

# Nestorian Inscriptions in Syriac Script Found on Silk Road in China

## 中国丝绸之路上发现的叙利亚文景教碑铭（英文）

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**摘要:** 本文对中国丝绸之路上的霍城、吐鲁番、敦煌、黑城、鄂尔多斯、百灵庙、赤峰、扬州和泉州等地发现的元代叙利亚文景教墓碑铭文及其内容作了分析和说明。

**关键词:** 元代 叙利亚文 突厥语 景教

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In 1625, about 377 years before, in the temple of Zongren 宗仁 of Zhouzhi 周至 county in the west of Xi'an city, a famous Sino-Syriac bilingual Nestorian Inscription of *Xi-an-fu* (or *Si-Ngan-fou*) 大秦景教流行中国碑 which was erected in 781, was found. The finding shocked the whole country and the world. Nestorianism, as a branch of Christianity in the Middle Ages, also was called *Ārkägün* in Turkic and Mongolian (also was called *Ye-li-ke-wen* in Chinese sources), entered China via Persia and Central Asia on Silk Road in the seventh century A.D. There are a number of publications on this inscription published by different scholars in different countries before. Today I do not want to spend time for this inscription but prefer to discuss other inscriptions which can be dated during 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries found on land route, steppe route and Maritime route of Silk Roads in China from western Almalīq (the modern name is Huocheng), Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region to eastern Yanzhou, Jiangsu Province, and from Northern Bailingmiao, Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region to South-eastern Quanzhou, Fujian Province. I will also simply review some Nestorian manuscripts and some Nestorian relics found in China.

During 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were at least 50 Nestorian inscriptions in Syriac or Uighur language or Syria-Uighur bilingual had been found from Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Fujian Province and Zhejiang Province. The almost all inscriptions were written down in Syriac script during the Mongolian period (13<sup>th</sup> ~ 14<sup>th</sup> centuries). Those groups of inscriptions almost have not been edited and studied very well up till now since the most inscriptions in special Syriac Nestorian script but in Uighur language together with some Syriac words can not easily be read and understand.

**Almalīq:** There is a ruined city was called Almalīq in Huocheng County, Xinjiang. There were eight Nestorian inscriptions with the Cross and the lotus found from Almalīq during 1950s to 1980s. One inscription in Syriac can be translated: "He died and left the world. The Christian Georges in the year of 1677 (=1365 A.D., or 1674(=1366 A.D.).

**Turfan:** The great majority of the Christian manuscripts of the Turfan collection derive from a single site, near Bulayiq, north of Turfan. The second and third German Turfan expeditions unearthed a whole library of fragmentary manuscripts from Bulayiq and also from Gaochang (Chocho), Astana, Kulutka and Tuyuq. The most of Nestorian fragments in

Sogdian, Syriac and Uighur scripts which now preserved in Berlin, Germany

**Dunhuang:** There are some new Christian fragments in Syriac script found in Dunhuang. About in 1990, a leaf of fragment of manuscript in Syriac script unearthed from Dunhuang grottoes, six lines scripts in black and red ink both on *recto* and *verso*, the content of *recto* is from *The Bible*, the letter of Paul to the church in Galatia and to the church at Corinth. This paragraph originally was used for Christians of East Syria to pray in the Saturday evening before Jesus Christ resurrection. There is a same content manuscript found in Berlin Turfan collections but in Syro-Sogdian bilingual fragment. In 1996, a manuscript in Syriac scripts was found in northern region of Dunhuang grottos. There are four columns of Syriac script on the *recto* and *verso* of one leaf of paper, 15 lines of Syriac script in every column, and the first column is Syro-Uighur bilingual document, there are 16 lines of Uighur script remained. The content of Syriac part is correspondent to the Syriac *Psalm* which was used by the Apostle for reciting in different days for Christians in church. The Uighur part is a Buddhist poem. The two manuscripts above can be dated in 14<sup>th</sup> century.

We can know from the two documents mentioned above that there is a group of Christian who spoken Syriac or Syriac-Uighur bilingual in the Church in Dunhuang between 13<sup>th</sup> ~14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some Nestorian documents in Chinese, Sogdian and Uighur were found in Dunhuang during the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Karahoto:** There were at least five leaves (ten faces) of Syriac manuscripts with Tangut relics found in the ruined city of Karahoto, Xiringol League, in the west of Inner Mongolia during 1984 and 1985.

**Bailingmiao:** There are three Nestorian ruined sites in Bailingmiao, the United Leagues of Darhan Momingan in north of Inner Mongolia, those are: Olun-sum, Muhur Sopurgha and Biqigtu Horai. About 30 tomb tablets with inscriptions found in Bailingmiao in 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Graveyard of Wangmuliang:** D. Martin discovered the famous *Tablet on the Spiritual Way of Lord Yeh-lü* (《耶律公神道碑》) in Chinese and seven tomb top stones with one line Syriac inscription in the graveyard of Wangmuling where locates about six kilometers west of the League of Siziwang. The archaeologists of Inner Mongolia investigated twenty-one tombs and found some Nestorian relics in 1973. There were seventeen tombstones found in this graveyard, among them there are twelve stones with Syriac inscription.

**White Tour in Huhhot:** White tour (*bai-ta*) which is 43 meters high and locates 20 kilometers east of Huhhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia, was built in Liao Dynasty. There were more than three hundred inscriptions in Chinese, Uighur, Pags-pa, Mongolian and Syriac etc. scripts on the wall of inside of the tour. There are at least five inscriptions in Syriac script and Uighur language found here, one of them can be read *tāḥri qutuq kālson. Amen!* "May God's happiness to come. Amen!" I believe that those inscriptions in Syriac and Uighur scripts should be written down by Uighur in Yuan Dynasty.

**Ordos:** An English man F. A. Nixon collected about more than thousand bronze seals-amulets with the Cross or doves from Baotou and around region, Inner Mongolia during he worked as director of post office in Peking and Qingdao in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, and now they were preserved in Feng Pingshan Museum at Hong Kong University. I have seen about forty the same bronze seals-amulets in the Museum of Dongsheng and also a large number of bronze seals-amulets in some private collections

during I was visiting Dongsheng city in the winter of 1999. There are some common characteristics of bronze seals-amulets between Ordos and eastern Iran and Central Asia.

**Chifeng:** Chifeng city locates the east of Inner Mongolia and not far from Anshan city, Liaoning Province. A rectangle beautiful big tomb break, which with the Cross and the lotus on the middle of the break, there is one line of Syriac inscription both on the left and right sides above the transverse of the Cross, there are four lines of Uighur inscriptions both on the left and right sides under the transverse of the Cross, found in a mountain slope in the Chengzi township of Chifeng city, , after a heavy rain in 1983 or 1984. The Syriac inscription can be read “Look ye unto it and hope in it”(came from *Psalms* of Syriac version, 34 v. 5[6]), the same inscription is also seen on the square stones with the Cross and potted flowers found in a ruined Nestorian temple of Fangshan. The Uighur inscription marks the grave of a certain Yawnan or Jonas, head of the local government and commander of auxiliary troops, who died in 1253 at the age of 71. He belonged most like to Turkic Uighur or Öngüt tribe.

**Peking:** A Nestorian tombstone beautifully carved with crosses and honey-suckle was found in destroyed temple known by popular name of Shi-fang-yuan 十方院, western gate of Guang-an-men of Peking in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, later it was moved to Catholic University in Peking, but now its whereabouts unknown. We see a big cross on the face and several smaller crosses in both sides of the stone. It is 94 cm high and 29 cm broad and 24 cm thick. Two square hollow stones carved with the Cross and potted flowers used for a base of stone pillar in the wall found in a ruined cross temple in Fangshan, some 40 kilometers south of Peking, and now preserved in Nanjing Museum. The two stones are in the almost same size, 68.5 cm high and 58.5 cm broad and 58 cm thick, originally they were put connectedly, in 117 cm broad, the two faces with crosses were on the two end faces and the faces with potted flowers connected on the front face. There are two lines of Syriac inscription on one of a pair of crosses which above the lotus or lotus with cloud. There were two Chinese tablets and some other Nestorian relics found in Fangshan. About 16 pages of Syriac manuscripts were found at the upper storey of the Wu-men (Horse Gate) of Imperial Palace in Peking. Those manuscripts which written during Yuan Dynasty are a portion of the *Nestorian Hymns Before and After* in the Nestorian Service Book, used on Sunday throughout the year.

**Yangzhou:** A Nestorian tomb tablet in Chinese-Syriac-Uighur tri-lingual in Chinese and Syriac scripts, found by a farmer in the west of Yangzhou city in November 14, 1981. The top of tablet is round and the bottom is upright. The Cross and lotus in the middle and two angles on the two sides on the top of tablet, the inscription of three lines in Chinese and twelve lines in Syriac script, among them the first line and last line are in Syriac language, another ten lines are in Uighur, on the lower part of the tablet. **The translation of Chinese inscription:** “In the Year Ding-si, the fourth year of Yanyou, the third month, on the ninth day, this is the tomb of Elizabeth, the wife of Xindu who is from Taydu (Peking), she died at the age of thirty-three. This tomb was engraved in the fifth month, on the sixteenth day”. **The translation of Syriac script part:** “( In Syriac) In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. (In Uighur) In the Year 1628 of the reckoning of King Alexander (= 1371A.D.), in the Turkic reckoning the snake Year, the third month, on the ninth day, the lady Elizabeth (Ališbay), consort of Yoanīs (John) Sam-ša of Taydu (Peking), in her thirty-third year carried out the command of God and laid aside life. Her body was hidden inside of this tomb. May her soul take hometown place eternally together with the pure

ladies Sarah (the wife of Abraham), Rebekka (the wife of Issak) and Rahel (the wife of Jakob) in the paradise. May her fame be ever new and may her name go down to posterity. (Syriac) Amen, yea, and Amen!"

**Quanzhou (or Zaiton):** Wu Wenliang discovered about more than thirty Nestorian tombstones, more than eighty Islam tombstones, several Manichean carved stones and a lot of stone relics of Indian Brahma Religion in Quanzhou from 1927 to 1957. But in 1930s, about 160 tombstones were broken or used for other building materials in a stone factory in the eastern Quanzhou according to Wu Wenliang's report. There are about ten tombstones with Syriac script, four tablets with 'Pags-pa script and one tablet with Uighur script among the group of Nestorian relics carved the Cross, lotus or the figures of angels or clouds. There were also several Nestorian tombstones found in Quanzhou in 1980s. One tombstone with the Cross and eleven lines of inscription was found in 1943, **the inscription can be translated:** "(Syriac) In the name of the Father, the Son, and the holy Spirit. (Uighur) In the Year 1613 of the reckoning of King Alexander (= 1301A.D.), in the Tabghach (Chinese) reckoning the ox Year, the tenth month, on the twenty-sixth day, Ustigh Tasqan, the son of Tuyhmiš Ata Ār of Qochu (Gaochang 高昌) city, in the age of sixty-seven, he came to the city of Zaytun, he carried out the command of God. May his soul take rest in the paradise! Amen!"

One of Syria-Uighur-Chinese tri-lingual inscriptions was found in 1956. There are two lines in Syriac script and two lines in Chinese, the contents of both Syriac script and Chinese inscriptions are almost same.

### **A Short Conclusion**

The discoveries of so many Nestorian tombstones and inscriptions in Syriac script in China enriched our knowledge of Christian in China and Central Asia especially deepened our understanding for the Nestorianism in the minorities who spoke Turkic or Syriac in China in Yuan dynasty. I believe that the most of inscriptions should firstly belong to the group of Uighur, including Öngüt; secondly belong to the small group of people who spoke Syriac or Syria-Turkic bilingual. The Nestorians in China had close relationship with the churches in the west and Central Asia during 13<sup>th</sup> ~ 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Those carved stones were recorded the mixed civilization between the east and the west, there are not only some style of Greek and Syria but also strong characteristics of Chinese traditional culture seen from the remains of ancestors. We can say that cultural blending is a universal way from tradition to civilization. Those inscriptions are very value to academic studies of cultural exchange between East and West via the Silk Road. Silk Road is the civilization road bridging east and west.

**Abstract :** This article has analyzing and introducing the Nestorian Inscriptions in Syriac Script found in Almaliq, Turpan, Dunhuang, Khara-hoto, Ordos, Bailingmiao, Chifeng, Yangzhou and Quanzhou on the Silk Road in China.

**Key Words:** Yuan Dynasty; Syriac script; Nestorianism; Turkic language.

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