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' ■■ in Chinese) corpus of Tang China: Aluoben and Jingjing. ~ahc #jingjiao /2

Aluoben (■■■) 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

占青雲而載眞經
望風律以馳艱險。

Let's pause on this name, Aluoben (■■■). Some translate it as 'Olopen.' Is it a Syriac name, perhaps a rendering of Yahballaha or Abraham? Or perhaps a Middle Persian name An■š-ruw■n (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,' (■■■) meaning 'our great one, or monk.' ~ahc #jingjiao /6



The other writer is Jingjing (■■), 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 in Adam. ~ahc #jingjiao /7



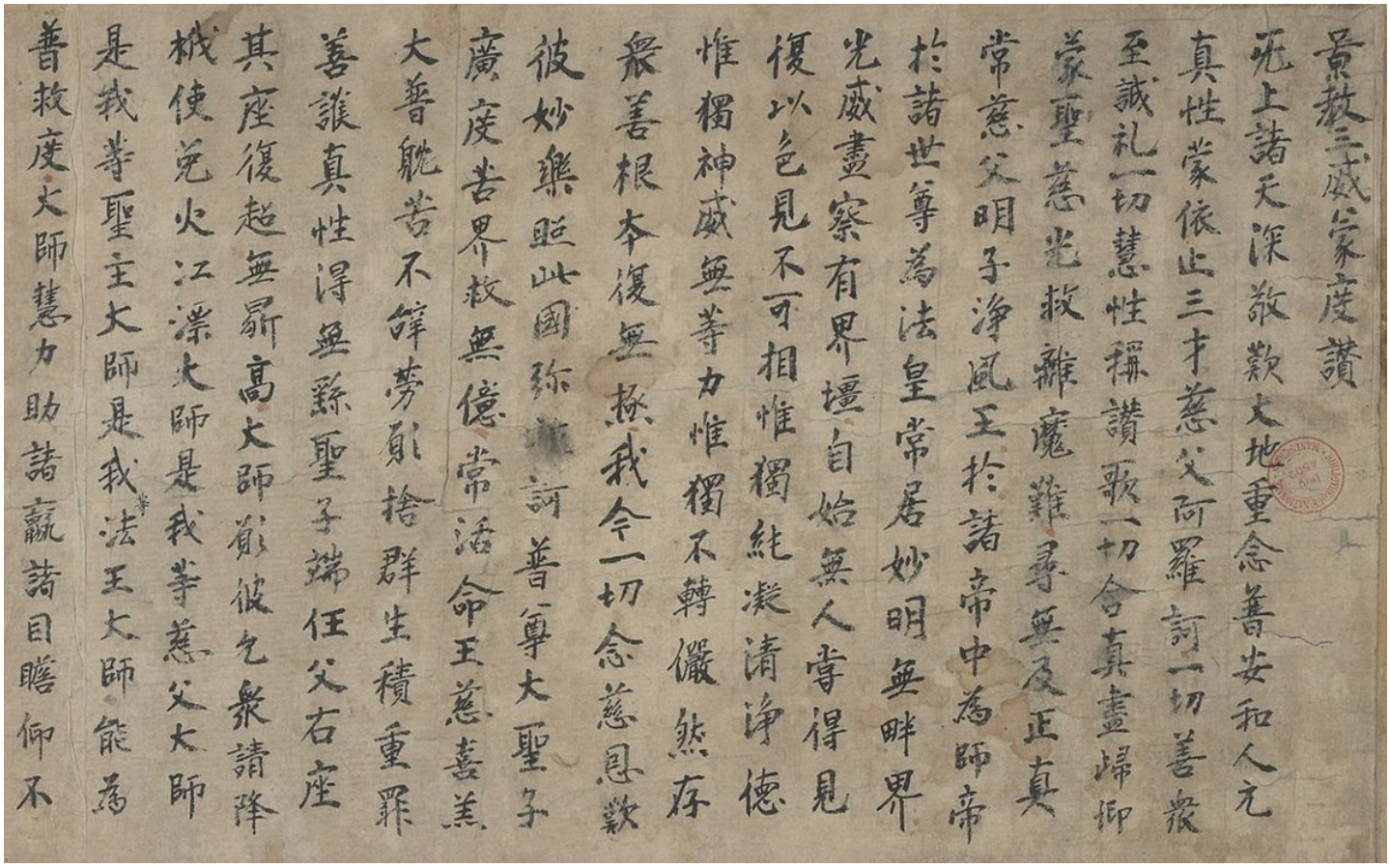
Now that we have our two writers established, we divide the Jingjiao corpus between the two. Aluoben is credited in the Book of Hearing the Messiah (■■■■■■) and the Discourse on One God (■■■). ~ahc #jingjiao /8

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

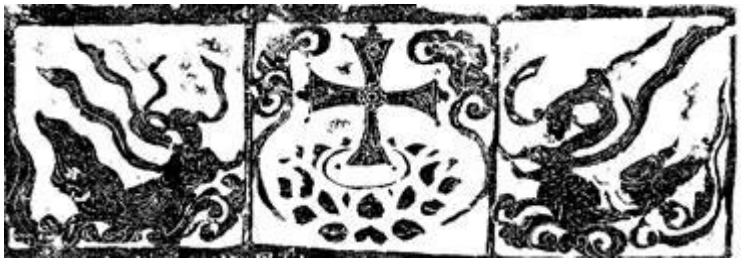
The first way is transliteration, as used by Jingjing in the Hymn in Adoration and Book of Honour.

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


景教三威蒙度讚
元上諸天深敬歎大地重念善安和人元
真性蒙依止三十慈父阿羅訶一切善衆
至誠礼一切慧性稱讚歌一切含真盡歸仰
蒙聖慈光救離魔難尋無及正真
常慈父明子淨風王於諸帝中為師帝
於諸世尊為法皇常居妙明無畔界
光威盡察有界壇自始無人聲得見
復以色見不可相惟獨純凝清淨德
惟獨神威無等力惟獨不轉儼然存
衆善根本復無極我今一切念慈恩歎
彼妙樂耶此國弥訶普尊大聖子
廣度苦界救無億常活命王慈喜美
大善能苦不饒勞能捨群生積重罪
善讓真性淨無繫聖子端任父右座
其座復超無最高大師能彼免衆請降
栰使免火江深大師是我等慈父大師
是我等聖主大師是我法王大師能為
普救度大師慧力助諸贏諸目瞻仰不

■■■ [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

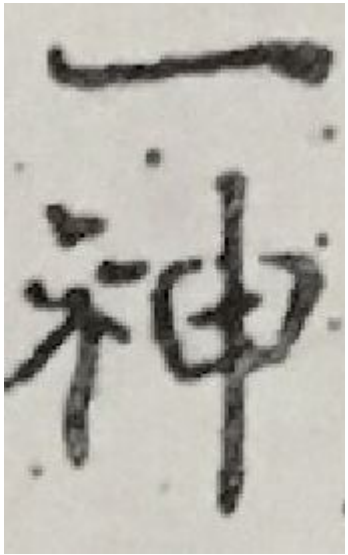


The 3rd way of translating Christian terms into Chinese is neologism. We can see this in the use of the term One God (■■). God (■) refers to a kind of supernatural being, a god or a spirit, and is usually used in the plural sense. It also can refer to

the souls of humans. /16



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



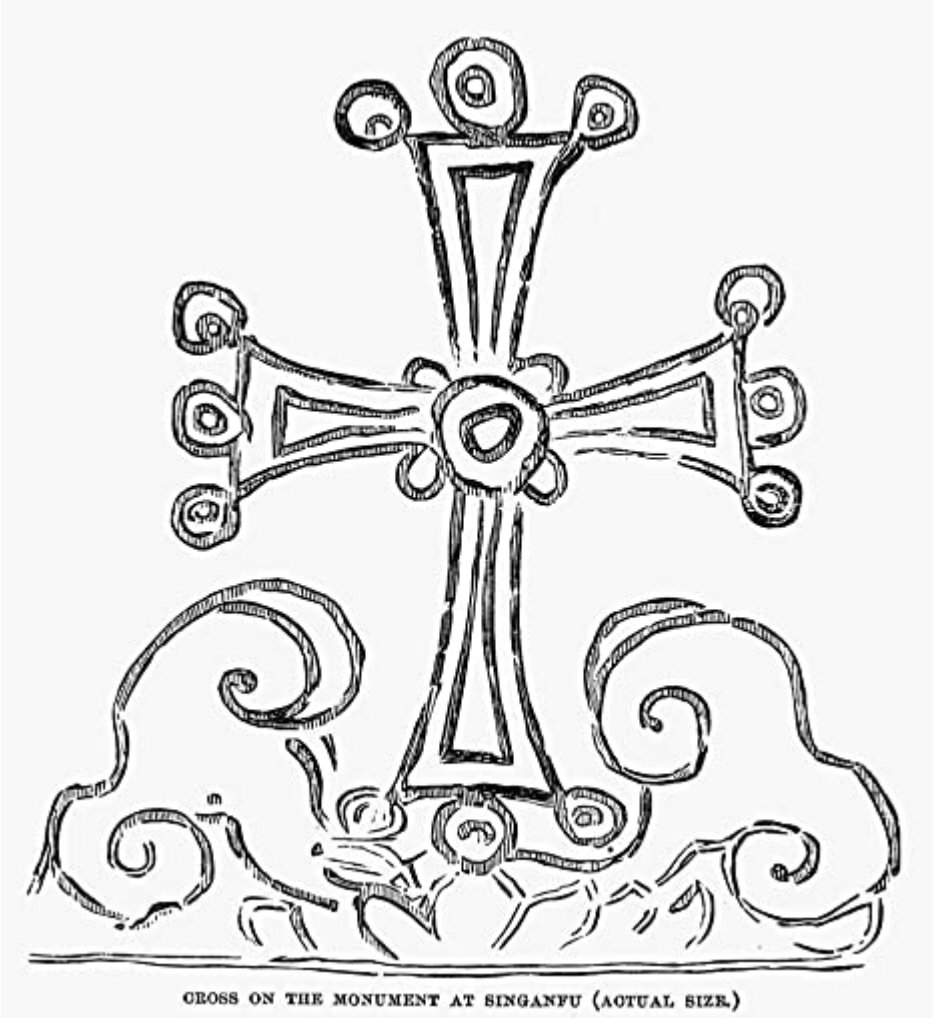
There are many titles/names for Christ, including Holy/Virtuous Son (■■), Son of Light (■■), King of Eternal Life (■■■■), Universally-Honoured One (■■), Merciful Joyous Lamb (■■■), Great Master (■■). ~ahc #jingjiao /18



The titles with the epithet 'son' are notably similar to the emperor's title, 'the Son of Heaven' (■■). ~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 ■), attempts to incorporate the multiple meanings of the Syriac Ru■a (■■■■), 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



CROSS ON THE MONUMENT AT SINGANFU (ACTUAL SIZE.)

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

