

<https://doi.org/10.25050/JDTREA.2025.4.2.139>

Glen L. Thompson, *Jingjiao: The Earliest Christian Church in China*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2024, 269 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8028-8352-0, US\$36.64. (pbk)

**Carole M. Cusack**  
University of Sydney

This well-written and admirably clear book is a history of what formerly was called “Nestorian Christianity” in China. In 1623, a monument dated 781 was uncovered in Xi’an. It provided reliable evidence for the “Luminous Religion” (*Jingjiao*), a form of Christianity spread by Syriac tradition evangelists from 635 CE onwards. Thompson is published by Eerdmans, an evangelical press, and the provision of a lengthier history for the Christian faith in China, as an inspiration to contemporary Chinese Christians is one of his aims. He discusses the Syriac church’s move east through Persia, noting fifth century theological arguments about the nature of Jesus (two separate natures or Diophysites or Nestorians, one nature or Monophysites or Miaphysites, and the orthodox position that Christ’s two natures were distinct yet united, or hypostatic union) which affected the Mesopotamian and Persian churches. This region was the source of missions along the Silk Road; in the sixth century the church struggled as it separated from the Christian West. However, the mission to China was bearing fruit.

Chapter 2, “The Stele from Chang’an,” and Chapter 4, “New Evidence Emerges,” are the core of the book. The stele proved authentic and in the early twentieth century explorer Sir Aurel Stein (1862-1943) and his French rival, Sinologist Paul Pelliot (1878-1945) acquired many texts from the Dunhuang Mogao Caves, now a World Heritage site (p. 85). These texts were eagerly received by scholars and seemingly gave rise to several forgeries. Thompson guides the reader expertly through the texts, providing titles and summarised contents. Chapter 3, “The Jingjiao is Planted and Grows” and Chapter 4, “The Teachings of the Jingjiao” discuss respectively early relations between Christians and the Tang Dynasty – with a lengthy sketch of the outstanding missionary bishop, Alopen, whose arrival “at Chang’an in 635 is one of the very few secure dates we have in Jingjiao history” (p. 56) – and the ways the Christians framed their (quite alien) doctrines in order to convert the Chinese. There is considerable attention paid to language and the precise terms used to designate key concepts like sin, grace, and messiah, and Thompson acknowledges that the missionaries encoded doctrines “in a culturally meaningful way for their Chinese hearers...[using] the highly ambiguous forms of literary classical Chinese...[leaving] modern readers with many difficult passages to decipher” (p. 133).

Chapter 6, “The Jingjiao Under the Tang,” explains how early success under the

Emperors Taizong and Gaozong Christianity prospered and spread; however, the formidable Empress Wu Zetian (who had long been regent) ascended the throne in 690 and reigned for fifteen years, declaring herself to be Maitreya, the Future Buddha. The Luminous Teaching began to decline, though the powerful official Yisi, who served under Emperors Suzong, Daizong and Dezong (reigned collectively 756-805 CE) “is praised for repairing old churches and building new ones” (p. 135). Thompson analyses what is known of the institutional structure of the Jingjiao and concludes that it closely resembles the Church of the East, its mother church. There is substantial information about named church officials in the first 150 years, and there are hints as to how far it spread, for example, the mention of a church or monastery in Luoyang in 745 CE. The Jingjiao declined from 842 when Emperor Wuzong set about laicising Buddhist monasteries and convents, and Christian institutions were deemed to be analogous and were similarly attacked. Chapter 7, “The Yelikewenjiao Revival Under the Yuan,” considers the impact of the rise of the Mongol khanate under the charismatic leader Genghis Khan (1162–1227), and the cultural adaptation of the Mongols to China under Kublai Khan (1215–1294), who established the Yuan dynasty in 1271 and moved the court to Dadu (modern Beijing). In Chinese texts from the Yuan, Christians were called Yelikewenjiao, a new term, and “in 1289 a single government office was established to oversee the Yelikewen across China” (p. 173).

In the later Middle Ages, Catholic clergy visited the court of the great Khan, and Chinese monks went west to contact the mother church in Persia and beyond. The rise to power of Timur (1336-1405), self-styled restorer of the Mongol Empire who conquered Iran, besieged Moscow, and invaded India, spelled the end of the Jingjiao. Thompson’s “Epilogue: So What?” asks questions about the new genealogy the discovery of the Jingjiao provides for modern Chinese (Catholic and Protestant) Christians, the ability of Christianity to become truly Chinese and at what cost, and the value of shedding light on this nearly-forgotten part of history. *Jingjiao: The Earliest Christian Church in China* is a wonderful book that unfolds like a thriller in parts, makes more familiar an ancient church (the Church of the East) that itself is scarcely known to modern Protestant and Catholic Christians, and will genuinely appeal to a broad range of non-specialists. It deserves a wide readership and certainly should be in every academic institutional library the world over