“No one has a surer grip than Daniel Bays on the complexities of the Christian experience in China. Based on the most up-to-date scholarship, Chinese as well as Western, this long-awaited account takes the story from the earliest Chinese contacts with Christianity in the Tang dynasty to the emergence of an increasingly ‘post-Western Christianity’ in the China of the early twenty-first century. A truly groundbreaking work.”

Paul Cohen, Harvard University

“This study is a splendid culmination to Daniel Bays’ life-long engagement with Chinese history. It is lucid, succinct, balanced, reader-friendly, informative, and altogether authoritative. Readers interested in solid historical treatment of the dynamic story of Christianity in China need look no further. This is the book.”

Mark Noll, University of Notre Dame

In this new book, one of the world’s leading writers in the field looks at Christianity’s long history in China and its extraordinarily rapid rise in the last half of the twentieth century, and charts its future direction.

Bays expertly tracks the expansion of Christianity in China from the seventh century to the present day, charting how a religion first brought into China by a foreign mission has been adapted by the local population into part of their religious landscape. Beginning with the Nestorian mission in the seventh century, Bays presents a bold reinterpretation which reveals a process that was closely bound up with national and local politics. The account moves through the expansion of Christianity in the Dynastic era, its survival under fire in the mid-1900s, and the growth of the Chinese Church from the end of the Cultural Revolution to the early twenty-first century.

The book concludes with an examination of the way in which China is both similar to and different from other non-Western societies – for example Africa, Korea, Indonesia, and the Pacific Islands – where Christianity is surging. Throughout, A New History of Christianity in China offers a broad scope and incorporates the major scholarship of the last 30 years, weaving a balanced narrative of Christianity’s long history in China, and tracing its transformation from an imported, Western religion to a thoroughly Chinese religion today.

Daniel H. BAYS is currently Professor of History and Director of the Asian Studies Program at Calvin College in Michigan. Previously he taught at the University of Kansas for 30 years. He is the author of several books on Chinese Christian history.

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The Blackwell Guides to Global Christianity chart the history, development and current state of Christianity in key geographical areas around the world. In many cases, these are areas where Christianity has had a controversial past and where the future of Christianity may yet be decided. Each book in the series will look at both the history of Christianity in an important region and consider the issues and themes which are prevalent in the lives of contemporary Christians and the Church. Accessibly written by area experts, the books will appeal to students and scholars of World Christianity and others who are interested in the history, culture and religion of Christianity around the world.

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*Christianities in Asia* edited by Peter C. Phan

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**Forthcoming**

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A New History of Christianity in China

Daniel H. Bays
To
Andrew Walls of Aberdeen
and
Thomas S. Y. Li of Tianjin
Both of whom I am humbly grateful to call
Teacher and Friend
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In researching and writing this book, I have become a debtor to many. It all began in 1985, with the Henry Luce Foundation’s support for my History of Christianity in China project, at the University of Kansas. Terry Lautz, the Asia Program Officer at the foundation, was consistent in his support of that project and in many other ways since; he has been a valued friend for 25 years.

Colleagues in the field of China missions and China Christianity studies have been faithful in assistance and encouragement: Gary Tiedemann, Chan Kim-kwong, Kathleen Lodwick, Murray Rubenstein, Bob Entenmann, Ryan Dunch, Lian Xi, Jessie Lutz, Carol Hamrin, Dick Madsen, David Mungello, Phil West, Silas Wu, among others.

Some senior China scholars not in the Christian studies field have nevertheless found time to be helpful in their support of my endeavors. Al Feuerweker and Ernie Young were wonderful mentors in my years in Ann Arbor in the 1960s, and always ready since then to write one more letter of recommendation. My thanks as well to the late John King Fairbank, the late K. C. Liu, to Paul Cohen, and to Jonathan Spence for assistance in many ways. I gained a much wider horizon of views on Christian history from my exposure to scholars of American religion: Grant Wacker, Mark Noll, Joel Carpenter, Nathan Hatch, Edith Blumhofer, among others. I am grateful to Jerry Anderson for including me in a group based during most of the 1990s at the Overseas Ministries Studies Center in New Haven. There I was exposed to stimulating new ideas and modes of analysis by Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Bob Frykenberg, and Dana Robert.

Very early in my odyssey, James Cha (Cha Shih-chieh), of National Taiwan University and China Evangelical Theological Seminary, played a key role by providing full access to his rich collection of Christian materials at the seminary during my stay in Taiwan in 1984–85. And the late Jonathan T’ien-en Chao did the same with his collection of rare historical materials at the Chinese Church Research Center, Hong Kong, all through the 1980s. Also in Hong Kong, Kim Chan has been a treasured colleague, collaborator, and friend for over twenty years; and I have enjoyed the friendship and hospitality on several occasions of Hong Kong colleagues Peter Ng, Philip Leung, Timothy Wong, and K. K. Lee.
In China my debts are legion. In the autumn of 1986 I travelled all over Shandong Province with Thomas S. Y. Li (Li Shiyu). We visited churches, also banged on hotel doors at 3 am, slept on concrete, rode farm wagons for taxis, and visited the original still-operating site of the Jesus Family, among other adventures. Thomas, at age 65, beat me to the top of Taishan, and drank most of the bai’ger. I owe him endless thanks, for friendship as well as for advancing my understanding of popular religion.

Other colleagues and friends in China are Tao Feiya and Liu Tianlu (both then of Shandong University; Tao is now at Shanghai University), Edward Xu of Fudan University, and Liu Jiafeng of Central China Normal University. Among senior scholars, Professor Lu Yao at Shandong University and President Zhang Kaiyuan of Central China Normal have always been hospitable and helpful. I also appreciate the assistance of Zhuo Xinping, Director of the Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), and of Zhao Fusan, formerly of CASS. All these, and others unnamed, made my research in China over the years thoroughly enjoyable in addition to being challenging intellectually.

Special thanks to Mark Noll and Joel Carpenter, who went the extra mile to read and give me feedback on the first draft of all the chapters. Thanks also to my editors at Blackwell (now Wiley-Blackwell), Andrew Humphries and Isobel Bainton, for their patience when I did not meet deadlines or otherwise misbehaved. I am grateful to Calvin College for a sabbatical in 2007 and for generous travel assistance over several years, and to the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship for providing support at key times. My colleagues in the History Department and the Asian Studies Program at Calvin College welcomed me warmly upon my arrival here a decade ago, and they have provided a congenial environment for thinking and writing.

In some ways, ideas finding expression here began well over 30 years ago. Though I have learned much from others, the remaining defects and shortcomings of this book are mine alone.

I have dedicated this volume to Andrew Walls, always gracious and polite as he drops blockbusters which challenge our assumptions about Christian history outside the West, and to Thomas S. Y. Li, who, like Andrew, has taught me much about life as well as scholarship.

Finally, very special appreciation to my wife Janny, who for all these years has shared my love for China and has kept me on task. Without her there would be no book. Thank you, Sweetheart.

Daniel H. Bays
Grand Rapids, Michigan
October 2010
This book has been close to my heart for many years, and in some ways it has been implicit in all my academic endeavors for the past three decades. In the early 1980s, when Christianity, along with other religions, was being resurrected in China after the Cultural Revolution and was showing immense vitality, I became part of a new generation of scholars, Chinese as well as American and European, who saw in the history of Christianity in China an important understudied area. Some topics in this area had in fact been studied; these studies centered mainly on the foreign missionaries and the story of what they did in China. But the other, and arguably more important, piece of the picture was the rise of Chinese Christians in the joint Sino-foreign endeavor to establish and nurture the faith in Chinese soil. This process was characterized by a persistent, overriding dynamic: the Chinese Christians were first participants, then subordinate partners of the foreign missionaries, then finally the inheritors or sole “owners” of the Chinese church. It was also a “cross-cultural process,” the result of which has been the creation of an immensely varied Chinese Christian world in our day.\(^1\) I have attempted to track some of the main features of this cross-cultural process over several centuries. I have also focused on China proper, making little reference to Christian stirrings among China’s minority peoples and in overseas Chinese communities. Both of those topics are worthy of in-depth attention by other scholars.

I have been told by many that there is a need for a volume such as this. I myself have felt compelled to write it, if only for the sake of my own understanding. My aim has been, in the writing process, to incorporate the considerable amount of research of the last 25 years into a coherent narrative. Previous accounts which are somewhat comparable to this effort include Kenneth Scott Latourette’s *A History of Christian Missions in China* (London, 1929), a large and remarkably detailed reference-type work which is unfortunately 80 years old. A 1988 book by the Rev. Bob Whyte,
Introduction

*Unfinished Encounter: China and Christianity* (London, 1988) was a very respectable general history by the project officer of the China Study Project, an ecumenical multi-year endeavor sponsored by several British Protestant and Catholic bodies, foremost among them the Conference for World Mission of the British Council of Churches. It has long been out of print, and at any rate cannot include the significant scholarship, much of it by Chinese scholars, of the past quarter century. Finally, Fr. Jean-Pierre Charbonnier has given us *Christians in China A.D. 600 to 2000* (in English, San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007; original French edition, Paris, 2002). With this volume Father Charbonnier, China Director of the Paris Foreign Mission society, has given us a very substantial and useful account, mainly of the Catholic efforts in China. Perhaps Charbonnier’s stress on Catholics balances out the greater weight given to Protestants by the other works, including this one.

In writing I tried to strike a balance between the early modern (pre-1800, with two chapters), modern (1800–1950, with four chapters), and recent (1950–present, with two chapters) periods. The heart of the book is the middle four chapters, Chapters 3 to 6. Here the basic tension between (foreign) mission and (Chinese) church is played out over a century and a half. Another large theme which recurs is the always-present instinct of the Chinese state, or political regime, to monitor and control religious movements; as a result Christianity was usually not seen only, indeed not even primarily, as a “religion” or belief system, but as a behavioral phenomenon which could cause endless trouble.

The appendix provides a brief history of the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission to China from the late seventeenth century until the mid twentieth century, when it ended. This mission was unique in several ways, and its story should be included somewhere. Rather than try to include it in pieces scattered among a few chapters, I have given a concise version of it which has been relegated to an appendix.

I have decided not to include a separate “conclusion” at the end of the book. Christianity in China is in a state of flux (as are many things in China), and I do not wish to extrapolate the present into the future any more than I have in the last few pages of Chapter 8 – especially when observers are so little agreed on the shape of the “present.” But there are some larger themes which I hope the reader will derive from this effort. One is the notion that Christianity, when it is separated from its bonding with Western culture in a package we may call “Christendom,” is perfectly capable of adapting to function in different cultural settings, often after a period of cross-cultural interaction which may be disruptive. The lesson: one can have Christ without Christendom. The other notion that I hope is manifest in this account is the remarkable flexibility and creativity in the Chinese relationship with Christianity (or perhaps with “Christianities”). Examples abound: the Daoist and Buddhist terms used by
the Nestorians; the powerful Biblical visions of the Taiping leaders in the
nineteenth century; devices of Chinese Catholics in renaming the ancestral
ceremonies in order to finesse the Pope’s proscription; and today’s frequent
occurrence of White Lotus-like Protestant millenarian sects in the Chinese
countryside. One is tempted to observe, “plus ça change, plus c’est la
même chose”.

Notes

1. Andrew Walls, “From Christendom to World Christianity,” in The Cross-Cultural
pp. 149–171.
The Nestorian Age and the Mongol Mission, 635–1368

Prologue

The new Beijing City Museum is a stunning showcase of daring recent Chinese architecture, built about 2004 or 2005, and is one of several monumental buildings that make central Beijing visually much more interesting than when the official style was “Stalinesque Victorian.” The city museum had formerly been in a one-story wing of the “Confucius Temple,” a peaceful but run-down structure on the northeast side of the city, with far too little viewing space to display its holdings. When the museum moved to its spacious new quarters on the main East–West artery, visitors could see an entire floor of artifacts, photos, exhibits, and other items all on the history of the city of Beijing, including history from the time before it was called Beijing. For of course it used to be called Kambaliq, or Dadu (Great capital) when the Mongols ruled China. Walking through the exhibits of that period of Beijing’s history, it is hard to miss a cross carved on a large stone slab. This is a Nestorian cross, with the four spikes of equal length, a symbol of the Christian Church of the East, often just called Nestorian. Moreover, there is a photo of a pile of rubble and perhaps part of a stone wall, identified as (possibly) the remains of a Nestorian Christian monastery in the suburbs of Beijing. These items do not date back to the very beginnings of Christianity in China – another stone we will discuss
presently will do that. But it adds concrete visual evidence of the recurring Christian presence in pre-modern China, which began almost 15 centuries ago, if not earlier.

Just exactly when Christianity first entered China is a matter of some debate and even dispute among scholars, church representatives, and other interested parties. Much of this uncertainty has arisen only in recent years. It is due to the discovery, almost 30 years ago in the early 1980s, of some very interesting bas-relief sculptures on a rock face at Kongwangshan, near the city of Lianyungang, in what is now Jiangsu Province. Lianyungang was an important port city in earlier times, first port of entry into China for many who came by sea. These bas-reliefs depict three persons. The undeniable existence of these sculptures, and probable dating of them to the reign of the Mingdi emperor (r. 57–75 CE) of the Later Han Dynasty (25–220 CE), have led to the conclusion that these are from the period of the very early entrance of Buddhism into China, and depicted Buddhist figures. This conclusion would not have been seriously questioned, until recently. Within the past five to ten years, however, some have begun to think that these carved figures might not be Buddhist, rather that the evidence pointed to their being Christian; the human figures on the rock face were the Apostle Thomas and Mary the mother of Jesus, with a variety of candidates for the third figure.

This idea of Thomas in China is not new. His alleged visit to China has never been questioned by the Mar Thoma church in India, which has always claimed direct descent from the claimed church-planting of the Apostle there in the early 60s CE. Their books and church traditions clearly have Thomas in the 60s CE coming to India, then to China, and back to India, where he died. Two breviaries (concise liturgy books) of the Church in later centuries, one from Malabar, south India, and one in Syriac from the Church of the East, also seem possibly to refer to Thomas and China. Nevertheless, few people believed the Thomas-in-China theory; there simply was not enough concrete evidence to take it very seriously. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, the early Portuguese explorers, chroniclers, and historians who came to India related the stories of the Indian church on the southeast coast concerning St. Thomas and China. Some favored accepting the claim, others were highly skeptical. Matteo Ricci, the first great Jesuit China missionary (in China 1583–1610), encountered there some ambiguous references to (possibly) Thomas. But no one had any concrete evidence.1 Then in 2008, two Frenchmen wrote a book strongly advocating the Thomas-in-China thesis. They based their argument on the Kongwangshan bas-reliefs and other evidence that they adduced, and concluded that Thomas went from India to China by sea, because of an outbreak of unrest on the Old Silk Road through central Asia. They also claim that rather than Buddhism setting the bar for other religions, Christianity may have influenced Buddhism, which
was just in its formative stages in China at this time. Now there is some controversy over these issues, because of their linkage to those of national self-image and questions such as which of the world religions got to a given place first.\(^2\) For example, Professor Perrier found a group of scholars of religion at Nanjing University, the school with some expertise in this period, quite resistant to his suggestions about the content of the bas-reliefs.\(^3\) I, for one, cannot see where this argument will end, or if it will end. The key evidence seems not at all clear-cut, so a more cautious stance would seem in order until more mainstream scholars become involved.

Regardless of the above controversy, when we turn to later times it is accurate to say that from the seventh century to the sixteenth century there were two false starts for the implantation of Christianity in China before the Christian presence became permanent. I will deal with both of them in the remainder of this introductory chapter. As we will see, from the verifiable beginning of the transmission of the Christian religion in the seventh century, the form in which it entered China was both replicated and transformed in varying degrees. We will probably never know just how close the Roman empire and the Later Han Dynasty in China (25–220 CE) came to linking up and establishing direct contact at the end of the first century. The peace which facilitated communications between the two great empires made possible commercial exchange along the Old Silk Road, which crossed central Asia and today’s Turkestan. But the trade remained in the hands of Middle Eastern or central Asian middlemen. Rome ruled all to the west of the Caspian Sea, and Han envoys made it as far as the east side of the Caspian. Conceivably Christianity could have entered China during these years, but there is no real evidence that it did so. Ironically, the same period of relative order along the Silk Road which enabled Rome and China to have a near-miss in contact did make possible the first significant foreign missionary movement successfully to arrive in China that of Buddhism, brought from India. Who can say what might have resulted if Christianity had been successful in establishing itself in China at the same time as Buddhism? There would have been two foreign religions competing for attention and converts. Of course that did not occur, and from the early third century China was in chaos and the Silk Road practically nonfunctional. To the west of China, as Rome’s empire dwindled over the next few centuries and competition grew between the Roman church and the Eastern church, first arose the Syrian Church of the East, and then the Persian empire in the Sassanid period (225–651) developed as the geographical base for Eastern Christianity. The Eastern Christians, who after the fifth century were called by some Nestorians or Nestorian Christians, succeeded in establishing a secure minority position vis-à-vis the Zoroastrians and Manicheans, their main competitors in the Persian religious marketplace.\(^4\) Despite the waning of the power of the Sassanid state, and strong competition from other branches of Eastern Christianity, the Persian Nestorians continued
vigorou...hundred thousands, of converts among the diverse peoples of central Asia. India also became a metropolitaine for the first time; and finally in 635 the first carriers of the Christian gospel, a band of Persian Nestorian Christians, arrived in China.

Nestorian Christians in Tang China

In either 1623 or 1625, either in today’s Xi’an or in an area about 75 km to the west of Xi’an, a nine-foot high marble stele (a commemorative slab, tablet) was dug up which told a remarkable story. In the more than 1800 Chinese characters and in the smaller number of Syriac letters carved on it, allegedly a Christian monk named Jingjing, claiming to be writing in the year 781, gives a detailed history of Nestorian Christianity from its beginnings in China in 635. He also (in Syriac) records the names of the bishops and priests of the Da Qin (vaguely countries of the west, probably meaning Persia or Syria, or even the Roman empire) monasteries around the empire. The title at the top of the stele translates as “A Monument Commemorating the Propagation of the Da-Qin (Syrian) Luminous Religion in China.” A slightly freer translation might be “The Story of the Coming of the Religion of Light from the West to China.” At the very top is a Christian cross rising from a (Buddhist) lotus blossom. It is hard to overstress the impact this discovery had on Christian history in China, after it was generally accepted as authentic. In the 1620s, the Jesuit missionaries in China, who had been there only 40 years, were often confounded by the claim that Christianity was entirely foreign and too new to have any appeal in China. As far as anyone knew, Roman Christian envoys were the first; they had come to Mongolia and then China in the thirteenth century, and were gone already just over a century later. But here in this massive stone tablet seemed to be proof positive that Christianity had been firmly established early in the Tang, more than six hundred years before the first European emissaries came in the thirteenth century. Moreover it survived for well over two hundred years. It was a member of the Chinese social and political elite, a Christian convert, who heard about the stele and alerted the Jesuits to its discovery. But this leads us to events to be covered in the next chapter, so we will leave the stele and return to the story it helps to clarify concerning the beginnings in early Tang.

The Tang dynasty (618–907) was young and vigorous in 635. Its second emperor, Taizong, presided over a capital city (Chang’an, today’s Xi’an) larger, richer, and more magnificent than any in the world. The Tang armies,
this early in the dynasty, were stronger than those of any neighbors, and Tang jurisdiction stretched farther west than that of any previous Chinese authority. With relative peace re-established in the area between China and Persia, a booming international trade revived on the Old Silk Road, of which the terminus was Chang’an. Some of the Middle Eastern and central Asian merchants who participated in the trade surely were Christian, but they were not missionaries. Yet Taizong may have learned a bit about their following a different religion and was curious; in addition to Buddhism being a fairly recent import, there were among the many foreigners in

Figure 1.1 The Nestorian stele. Credit: dk/Alamy.
cosmopolitan Chang’an Zoroastrians from Persia, Manicheans, inner Asian tribal groups with their own practices and rituals, and Jews. And Guangzhou, already by this time an important south China coastal entrepôt, had a large number of Arabs, of diverse religious identities, engaged in maritime trade. So when a delegation of Nestorians, led by their bishop, Alopen (or Aluoben), dressed in white robes and carrying their scriptures and icons of Christ, Mary, and the saints, arrived in dignified procession at the city gate after months on the Silk Road, they were formally greeted and escorted in dignified procession to the emperor. At least this is the story told on the stele. The court certainly knew they were coming, and must have known something about them, because (again, according to the inscription on the stele) Taizong ordered the Christian scriptures which the Nestorians had brought with them to be translated. It is implied that Alopen himself was heavily engaged in this work. After familiarizing himself with the basic doctrines, three years later, in 638, the emperor issued an edict of approbation for the Christians:

The way does not have a common name and the sacred does not have a common form. Aluoben, the man of great virtue from the Da Qin empire, came from a far land...his message is mysterious and wonderful beyond our understanding. The message is lucid and clear; the teachings will benefit all; and they shall be practiced throughout the land.\(^7\)

In the same year, 638, the group of Nestorians around Alopen built the first Christian church in China, in Chang’an. There were 21 Nestorian monks in China, probably all Persian. For the period down to its creation in 781, the stele itself is the primary source of what is known about Tang Nestorian Christianity. It records a pattern of expansion and growth, with perhaps two or three dozen monasteries being established during that century and a half. There was also some persecution, especially during the late seventh century when Empress Wu reigned (685–704) and favored the Buddhists. For centuries there was very little known of events after the 781 stele. And the theology of the Nestorians is not described in detail on the stele. But early in the twentieth century, at Dunhuang (in the far West, on the northern route of the Silk Road in today’s Xinjiang), thousands of manuscripts were discovered stored in sealed grottoes in approximately the year 1005. They had been preserved by the dry climate. Among them were several early Nestorian documents, including scriptures translated very early, some perhaps by Alopen himself.\(^8\) From these documents we can see the remarkable combination of Christian ideas and concepts mixed with Daoist and Buddhist terms that constituted Nestorianism in China. One scripture found at Dunhuang, “The Treatise of Veneration,” even includes a Manichean scripture.\(^9\) Other titles of these scriptures and liturgies include: “The Book of Jesus-Messiah,” “Sutra of the Teachings of the World-Honored One,” “Discourse on
Monotheism,” “Da-Qin Luminous Religion Hymn in Adoration of the Holy Trinity,” and several others. The first two of these are thought by several scholars to have been, as the documents themselves claimed, translated into Chinese between 635 and 641. If so, then Alopen himself may well have been the translator. According to scholars who have analyzed them, they show a clearly discernible Christian core, not any significant deterioration of the essential dogmas of Christianity, although there is little emphasis on the crucifixion of Jesus, and considerable admixture of Daoist and Buddhist terms and images. Yet the whole question of the extent to which Christianity and Daoism (more so than Buddhism) might have been compatible with each other still awaits systematic treatment by scholars conversant with both traditions. In other words, we still do not have a good grasp of the “religious content” of Nestorian Christianity in China.

We do know, in broad outline, the fate of Tang Christianity. After a massive internal rebellion which nearly toppled the state in the 750s, the cosmopolitanism of the early Tang ebbed, and nativist elements revived. The court was weaker (its writ not extending as far), poorer (unable to subsidize religions as it had before), and more vulnerable to the cultural conservatives, many of them ardent Confucianists, who in the ninth century created a rising chorus of anti-foreignism and demands for a crackdown on “foreign religions.” This culminated in 845, with a decree from the throne which was aimed mainly at cutting back the wealth of Buddhist monasteries and restricting use of them as tax shelters, laicizing many of the clergy, and drastically tightening overall control of Buddhism. Monks were now required to register with the state, and the state itself took on the authority to ordain new clergy (in this regard, obviously one is reminded of the imperatives of the present Chinese state in maintaining a system of official registration of church buildings and clergy). Near the end of the edict, almost as an afterthought, the emperor added, “We have ordered more than 2,000 men of the Nestorian and Mazdean religions to return to lay life and to cease polluting the customs of China.”

This was a severe enough blow to Buddhism to check its growth for some time, although it made a comeback fairly quickly. It seems to have been a truly disastrous event for the Christians, and as a matter of fact for all other foreign religions as well, except Islam. We do not know the health of the overall Christian church in China as of 845, although it must have had several monasteries in order to have so many monks laicized. But apparently it was moribund by the end of the dynasty in 907. Snippets of sources, a handful of scattered references, in the tenth century indicate that no Christians were left in China.

There is not full agreement on the most important cause of the decline and disappearance of Tang Christianity. Some theologically oriented scholars stress the alleged amalgamation, even syncretism, between Christian dogma
and Daoism or even Buddhism, and blame this for Christianity’s loss of doctrinal integrity and its fading from the scene. Some stress the change in context, that is, the loss of the openness of Chinese society and the imperial court which had characterized the cosmopolitan seventh century. Others point out a related factor: there is very little evidence anywhere in the sparse documentation on the Nestorians that ethnic Chinese became converts or monks. In fact the evidence, such as it is, indicates that virtually all of the clergy and converts were foreign, both Persian and several other identities. Only a handful of Christians could have conceivably been Han Chinese. Thus we are probably justified in judging Nestorian Christianity in Tang China to have been a marginal religion, not central to the processes of Chinese history and society. Yet what is most noteworthy and portentous for the future, perhaps, despite the relative paucity of documentation, is the alacrity with which the Christian faith took on distinct Chinese characteristics, as seen in the cross-fertilization of Daoism and Christianity in some of the early scriptures and liturgical pieces which have survived. This feature of Christianity in China, the process of cross-cultural movement and the simultaneous replication and transformation of the faith in a new cultural setting, is one to which we will frequently return.

Christians and Mongols (Thirteenth to Fourteenth Centuries)

Just as the “pax Romana” during the first two centuries imposed sufficient security on the Mediterranean basin for the apostles to make missionary journeys far and wide, the “pax mongolica” imposed by the Mongols made possible the first direct European Christian contacts with China. But when the European friars who were the first emissaries of the Western church arrived among the Mongols a few decades before the 1271 Mongol conquest of all of China, they discovered many Nestorian Christians among them, including among the Mongol elite and their tribal allies. This is a chapter of China’s Christian history that is often overlooked or given short shrift. We will try concisely to do it justice here.¹⁴

Nestorian Christianity remained prevalent in its core area of Persia, and many Persian Christian merchants plied the trade routes of central Asia, where they had considerable contact with a Turko-Mongolian tribe called the Kerait. In the early twelfth century the Kerait, who numbered about 200,000, began to convert to Nestorian Christianity, and by the thirteenth century were virtually entirely Christian. Other tribes, such as the Ongut, the Naiman, the Merkit, and others, converted in smaller numbers. In the late 1100s the Christian Kerait were an early ally of the Mongol subclan which produced Genghis (or Chinggis) Khan (1162–1227) as its leader. When Genghis Khan began to amalgamate the Mongol tribes into the greatest
fighting machine the world had ever seen, he took many of his leaders and officials from the Kerait. Despite a falling-out with the Kerait chief, which cost the latter his life, Genghis took three daughters of the Kerait royal family as wives – one each for himself, his oldest son Jochi, and his fourth son Tolui. This wife of the fourth son, Sorkaktani-beki (or Sorghaghtani), a Kerait Christian princess, became the mother of three emperors: a Great Khan of the Mongols, an emperor (ilkhân) of Persia, and the founding emperor of the Yuan dynasty in China, Khubilai (1216–1294).

At the halfway point of the thirteenth century, as Pope Innocent IV (1243–1254) and other strategists of Western Christendom surveyed the world which confronted them, they were concerned about both the Moslem occupation of the Holy Land and the memory of Europe’s recent (1230s) providential escape from being ravaged by the fearsome Mongol war juggernaut. Thus for strategic reasons of realpolitik the Vatican wished to make contact with the Mongol rulers in order to avoid future hostilities and to explore forming an alliance which could oust the Islamic defilers of Jerusalem and the Holy land. There was also an authentic religious motivation at work. In recent decades two new missionary-minded orders had been founded, the Dominicans and the Franciscans, Why not send missionaries from among these enthusiastic priests to try to convert the Mongols to Christianity in addition to the politico-strategic purpose?

Accordingly, between 1245 and 1253 Innocent IV commissioned two different Franciscan-led diplomatic-religious missions to the Mongols. Both friars made it to Qaraqorum (Karakorum), the Mongol capital before it was moved to China proper. And both returned to Europe after two years, each writing a description of what he had seen and experienced, even though the hope of achieving an alliance with the Mongols had evaporated and there was no success in converting them to Christianity. The friars also alerted the European world to the success and prominence of the Nestorian communities among the members of the Mongol coalition. There were no more Christian emissaries sent by Rome until the 1290s, by which time the forces of Khubilai Khan had defeated the last Song Dynasty resistance, destroyed the old regime, and in 1271 set up a new dynasty, the Yuan, ruling all of China. Several years before that, Khubilai had already moved the Yuan capital from Qaraqorum to Khanbaliq (also called Dadu), the site of today’s Beijing. Thus until 1293 the Nestorians, still largely non-Chinese, maintained a monopoly on the institutional Christian religious presence in China. Indeed, there is scattered documentary and archaeological evidence (tombstones, tablets with inscriptions and images) that there were small groups of Han Chinese converts among the Nestorians, although the preponderance of the members of these Christian communities remained non-Chinese.

It is just at this juncture of the Christian story in China that we should acknowledge the story of the Polo brothers and Marco Polo’s famous
Description of the World (published circa 1298). They are representative of the presence of several Italian traders, Roman Christians, in Yuan China. The Venetian brothers Niccolo and Maffeo Polo left Venice about 1252, and they managed to make it to Khanbaliq in 1265, where they had at least one audience with Khubilai. After a return to Europe, they set out on their second voyage in 1271, accompanied by Niccolo’s son Marco (1254–1324/5). They reached Khubilai’s summer capital Shangdu in 1275, and then remained in China for the next 16 years, apparently in the employ of Khubilai and the dynastic government. Only in 1291 were they given permission to leave China, accompanying a mission to the Khanate in Persia. They left the rest of their traveling companions at Hormuz, and were back in Venice in 1295. Marco’s Description of the World has unique and valuable information on the distribution of Nestorian Christians in Yuan China.

There were other Italian merchants, who were residents in several cities, and who were sometimes helpful to the Roman Catholic missions which existed in a handful of places in Yuan China. The first papal envoy since the 1250s, Friar Giovanni da Montecorvino, was accompanied by an Italian merchant from Venice, Pietro de Lucalongo, arriving at Quanzhou on the southeast coast and coming to Khanbaliq in 1293 via the Grand Canal. De Lucalongo also a few years later bought for Friar Giovanni a piece of land in the capital on which to build a church. Italians in other cities assisted the small number of Catholic missionaries in various ways.

Del Carpini and van Rubroek had observed the established Nestorian presence in the Mongol capital of Qaraqorum in the 1240s and 1250s, but did not stay long enough to get into competition with the Nestorian hierarchy. Giovanni da Montecorvino, however, had considerable success, so much so that it prompted the Roman Church to send several more missionaries, a few Dominicans as well as Franciscans, to China. The result was direct competition between Catholics and Nestorian Christians. Montecorvino claimed as many as six thousand baptisms by about 1305. One group was from the Nestorian Ongut tribe, whose chief (whom the missionaries called Prince George) converted with many of his fellow tribesmen. Several thousand Armenian Christians and Byzantine Alans in the capital city also came into the Catholic fold, partly because they had no clergy of their own nearby and they were not permitted in the Nestorian churches without converting. As far as we can tell, Montecorvino, who was consecrated archbishop of Khanbaliq in 1313 by newly arrived priests bringing instructions from the Holy See, was a dedicated and enthusiastic representative of the Franciscans, and preached and evangelized with perseverance, so much so that he sparked active and voluble opposition, even threats, from the Nestorians. Tension and conflict between Catholics and Nestorians were frequent in these circumstances.

From the 1320s until the end of the dynasty in 1368, both varieties of Christianity persevered, but without signal success. In addition to two
churches in the capital, a few Catholic missionaries and as many as three churches were present in the port city of Quanzhou, Fujian Province, and Hangzhou and Yangzhou, for a time had Franciscan residences. After Montecorvino’s death in 1330, instability in the empire, and uncertainties of transport in sending more missionaries, slowed the Catholic efforts, and by the 1350s virtually all of the European Catholic priests were gone.

What of an overall verdict on Christianity in Mongol times? We know more about its presence and nature than we do about Christianity in the last part of the Tang, but that is still not a great deal. We do know that Nestorianism was sufficiently successful along the Silk Road that the Patriarchy in Baghdad established several metropolitan provinces on the way to China, two of them, including Khanbaliq, in China proper. Almost nothing concerning Christianity appears in Chinese sources of the Yuan. There is not even a specific Chinese language term for Christianity, Nestorian or Catholic. There is also very little evidence of interaction between either Catholics or Nestorians with Buddhism and Daoism. Over the time of the century from the 1240s to the 1340s, there were only a handful of clues: a Buddhist-Christian “debate” in which Willem van Rubroek participated in May 1254; conflict in 1304 between Nestorians in Jiangnan (lower Yangzi R. delta) and the local Daoist clergy whom the Christians were evangelizing; and the restoration of two Nestorian monasteries to the Buddhists in 1311. It seems that there was more trouble between Montecorvino and the Nestorians in Khanbaliq over his alleged stealing of Nestorian sheep than occurred between either version of Christianity and native Chinese religions. One inference that may be drawn from this is that none of the Chinese religious traditions saw Christianity as a religious or ideological threat.

Thus we must conclude that, much as in the case of the Tang Nestorians, in the Mongol period, despite the Roman church joining the Church of the East in missionary work in China, the elements of Christianity present seem to have been so closely tied to the foreign presence that there was almost no influence on indigenous persons and institutions. Even though the Franciscans, for example Montecorvino, preached to the Chinese and wanted to convert them, there is no evidence that any responded in verifiable numbers, at least not in sources that are at present available.

What became of Christianity in China from the mid fourteenth century? Ming dynasty sources have no reference whatsoever to Yuan Christians’ fate. The demise of the Yuan dynasty in 1368 did not necessarily have to entail an end to the faith in China, but it created severe restrictions on missionaries. Their primary source of protection and funding was the Mongol ruling clan and the foreign merchants, most of whom retreated north with the Mongols; or, if they stayed, they were expelled by the somewhat xenophobic politics of the new Ming. Still, the establishment of a new dynasty alone, however xenophobic, cannot account fully for the decline of the missions