

Twitter Thread by Tweeting Historians



Tweeting Historians

@Tweetistorian



How do you explain the Trinity in Chinese? If you're a Christian in Tang China, there's a few ways!

I'm @ChenHuailun, back for my last #Twittistorian thread, this time on translating the names of God in Chinese Christian documents. ~ahc #jingjiao 1/



There are two main writers/translators credited in the extant documents of the Christian (called 'Jingjiao' 景教 in Chinese) corpus of Tang China: Aluoben and Jingjing. ~ahc #jingjiao /2

Aluoben (阿罗本) was said to have been the Persian missionary responsible for bringing Christianity to China, arriving in Chang'an in 635 and building a church there with 21 monks. ~ahc #jingjiao /3



'Observing the azure clouds, he [Aluoben] bore the true sacred books; beholding the direction of the winds, he braved difficulties and dangers.' - Xi'an stele ~ahc #jingjiao /4

占青雲而載真經
望風律以馳艱險。

Let's pause on this name, Aluoben (阿羅本). Some translate it as 'Olopen.' Is it a Syriac name, perhaps a rendering of Yahballaha or Abraham? Or perhaps a Middle Persian name Anrōš-ruwān (meaning immortal soul)? ~ahc #jingjiao /5

In Tang Chinese, these characters would be pronounced [a-la-pun]. I am inclined to believe the explanation of Kahar Barat, who suggests that it is simply a colloquial rendering of the Syriac title 'Rabban,' (ܪܒܢܐ) meaning 'our great one, or monk.' ~ahc #jingjiao /6



The other writer is Jingjing (景净), who is the author of the Xi'an stele erected in 781, more than 100 years after Aluoben brought Christianity to China. His Syriac name in the stele is Adam. ~ahc #jingjiao /7



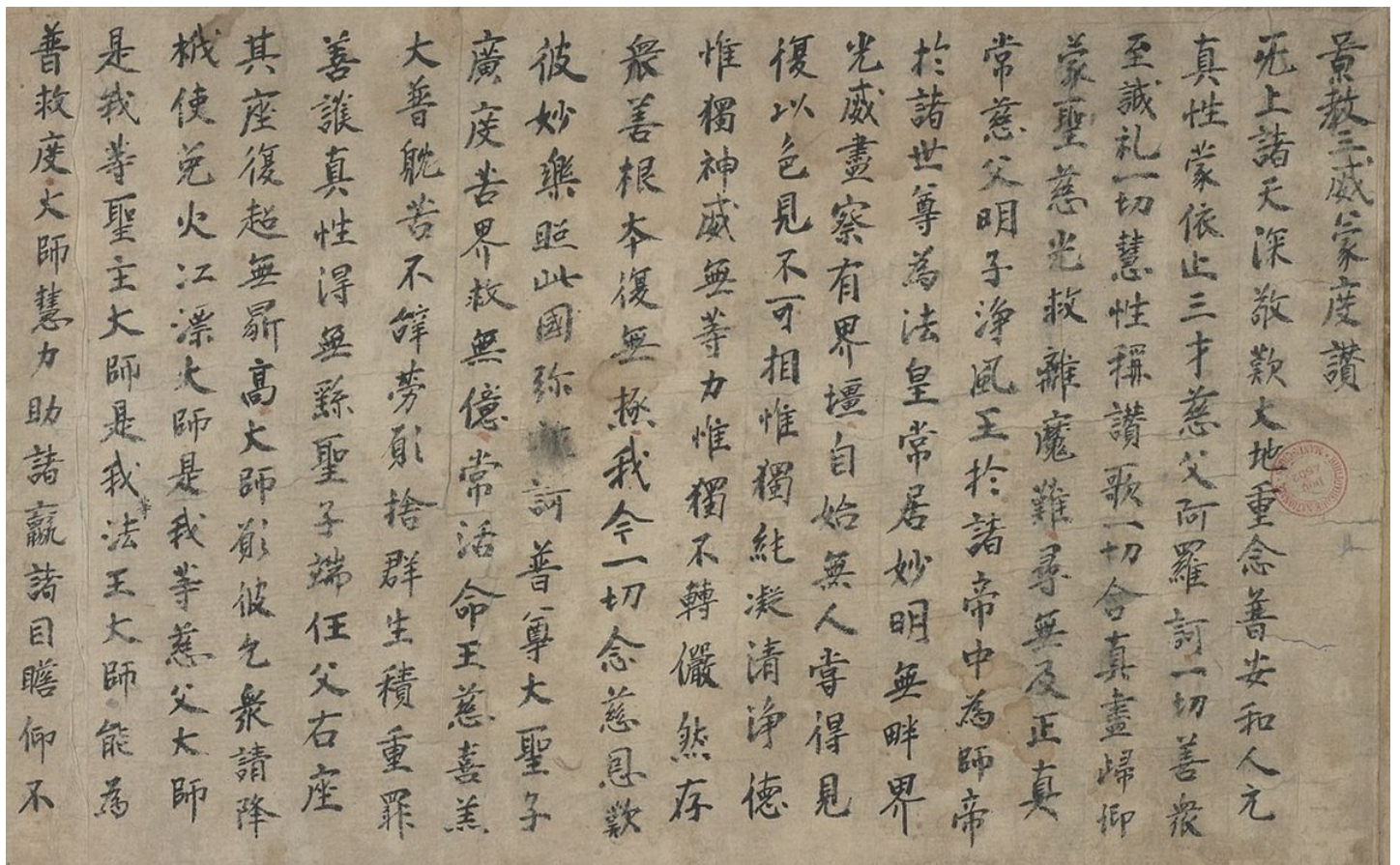
Now that we have our two writers established, we divide the Jingjiao corpus between the two. Aluoben is credited in the Book of Hearing the Messiah (■■■■■■■) and the Discourse on One God (■■■■). ~ahc #jingjiao /8

Jingjing is credited in the Book of Attaining Mysterious Rest and Joy (■■■■■■■), the Book of Proclamation of the Highest Origin of Origins (■■■■■■■■■■), the Hymn in Adoration of the Three Persons (■■■■■■■■■■), and the Book of Honour (■■■). ~ahc #jingjiao /9

They have markedly different ways of translating the names of God into Chinese. ~ahc #jingjiao /10

The first way is transliteration, as used by Jingjing in the Hymn in Adoration and Book of Honour.

For those who may be familiar with Syriac or even other Semitic languages, try to look at these Middle Chinese pronunciations and guess their meanings. ~ahc #jingjiao /11



■■■■ [Mandarin: a-luo-he; Middle Chn: ■a-la-xa]

■■■■ [Mandarin: mi-shi-he; Middle Chn: mji-■i-xa]

■■■■■■ [Mandarin: lu-he-ning-ju-sha; Middle Chn: lu-xa-niajn-ky-■a]

~ahc #jingjiao /12

These correspond to the three persons of the Trinity, namely God (Alaha ■■■■■), Christ (Mši■a ■■■■■■), and the Holy Spirit (Ru■a d-Qudša ■■■■■ ■■■■■■■) ~ahc #jingjiao /13



The second way is using indigenous terms, as in Aluoben's Book of Hearing the Messiah. God is Tian-zun (■■■). Tian (■) means something like heaven or sky, but etymology dates back to the 9th cent BCE. Zun (■) is a title of the Buddha as well as a deity in Daoism. ~ahc /14



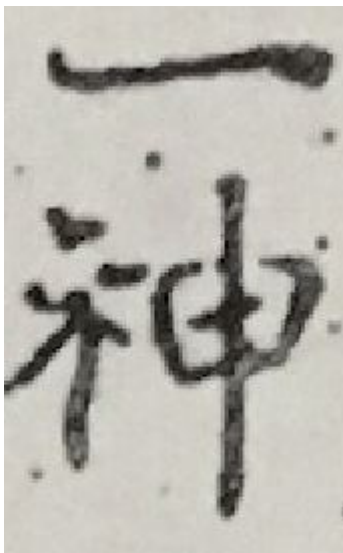
Jesus Christ is Shi-zun (■■), as used in the Discourse on One God. This is one of the ten epithets of the Buddha. However, there is no indigenous term for the Holy Spirit. ~ahc #jingjiao /15



The 3rd way of translating Christian terms into Chinese is neologism. We can see this in the use of the term One God (■■). God (■) refers to a kind of supernatural being, a god or a spirit, and is usually used in the plural sense. It also can refer to



However the term 'One God' would imply a strong monotheistic emphasis of the Christian 'god' (神). ~ahc #jingjiao /17



There are many titles/names for Christ, including Holy/Virtuous Son (神子), Son of Light (光之子), King of Eternal Life (永生之主), Universally-Honoured One (神), Merciful Joyous Lamb (慈喜之羊), Great Master (大神). ~ahc #jingjiao /18



The titles with the epithet 'son' are notably similar to the emperor's title, 'the Son of Heaven' (天子). ~ahc #jingjiao /19

武王

受天眷命 繼志前人

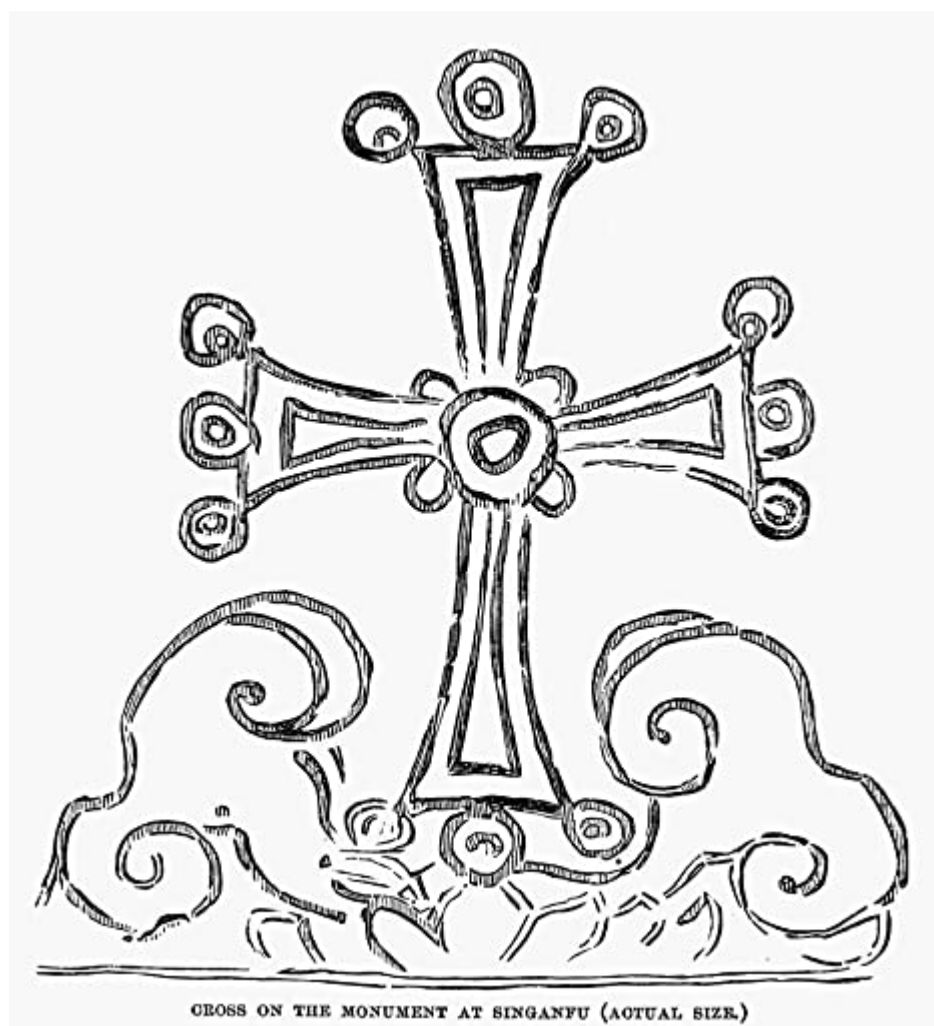
遐迩悅服 偃武修文

惟賢是寶 法度彰明

建用皇極 爰叙彝倫



The word 'wind' (feng 风), attempts to incorporate the multiple meanings of the Syriac Ruha (ܪܫܐ), which not only means 'wind,' but also 'breath' and 'spirit.' It may also be influenced by Manichaean translations of Spirit in Chinese as 'wind' as well. ~ahc #jingjiao /20



Different ways of translating may imply different theological understandings or emphases between writers. For instance, the Cool Wind in Aluoben's docs have a sensory emphasis, while the Pure and Parisuddha Wind in Jingjing's docs have an emphasis on purity. ~ahc #jingjiao /21



Translation is never easy, especially between religious traditions that have few premises in common. Christians writing in Chinese had to be creative, and their translations may even give us insight into the theology of the church in China at the time. ~ahc #jingjiao /22

Overall, the Jingjiao corpus is small, but it is rich, and it can reveal to us a crucial part of the religious world of China and the medieval east.

Thanks for reading, and I will follow up with a round-up of all my threads this week! ~ahc #jingjiao /23

