

## Article

# Jingjiao under the Lenses of Chinese Political Theology

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Received: 28 May 2019; Accepted: 16 September 2019; Published: 26 September 2019



**Abstract:** Conflict between religion and state politics is a persistent phenomenon in human history. Hence it is not surprising that the propagation of Christianity often faces the challenge of “political theology”. When the Church of the East monk Aluoben reached China in 635 during the reign of Emperor Tang Taizong, he received the favorable invitation of the emperor to translate Christian sacred texts for the collections of Tang Imperial Library. This marks the beginning of Jingjiao (景教) mission in China. In historiographical sense, China has always been a political domineering society where the role of religion is subservient and secondary. A school of scholarship in Jingjiao studies holds that the fall of Jingjiao in China is the obvious result of its over-involvement in local politics. The flaw of such an assumption is the overlooking of the fact that in the Tang context, it is impossible for any religious establishments to avoid getting in touch with the Tang government. In the light of this notion, this article attempts to approach this issue from the perspective of “political theology” and argues that instead of over-involvement, it is rather the clashing of “ideologies” between the Jingjiao establishment and the ever-changing Tang court’s policies towards foreigners and religious bodies that caused the downfall of Jingjiao Christianity in China. This article will posit its argument based on the analysis of the Chinese Jingjiao canonical texts, especially the Xian Stele, and takes this as a point of departure to observe the political dynamics between Jingjiao and Tang court. The finding of this paper does show that the intellectual history of Chinese Christianity is in a sense a comprehensive history of “political theology”.

**Keywords:** Xian Stele; Jingjiao Christianity; Tang Dynasty; Political Theology; politics-religion relationship

## 1. Introduction

Conflict between religion and politics is a persistent phenomenon in history. In an introductory preface to Chen Yuan’s (陳垣 1880–1971) *Mingji Dianqian Fojiao kao* 明季滇黔佛教考 [Late Ming Period Buddhism in Yungui Region], the prominent Chinese historian Chen Yinke (陳寅恪 1890–1969) claims: “General opinion has it that politics and religion are two different entities and should not be treated together. However, historical events suggest the opposite. Politics and religion are in indeed closely related. . . . When the Ming Dynasty fell, most of its literati royalists turned into avid Buddhist devotees in order not to serve the new dynasty. . . . In this context, religious history is nonetheless a political history”<sup>1</sup> (Chen 2002, pp. 235–36). In other words, Chen Yinke recognizes that Chen Yuan’s historical survey on the propagation of Buddhism during the late Ming period also reflects the political condition of the Ming Dynasty. The author Chen Yuan himself wrote a postscript that reaffirmed Chen Yinke’s statement when the book was reprinted in 1957 (Chen 2002, p. 480).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise mentioned, all translation from the Chinese text in this article is by the author.

<sup>2</sup> In this postscript, Chen Yuan has subtly made a critical allusion to the political-religion climate of his days.

A school of scholarship in Jingjiao (景教)<sup>3</sup> studies considers that the downfall of the Jingjiao-church in Tang China is the obvious result of its over-involvement in local politics.<sup>4</sup> However, the flaw of this assumption lies in the fact that it is not possible for Jingjiao, as a religious establishment, to avoid any interactions with the Tang court. In light of this notion, this article adopts Chen Yinke's view aforementioned and approaches the question of Jingjiao's downfall from the perspective of "political theology" instead. This paper argues that instead of over-involvement, it is rather the clashing of "ideologies" between the Jingjiao establishment and the ever-changing Tang court's policies towards foreigners that has caused the downfall of Jingjiao in Tang China.

In light of Chinese historiography, Chinese dynasties throughout the ages have always been a political domineering structure where the role of religion is subservient and secondary. When the Jingjiao-church first established itself in Tang China, official approval of settlement and royal patronage from the Tang imperial court were both crucial. From the moment Alouben and his missionary group entered Chang'an, they were well aware of the Tang court's "political theology". This awareness was explicitly but subtly revealed in Jingjiao's written records such as Xian Stele.

The Jingjiao establishment is often recognized as the beginning of the "political theology" awareness in the propagation history of Sino-Christianity. As one of the "three *yi*/barbarian religions" 三夷教 in the Tang Dynasty, the Church was inevitably subjected to the domineering cultural hegemony of the Tang court. According to Liu He, the concept of *yi* in viewing all foreigners as barbarian is "a Chinese classical theory of sovereignty imagination" (Liu 2004, p. 72). Liu argues that in classical Chinese view, this concept serves as an important figurative metaphor in the sovereign discourse of China imperial past viewing themselves as the center in the matter of both national administration and foreign relationships. As a discourse, *yi* serves the function of naming the boundaries of the imperial sovereign rule on the other's territories (Ibid.). In the Chinese context, the idea of sovereignty is closely associated with the view of *tianxia* (天下, literally "under heaven"). This is the figurative imagination of Chinese past dynasties which eventually turns into an imperial political discourse. In other words, in the traditional Chinese view, sovereignty is as much a matter of external recognition as one of domestic legitimacy, and it is the quest for such recognition that Chinese dynasties of the past often maintained a strict policy of *huayi zhi bian* (華夷之辨, distinction of Chinese against the foreign) in the coercion of foreigners. Segregating the Chinese from the barbaric foreigners is a projection of the classical Chinese imperial desire to dominate the others (Ibid., pp. 72–75). Hence, when Jingjiao first established itself in China, the institution was subjected to this domineering ideology of the Tang court.

The ego-centric world view of *tianxia* is the domineering political ideology that has shaped the foreign policies of ancient China towards its neighboring countries and other nationalities throughout the ages. Ancient imperial China referred to itself as *Zhongguo* (中國, the Centre State) and related to others as a suzerain would treat his vassals. Therefore, the demanding of tributes from the neighboring "barbarian" countries and treating all foreigners as "subjects" of the Chinese emperor were both justifiable and legitimate in the eye of Chinese sovereign rulers (Yu 2009, p. 221).

Within the conceptual framework of *tianxia* and *huayi zhi bian*, Jingjiao "political theology" needs to address two main issues: the sovereignty of *daotong* (道統 Chinese traditional orthodoxy) and the sovereignty of *zhengtong* (政統 political governance), i.e., *tianming* (天命, the Heavenly mandate) and *tianzi* (天子, the Son of Heaven-the emperor). Often, these two issues overlap with each other; they

<sup>3</sup> Jingjiao, the particular branch of Christianity which reached China during the Tang Dynasty, used to be commonly rendered as Nestorianism in English. However, the appropriateness of the term has recently attracted wide discussion in the scholarly circle East and West. Due to the limitation of capacity and scope, this paper will use Jingjiao 景教 instead of Nestorian to designate this particular religion, as this is the self-reference of the Jingjiao-church in Tang-China which is literally known as the "Luminous Religion".

<sup>4</sup> Representative scholars who hold this opinion includes Xu Zongze 徐宗澤, Yang Senfu 楊森富, Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之, Jiang Wenhan 江文漢 etc. For general overview, ref. Ren Jiyu 任繼愈 ed. *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xueshu dadian: Zongjiaoxue* 20世紀中國學術大典：宗教學 (Fujian jiaoyu chubanshe, (Ren 2002)), pp. 274–75; Weng Shaojun 翁紹軍, *Hanyu Jingjiao wendian quanshi* 漢語景教文典詮釋 (Shanghai: Sanlian shuju, (Weng 1996)), pp. 9–10.

are the two sides of the same coin. To a certain extent, Tang Jingjiao priests might have noticed the potential problems which would arise out of the adherence of the two. Therefore, in the first part of the text inscribed (hereafter Inscription) on the Monument for the Propagation of Daqin Jingjiao in China (大秦景教流行中國碑, hereafter Xian Stele), an elaborated account of *daotong* (theology) is being given, while the second half of the Inscription is dedicated to the account of *zhengtong* (politics). The Inscription<sup>5</sup> reads: “But any (such) system without (the fostering of the sage (the sovereign),<sup>6</sup> does not attain its full development; and a sage (sovereign) without the aid of such a system does not become great” (惟道非聖不弘, 聖非道不大) (Legge 1966, p. 9). “None but the Illustrious Religion is observed; none but virtuous rulers are appointed” (法非景不行, 主非德不立) (p. 13). “There is nothing which the right principle cannot effect; and whatever it effects can be named. There is nothing which a sage (sovereign) cannot do; and whatever he does can be related” (道無不可, 所可名; 聖無不作, 所作可述) (p. 19).

In other words, “foreign religions” and “barbarian temples” do need the Tang sovereign’s patronage for their establishment in China. Even in such an underprivileged position, the Jingjiao clerics boldly declared the theological proposition of the Church that “politics cannot exist without the aid of religion” or “politics does need the support of religion”. Obviously, the Jingjiao-church had attempted to strike a balance between their adherence to the “(Religion) system” and the “Sage (sovereign)”. By implying the relationships to be mutual, Jingjiao in a way implied that both parties are “equal” in status. The aforementioned statement clearly shows that the most crucial problem Christianity encountered in Tang China is political theology in nature instead of a cultural-theology one. This issue remains unresolved until today. In fact, many of the challenges Jingjiao faced during the Tang Dynasty are not just religious or doctrinal in nature, such as *huayi zhi bian* which is partly ethnic in nature; *jingong* (進貢, paying tribute) which is political in nature, and *zhibai junqin* (致拜君親, worshipping the emperor and the ancestors) which is both cultural and religious in nature. As a “barbarian religion”, Jingjiao had no alternative but to accept the assigned identity and designated naming of their establishment as stipulated by the Tang court. The Church was under the full governance of the national administrative system almost in every aspect, this is to demonstrate the encompassing Tang sovereignty towards foreign subjects. In this regard, the establishment of Jingjiao in Tang China involved not only the issue of keeping proper boundaries but also the shift of identity. By adhering to the requirement of *jingong* upon arrival and fully submitting to the Tang governance after its establishment, Jingjiao was shaped according to the cultural imagination and perceptions of the sovereign Tang. The submissiveness of the Jingjiao-church in accepting the designation of name and identity granted by the Tang court is the recognition of the full sovereignty of the Tang.

In traditional Chinese view, the power of state sovereignty is actualized through the integration of political and religious-cultural operations. Tang emperors turned this practice into a dominant political discourse to support royal legitimacy and the centralization of power. The history and destiny of the Jingjiao-church has clearly revealed the essentially subservient nature of Chinese political theology. In light of the stated observation, this paper intends to approach the issue of the down fall of Tang Jingjiao through the textual analysis of the Chinese Inscription on the Xian Stele, and takes this as a point of departure to observe the political dynamics between the Jingjiao establishment and the

<sup>5</sup> For the Inscription text of the Xian Stele, James Legge’s English rendition is being used in this particular paragraph in order to stress the notion of “political sovereignty” in relation to the discussion of *daotong* 道統 and *zhengtong*. James Legge. *The Nestorian monument of Hsi-an Fu in Shen-Hsi, China relating to the diffusion of Christianity in China in the seventh and eighth centuries* (London: Trübner, 1888, New York: Paragon, 1966) Citations refer to the Paragon edition. For the rest of the article, the translation and commentary produced by L. Eccles and S. N. C. Lieu: *Stele on the Diffusion of the Luminous Religion of Da Qin (Rome) in the Middle Kingdom* 大秦景教流行碑 27 July 2016 is used, online at: <https://bit.ly/2wdbNBv>, accessed 14 April 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Legge has aptly translated *dao* (道, the Way) as the system, referring to the Illustrious Religion (*Jingjiao*) and the *sheng* (聖, the sage), referring to the sovereign.

Tang court so to prove the point that the intellectual history of Chinese Christianity is in a sense a comprehensive history of “political theology”.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Historical Background and Context

For extended periods of time, the Inscription remains as the sole documentary reference to Jingjiao until the discovery of other major manuscripts such as the *Daqin Jingjiao xuanyuan zhiben jin* (大秦景教宣元至本經)<sup>8</sup> in the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>9</sup> Although these manuscripts provide a clearer picture as regards to the theology of Tang Jingjiao, the bulk has not contributed much in the aspects of revealing Jingjiao propagation and activities in the Tang Dynasty.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, the Inscription remains as most important historical archive in the intellectual history of Sino-Christianity. The discovery of the Xian Stele and the interest it has attracted from the scholarly circle is indeed a remarkable event in the studies of Tang Jingjiao. Fang Hao 方豪 (1910–1980) recognizes the Inscription as “The Champion of Chinese-Jingjiao text”. When the Xian Stele was first discovered, its authenticity had been once questioned.<sup>11</sup> Such suspicion was soon dismissed. Historian Chen Yuan considers that it is the starting point of the history of Chinese Christianity. It is indeed the most substantial primary source text of Chinese Christian theology.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 is of the opinion that, “It has been a while since the research on Tang Jingjiao comes out with any groundbreaking discovery, ... Although the Stele with the inscription of ‘The Propagation of the Luminous Religion in Daqin’—the most important substantiate written record on Jingjiao—should be taken seriously, it has already been studied over a span of three hundred years, not to mention the recent publication of Paul Pelliot’s comprehensive commentary. One might wonder the justification of further study on this subject”. Quoted from “Introduction” (導言) in *Tangdai zongjiao xinyang yu shehui* 唐代宗教信仰與社會 (Shanghai: Cishu chubanshe, (Rong 2003)), p. 10. Contrary to Rong’s view, this paper attempts to offer an alternative approach to the interpretation of the Inscription.

<sup>8</sup> Scholars have varied opinions regarding whether the total number of chapters is 8 or 9; depending on whether *Xuanyuan zhibenjing* 宣元至本經 and *Xuanyuan benjing* 宣元本經 should be treated as a single text or not. As for the authenticity of the text, Ref. Lin, Wushu 林悟殊, *Tangdai jingjiao zai yanjiu* 唐代景教再研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, (Lin 2003a)). Regarding the actual number of Jingjiao canons, Li (1628) Zhizhao 李之藻 (1571–1630) stated in the opening paragraph of *Tianxue chuhan* 天學初函 that quite a substantial number of these Jingjiao canons had been translated during Tang period. However, all of these texts were being collected into the anthology of *Beiyue Cang* 貝葉藏, and therefore not properly categorized. Li further stated that the 27 Books of translated scriptural texts from Zhenguan 貞觀 period (627–649) might still be found in other Buddhist anthologies. Jingjing 景淨 (a Jingjiao Monk) was said to have translated 30 Books of Jingjiao Scriptures and that he was even being invited to translate Buddhist sutras. However, Jing unfamiliarity with Sanskrit was later being ridiculed. Scholars have varied opinions regarding whether the total number of chapters is 8 or 9; depending on whether *Xuanyuan zhibenjing* 宣元至本經 and *Xuanyuan benjing* 宣元本經 should be treated as a single text or not. As for the authenticity of the text, Ref. Lin, Wushu 林悟殊, *Tangdai jingjiao zai yanjiu* 唐代景教再研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, (Lin 2003a)). Regarding the actual number of Jingjiao canons, Li (1628) Zhizhao 李之藻 (1571–1630) stated in the opening paragraph of *Tianxue chuhan* 天學初函 that quite a substantial number of these Jingjiao canons had been translated during Tang period. However, all of these texts were being collected into the anthology of *Beiyue Cang* 貝葉藏, and therefore not properly categorized. Li further stated that the 27 Books of translated scriptural texts from Zhenguan 貞觀 period (627–649) might still be found in other Buddhist anthologies. Jingjing 景淨 (a Jingjiao Monk) was said to have translated 30 Books of Jingjiao Scriptures and that he was even being invited to translate Buddhist sutras. However, Jing unfamiliarity with Sanskrit was later being ridiculed.

<sup>9</sup> (Deeg 2006, pp. 92–93).

<sup>10</sup> The research on Jingjiao is far from seeing its end. Scholars around the world are showing greater interest in the studies of Jingjiao than the Chinese academics. The Monumenta Serica Institute in Salzburg, Germany holds special international conference regarding this topic triennially. The Initial Conference: “Jingjiao: The Church of the East in China and Central Asia” was held in 2003, followed by “Research on the Church of the East in China and Central Asia” in 2006. In China, research has been reactivated after the new discovery of the Luoyang jingchuang 洛陽經幢. See Ge Chengyong 葛承雍 ed. *Jingjiao yizhen — Luoyang xinchu Tangdai Jingjiao jingchuang yanjiu* 景教遺珍—洛陽新出唐代景教經幢研究 (Beijing: Beijing Wenwu chubanshe, (Ge 2009)). Apart from that, an important breakthrough has been attained in the research of Yuan Jingjiao stele inscription. Ref. Niu Ruji 牛汝極, *Shizi lianhua — Zhongguo Yuandai Xuliya wen Jingjiao bei wenxian yanjiu* 十字蓮花—中國元代敘利亞文景教碑文獻研究 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, (Niu 2009)).

<sup>11</sup> For detail discussion on the queries, Ref. Erica C.D. Hunter (2010). “Syriac Onomastica in the Xian Fu Inscriptions”. *Parole de l’Orient* 35: 357–69.

<sup>12</sup> The first person who has annotated the Xian Stele Inscription is the Portuguese Jesuit Emmanuel Diaz Jr. (1574–1659). *Jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo beisong zhengquan* 景教流行中國碑頌正詮 was inscribed in the 17th year of Ming Chongzhen 明崇禎 (1644 A.D). The text was later compiled into *Tianzhujiao dongchuan wenxian xubian* 天主教東傳文獻續編 (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng shuju, (Diaz 1966)). One of the earliest translated versions (the Shaanxi 陝西 version) of the Inscription was done by the Italian Jesuit Missionary Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628) with the help of Wang Zheng 王徵 (1571–1644) and Zhang Xunfang 張纁芳. Another early translated version (The Hangzhou 杭州 version) was done by the Portuguese Jesuit Missionary Alvaro de Semedo (1585–1658), collected in his work *Da Zhongguo zhi* 大中國志. It is noteworthy that Li Zhizao 李之藻 has



Why was the Xian Stele installed in the first place? It is widely recognized as a “monument” (碑) which commemorates certain occasion or event, but early Chinese Scholar Feng Chengjun 馮承鈞 (1887–1946) believes that it is a tombstone instead (Feng 1931, p. 69).<sup>13</sup> Feng contends that Jingjing 景淨 (also known as Adam, a Jingjiao priest) ordered the Xian Stele to be made in order to commemorate and give credits to the merits and works of Yisi 伊思 (Iazedboujid): “... to engrave a grand tablet, in order to set forth a eulogy of such great deeds ...” (願刻洪碑, 以揚休烈) (Eccles and Lieu 2016, p. 7).<sup>14</sup> However, Paul Pelliot disagrees with this notion. Instead, Pelliot contends that the stele was “simply” set up during one of the annual gathering banquets of Jingjiao clerics for the purpose of documenting the history of Jingjiao in China.

However, the events inscribed on the Xian Stele covers a span of over 150 years of Jingjiao history in China, ranging from the ninth year of Tang Zhenguan 貞觀 (635 CE) when Alouben arrived in the imperial capital Chang’an till the date when the stele was set up in the second year of Tang Jianzhong 建中 (781 CE) under Dezong’s 德宗 (742–805 CE) reign. From this perspective, the installation of the stele and its occasion should not be taken lightly. As one among the “three barbarian religions”, the Jingjiao-church is the only one which had received such a favor, the reason behind needs to be further investigated. In Chinese history, the Tang Dynasty is one of the extra-sensitive periods in regard to the relationships between politics and religion. In this context, the favoritism received by Jingjiao is exceptional and almost impossible without the patronage of the Tang court. Jingjiao indeed acquired the legitimacy of its establishment in China under the sovereign recognition of the Tang court. Such an insight should not be ignored by those who are acquainted with the complicated relationships between politics and religion in Tang China. Therefore, the occasion of installing the stele should be viewed as a more solemn and significant event than what has been suggested by Pelliot.

Nevertheless, as the most important text of Jingjiao, the Inscription has fully revealed that the installation of the Xian Stele was the result of an important military operation by the Tang court to suppress the An-Shi Rebellion (安史之亂) in which the prominent Jingjiao priest Yisi made a tremendous contribution. The whole affair therefore is political in nature. According to the Inscription, Yisi “... was the Duke’s right-hand man (lit. ‘claw and fang’) and was the eyes and ears for the army” (為公爪牙, 作軍耳目) (Ibid., p. 6). Therefore, the imperial Tang court conferred to Yisi a purple priestly gown. On top of that, Emperor Suzong (肅宗) further rewarded Yisi by granting him the favor of “rebuilt the Luminous temples in Lingwu and four other commanderies”<sup>15</sup> (於靈武等五郡, 重立景寺) (Ibid., p. 5). Based on Yisi merits, Jingjiao finally gained the precious opportunity to reaffirm

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played a significant role in influencing Alvaro de Semedo’s study and translation of the Inscription. There is a speculation on whether Li is in fact the real author of this work attributed to Emmanuel Diaz. Fang Hao 方豪 has denied this possibility. According to Emmanuel Diaz, when the Xian Stele Inscription was first discovered, Li commented that “From now on, people in China can no longer blame the holy teaching for arriving so late! The sages in the past have started the cause, and it has flourished within the imperial court and among the commoners. They have all glorified the teaching. Moreover, the believers of such great teachings are still existing right here and right now”. Ref. “Preface” to *Tang Jingjiaobei Song Zhengquan* 唐景教碑頌正詮 in Xu Zongze ed. 徐宗澤 *Ming Qing jian Yesu huishi yizhe tiyao* 明清間耶穌會士譯著提要 (Shanghai shudian chubanshe, (Diaz 2006)), p. 178. After Li studied the Inscription, he commented, “It is surprising to know that this religion already existed in China since 990 years ago”. Ref. Li Zhizao 李之藻, “Du Jingjiaobei Shu Hou” 讀景教碑書後, in *Tianxue Chuhan* 天學初函 (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, (Li 1965)). In *Tang Huiyao* 唐會要 Vol. 49 the followings are recorded: “Alouben” 阿羅本, “establishing a ‘temple’ in Yi-Ning Ward 義寧坊建寺” “Persian sutras and religion 波斯經教” and “Daqin Temple 大秦寺”. See Xu Zongze ed. 徐宗澤 *Zhongguo Tianzhujiao Chuanjiaoshi Gailun* 中國天主教傳教史概論, (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, (Xu 1992)), pp. 76–78.

<sup>13</sup> Later Chinese scholarship considers Feng’s statement to be inaccurate. See Wu Changshing 吳昶興, *Zhenchang zhidao : Tangdai Jidujiao lishi yu wenxian yanjiu* 真常之道：唐代基督教歷史與文獻研 (Taiwan Jidujiao wenyi chubanshe, (Wu 2015)), pp. 46–47.

<sup>14</sup> From this point onwards, unless otherwise mentioned, the Eccles and Lieu English translation text will be consistently used for the contemporariness of language. (Ref. Footnote No. 5).

<sup>15</sup> It is widely acknowledged that Yisi 伊思 (Iazedboujid) is a doctor as well. His medical expertise is described as “the best among those in the three dynasties and good in treating all illness”. He is a well praised philanthropist who “fed the hungry; clothed the naked; cured the sick; and buried the dead”. Iazedboujid was probably a coadjutor bishop, therefore not an ordinary priests. As for his political standing, Iazedboujid survived three Tang emperors and was a close ally of Guo Ziyi 郭子儀. See Duan Qing 段晴, “Tangdai Daqinsi yu Jingjiaoseng xinshi” 唐代大秦寺與景教僧新釋, in Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 ed. *Tangdai zongjiao xinyang yu shehui* 唐代宗教信仰與社會 (Shanghai: Cishu chubanshe, (Duan 2003)), pp. 463–66.

its establishment, and to recount the favorable treatments from a list of successive Tang emperors, meanwhile also not forgetting to praise the virtuous rule of the stated emperors. In view of this, the Inscription has on one hand expounded the doctrines and theological belief of Jingjiao from its very beginning, but also recounted over 150 years of its history. The purpose was obviously to “legitimize” the status of Jingjiao-church establishment in Tang history.

From the ninth year of Zhenguan to the fifth year of Huichang 會昌 (845 CE), the Jinjiao-church was at the pinnacle of its establishment for a period of nearly 200 years. However, this does not mean that the church had not faced any challenges during this period of time. The Tang Jingjiao establishment had at least undergone three critical moments concerning its establishment during the stated period. When Tang Wuzong’s 武宗 (814–846 CE) suppression of the Buddhist establishments reached its climax in the fifth year of Huichang, Jingjiao was also not exempted from this ordeal and suffered from the impact of this operation. All the Jingjiao monasteries were being destroyed, and the believers were either forced to renounce their faith or retreated to remote borderlands of Tang territories. Since then the Jingjiao-church was detached from the politics of the Tang Dynasty. All the Jingjiao foreign missionaries were expelled and Tang Jingjiao seemingly never recovered from this heavy blow. Over two centuries of missionary work had ended up pathetically described by the poet Yang Yunyi 楊雲翼 when he visited the Daqin Temple: “The temple is collapsed; only the ruins remain. All the people had left; the place is laid waste” (寺廢基空在，人歸地自閑).<sup>16</sup>

Chinese scholars with “ecclesiastic background” have always attributed the fall or failure of Jingjiao mission in China to its over-emphasis on indigenization (Song 1978, p. 41; Fang 1983, p. 424). This school argues that on one hand, the Jingjiao priests appropriated too much of the Buddhist and Taoist terminology in translating the Jingjiao canons, and therefore compromises in their theological stance (Yang 1968). On the other hand, the Jingjiao establishment depended too heavily on the patronage of the Tang court, and therefore subjected the Church’s autonomy to the mercy of the Tang sovereign (Yang 1968; Zhu 1993; Zhu 2009).<sup>17</sup>

From the perspective of historical context, the first cause as regard to the fall of Jingjiao seems to be a misjudgment due to the lack of historical insights. Those who hold this opinion have overlooked the social-political setting of the Tang Dynasty where the Jingjiao priests had little other option but to appropriate existing Buddhist and Taoist terminology in their translation of scriptures. As a foreign religion which entering Tang China, it is quite feasible that Jingjiao doctrines and theological teachings would first undergo a process of language and cultural appropriation. The canons needed to be rendered into local language and dictions familiar to the locals in order to propagate. When Jingjiao founders first settled in Tang China, the domineering religious terminology and dictions were those of the Buddhism and Taoism. If the pioneering Jingjiao priests wished to propagate their faith in Tang China, they would have had no other alternatives but to appropriate the terminology used by the two established religions in the rendition of Jingjiao canons and liturgies. Unless the initial Jingjiao establishment only intended to serve the Tang Assyrian community exclusively, the clerical group would have needed to appropriate the existing local religions for their translation endeavor. Since the Chinese Republic era, Chinese intellectuals have been deeply concerned about the issue of so call “Christianity indigenization” (or “practicality” as what Cai Hongsheng 蔡鴻生 refers to). They have deemed the Tang Jingjiao clerics’ appropriation exercise as erroneous and a gesture of compromise to the local beliefs, especially to Buddhism in particular. What the “indigenous” school in the past overlooked is the fact that their interpretation is anachronistic. Tang Jingjiao clerics did not enjoy the

<sup>16</sup> Yang, Yunyi (2019), *Daqingshi in Qingding Siku quanshu* 欽定四庫全書, digital version available at Ctext Repository, Url: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=779959> (accessed on 16 April 2019).

<sup>17</sup> For an overview of the representative Chinese scholars who hold this view, see Sun Shangyang 孫揚, N. Standaert 鐘鳴旦, 1840 *nianqian de Zhongguo Jidujiao* 1840年前的中國基督教 (Xueyuan chubanshe, (Sun and Standaert 2004)), pp. 42–46; Gu Weimin 顧衛民. *Jidujiao yu jindai Zhongguo shehui* 基督教與近代中國社會 (Shanghai renmin chubanshe, (Gu 2010)), pp. 23–24. For linguistic discussion, refer to Nie Zhijun 聶志軍, *Tangdai Jingjiao wenxian ciyu yanjiu* 唐代景教文獻詞語研究 (Hunan renmin chubanshe, (Nie 2010)).

many advantages and benefits of multi-languages learning in a modern society. The appropriation of local religions terminology seemed to be the most natural and reasonable decision for them. At least such an adaptation indeed provided room for Jingjiao to thrive under the prevailing mainstream Tang discourse of *huahu jingshuo* 化胡經說 [Laozi<sup>18</sup> has converted the barbarians]. Therefore, the root cause of the downfall of Jingjiao is more political than cultural in nature.

Scholars, with or without an “ecclesiastic background”, who contend that the perishing of Tang Jingjiao from an appropriation perspective have overlooked the context of political theology.<sup>19</sup> In Tang history, religion and politics were inseparable. Therefore, religious establishments must serve the purpose of a political end i.e., to pacify the people and maintain the stability of the social structure.<sup>20</sup> In other words, as far as the Tang court was concerned, religious institutions were only allowed when the institutions served the political agenda of its governance. Jingjiao was obviously not exempted from this governing principle. The notion is presented in the stele inscription:

Though elevated he (Emperor Dezong) is humble and because of his inner tranquility he is merciful and rescues multitudes from misery, he bestows blessings on all around. The cultivation of our doctrine (Illustrious Religion) gained a strong basis by which its influence was gradually advanced. If the winds and rains come at the right season, the world will be peaceful; people will be reasonable, the creatures will be clean; the living will be prosperous, and the dead will be at peace. When thoughts echo their appropriate response, affections will be free, and the eyes will be sincere; such is the laudable condition which our Luminous Religion labor to attain. (Eccles and Lieu 2016, p. 6)

廣慈救苦，善貸被生者，我修行之大猷，汲引之階漸也。若使風雨時，天下靜，人能理，物能清，存能昌，歿能樂，念生響應，情發目誠者，我景力能事之功用也。 (Ibid., p. 6)

From this perspective, the rise and fall of religious institutions in Tang China was indeed completely subjected to the encompassing control of the central political administrative system. In other words, the propagation and diminishing of Tang religious institutions was a matter greatly affected by the active interference and close management of the imperial policies. Many Jingjiao scholars, including Saeki Yoshio (1871–1965), were oblivious to this historical context. Such oversight is the result of underestimating the impact and the inseparable political-religious dynamics in Tang China. A comparative study on Tang Buddhism and Taoism will clearly reveal the political challenges faced by religion institutions from which the Jingjiao-church was not exempted.

Cai Hongsheng once commented on this situation, “(In China) Manichaeism gradually heads toward heresy, Zoroastrianism gives in to populism while Jingjiao inclines to pragmatism” (Lin 2003b, p. 359 ff.). Manichaeism had gone underground and Zoroastrianism integrated itself into the local religions. As a result, these religion institutions had both disassociated themselves from the political arena of the host country. In contrast, Jingjiao adopted a pragmatic strategy instead. The Jingjiao-church actively engaged in the Tang court’s affairs and practically earned the official recognition of the Church’s social-legal status from Tang authorities. In other words, Jingjiao had aligned its political theology with the mainstream political-religious discourse. For this was the only possible way to ensure the success of the Church establishment in Tang society. As a result, since the reign of Tang Taizong Li Shimin 唐太宗李世民 (598–649 CE), Jingjiao was always very supportive and cooperative to the Tang administration, a gesture of goodwill and friendliness to its host country.

Apart from that, a noteworthy point of Tang administration is its double-edged religious policies, which on one hand was rigorously domineering and on the other hand dependent. In the Tang court, the power struggle within the imperial establishment often involved religious institutions. This

<sup>18</sup> Laozi 老子 is the founder of Taoism.

<sup>19</sup> Ref. Footnote No. 17.

<sup>20</sup> (Daoxuan 655).

particular historical reality during the Tang Dynasty again points to the fact that the Jingjiao-church did not have the convenience to decide on its own political stance. Autonomy was next to impossible. The best illustration is the case of changing the name of the Jingjiao monasteries from “*Bosi si*” (波斯寺) to “*Daqin si*” (大秦寺). The change of name could only be carried out with the agreement of the emperor and officiated by a nation-wide imperial edict (Li 2003, p. 1405).

Since the founding of the Tang Dynasty, the involvement of religious institutions in the political struggle of the imperial court was a norm. Taizong ascended to the throne with the help of the Taoist group led by Wang Yuanzhi 王遠知 (528–635 CE) while Taizong’s brother Li Jiancheng 李建成 (589–626 CE) was supported by the Buddhist group led by Falin 法琳 (572–640 CE). When Taizong Li Shimin won out in the end and ascended to the throne, he arrested Falin on the ground that Falin had criticized Laozi’s teachings in *Bianzheng lun* 辯正論 [On true orthodoxy]. This is overtly a political backlash and indeed has little to do with religious beliefs. From this point onwards, though Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism co-existed, but Taoism became the most distinguished. Taken at face value, Taoism became the most prestigious religious establishment during the Tang Dynasty because the Tang royal family considered themselves as Laozi’s decedents as they shared the same surname Li (李) with Laozi. However, a closer investigation shows that in actual fact the Tang emperors had established Taoism as the “state religion” of Tang imperial out of their political concerns. This was a political strategy to suppress Buddhism. When Gaozong 高宗 (628–683 CE) was at his death bed, he reiterated to his Taoist courtiers and royalists that the legitimate rulers of the Tang imperial must come from the “Li” family instead of the “Wu”. Gaozong’s last words indicated his strong will in preventing Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705 CE) from usurping the throne (Kou 1998, pp. 69–77).

The Tang Jingjiao clerics were indeed well aware of this political reality. Their establishment and success in propagation was at the mercy of the Tang rulers. This notion is implied clearly in the Inscription which reads, “But any (such) system without (the fostering of the sage (the sovereign), does not attain its full development; and a sage (sovereign) without the aid of such a system does not become great” (Legge 1966, p. 9), “None but the Illustrious Religion is observed; none but virtuous rulers are appointed” (Ibid., p. 13). “There is nothing which the right principle cannot effect; and whatever its effects can be named. There is nothing which a sage (sovereign) cannot do; and whatever he does can be related” (Ibid., p. 19). The Inscription has represented the goodwill of the Jingjiao-church in maintaining a favorable and cordial relationship with Tang court as well as its succession of emperors. Apart from that, these statements also reveal the honorable and exclusive role played by Jingjiao in the arena of Tang politics. In this context, the fact that the destiny of Jingjiao in Tang China was actually decided by the Tang court’s political agenda more than any other thing else is conclusive. The reception of a religious establishment in Tang China was almost exclusively dependent on its political stance rather than its doctrine and liturgies. The Inscription is a convincing proof of the political theology issue in the Chinese context, i.e., the domination of political sovereignty over religious orthodoxy. Religion is subservient to politics.

Therefore, the Inscription should be read and understood as a discourse of political theology. The Xian Stele is a sign which represents the political reality of the Tang Dynasty. The Inscription states the fact that *zhengtong* (“sage”) and *daotong* (“orthodoxy”) are inseparable. As far as the Jingjiao-church is concerned, “a sage (sovereign) without the aid of such a system does not become great”. “None but the Illustrious Religion is observed”. However, for the Tang rulers, “any (such) system without the fostering of the sage (the sovereign), does not attain its full development”. “There is nothing which a sage (sovereign) cannot do; and whatever he does can be related” (Legge 1966). Either party could interpret from the perspective of their respective “ideologies”, but the ultimate and sole authoritative interpretation came from the *zhengtong* representative—the emperor. All theological ideas at the end are subjected to political interpretations, for the power of interpretation and discourse was in the hands of the Tang rulers instead of the clerics. Hence, it is conclusive that in the discussions of Jingjiao, the political agenda of the Tang court: “the government establishes temples for the purpose of pacifying the country” should prevail, and that religion indeed was subservient to Tang political sovereignty.



### 3. Political Theology in Chinese Context

The first paragraph of the Inscription expounds the Jingjiao theological stance and its doctrinal belief, after that a long account of the history of the Church follows. A noteworthy point in the historical narration is the stressing of the cordial relationships between a succession of Tang emperors and the Jingjiao-church. This cordial relationship implies the harmonious relationship between the church and the “State”, one that is based on mutual trust. As a result, “While this doctrine (the Illustrious Religion) was established in the Ten Provinces, the State became rich and tranquility abounded. Because every city was full of monasteries, the (ordinary?) families enjoyed ‘luminous’ (or illustrious) (jing) fortune”. (Eccles and Lieu 2016, p. 4) The most extraordinary gesture of the imperial court in showing royal favor is by sending the portraits of various emperors to the Jingjiao monasteries—a significant sign of political symbolism:

The virtue of the house of Zhou had come to an end, and the black chariot has ascended into the western heaven. The way of the great Tang dynasty shone forth, and the Luminous teachings spread into the East. It was decreed that the Emperor’s portrait should be copied onto the temple wall. His celestial image radiated light, giving a heroic aspect to the luminous portal. His sacred countenance brought blessings upon it and cast glory upon the learned company. (Ibid., pp. 3–4)

宗周德喪，青駕西昇。巨唐道光，景風東扇。旋令有司將 帝寫真轉摸寺壁。天姿汎彩，英朗景門。聖騰祥，永輝法界。 (Ibid.)

The then newly constructed Jingjiao Monastery (named “Persian Temple” at that time) received a gift from the Tang court, a painted portrait of Taizong. The proper officers were further decreed to have the portrait copied and transferred to the walls of the monastery. This is a significant sign of recognition of the Tang court to the Jingjiao-church. The Inscription also mentions that “In the early Tianbao period (742 CE) the great general Gao Lishi had received royal instructions to send (a) sacred portrait(s) of the five sages (emperors) and have it (them) placed in the temple ... ” (Ibid., p. 4–5). This is an event in which Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (685–762 CE) had the portraits of the five emperors (Gaozu 高祖, Taizong 太宗, Gaozong 高宗, Zhongzong 中宗 and Ruizong 睿宗) sent as a gift to the Jingjiao Monastery situated in Chang’an Yi-ning Ward, so that the monastery monks could “honor this picture of wisdom (the emperors portrait(s)) 奉慶睿圖, and the Priest Jihe 佶和 “following the sun, came to pay court to the most honorable (i.e., the Emperor) 望日朝尊” (Ibid., p. 5). This particular description which implies the notion of “emperor Worship” is full of figurative images of the sovereign. The expressions such as *qingruitu* 慶睿圖 (the picture of wisdom), *longran* 龍鬚 (beard of the Dragon (emperor)), *tianyan* 天顏 (celestial visage (the emperor’s countenance)), etc. are figurative imagination referring to the sovereign throne and its ruler. The rhetorical imagery reflects the political theological intentions of the Inscription.

It is crucial to understand that portraits of the emperors were hung in the Jinjiao monastery for worshipping purposes (Lei 2009, p. 101ff). When Alouben arrived at the capital of Tang China, he had brought “... scriptures and images from afar and presented them at the capital” (遠將經像來獻上京) (Ibid., p. 3). However, he immediately gauged the social-political reality of his host country and therefore accepted the fact that “... the Emperor’s portrait should be copied onto the temple (the Jingjiao Monastery) wall”. (帝寫真轉摸寺壁) (Ibid., p. 3). During the Tang Dynasty, the emperors gave out their portraits as gifts to be *chaobai* 朝拜 (worshipped) by the recipients as a sign of royal favors to the recipients. To a certain extent, this is a representation of “the cult of emperor worship” which existed in the Tang Dynasty under the principle of *zhibai junqin* 致拜君親 (worshipping the emperor and one’s parents).

*Zhibai junqin* comes from the idea of being loyal to the emperor and paying respect to one’s parents which originates from Confucianism since the period of the Six Dynasties. At some point, Taoism adopted this particular idea and transformed it into a Taoist religious ethic. Scholarship on

Tang religions is well aware of the strife between Buddhism and Taoism over the question of *zhibai junqin*.<sup>21</sup> Tang emperors were closely attached to Taoism. From Gaozu to Xuanzong, numerous conflicts had risen between the throne and the Buddhist Sangha. There were a few specific royal edicts commanding all the religious personnel regardless of their orders to “worship” their parents (ancestors).<sup>22</sup> Obviously in Tang Dynasty the principle of *zhibai junqin* had been implemented as an imperial policy and represented an indispensable element in political-religious conflicts. In other words, the root course of those conflicts is “political theology” in nature. To the Taoists, practicing *zhibai junqin* is the proper adherence to the mainstream “political-religious” discourse. The Taoist establishment was under the royal patronage of the Tang court—the sovereign recognition of their religious establishment to the effect of becoming state-religion. On the occasion that Gaozong set up a Taoist Temple *Haotian Guan* 昊天觀 for the specific purpose of conducting the ritual of commemoration and reverting blessings to Taizong, the prestigious status of Tang Taoism was obvious. Taizong’s portrait was placed in the temple. When the royal family and all the Taoist priests bowed down to the portrait and performed the ritual of worship, the notion of imperial ritualistic worship was established. In this regard, the sovereign throne became the subject of religious worship (Tonami 2004; Wu 2009).

The practice of “state-emperor” worship was indeed established by the Tang Taoists. As mentioned earlier, the Tang sovereign honored Laozi, claiming that he is the distant ancestor of the Tang emperors based on sharing the same surname of “Li”. Apart from that, Taoism venerates Laozi as Taishang xuanyuan huangdi 太上玄元皇帝 [Ultimate and Primordial Emperor] and Dashengzu 大聖祖 [The Great Sage Ancestor] which verifies that Taoism is indeed an “emperor worshipping cult”, or rather it is the cult of “emperor worship” which successfully integrated with Taoism and formed a new Taoist religious model in Tang Dynasty. Since Taishang Xuanyuan huangdi was the ancestor of the Tang emperors, all the successive emperors were his descendants. Taoism had therefore naturally become the State-religion. In addition, when the royal family worshipped Xuanyuan huangdi, they (the Tang emperors) were implying that they were indeed the most distinguished descendants of Xuanyuan huangdi.<sup>23</sup> This is the imagination that had ensured the political legitimacy of the Tang royal family to the throne. In this regard, installing the portraits of the emperors in all the temples and shrines was an act of orthopraxy. During Tang era, religious practice became an integrated part of the imperial ritualistic structure. When portraits of the emperors were installed in every imaginable worship venue, the imagination of the emperor’s “divinity” was stressed and effectively communicated to the common people during the open imperial sacrificial and ritualistic ceremonies.<sup>24</sup>

The cult of emperor worship encouraged the general public to worship the emperor portraits while worshipping other gods and deities. The death anniversaries of all the deceased emperors would have been commemorated with full ritualistic religious ceremonies during Tang era. These ceremonies were

<sup>21</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the discussion see Wu Zhen 吳真, “Daojiao xiudao shenghuo de zhong yu xiao—Yi chu Tang zhibai junqin lunzheng wei zhongxin” 道教修道生活的忠與孝——以初唐「致拜君親」論爭為中心. *Journal of Modern Philosophy of Sun Yat-sen University* 105 (2009): 111–16.

<sup>22</sup> “Ling sengni daoshi nuguan bai fumu chi” 令僧尼道士女冠拜父母敕 [The royal edict on commanding the Buddhist monks, nuns, Taoist male and female priests to worship their parents] and “Sengni bai fumu chi” 僧尼拜父母敕 [The royal edict on commanding the Buddhist monks and nuns to worship their parents], in Song Minqiu 宋敏求 ed. *Tang dazhaoling ji* 唐大詔令集 [Collection of Tang Dynasty Imperial Edicts and Orders]. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), pp. 588–89; “Ling sengdao zhibai fumu zhao” 令僧道致拜父母詔 [The royal edict on commanding the Buddhist monks and Taoist priests to worship their parents], in Li Ximi 李希泌 ed. *Tang dazhaoling ji bubian* 唐大詔令集補編 [Collection of Tang Dynasty Imperial Edicts and Orders (Supplements)] (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 2003), p. 1358.

<sup>23</sup> See several representative royal edicts which imply this notion, such as Zhuizun Xuanyuan huangdi zhi 追尊玄元皇帝制 [The Edict of honor the Ultimate and Primordial Emperor] (cf. Song 2008, pp. 442–43) and Chongsi Xuanyuan zhongdi zhi 崇祀玄元重帝制 [The Edit of worshipping Xuanyuan zhongdi] and Chongfeng Daojiao zhao 崇奉道教詔 [The Edict of honoring Taoism]. (cf. Li 2003, pp. 1378, 1383).

<sup>24</sup> It is a common practice to hang portrait for of Xuanyuan huangdi 玄元皇帝. See Wei Xuanyuan huangdi shexiang zhao 為玄元皇帝設像詔 [The Edict for the portrait installation of Xuanyuan huangdi] (cf. Li 2003, p. 1374). See also Ji Yuanqiu mingtang bingyi Gaozu Taizong pei zhao 祭圓丘明堂並以高祖太宗配詔 [The Decree on conducting rites at the Round Altar and Bright Hall and making offerings to Gaozu and Taizong] and Jiaoli weitian haocheng Tian wudi zhicheng di zhi 郊禮唯天昊稱天五帝只稱帝制 [The Decree of addressing the Lord of Heaven as such and the Five Emperors as emperors in the suburb rites] (cf. Song 2008, p. 376).

performed either in Buddhist or Taoist rituals, and sometimes both. According to *Tang Huiyao* 唐會要 [Notabilia of Tang], religious activities and ceremonies in regard to “state-emperor” worship were active and frequent. In a way, frequent and repetitive ceremonies refreshed the imagination of emperor worship, and reminded the public that the link between politics and religion was inseparable. The sovereign was pursuing the public recognition of its legitimacy. On the other hand, public ritualistic performances carried out in those commemoration ceremonies were signs of recognition of the imperial sovereignty (Lei 2009, pp. 72–76). In this context, the emperor “deified” himself by installing his portrait in temples and worship venues, and made himself the subject of public worship.

In this context, though the Jingjiao monasteries had no alternative but to receive the portraits of the emperors and hence in a subtle way accepted the reality of the state-emperor worship, its establishment had as a result received the patronage of the Tang court. Portraits of the emperors placed in the Jingjiao monasteries were worshipped. The acceptance of portraits in which “his (the emperors) celestial image radiated light, giving a heroic aspect to the luminous portal. His sacred countenance brought blessings upon it and cast glory upon the learned company” (Eccles and Lieu 2016, pp. 3–4) by the Jingjiao establishment ensured and secured the Church propagation in Tang China. The gestures of portrait donation suggest that the ethnic identity of the Jingjiao Syriac community was being “recognized” by the host country which generally despised the “Others”.

“Barbarians come from the four directions to subject themselves to the king: This is what the sagely ancestors have desired and the outcome of the ultimate Way”.<sup>25</sup> In the Inscription, it was said that Xuanzong once issued an order: “The Emperor commanded the priest Luohan (Abraham), the priest Pulun (Paul), and others, seven in all, together with the great virtuous (i.e., bishop) Jihe, to perform a service of merit in the Xingqing palace”. (詔僧羅含僧普論等一七人, 與大德倍和, 於興慶宮修功德) (Eccles and Lieu 2016, p. 5). What does a “service of merit” refer to? What kind of a place is Xingqing Palace 興慶宮?<sup>26</sup> (cf. Lin 2006, p. 114) By the context of the description, Xingqing Palace was definitely one of the palaces within the compound of the Imperial palace. Most probably the portraits of all the emperors were kept in this great hall. Though it is unclear whether “the service of merit” was a common religious ritualistic ceremony, it is definitely not a Jingjiao worship ceremony. It seems like the ceremony Xuanzong conducted was the ritualistic ceremony of ancestral worship.

Indeed, public performance of sacrificial ritual was crucial in the state’s civil religion structure. After indoctrinating and formalizing the worship of state-emperor through the installation of emperors’ portraits in all religious establishments proper, the imperial court had effectively—especially through Buddhism and Taoism—imprinted the ideology of a civil religion into all spheres of life. The comprehensive ceremonious performance, which included incense offerings and bodily gestures of kneeling/bowing down to the emperors’ portraits, reinforced the solemnity and religious notion of orthopraxy. In Tang era, State sacrificial rite had partially replaced the traditional Confucians rites of paying respect to the deceased rulers and sages. The ritualistic civil religious structure was a form of cultural hegemony with an underlying state political agenda. Performing sacrificial rituals for the remembrance of previous emperors became in essence a “cult” of emperor worship instead of simply a commemorating ceremony of paying respect to bygone sages and ancestors. In this context, politics integrated with religion and formed a civil religion discourse that promotes the theology of the triune “state-emperor-deity”. From this perspective, the political theology issue that Jingjiao faced was not merely the ‘worship’ of emperors’ portraits along with God but the encompassing orthopraxy imposed by the imperial religious establishment. The royal sovereign was the civil religion itself. As the Inscription phrases: “The way of the great Tang dynasty shone forth, and the Luminous teachings spread into the East” (Eccles and Lieu 2016, p. 3). The integration of *zhengtong* and *daotong* was crucial

<sup>25</sup> Refer to “Zhuizun Xuanyuan huangdi fumu bing jiaoshi yuanzu zhi” 追尊玄元皇帝父母並加謚遠祖制 [The decree for honoring the Ultimate and Primordial Emperor’s parents and to name them as distant ancestors]. (Li 2003, p. 1381).

<sup>26</sup> Presumably a *neidaochang* 內道場 [inner court worship hall] refers to a Buddhist or Taoist temple situated within the royal palace compound where the emperor and the royal family attend and perform religious ceremonies.

in the Tang court establishment. The Inscription shows the awareness of the Jingjiao-church to the encompassing control of the imperial court in religious matters. As a response, Jingjiao-church stepped up to the challenge by adapting itself positively and actively to the civil religious structure established by Tang administration. The history of Jingjiao in Tang China as narrated on the Xian Stele is a history of making compatible the Church's political theology in Tang China,

Apart from the Xian Stele, another primary text of Jingjiao: *Xuting mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所經 [The Jesus Sutras] (hereafter *Xuting*)<sup>27</sup> is especially noteworthy in the investigation of Jingjiao political theology. The author of this manuscript consistently insists on the virtue of filial piety, as well as respect for the emperor, indicating a conscious adaptation to the traditional Chinese values which emphasizes *zunjun shiqin* 尊君事親 [loyalty to the emperor and servitude to the parents].<sup>28</sup> It is clearly a teaching which has infused and integrated with the ideology of Tang civil religion. In the stated sutra, *shiyuan* 十願 [ten vows]<sup>29</sup> are listed. In the very first vow *shengshang* 聖上 [emperor] is being regarded as an equal to *tianzun* 天尊 [God].<sup>30</sup> The text reads, “The fear (of God) is like the fear of the Emperor. The Emperor is who he is because of his previous lives which have led to his being placed in this fortunate position. He is chosen by God, so cannot call himself God, because he has been appointed by God to do what is expected. This is why the people obey the Emperor, and this is right and proper” (Palmer 2001, p. 163). (衆生若怕天尊，亦合怕懼聖上。聖上前身福私天尊補任，亦無自乃。天尊耶屬自作聖上，一切衆生，皆取聖上進止) (CBETA, p. 2. L5–L7). This paragraph implicitly refers to the Confucians teachings of *weitianming* 畏天命 (fearing the command of Heaven) and *weidaren* 畏大人 (fearing those in authority). The seeming exegesis and rendition of the Christian Ten Commandments which has added in “the Emperor” reveals a genuine appropriation of Christian text on the part of Jingjiao author.

In *Xuting*, a true believer must be a person who is conscientious in serving God, the Emperor and one's parents. The reason is given below:

The whole Heaven and Earth follow this way. Everything follows this way of respecting parents; throughout the world everything owes its existence to parents. The sacred spirits have ordained that the Emperor is born as Emperor. We should fear God, the Sacred One, and the Emperor. And fear your parents and do good. If you understand the Law and precepts, do not disobey, but instead teach all people true religion”. (Palmer 2001, p. 163)

為此普天在地，並事父母行，據此聖上皆是神生，今世雖有父母見存，衆生有智計，合怕天尊，及聖上，並怕父母，好受天尊法教，不合破戒。 (CBETA, p. 2. L12–L14)

The passage implicitly refers to the dominant Confucian ideologies of *daotong* and *zhengtong* again by mentioning “the Way” and “the Emperor”. Read within the framework of the Tang context, the impact of the imperial religious policy of integrating politics and religion is quite obvious. Disobedience to or rebellion against the Emperor is regarded as “sinful” as the disobedience to God. Based on the text of *Xuting*, the Jingjiao-church seems to have created a new “triune” of God, the Emperor, and one's parents in the process of appropriation, placing the latter two as subjects equal to God and worthy of being worshipped. Recognizing the Emperor's ordination as mandated by God bears the Chinese notion of referring to the Emperor as *tianzi* 天子 [the Son of Heaven]. In the light of this Jingjiao

<sup>27</sup> Hereafter, *Xuting*.

<sup>28</sup> The text is reproduced in Saeki (1937, pp. 13–29). Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 bought the original manuscript of this text from a Chinese seller in 1922. Saeki (1937, pp. 113–17) argued that this text is produced by Aluoben before 638. Saeki (1937, p. 147) suggested that *Xuting* 序聽 is a Chinese approximation of ‘Ye-su’ (Jesus). *Mishisuo* 迷詩所 is a scribal error for *Mishihe* 迷詩詞 or ‘Messiah’ (Haneda 1958, vol. 2, p. 250). See (Kotyky 2016).

<sup>29</sup> A parallel to the Christian Ten Commandments.

<sup>30</sup> For English translation of *Xuting mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所經 [The Jesus Sutras], the rendition by Martin Palmer is used. Ref. Martin Palmer. *The Jesus sutras: Rediscovering the lost scrolls of Taoist Christianity*. (Wellspring/Ballantine, 2001), pp. 159–68. The Chinese text of *Xuting mishi suo jing* is cited from Taisho shinshu daisokyo Vol. 54 No. 2142 *Xuting mishi suo jing*, digital copy provided by CBETA, available at <https://bit.ly/2Ela0z2>, accessed 18 April 2019.



“triune”, the Emperor and one’s parents have implicitly become deified. It is in this implication that “to serve” became an act of presenting an offering which bears a religious connotation. In a sense, only God, deities and other spiritual beings are the subjects of *jisi* 祭祀 [sacrificial rites]. Only those are liable of receiving sacrificial offerings. Therefore, implying that the service due to the Emperor and one’s parents are the same as the service due to God is subtly deifying the Emperor and parents. From this perspective, the connotation of “emperor worship” and “ancestral worship” is being explicitly demonstrated. Jingjiao’s incorporation of the traditional discourse of loyalty to the emperor and obedience to the parents into its teaching was an adherence to the civil political theology of the imperial Tang. However, rather than contending that the proposition in *Xuting* as appropriation of the Chinese *daotong* of loyalty (忠) and faithfulness (誠) (common elements uphold by the three main local religions) by the Jingjiao-church which ultimately tampers its unique theological stance, it is more appropriate to see that the Jingjiao-church has no other alternatives but to compile a grand discourse of the imperial civil religion constitution.

#### 4. Discussion

The Jingjiao-church was established at the most glorious period of the Tang Dynasty. However, that was also the period when religious establishments were most tightly controlled. In the Tang context, religion was an integrated part of the state establishments and therefore subjected to the full supervision of the imperial court. In other words, the Tang court’s religious policy was intentionally a civil religion system meaning that all religious establishments were “owned” by the state. The stated policy was implemented through the establishment of ritualistic public religious performances and active intervention in all levels of the constitution of the religious institutions (Zhou 2005).

During the Tang period, a large corpus of written law was in effect. According to the Tang Code唐律疏義 (*Tanglü shuyi*, [Tang Code and commentaries]), these rules and regulations were categorized into four divisions: the Codes (*lü*律), the Statutes (*ling*令), the Regulations (*ge*格), and the Ordinances (*shi*式).<sup>31</sup> Apart from those mentioned, there were also the Imperial Edicts (Decrees) (*chi*敕) promulgated by the emperor at his discretion (Xiong 2009, p. 335). “At times the Lord of Men finds it fitting to use his power to make judgments by an imperial decree or an imperial edicts, he weights the circumstances in making decisions by the time . . . ” (Johnson 1979b, p. 556) (事有時宜, 人主權斷, 制敕量情處分) (Zhangsun et al. 1983, p. 562). Although in principle, Edicts were only case specific in nature, and could not overwrite the Codes, Statutes, Regulations and Ordinances, it is noteworthy that they could be all encompassing at times. For example, edicts that were directed to specific groups: such as “Ling sengni daoshi nuguan bai fumu chi” 令僧尼道士女冠拜父母敕 [The royal edict on commanding the Buddhist monks, nuns, Taoist male and female priests to worship their parents]; “Sengni bai fumu chi” 僧尼拜父母敕 [The royal edict on commanding the Buddhist monks and nuns to worship their parents], etc. These were apparently the emperor’s sole discretion when he saw it “fitting to use his power to make judgments” (Ibid.). At times, Edicts could also function as a supplementary to the four divisions of regulations. Particularly in the context of revising and amending existing law articles, the impact of the Edict could be enormous.

The core maxim of Tang court political theology was: “The way does not have a constant name, and the holy does not have a constant form. Teachings are established according to the locality, and their mysteries aid mankind” (道無常名, 聖無常體, 隨方設想, 密濟群生) (Eccles and Lieu 2016, p. 3).<sup>32</sup> From the investigation of the large corpus of rules and regulations that governed religious matters, Tang court religious administration focused on three main aspects: controlling the number of votaries,

<sup>31</sup> For Tang Code, the English translation produced by Wallace Johnson is used throughout this article. Ref. Wallace, Johnson. *The T’ang Code, Volume I: General Principles*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, Johnson 1979a), p. 5

<sup>32</sup> This is taken from a Tang decree which was recorded in *Tang Huiyao* (Wang 1955, p. 864), also quoted in the Inscription.

restricting the construction and renovation of temples, and preempting the potential threats posed by Buddhists and Taoist communities (Zhou 2005, pp. 17–18).

Monitoring the number of religious personnel was administrative in nature. The Inscription records the number of Jingjiao clerics. When Daqin Temple was built in Yi-Ning Ward, there were “twenty-one priests”. There were “seven in all who was called to the Xingqing Palace to perform a service of merit” (Eccles and Lieu 2016, p. 5). At the end of the Inscription, sixty-seven Jingjiao priests had signed their names in Syriac.<sup>33</sup> It was also recorded that every year Yisi (Iazedboujid) “assembled the monks from the four temples, and provided for them for fifty days” (每歲集四寺僧徒) (Ibid., p. 7).

In the first year of Huichang (841 CE), Tang Wuzong decreed a campaign of suppressing Buddhism.<sup>34</sup> The related edicts detailed the number of the temples and shrines affected, especially specified the number of monks and nuns mandated to revoke their votary vows. Since the underlying agenda of this suppression was to appropriate war funds and to eliminate foreign influence, other religions including Jingjiao were also affected (Foster 1939, pp. 121–25). According to the edicts, over 3000 priests from Jingjiao, Zoroastrianism and other religions were commanded to revoke their religious vows and left China, in order to maintain Chinese traditional orthodoxy and culture (Zhang 1977, pp. 127–28). According to *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 [Comprehensive mirror to aid in government] Book 248 on Tang Dynasty: “All the priests of Daqin (Jingjiao) and Zoroastrianism all revoked their votary vows” (餘僧及尼並大秦穆護，襖僧皆勒歸俗) (Sima 1086, 248:36).<sup>35</sup> In *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 [Complete History of Tang Dynasty] Book 967: “Since Buddhism has been eradicated, the other heretic teachings should not exist either. The priests should be ordered to revoke their religious vows. These personnel shall be sent back to their hometowns and become tax-paying citizens. The foreigners shall be sent back to their home country” (釋教既已厘革，邪法不可獨存。其人並勒還俗，遞迴本貫充稅戶，如外國，送還本國收管) (QTW 1819, 967:60).<sup>36</sup>

Tang China used to be a place where “monks can be seen in every village of ten households and towns of a hundred families. It is even more so in the recent years of our dynasty. Various barbarians also came: Manicheans, Daqing people (Jingjiao), and Zoroastrians. However, all the temples of the three barbarian religions put together, the number is not as numerous as the number of Buddhist temples in one small county” (故十族之鄉，百家之間，必有浮圖，為其粉黛。國朝沿近古而有加焉，亦容雜夷而來者，有摩尼焉，大秦焉，襖神焉。合天下三夷寺，不足當吾釋寺一小邑之數也) (Yao 1986).<sup>37</sup> From the description, it is known that the actual number of foreign monks and clergies was relatively small as comparing to Buddhist monks and nuns. While during that period over 260,000 Buddhist monks and nuns were commanded to revoke their votary vows and resumed the status of secular civilians, the whole population of foreign monks and clergies from the three “barbarian religions” only amounted to 3000 as noted in *Tang huiyao*. The number of Jingjiao clerics was already relatively small; after the impact of Wuzong persecution, Jingjiao was almost wiped out from Tang China.<sup>38</sup>

During the Tang Dynasty, the number of religious personnel was controlled by the Department of Religious Establishments (*cibu*祠部) of the Ministry of Rites (*libu*禮部). During the Huichang

<sup>33</sup> For the discussion on the Syriac names, Ref. Erica C.D. Hunter (2010), “Syriac Onomastica in the Xian Fu Inscriptions”, *Parole de l’Orient* 35: 357–69.

<sup>34</sup> Huichang Suppression of Buddhism 會昌毀佛, also known as The Great Anti-Buddhist Persecution initiated by Tang Emperor Wuzong reached its height in the year 845 CE. The purpose of this campaign was to appropriate war funds and to cleared China from foreign influences. As such, the persecution was directed not only towards Buddhism but also towards other religions, such as Zoroastrianism, Jingjiao Christianity, and Manichaeism. See Philip, T. V. *East of the Euphrates: early Christianity in Asia* (Kashmere Gate, Delhi: CSS et ISPCK, (Philip 1998)), p. 125. See also John, Foster. *The church of the T’ang dynasty*. (London: SPCK, 1939).

<sup>35</sup> The Chinese text of *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (ZZTJ) is cited from Ctext Repository, available at <https://bit.ly/2VXytVD>, accessed 18 April 2019.

<sup>36</sup> The Chinese text *Quan Tangwen* (QTW) is cited from Ctext Repository, available at <https://bit.ly/2YFJ3h2>, accessed 18 April 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Also recorded in QTW 727:57, available at <https://bit.ly/2WYtd0p>, accessed 19 April 2019.

<sup>38</sup> See Yule, Henry. *Cathay and the Way Thither: Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China*. ed. Henri Cordier. Chinese translation by Zhang Xushan (Kunming: Yunnan Renmin Press, (Yule 2002)), pp. 83–100.

Persecution, although Buddhism was the main target, all the other religious establishments were not exempted from the impact. Religious personnel (including monks, nuns, Taoist priests and priestess, and religious personnel from all other religions) were forced to *huanshu* 還俗 (literally return to secular), which was to revoke their votary vows and resume a secular life. The Tang court viewed monks and nuns as the pillars of the Buddhist establishments (likewise other religious personnel to their respective establishments). The increasing and numerous religious votaries could pose a potential political threat to the imperial court. On top of that, one of the reasons why Wuzong persecuted the Buddhist establishments and temples in the imperial domains was related to economic matters. Monks and nuns once ordained would cease to contribute to the labor force, i.e., production activities such as agricultural farming and weaving. In addition temples and religious establishments were exempted from tax. Therefore, the persecution in actual fact sought to restore the monks and nuns to become tax-paying commoners and be economically productive again (Reischauer 1955, p. 221 ff.). Suppressing the scale of religious establishments therefore bears an economic notion. It was an effective economic measure to elevate labor productivity and effective land-use. Monastery economics had had a great impact on the state establishment in the Tang Dynasty. The financial autonomy and ever increasing clerical population of the religious establishments had indeed become a threat to the imperial court. The religious establishments had in a way become “states within a state”.<sup>39</sup> The whole dynamics of political and economic concerns ultimately culminated in the Grand persecution during Huichang period and made the Tang era one of the most religiously sensitive periods in Chinese history.

The sensitivity and delicate nature of the Tang religious situation had driven the Tang court to implement a strict religious policy. The ideologies of *daotong* and *zhibai junqin*<sup>40</sup> were actively promoted. The orthopraxy of *Zhibai junqin* had become a yard stick to test the political stance of the religious establishments. The abolishing of the Buddhist temples (and all other religious establishments) was an effective measure in killing off the Buddhist religious development by taking away their economic support. In the light of the Grand Buddhist persecution, the dilemma of the Jingjiao community is clearly revealed. Indeed, the greatest concern of all the Tang rulers was the stability and security of their sovereign throne. “The way does not have a constant name, and the holy does not have a constant form. Teachings are established according to the locality, and their mysteries aid mankind” (Eccles and Lieu 2016, p. 3) serves as the ultimate guideline for the Tang religious administration. Under the surface of religious freedom, there was always an effective regulating institutional structure which was in control. In this context, the establishment and propagation of Jingjiao, likewise many other religions, during the Tang era was unquestionably fragile and restricted. Even the indigenous religions were not exempted from state persecution, let alone the “barbarian” religions. On top of that, the occasional social turmoil during Tang era had further pressurized the fragile establishment of the Jingjiao-church. Scholarship which sees the downfall of Jingjiao during the Tang era from the perspective of overtly political involvement and too much appropriation might widen their scope of investigation and consider the whole matter in the context of Tang religious policy. Perhaps in the light of the long established traditional Chinese political theology based on *daotong* and *zhengtong*, the history of Jingjiao can be understood more correctly, and serve as an allegorical prophecy on the fate of Christianity in Modern China. The root cause of the rise and fall of Jingjiao during the Tang era might be varied. However, the emphasis of the discussion should not only focus on Jingjiao’s agency alone such as failure in indigenization, over appropriation, etc. but on the wider social and political context in which Jingjiao had to face the formative political theology of the Tang civil religion. This might be a more inclusive scope in the discussion of the Tang Jingjiao.

According to a narration of the Northern Wei period (386 to 534 CE) historian Yang Xuanzhi 楊炫之, *Siyi guan* 四夷館 [The Four Foreigners/Barbarians residences] were established. The establishments were

<sup>39</sup> Xie, Chongguang. *The Monk-Official System and Social Life in the Mid-Ancient Times* (Beijing: The Commercial Press, (Xie 2009)), pp. 419–40.

<sup>40</sup> Ref. Discussion of this idea in Section 1 of this paper.

situated at both sides of the imperial main street between the Yi River and the Luo River. Additionally, at the Westward lane, there were the establishments of *Siyi li* 四夷里 [The Four Foreigners/Barbarians Quarters], named *guizheng* 歸正 [Adapt to orthodoxy], *guide* 歸德 [Adapt to virtue], *muhua* 慕化 [Aspire to culture], and *muyi* 慕義 [Aspire to righteousness] (Yang 2006, p. 120).<sup>41</sup> The domineering Chinese mainstream discourse of *huayi zhi bian* (cf. Liu 2004, p. 72) again was clearly illustrated. This Chinese traditional idea holds that the main difference between *hua* (Chinese) and the *yi* (barbarians/foreigners) is that the Chinese are civilized and the foreigners are not, therefore all foreigners are barbarians. All non-Chinese were treated with contempt and were despised. *Hua* was superior over the inferior *yi*. Thus arise the terms of *rangyi* 攘夷 (drive out the barbarians) and *zhiyi* 治夷 [control the barbarians]. The Tang legend of Laozi converting the barbarians apparently emerged from this Chinese cultural superiority complex. In short, all tribes beyond the Tang imperial territories were considered as barbarians. Therefore, they were expected to either comply or to be submissive to the Chinese culture and ruling; the essential sentiments of *gui* and *mu* (to acknowledge the political status quo and resume a right political identity).

As a *yijiao*—barbarian religion—all the Jingjiao priests and their followers inevitably had to acknowledge their appointed barbarian identity. These people had to abandon their native “barbaric” attire and put on proper Chinese attire. The shift of attire is both a physical and metaphorical sign of submission. The school of scholarship which contends that the failure of Jingjiao is due to its inherent heretic inclination has truly underestimated the power of the deep rooted Chinese tradition of *daotong* and *zhengtong*, as well as the cultural hegemony of *huayi zhi bian*. These are the two pillars of Chinese imperial ideologies reinforced throughout the ages. In other words, the Jingjiao-church and community was facing an extremely powerful “political theology” from its host country. Therefore, the contingency plan of the Jingjiao-church was inevitably to acculturate in nature: the explicit expressions of similarities must be shown while all the differences must be eradicated; emphasizing the commons and getting rid of the odds.

## 5. Conclusions

In the contention of how to relate and appropriate Jingjiao in Tang China, the majority of the existing scholarship has taken a cultural approach; stressing on the negative impacts of appropriating too much Buddhist and Taoist terminologies. Thought part of the scholarship might have noticed the social-political dilemma Jingjiao had faced during the Tang Dynasty, yet the deep underlying political theology root of Tang civil religion structure at work is generally over-sighted (Chen 2012). Indeed, few people have recognized the political theology notion revealed in the Inscription. When Yisi was contributing extensively to the successful suppression of the An-Shi Rebellion, his purpose was to show the functionality and allegiance of him and his religion to the Tang court. Underlying this allegiance, the legitimacy of the Jingjiao establishment was at stake. Therefore, it is more appropriate to base the discussion of the demise of Jingjiao-church from a political-religious point of view instead of a purely cultural one. At the end of the day as informed by history, the Tang sovereign did have the last say in affecting the rise and fall of a religion, local or foreign. In light of this, the setting up of a stately and solid monument could not be considered as light and trivial as suggested by Pelliout. On the contrary, this was a solemn occasion which represented the rare opportunity to dignify recognition and patronage granted by the imperial court to a foreign community. The Jingjiao clerics attached to the Jingjiao community had met the basic expectations of the imperial authorities. Their efforts of making positive contributions in maintaining the social stability of the imperial power and defending the throne were appreciated, therefore their religion was being officially recognized.

For Yisi “the white-robed Luminous priest” (白衣景士) (Eccles and Lieu 2016, p. 7), had earned the trust of the imperial court towards the Jingjiao community by making crucial contributions in the

<sup>41</sup> Referring to the details of the ‘*yi*’—foreigner/barbarian concept discussed earlier in this article. (cf. Liu 2004).



successful suppression of the An-Shi Rebellion. Not only had he with his priestly status represented the loyalty and services rendered by the Jingjiao community to the imperial court but he also demonstrated the orthopraxy of the community. To the Tang rulers who were always alert and sensitive to religious matters, the Jingjiao-church was eager to show their loyalty in order to secure the royal patronage. This would ensure a better prospect for the Jingjiao religious community to propagate in Tang China. In other words, the Jingjiao-church was seeking earnestly for the cultural recognition of its host country as well as the imperial power's political recognition. The latter is obviously more urgent and crucial than the former: "the pure, bright Luminous Religion was being introduced to (us) Tang" (明明景教, 言歸我唐) (Ibid.).

Looking from this perspective, the Inscription is indeed a written manifesto in terms of political theology. The historical narrative of the inscription has duly described the beginning of the Jingjiao establishment in Tang China that was closely related to the Tang political establishment. In a sense the history of Jingjiao was also shaped by politics. When the Jingjiao monk Alouben first reached China, he had duly followed the rules of the Chinese "tributary system". He came with tributes (gifts) and presented them to the imperial court. The tributary system was a pattern of interaction between the imperial authorities and their foreign counterparts. Although under the lenses of traditional Chinese imperial world view, this is a kind of suzerainty relationship between the empire and its colonies.<sup>42</sup> The Inscription mentions that the Jingjiao Abbot Lohan and priest Gabriel came with precious gifts and paid tributes to the court as a way of retaining cordial relationship. The Inscription reads: "At that time there was the Abbot Lohan, the Bishop Jilie (i.e., Gabriel), both noble sons from the golden regions (i.e., the West), unworldly senior monks, who harmoniously restored the mystic order and tied up the broken knot" (有若僧首羅含, 大德及烈, 並金方貴緒, 物外高僧, 共振玄綱, 俱維絕紐) (Eccles and Lieu 2016, p. 4).

Apart from the tributary system, there was a top down title conferring system. The conferring of title represented a master-servant relationship between the suzerain and the vassal. In Jingjiao case, the conferring of title to the Bishop Alouben represented an imperial gesture of recognition to the "barbarian religion".<sup>43</sup> The Inscription illustrates one such incident: "He (Gao Zhong) also honored Alouben by making him the great master of doctrine for the preservation of the State" (仍崇阿羅本為鎮國大法主) (Ibid., p. 4). In fact, when Alouben arrived China during the Zhengguan period under Taizhong's reign, he had paid tributes to the Tang court and therefore had in a way demonstrated the submissive and subservient stance of Jingjiao establishment to the Tang Empire. The inscription describes this clearly:

In Syria there was a man of great virtue (bishop), known as Aluoben, who detected the intent of heaven and conveyed the true scripture here. He observed the way the winds blew in order to travel through difficulties and perils, and in the ninth year of the Zhenguan reign (635 CE) he reached Chang'an. The emperor (Taizhong) dispatched an official, Duke Fang Xuanling as an envoy to the western outskirts to welcome the visitor, who translated the scriptures in the library. [The emperor] examined the doctrines in his apartments and reached a profound understanding of their truth. He specially ordered that they be promulgated. (Eccles and Lieu 2016, p. 3)

大秦國有上德。曰阿羅本。占青雲而載真經。望風律以馳艱險。貞觀九祀至於長安帝使宰臣房公玄齡總仗西郊賓迎入內。翻經書殿。問道禁闈。深知正真。特令傳授。(Ibid.)

From this description, the influence of *daotong* and *zhengtong* in Tang imperial administrations is clearly illustrated. When Alouben reached China, he was first met up by a high ranking court official,

<sup>42</sup> See Zheng, Yongnian. China and international relations: the Chinese view and the contribution of Wang Gungwu (London: Routledge, (Zheng 2012)), p. 103.

<sup>43</sup> Yu, Yunguo. "The Ancient Chinese View of the Neighboring Countries: as Seen in 'On the Barbarians' of General History of Institutions and Critical Examination of Documents and Studies". pp. 222–23.

the Prime Minister Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (579–648 CE), who was appointed by Emperor Taizong. Then Alouben discussed in length with Taizong. The emperor questioned Alouben regarding the doctrinal teachings of Jingjiao and read the translated Jingjiao Sutras provided by Alouben in his own private quarters. After seeing the similarities of the Jingjiao doctrines to that of the Taoist thought, the emperor was convinced that this faith was a “harmless” religion (to the state). Therefore, it was allowed to propagate in Chang’an. The Inscription describes Jingjiao doctrine as understood by the emperor as such:<sup>44</sup>

Having carefully examined the scope of his (Alopen) doctrines, we find them to be mysterious, admirable, and requiring nothing special to be done; principal and the most honored having looked at the points in them, they are intended for the establishment of what is most important. Their language is free from the troublesome verbosity; their principles remain when the immediate occasion for their delivery is forgotten; their system is helpful to all creatures, and profitable to men. Let it have free course throughout the empire. (Legge 1966, p. 11)

詳其教旨。玄妙無為。觀其元宗。生成立要。詞無繁說。理有忘筌。濟物利人。宜行天下。(Ibid., p. 10)

However, it is noted that from the time Alouben arrived at the imperial capital city of Chang-an in 635 CE to the actual establishment of the Jinjiao monastery with proper personnel in 638 CE, there was a three-year gap. Presumably, certain official procedures concerning religion establishments still needed to be processed. Only after three years, Taizong issued the edict which allowed the Jingjiao-church to conduct liturgical services and engage in missionary activities. It is interesting to observe how Taizong “interpreted” Jingjiao doctrine and defined the religion as a religion of “requiring nothing special to be done” (*wuwei* 無為, literally “doing nothing”). *Wuwei* is the core teaching of Taoism. Whether Taizong’s interpretation of Jingjiao theology was proper and agreed by Alouben or not was uncertain. However, in a social cultural milieu in which Taoism was the civil religion, the adherence of Jingjiao theology to that of the Taoism as understood by the emperor fully expresses the imperial attitude towards religion: it must be practical and functional. The religion must be “helpful to all creatures, and profitable to men” (Legge 1966, p. 11) and therefore beneficial to the *zhengtong* (political administration) of the imperial court.

The translation of the Jingjiao canons is another important aspect worth discussion. According to *Junjing*<sup>45</sup> 尊經, Alouben had brought numerous books that he intended to translate into Chinese to Chang’an. Later Jingjing (Adam) brought more. It was said that thirty of those books had been translated, while most were “still in the leather folder to be translated”.<sup>46</sup> Judging from the political climate and strict religious control during the Tang era, there is a high possibility that those Jingjiao canons were not rendered into Chinese due to political reasons. Considering the close examination Alouben had to undergo, this proposition is quite possible. In the light of this possibility, one cannot take it for granted that the inquiries of Taizong and his administration were “friendly” or just for the sake of learning new ideas.

Xiang Da, an expert of Tang history, contends that the splendor of Tang Dynasty is manifested in its active communications with foreign cultures:

The power of China extends beyond its western border. It reaches its peak in the Han and Tang Dynasties. During Tang Dynasty, Chinese are referred to as “Tang people” in central

<sup>44</sup> The translation of James Legge is quoted in this context for its clarity in the doctrinal exposition.

<sup>45</sup> *Zunjing* 尊經 is an anonymous work from the early tenth century. It provides the names of saints such as David, Hosea, Peter, and Paul. It lists several presently non-extant texts including the *Book of Moses* 牟世法王經 *Zechariah* 刪河律經 *Epistles of Saint Paul* 寶路法王經 and *Revelations* 啓真經 (Foley 2009: 7–8). It mentions the aforementioned clergyman Jingjing (Adam), stating that he translated thirty texts listed therein. See (Kotyk 2016).

<sup>46</sup> *Jingjiao sanwei mengdu zan* 景教三威蒙度讚 [Nestorian Hymn of the Three Majesties for Obtaining Salvation], digital copy taken from CBETA, available at <https://bit.ly/2JCLP3e>, accessed 18 May 2019.

Asia. This is how powerful Tang China was. Since Zhenguan period, royal families from the neighboring countries had to send their princes to live in Tang court as hostages. There were also countless foreigners from various countries that had made Chang'an their home. This group of people has greatly contributed to the dissemination of the Western territories culture to Chang'an.<sup>47</sup>

中國國威及於西陲，以漢唐兩代為最盛；唐代中亞諸國即以「唐家子」稱中國人，李唐聲威之宣赫，於是可見也。貞觀以來，邊裔諸國率以子弟質于唐，諸國人流寓長安者亦不一而足，西域文明及於長安，此輩蓋預有力焉。(Xiang 1988, p. 4)

Therefore, the perishing of the three “barbarian religions” in China could not be taken for granted as just a common phenomenon in the history of East West cultural exchange and communications. In fact, looking from the perspective of *huayi zi bian*, it is the ability to sinicize and acculturate the barbarians which forged the Chinese Empire. The Middle Kingdom world view of *tianxia* is the fundamental essence of imperial China sovereignty. *Huayi zhi bian* ultimately bears the connotation of differentiating “those who are of us” and those “who are against us”. In such, the tributary system becomes the signifier of an inequality relationship between the imperial and its colonies.

It is not necessarily true that when an empire becomes more powerful, it will be more confident in the reception of anything foreign and therefore become more open and lenient in its foreign policy. On the same basis, the seemingly openness of Tang Dynasty towards the reception of foreign cultures and influences does not necessarily represent that the Tang imperial court is less suspicious of the “Others”. Instead this might be a reflection of the imperial court's confidence in its tight administrative system which is capable of handling any undesirable situations or threats posed by foreign cultures.<sup>48</sup> In other words, the openness of Tang Dynasty in its reception of foreign cultures does not represent that the empire is more lenient and welcoming than its predecessors in handling foreign relationships. Underlying that seemingly openness is the stronghold of a political structure formed by the integration of *daotong* and *zhengtong* which represents an imaginative “civil religion”. Under this notion, it is right to conclude that the deep rooted traditional Chinese imperial ideologies and its conception of “State sovereignty” have always been a form of political theology, and this is the kind of political theology that Jingjiao encountered in Tang China.

The majority of Chinese Jingjiao scholars such as Fang Hao, Gu Weimin, Zhang Xinlang, etc. have looked at the downfall of Jingjiao from the perspective of cultural exchange between China and the West. In the discourse of cultural exchange, many have concluded that the downfall of Jingjiao was caused by its inherent inclination of appropriating Buddhist and Taoist terminologies. In short, the Jingjiao downfall may be considered to be due to the agency of its clerics from within. This assumption falls short of presenting a comprehensive picture of the whole issue. The underlying imperial “political theology” formed by the integration of *zhengtong* and *daotong* has been almost completely ignored. The significant role played by the deep rooted traditional Chinese concept of sovereignty affecting Tang Jingjiao is mostly overlooked. The greatest fault of the scholarship which overlooks the political theology aspect of Jingjiao downfall is perhaps their exclusion of the Tang court's crucial and active agency in this whole matter. As has been discussed in this paper, it might be more appropriate to consider the downfall of Jingjiao in the context of Tang sovereign “political theology” which will give a more accurate picture of the propagation and demise of Jingjiao in Tang China.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

<sup>47</sup> In Chinese History, East West Cultural Communication is always a significant phenomenon and a popular topic for scholastic inquiries.

<sup>48</sup> Ke, Wen 柯文. (Paul A. Cohen) contends that Modern China has developed four types of anti-foreignism based on wrath, fear, contempt, and shame. See Ke (1989). *Discover History in China*. Beijing: China Press, 1989. pp. 36–37.

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