

Nestorian Remains of Inner Mongolia:
Discovery, Reconstruction and Appropriation

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**NESTORIAN REMAINS OF INNER MONGOLIA:
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Tjalling Halbertsma

Now enter the kingdom of Prester John...
Marco Polo

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¹ The Hulsewé-Wazniewski Foundation for the advancement of teaching and research in the archaeology, art and material culture of China at Leiden University. Incidentally, dr. A.F.P. Hulsewé, during his time as professor of Chinese at Leiden University, contributed to the translation of one of the key Nestorian inscription from China, see: Jansma (1971) 204.

NOTE ON NAMES, SPELLING AND ILLUSTRATIONS

The early researchers of Nestorian remains in Inner Mongolia used a variety of Mongolian and Chinese spellings and transcriptions. In addition, a number of Mongolian place names have now entered literature in Chinese transcriptions. Without restricting myself to one system, I have opted for whichever transcription raises the least confusion. Where possible I have followed Standaert (2001).

I have transcribed the majority of Chinese place names in *pinyin* and attempted to include Chinese characters for Chinese place names (for characters see the glossary in Appendix 3). I have maintained other transcriptions when drawing upon early publications that omit Chinese characters and have generally transcribed Mongolian place names as they are in early source publications, such as Martin (1938) or Gai (1991), unless these transcriptions were problematic.

I have chosen to use Chinese and Mongolian geographical names followed by the English for river, mountain or banner and thus, for instance, used Yinshan mountains instead of Yinshan or Yin Mountains, Shara Muren river instead of Shara Muren or Yellow River, and Damaoqi banner instead of Damaoqi or Damao Banner.

With 'Inner Mongolia' I refer to the Chinese province of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR) and with 'Mongolia' the independent country Mongolia, formerly Outer Mongolia. I have used 'Mongol' when referring to issues or people related to the Mongol rule of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries or traditional characteristics, and 'Mongolian' when referring to the people currently living in Inner Mongolia and Mongolia and to more recent issues and developments in both Inner Mongolia and Mongolia.

Images in plates are credited with the initials of the photographer followed by the year when they were made. The initials 'IW' thus stand for Iwan Baan, 'WJ' for Wei Jian and 'TH' for the present author.

Plates follow chapters, whereas maps are inserted at the start of chapters. For objects included in the appendix of Halbertsma (2005a) I have listed the object's number in a footnote. The appendix to Halbertsma (2005a) is reproduced here with errata and further data in Appendix 4.

INTRODUCTION

The western world, being a culture rooted in Christianity, has a longstanding interest in Christians in other parts of the world. This interest has undoubtedly shaped western views of the wider world. It has, for one thing, inspired legends relating of a mysterious eastern Christian king named Prester John and an eastern Christian realm. The legends in turn motivated mediaeval European leaders to send envoys to the Far East in an attempt to contact this Christian ally. Europe's searches for Prester John have resulted in a variety of encounters between western envoys and Nestorian Christians in the Far East. Prester John was never found, but Marco Polo, who described numerous Christian communities in the Far East, claimed to have encountered his Christian descendants. Polo's references to Christians in China are in part a product of the western interest in Christianity abroad and have in turn become the object of study for whoever is interested in the Christendom of the East. The popularity of Polo's travels also illustrates a parallel fascination of the western world for China. It is thus not surprising that despite the marginal presence of Christians in China and the limited instances of direct contact between China and mediaeval Europe, western scholars traditionally pay generous attention to the study of Christianity in China. This practice is illustrated by the fact that the majority of the studies dealing with the present topic is written in western languages such as English, French and, to a lesser extent, German and Italian. Indeed, even the small number of Japanese scholars researching the Christian presence in China has chosen to publish in a western language whereas material in Chinese frequently proves to be descriptive rather than interpretive. But what is it that feeds these fascinations in the western world?

It is exactly this question that Roman Malek raises in his introduction to a collection of conference papers on the study of Nestorian Christianity. Malek argues that the scholastic interest is motivated by the historical perspective of the coming and presence of Nestorianism in China and Central Asia:

“Nestorianism” in China and Central Asia is an example *par excellence* of an intercultural encounter because it very clearly raises questions which are of relevance to theology, dialogue, tolerance, inculturation, and the assimilation, the preservation of identity and demarcation: How does a foreign culture and religion fare in China? And which position does Chinese culture take when encountering foreign cultures and religions.²

The ‘intercultural encounter’ revealed by this search is perhaps best illustrated by depictions of crosses rising from lotus flowers and the use of multiple scripts and languages expressing Christianity in Buddhist, Confucian and Daoist vernacular. The two sub-questions raised by Malek have been relevant since the discovery of, what in the western world, has simply become known as the ‘Xi’an Stele’.³ The stele has become so central to the study of China that it is identified by a geographical position and given a name which could be applied to a great number of similar objects in Xi’an. It thus comes to no great surprise that this particular stele deals with the arrival and reception of Christianity in China.

Seventeenth century Jesuits in China may have seen a missionary use for the Xi’an Stele - as evangelical groups both inside and outside China still do so today - but their translation work of the inscription also triggered a renewed search for the early Christians in China, long after the search for Prester John had been abandoned.⁴ The discovery at the start of the twentieth century of further Nestorian documents and paintings in East Turkestan – present western China - renewed the search for Nestorian objects in China. The dubious interpretation of a large number of bronze objects as ‘Nestorian crosses’ shows, perhaps, how frantic the search for Nestorian objects eventually became.⁵ It did not take long, however, before undisputed Nestorian relics were discovered all over China. Despite the discovery of such large numbers of authentic Nestorian relics, scholarly attempts to categorize the field regularly appealed for further study and field research on the Nestorian remains,⁶ in particular regarding those found in Inner Mongolia.⁷

² Malek (2006b) 18.

³ ‘Stele on the Propagation of the Luminous Religion of Daqin in China’, also called the ‘Nestorian Monument’ or ‘Daqin Stele’.

⁴ Examples for contemporary missionary use of the Xi’an Stele are found in: Joseph (undated). For a recent essay on the appropriation of the stele see: Nicolini-Zani (2006b).

⁵ For these so called ‘bronze Ordos crosses’, see among many publications: Yeung (1978); Pelliot (1932); Hambis (1954); and Chapter 11 of the present study.

⁶ See for instance: Saeki (1951) 450; but also Klein (2002) [29].

⁷ See for instance: Enoki (1964) 51; Grönbech (1940) 307; Chen Yuan (1938) 256; and Heissig (1964) 295.

The discovery of Nestorian relics has not only led to new insights but also resulted in radically new interpretation, or rather, appropriation of the material. Indeed, the heritage of the early Nestorian Christians in China has often been stripped of its original intention and purpose and given new meaning. This appropriation is still continuing.⁸ Though this process will eventually lead to the destruction and disappearance of the material, for there are no natural custodians of this material since the disappearance of Nestorian Christians from China, it also means that the Nestorian archaeological sites and objects develop a history of their own.

The study of the Nestorian Christian heritage in China has in recent years received much attention, perhaps more so than in previous years. International conferences and exhibitions, field projects and independent studies have resulted in a large number of publications, both academic and popular.⁹ The study of Nestorian relics from China is thus very much a work in progress. Indeed, Nestorian heritage is still being found in China, especially in Quanzhou¹⁰ and Inner Mongolia,¹¹ and academic publications covering these discoveries continue to appeal for further investigations.¹² Inner Mongolia in particular is singled out for ‘a deepened research on the field’.¹³ As pointed out by Igor de Rachewiltz in his recent authoritative annotated translation of *The Secret History*, an ‘analysis and evaluation of the archaeological discoveries made in the last decades in Inner Mongolia is now imperative’.¹⁴ Sadly, widespread looting and destruction causes the Nestorian sites and objects in Inner Mongolia to literally disappear under our eyes. The heritage needs to be preserved at least through photos and text before it is destroyed, stripped of all context, or - in case of objects - distributed to private collections where it is no longer possible to study remains or trace their origins.

This project arose from an endeavour to document Nestorian remains in Inner Mongolia before they are lost. The field was thus defined by a presence of Nestorian remains as well as recent developments affecting the heritage. The geographical field with these remains was once inhabited by Öngüt and is bordered on the south by the Daqingshan mountains and on the north by the present border between China and Mongolia. Although a number of related remains have been found south of the Daqingshan mountains no such remains have been encountered in Mongolia. Naturally, the documentation of these Nestorian remains demands some sort of interpretation of the material and a reconstruction of the past.

The first objective of the project is the material documentation, description and interpretation of these sites and objects. Whilst documenting and interpreting the material, a conviction arose that there was more to the story of the search for and discovery of Nestorian remains in Inner Mongolia than a reconstruction of the past. The many ways in which the remains were discovered and how they were reconstructed and appropriated are as interesting, for these approaches throw an important light on twentieth century attitudes towards a distant past – be these attitudes foreign, Mongolian or Han Chinese.

Vice versa it is most useful to be familiar with these attitudes whilst studying the documentation of Nestorian remains that have been lost, for it might be the case that these very attitudes have become an intrinsic part of the documentation and presentation of the heritage. It is thus the project’s second objective to record how the Nestorian objects and sites of Inner Mongolia were appropriated and how they obtained new meaning and usage.

The present study is divided into four parts. Part I provides an introduction to the medieval sources on the Nestorian presence in the Far East, the associated terms and the historical framework.

Part II presents a new synthesis of publications and unpublished sources on the Nestorian remains in Inner Mongolia. This synthesis provides in the first place a chronological overview of the discovery of Nestorian relics and remains in Inner Mongolia and, to some extent, in related regions in Central Asia and China. These sources include primarily western contributions but also concern a small number of important Chinese publications. Though indispensable for the study of Nestorian remains in Inner Mongolia, the presentation of Nestorian remains in a number of these Chinese publications is at times problematic or at the very least confusing. The present study’s contribution regarding these sources includes a clarification of the sometimes lapidary presentation of early Chinese archaeological reports on Nestorian finds and the presentation of visual

⁸ See for contemporary uses of Nestorian material in Inner Mongolia: Halbertsma (2006a).

⁹ For popularized accounts on early Christianity in China see: Palmer (2000); Moore (2003); Baumer (2005) and the present author’s: Halbertsma (2002a). For a most critical appraisal of a number of popularized translations see: Deeg (2006).

¹⁰ Parry (2003); Niu (2004); Gardner, Lieu and Parry (2005); Parry (2006a); Lieu (2006) 295; Franzmann and Lieu (2006); Wu (2005).

¹¹ For recent discoveries see: Gai (1991); Hamilton and Niu (1994) and Halbertsma (2005a).

¹² Malek (2002b) 37.

¹³ See for instance: Paolillo (2006a) 373.

¹⁴ Rachewiltz (2004) 657.

material in the appendixes of this study. Part II further introduces the present author's research project and findings in Inner Mongolia.

Part III provides a historical reconstruction of the Nestorian culture in Inner Mongolia. This reconstruction focuses primarily on remains of Nestorian settlements and Nestorian grave material and cemeteries. In order to contextualize these remains I distinguish in this chapter a number of dimensions expressing religious, ethnic, geographic and political characteristics of the material.

Part IV provides an insight in the contemporary interpretation and appropriation of Nestorian material of Inner Mongolia by herders and farmers of both Han Chinese and Mongolian descent. This part is primarily based on a number of interviews conducted with herders and farmers in the field and intends to provide a contemporary angle to what otherwise would remain a study dealing exclusively with the past. The second objective of this final part is to highlight some problems regarding academic study of appropriated material and documentation of Nestorian heritage from Inner Mongolia.

The four parts are illustrated with plates and concluded with a number of appendixes. Material in these appendixes includes a number of previously unpublished objects from Inner Mongolia identified and documented by the present author.¹⁵ The appendixes also include a number of illustrations and photos which are difficult to find or access.

¹⁵ The majority of these objects have been published in: Halbertsma (2005a) Appendix, which forms an appendix to the present study and is thus frequently referred to.

MAP 1. NORTH CHINA AND MONGOLIA

