</sup> Second, *erqi* 二气 (“the two breaths”) refers to *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳,<sup>48</sup> 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).<sup>49</sup> A further investigation of the word *qi* indicates that the word appears ten times in the entire Tang *Jingjiao* corpus.<sup>50</sup> 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] conform[ity] with the traditional Chinese cosmological or cosmogonic scheme of chaos which has

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46 Translation adapted from Nicolini-Zani. See Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 197–198.

47 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 198, n. 6.

48 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 198, n. 13.

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 *qi*, is able to develop the two polar principles which are made concrete by the separation of heaven and earth.<sup>51</sup>

Also pertinent to the discussion of *qi* in *Jingjiao's* theology of creation are occurrences of the word in *Xuting mishisuo jing* 序听迷诗所经 (Book of Righteous Meditator) and *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 *qi* (breath) of the Honoured One of Heaven.” Here the physical and spiritual senses of *qi* are actively engaged in *Jingjiao's* theology of creation.<sup>52</sup> In *Zhixuan anle jing*, the word *qi* appears together with *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.”<sup>53</sup> The *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,<sup>54</sup> and they were famous in Western Asia for their medical skills.<sup>55</sup>

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- 51 Max Deeg, “The ‘Brilliant Teaching’: The Rise and Fall of ‘Nestorianism’ (Jingjiao) in Tang China,” *Japanese religions* 31:2 (2006): 91–110, at 99.
- 52 For Nicolini-Zani, physical and spiritual balance is given by the proper flow of *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, *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 *Jingjiao*. See Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 295. According to Zhou Jiazhou, the earliest Chinese record *fanhun xiang* 返魂香 (Scent for Resuscitating the Soul) was a tribute from the Western Regions. See Jiazhou Zhou 周嘉胄, *Xiangcheng* 香乘 [Encyclopedia on Scents] (Beijing: Jiuzhou chubanshe 九州出版社, 2014), 158.
- 54 Friedrich Hirth, *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.
- 55 K. Chimin Wong and Lien-teh Wu, *History of Chinese Medicine: Being a Chronicle*

*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.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup>

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.”<sup>58</sup> Namely,

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*of Medical Happenings in China from Ancient Times to the Present Period* (Tientsin: The Tientsin Press, 1933), 259–261.

- 56 Elisabeth Hsu, “The Experience of Wind in Early and Medieval Chinese Medicine,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13:1 (2007), DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9655.2007.00400.x: S117–34, S119–20.
- 57 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 *Jingjiao*. See Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 295. According to Zhou Jiazhou, the earliest Chinese record *fanhun xiang* 返魂香 (Scent for Resuscitating the Soul) was a tribute from the Western Regions. See Jiazhou Zhou 周嘉胄, *Xiangcheng* 香乘 [Encyclopedia] (Beijing: Jiuzhou chubanshe 九州出版社, 2014), 158.
- 58 Richard R. Cook, *Darkest Before the Dawn: A Brief History of the Rise of*

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 *yuānfēng* (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).<sup>59</sup> Then, in line 5, *jìngfēng* 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.<sup>60</sup>

Then, in line 6, *shuǐfēng* 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.”<sup>62</sup> The close association of *fēng* 风 (wind) and the Spirit

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*Christianity in China* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021), 109.

- 59 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 198, n. 12. Other scholars interpret *yuānfēng* 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 楊榮鎰, *Jingjiao beiwen jishi kaozheng* 景教碑文紀事考正 [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 *fēng* 风 (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 景教‘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.
- 61 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 202.
- 62 Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Faith* 40.10, trans. Jeffrey Thomas Wickes, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947). See on this Sebastian P. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, Gorgias Eastern Christian studies 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2008), 13.



is also attested in other *Jingjiao* documents: *liangfeng* 凉风 (cold breeze) and *fengliu* 风流 (wind current) in the *Xuting mishisuo jing*; *jingfeng* 净风 (pure wind) in the *Yishen lun* 一神论 (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).<sup>63</sup>

Fourth, *feng* 风 (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.’”<sup>64</sup> Semiotically, Tamaki Ogawa traces the usage of the phrase *fengjing* 风景 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.<sup>65</sup> The Poet Yin Zhongwen 殷仲文 (d. 407) of the Sixth Dynasty closely associated *jing* with *qi* 气 (in *jingqi* 景气) as a synonym with *feng* (wind).<sup>66</sup> The Poet Wang Bo 王勃 (648–675) in the Tang Dynasty used *jing* in place of *feng*.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that, by the Tang dynasty, the word *jing* refers to light

63 Liu Zhenning summarizes 8 different translations of the Holy Spirit in *Jingjiao* documents. Besides those terms related to *feng* 风, other translations include *luoji* 罗嵇 in the Book on Profound and Mysterious Blessedness; *zhengshen* 证身 in *Daqin Jingjiao sanwei mengdu zan* (the Hymn in Praise of the Salvation Achieved through the Three Majesties of the Luminous Teaching); and *luhe ningjusha* 卢河宁俱沙 in *Zunjing* (the Book of the Honoured). See Zhenning Liu 刘振宁, *Shiyu 'guaikui' zhongyu 'guaikui': Tangdai Jingjiao 'geyi' guiji tanxi* 始于‘乖睽’终于‘乖睽’: 唐代景教‘格义’轨迹探析 [Originating from Deviation, Ending in Deviation: Exploring the Traces of ‘Interpretation’ of *Jingjiao* in the Tang Dynasty] (Guiyang: Guizhou daxue chubanshe 贵州大学出版社), 100, 134.

64 Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 205, n. 61.

65 In his article “The Linguistic Changes of *fengjing* in Chinese Literature,” Ogawa proposes that the earliest appearance of the phrase is in *Shishuoxinyu.Yanyu* (《世说新语·言语》). See Tamaki Ogawa 小川環樹, *Lun Zhongguo shi* 論中國詩 [On Chinese Poems], trans. Ruqian Tan, Zhicheng Chen, and Guohao Liang (Hong Kong: Zhongwen daxue chubanshe 中文大学出版社, 1986), 15.

66 Ogawa, *Lun*, 8.

67 Ogawa, *Lun*, 11.

and wind, great or universal, and “to venerate, admire,”<sup>68</sup> and that the Syriac-speaking missionaries creatively took advantage of the multifaceted meaning of the word *jing* 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.<sup>69</sup> Specifically, in the Acts of Thomas, one probably finds the first attestation in Syriac of the identification of the *ruhā* (Genesis 1:2) with the Holy Spirit.<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup> 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 *jing* 景 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 *jing* 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.

69 Gabriele Winkler, “Weitere Beobachtungen zur frühen Epiklese (den Doxologien und dem Sanctus): über die Bedeutung der Apokryphen für die Erforschung der Entwicklung der Riten,” *Oriens christianus* 80 (1996): 177–200. See also Sebastian P. Brock, “Invocations to/for the Holy Spirit in Syriac Liturgical Texts: Some Comparative Approaches,” in *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock, Variorum collected studies series CS863 (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Variorum, 2001, repr. 2006), 377–406, esp. 379.

70 Sebastian P. Brock, “The ruach elohim of Gen. 1,2 and Its Reception History in the Syriac Tradition,” in *Fire from Heaven*, 327–349, esp. 329.

71 See Michael Philip Penn et al. (eds), *Invitation to Syriac Christianity: An Anthology* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 299. See also Ephrem the Syrian, *The Harp of the Spirit: Poems of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, trans. Sebastian P. Brock, 3rd enlarged edn (Calgary, Canada: Aquila, 2013).

Spirit.<sup>72</sup> In their commentaries on Genesis, both Ephrem and Theodore understand *ruhā* 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.<sup>73</sup> *Jingjiao*'s frequent references to *feng* (wind) might then be traced to Ephrem and Theodore's exegetical influence.<sup>74</sup>

Without a distinctive pneumatology in combination with Christology,<sup>75</sup> *Jingjiao* could not distinguish themselves from their competitors, such as Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism, because the three are recognised in lump sum as *sanyijiao* 三夷教 (the Three Persian Religions). Both the Manichaeans and the Zoroastrians emphasised the warfare between light and darkness.<sup>76</sup> Xia Jinhua 夏金华 even goes as far as recognising the three Persian religions' common characteristic of advocating "light."<sup>77</sup> If Xia is right, it also suggests that *Jingjiao*'s reason

72 Frederick G. McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, The early church fathers (London: Routledge, 2009), 4.

73 Brock, "ruach elohim," 329–330.

74 Even though both Ephrem and Theodore (and Narsai, who is strongly under the influence of Theodore) are against interpreting the *ruhā* (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 *ruhā* 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.

75 For studies of *Jingjiao*'s Christology, see Donghua Zhu 朱東華, "Nixiya xinjing' yu *Jingjiao* shenxue 《尼西亞信經》與景教神學," [The Nicene Creed and *Jingjiao* Theology] *Logos & Pneuma* 47 (2017): 27–48; Steve Eskildsen, "Christology and Soteriology in the Chinese Nestorian Texts," in *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*, ed. Roman Malek (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica; China-Zentrum, 1991), 181–218.

76 Jinhua Xia 夏金华, "Zhonggu shiqi Sanyijiao de xiaowang yu wailai zongjiao Zhongguohua de lujing xuanze 中古时期三夷教的消亡与外来宗教中国化的路径选择," [The Demise of the Three Foreign Religions in the Medieval Times and the Choices of Sincization] *Huadong shifan daxue xuebao (Zhhexue shehui kexueban)* 华东师范大学学报 (哲学社会科学版) [Journal of East China Normal University, Humanities and Social Sciences] 51:1 (2019): 117–123, at 122.

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 Manichaeism were considered universal religions.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, above all other rich meanings such as “light,” “grand,” and “veneration,” as suggested by Zhu Donghua 朱东华,<sup>79</sup> 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,<sup>80</sup> *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*.

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*Chinese Christianity*, 320–322.

78 Kianoosh Rezaia, “‘Religion’ in Late Antique Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism: Developing a Term in Counterpoint,” *Entangled Religions* 11:2 (2020), DOI: 10.13154/er.11.2020.8556; Jenny Rose, *Zoroastrianism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 10.

79 Zhu, “Chinese *Jingjiao*,” 48–51.

80 The translation of *Jingjiao* as the Luminous Religion/Teaching can be traced to Li Zhizao, who interprets *jing* 景 as “luminary.” See Zhizao Li 李之藻, “Du *Jingjiao* bei hou 读景教碑后,” [After Reading the *Jingjiao* Stele] in *Tian xue chu han* 天學初函, ed. Zhizao Li (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju 台湾学生书局, 1986), 82. Lin Wushu suggests that *jing* 景 was used by the Nestorian missionaries due to its similar pronunciation with “Christ” and “Catholic.” See Wushu Lin 林悟殊, *Tangdai Jingjiao zai yanjiu* 唐代景教再研究 [Reexamination of *Jingjiao* in the Tang Dynasty], Tang yanjiu jijinhui congshu (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社, 2003), 54, n. 1. See also Wushu Lin 林悟殊, *Zhongguo sanyi jiao bianzheng* 中古三夷教辩证 [Debate and Research on the Three Persian Religions: Manichaeism, Nestorianism, and Zoroastrianism in Mediaeval Times] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 2005), 257–258. However, Wu Liwei forcefully refutes Lin’s proposal due to the latter’s insensitivity to the Persian language. See Liwei Wu 吴莉苇, “Guanyu *Jingjiao* yanjiu de wenti yishi yu fansi 关于景教研究的问题意识与反思” [Problematics and Reflection on the Research of Nestorian Church]. *Fudan xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 复旦学报 (社会科学版) [Fudan Journal (Social Sciences)] 53:5 (2011): 95–106, at 100–102. However, Wu does not articulate the origin of the name *Jingjiao*.

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).<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup> 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."<sup>83</sup> 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

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81 Liu, *Shi yu*, 102.

82 Elsewhere, I brought Michael Welker and Watchman Nee into dialogue and argue that scientific creativity depends on the human spirit, whose primary function is intuition. See Jacob Chengwei Feng, "Addressing the Needham Question from a Theological Perspective: Toward a Chinese Theology of Holistic Wisdom," *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 57:2 (2022): 299–321, at 311–312, DOI: 10.1111/zygo.12787.

83 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Historicity of Nature: Essays on Science and Theology* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation, 2008), 117–118.

with all creation.”<sup>84</sup> 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.”<sup>85</sup>

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 pantheistic nature of the spirit.”<sup>86</sup>

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

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84 Pannenberg, *Historicity of Nature*, 118.

85 Pannenberg, *Historicity of Nature*, 118.

86 George III Medley, “The Inspiration of God and Wolfhart Pannenberg's ‘Field Theory of Information,’” *Zygon* 48:1 (2013): 93–106, esp. 99–101, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9744.2012.01318.x.

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,<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup>

Second, their *qi*-logical 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.<sup>89</sup> 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.”<sup>90</sup>

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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89 Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 188–190.

90 Gavin D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity, Faith meets faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 361.