

THE LUMINOUS TEACHING STONE OF CHINA: The Stone Itself, Part 1: Introduction



The Monument at
Peilin

In the year 781 of the Christian era, a monument was erected in the western suburb of the Chinese capital at Ch'ang-an to commemorate the mission of the ancient Church of the East to the great T'ang dynasty. With it begins the indisputable (accessible) history of Christians in China. (See footnote 1) The stone itself is a single slab of hard, grey limestone, nine feet in height, between three and four feet in width, tapering toward the top, and nearly one foot in thickness. The weight is rather more than two tons. Its inscription is written in both Chinese characters and a form of Syriac that, like the Chinese, is written vertically and from right to left. The stone is known as the "Luminous Teaching Monument" (*ching-chiao pei*) to the Chinese, who style it a "grand tablet" (*feng pei*), a term commonly and almost technically applied to tombstones.

The nominal purpose of the monument is to praise the emperors under whom the East Asian Church had flourished. Nine large Chinese characters arranged in three rows form the titular heading of the stone read:



Monument headstone

A MONUMENT COMMEMORATING THE PROPAGATION OF THE TA'CHIN
LUMINOUS TEACHING IN THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

The verses of an ode and a long prose preface occupy the stone's face. (See footnote 2) Both the ode and the preface were composed by a Persian father of the Church (named Ching-ching in Chinese and Adam in Syriac) who resided at the monastery at Ch'ang-an. (See Supplement 1)

The narrative preface is arranged in eighteen paragraphs. The six paragraphs of the first part briefly outline the Teaching and the practices of its ministers. The first paragraph proclaims at once the existence of the True God, Elohim. The second introduces the etheric processes of creation leading to the formation of man. In the third, the ethereal theme digresses into a description of the Fall of Man and the subsequent degeneration of his descendants. God intercedes for man in the fourth paragraph: A Messiah announced by Angels appears in human guise, and the Persians are given knowledge of his birth in the land of Ta-ch'in by means of a star. The

same paragraph sets forth the works by which the human Messiah brings the ancient law to completion. The theme of salvation thereby passes from the Messiah to his ministers and their customs. Here the doctrinal portion of the inscription changes into the historical narrative. A transition paragraph relates the difficulties of naming the true, unchanging System called the "Luminous Religion."

The next eleven paragraphs tell the story of the Teaching's entrance into China and the patronage which the emperors of China extended to it for nearly 150 years. In the space of the first four paragraphs of the history, the missionary Rabban A-lo-pen arrives (A.D. 635), is favorably received, and conducts his first interviews with Emperor T'ai-tsung. The result of these initial meetings is the issuance of an imperial edict that authorizes the propagation of the new doctrines throughout the empire and the building of the first monastery (A.D. 638). This section closes with evidence of the continued favor shown to A-lo-pen by T'ai-tsung's son, Kao-tsung. The seven following paragraphs trace the changing fortune of the Luminous Teaching after its establishment until the monument is raised: the disorderly years (A.D. 688-699) when audacious Buddhists influenced the usurping Empress Wu and raised their voices against the Luminous Teaching in the province of her Eastern Capital; the year of slander and ridicule in the Western Capital (A.D. 712) (See footnote 3) and the restoration of the Teaching under eminent monks; the granting of imperial protection (A.D. 742); the auspicious arrival of the priest Chi-ho from the West to reinforce the mission; the establishment of the religion under state sponsorship; the rebuilding of the monasteries; and the imperial favors and meritorious deeds of the most recent emperors. The final paragraph of the historical narrative, the seventeenth, describes the titles, virtues, and honorable imperial service of the priest I-ssu, the great benefactor of the Church. A line of the Syriac below the Chinese inscription identifies this same man under his Turkic name as the donor of the

monument, Iazed-buzid. (See Supplement 2) The eighteenth paragraph is a short transition leading directly into the ode.

The ode, composed in ancient style, is a eulogy to the five emperors who sponsored the Church of the East from the time of its first mission under Rabban A-lo-pen to the time of the erection of the monument (A.D. 781). In eight stanzas it covers the same ground as the long historical narrative that precedes it. (See Supplement 3) The inscription ends with the date the monument was raised (first, according to the Chinese calendar and then, in both Chinese and Syriac, by mention of the ruling patriarch of the time) and with identification of the calligrapher who wrote it: Lu Hsiu-yen. (See Supplement 4)

At the foot of the stone, on the front face below the inscription, is a list of credits made partly in Syriac and partly in Chinese. The date, here given according to the calendar of the Greeks, is followed by the names of several individuals involved with the monument: the donor, his son, presbyters, church heads, and supervisors at the raising of the stone. The names of seventy monks, most with Syriac-Chinese equivalents, are catalogued in rows along the narrow edges of the stone. The back of the monument is innocent of inscription.

The symbols cut into the crown of the stone, like the Syriac words at the foot of the inscription, are traced with a hand that is graceful but much less certain and positive than the young hand of Lu. The design of the figurehead adopted by the ancient churchmen is called by Professor P.Y. Saeki (See Supplement 5) "a Hindu idea that had become thoroughly Buddhistic": an immense pearl held between two monstrous creatures with the bodies of fish coiled into the shape of snakes. (See Supplement 6) For all his comprehension, Professor Saeki fails to explain the obvious resemblance of the "pearl" to the Sun of Spirit and the significance of this

mythologem to the early Christians, for whom the pearl also represented the latent spiritual nature of man. Neither does he mention the occurrence of similar dragon figures in the Pistis Sophia (See Supplement 7) and The Acts of Thomas. (See Supplement 8)



Incised scene beneath the pearl in the center of the headpiece

Beneath the pearl in the center of the headpiece – framed on either side by sprigs of either myrtle or lily (the former a regular Buddhistic emblem, the latter a familiar Christian symbol) – is the apex of a triangle that forms a canopy over a significant incised scene: The Flying Cloud of Chinese Muslims and Taoists rising out of the Buddhist Lotus Flower to support the Cross of the Apostle Thomas, ignited from above. (See Supplement 9) It is the presence of this form of the cross that gives the monument its special appeal. Its presence signals that the inscription may hold trace elements of the one True Teaching (a teaching that is itself timeless and unchanging but is lost and then revealed cyclically again and again at various times and in various places), some evidence that a fragment of the Teaching still remained even into the eighth century of the Common Era.

It is said that the cross on the stone is no longer very clear and must be searched for before it can be found. One authority suggests that its form may be a copy from memory of the Roman papal cross used up until the sixth century when it was discarded. The Portuguese missionary Alvarez Semedo saw it in

the seventeenth century as “a beautiful cross, whose ends, finishing in fleurs de lys, resembles that carved upon the tomb of the Apostle St. Thomas in the city of Meliapor.” (See Supplement 10)

From the information preserved in the Acts of John, we know that this form of the cross signifies not the wooden cross of crucifixion but the Cross of Light. (See Supplement 11) The descendants of the ancient Church of the East, still in existence but split and factioned among themselves, retain the same form of the cross as their sign. This cross, in silhouette, or shadow, form, has remained to our own time in the form familiar to us as the Greek, or Eastern Orthodox, cross.

With rectified proportions and symmetry, the image of this same cross was revealed to the Second Advent Church, whose members know it also as the Cross of Enlightenment, the sign of God’s Image and Word in the Spiritual Sun, the Solar Cross, the representation of the Golden Flower, the Body of Light, the cross whose twelve sun symbols represent the twelve revealed religions of man and their cycles, the twelve great teachers, the twelve great nations, the twelve apostles, and the twelve signs of the zodiac – the cross whose numbers multiplied among themselves represent the sacred numbers of The Church. This cross was known and used in China by the Apostle Thomas, who had come to China to remind the people that he was part of the prophecy of the sages, to remind them that the Great Sun Teaching was part of their heritage and was held in their genes but had been forgotten. (See Supplement 12)

Robert G. Petrovich

1989, 2010

FOOTNOTES

(1) The inscription carved into its stone is one of the nine

early Christian documents written in Chinese that have so far been uncovered in China. All of them have been placed within the context of the history related through the inscription by the twentieth-century sinologist Dr. P.Y. Saeki. He identified the inscription and four of the others as creations of the early seventh century and called them "Bishop A-lo-pen's documents."

A-lo-pen (described in paragraphs seven and eight of the inscription) is the Persian missionary met by a Chinese guard of honor in the western suburb of Ch'ang-an in A.D. 635 and conducted to the palace, where he was interviewed by the emperor. Over the next three years, Rabban A-lo-pen translated in the imperial library at least one of the treatises attributed to him for the emperor's personal investigation of "The Way." Three years later, in 638, the emperor gave special orders for the propagation of the Teaching.

The other four documents Dr. Saeki attributed to Bishop Chieh, a missionary who (according to paragraph eleven of the inscription) came to Ch'ang-an with eminent priests and noblemen from the "Golden Region" shortly after the Christian teaching was slandered by inferior Taoist scholars from western Hao in A.D. 712.

In addition, two ancient Syriac manuscripts have been discovered: one during the 1930s in a building attached to the imperial palace, the other in 1908 at the oasis city of Turfan in the northern desert of Central Asia.

(2) The Chinese considered the prose foreword to a poem to be fully as important as the poem it prefaced. Often the author used his preface to create allusions to Chinese cosmogony and to convey secret thoughts through the veil of conventional phrasing.

(3) The ode, like the preface, passes from A.D. 683, the end of Emperor Kao-tsung's reign, to the reign of Emperor Hsuan-

tsung, beginning in A.D. 712. While the eleventh paragraph of the preface gives some account of the period of disorder during the Sheng-li years, this same period in the ode is marked only by the space between the third and fourth stanzas, the stanzas that praise the emperors Kao-tsung (reign A.D. 650–683) and Hsuan-tsung (reign A.D. 712–755).

Read [THE LUMINOUS TEACHING STONE OF CHINA: The Stone Itself, Part 1: Supplements](#)

Read <THE LUMINOUS TEACHING STONE OF CHINA: The Stone Itself, Part 2: Discovery>