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Lotus and Swastika in Assyrian Church in China: Buddhist Legacy for Aryan Heritage?

CHAN KIM-KWONG

Abstract

The Assyrian branch of Christianity (Jin Jiao 景教) was introduced to China from the seventh century (the Tang Dynasty). Since then, Assyrian missionaries appeared to utilize seemingly Buddhist symbols, such as lotus, to communicate this new faith to the Chinese audience. Many scholars thought that the lotus symbol used by Assyrian Christians in China suggested a close link between Buddhist expressions and Assyrian Christian expressions in China, as these two faiths seemed to have interacted closely with each other. Furthermore, such closeness between Assyrian Christianity and Buddhism might have even caused the downfall of Assyrian Christianity in China as the government later suppressed Buddhism. Assyrian Christianity had declined in China since the ninth century and did not reappear in strength until the beginning of the Yuan Dynasty in the twelfth century, as many of the Mongols were Christians of the Assyrian Church. These Christians in the Yuan Dynasty usually carried a bronze cross (commonly yet wrongly referred to as Nestorian cross) and many of these crosses contained a swastika symbol. Based on the suggested Buddhist-Christian relation in the Tang Dynasty, scholars interpreted that the swastika design in the Nestorian cross further evidenced the

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continual close relation between Assyrian Christians and Buddhists just as they had done several hundred years ago with the lotus symbol. The use of lotus and swastika by Assyrian Christians in China became a strong evidence to support such an hypothesis. However, this paper suggests that the lotus and swastika found in the Assyrian Christian artefacts in China might be a legacy of Aryan tradition carried over by the Persians from Central Asia, rather than syncretistic integration with Buddhism in China. Such hypothesis suggests that there may be far less exchange between Assyrian Christianity and Buddhism in China than scholars wished to acknowledge.

Assyrian Christianity appeared in China perhaps as early as AD 455 in the Persian embassy in Datung (大同 Datong), the capital of the Wei 魏 Dynasty.[1] In AD 635 the emperor of the Tang Dynasty officially received Assyrian missionaries from Persia in the capital, Xi'an 西安. From the fifth till the seventh century, the Assyrian Church was for most of the time situated in Persia under the Sassanid Dynasty—the height of pre-Islamic Persian civilization which ruled over the vast land between Europe and Asia (picture 1). During the Sassanid Dynasty, Zoroastrianism was the state religion and other religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism also flourished in the empire. There were three main groups of Christians: the Assyrian Church which used neo-Aramaic language (Syriac)—at time conveniently yet incorrectly referred to as the Nestorian Church,[2] the Jacobites (now known as the Syriac Orthodox Church),[3] and the Armenians who were Christianized at AD 3 and subjected to Persian rule during the Sassanid Period. The Assyrian Church (now known as the Assyrian Church of

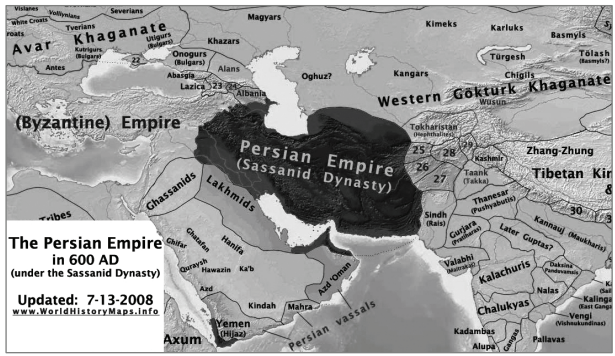
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[1] Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 290.

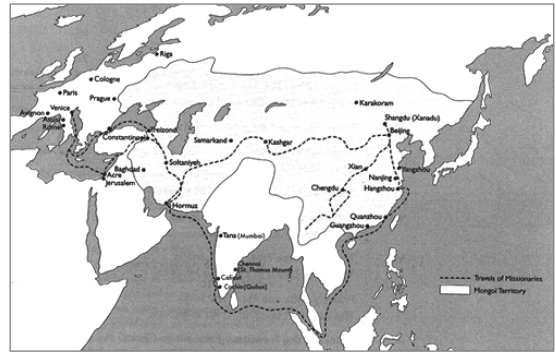
[2] Nestorius and his followers had taken refuge in Persia from Syria and established the Syriac speaking Assyrian Church in the fifth century. They never referred to themselves as the Nestorian Church. The Latin Rite churches called the Assyrian Church "the Nestorian Church" as they regarded this church as heretical following the teaching of Nestorius. The Nestorian controversy was more political than theological in nature. It is improper to call the Assyrian Church "the Nestorian Church" for such labelling is both inaccurate and discriminatory, suggesting that the Assyrian Church was heretical. Although most of the literature on the Assyrian Church in China uses "the Nestorian Church," this article uses the term "the Assyrian Church in China" as much as possible to reflect the historical reality. However, there are places in this article where the term "Nestorian" is retained, such as "the Nestorian Stele" for the sake of convenience.

[3] There are currently more than 12 branches of Syriac Christian groups. For description, see "Syriac Christianity," in the website of Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syriac_Christianity.

the East) based in Ctesiphon,[4] the capital of the Sassanid Empire, sent missionaries eastwards through the Silk Road all the way to China and Japan. Those who went through the sea route stopped at Southern India and their converts founded the present Mar Thoma Church, which still uses the Syriac language today (picture 2). By AD 823, the Church of the East, based in Mesopotamia, had a missionary presence that encompassed India, China, Turkestan, Yemen, and around the Caspian Sea. Travelling the same paths as merchants and mariners, they claimed tens of millions of adherents in 230 dioceses with 27 metropolitans.[5]



Picture 1. The Persian Empire, Sassanid Dynasty, AD 600.[6]



Picture 2. Travels of missionaries and Mongol territory.[7]

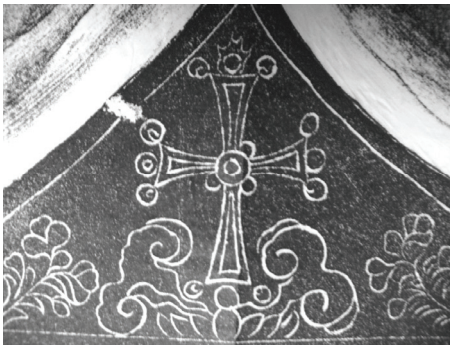
[4] Now it is a ruin 35 kilometres south of Baghdad, Iraq. It was considered one of the largest cities in the ancient world.

[5] Ken Parry, "The Lotus & the Cross: East-West Cultural Exchange along the Silk Road," an exhibition at the Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History of The University of San Francisco, 2007, http://www.usfca.edu/ricci/events/lotusandcross/lotusandcross1.htm.

[6] See the website of World History Maps, Talessman's Atlas, http://www.worldhistorymaps.info/images/Persia_600ad.jpg. Used by permission. Unless stated otherwise all pictures were taken by the author.

[7] See Parry, "The Lotus and the Cross: East-West Cultural Exchange along the Silk Road." Used by permission of Ken Parry, Macquarie University.

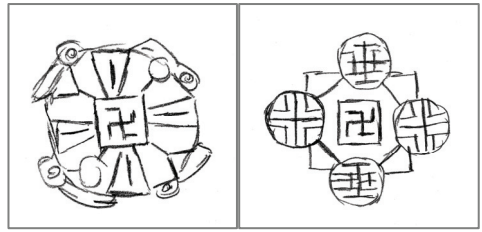
The missionaries who went to China established the Assyrian Church, at first calling it "the Persian Religion" and their church "Bosi Husi" (Persian Foreign Temple 波斯胡寺). Later the missionaries renamed it as "Jin Jiao" (the Religion of the Light).[8] This religion would have ended in obscurity had there not been the discovery of the famous Xi'an Nestorian Stele, excavated in the seventeenth century, which contained a detailed record of the beginning and development of this religion from the seventh to eighth century in China. At the top of the stele, there was a cross on the top of a lotus (picture 3). This lotus-cross later became a popular symbol of Christianity in ancient China representing the inculturation of Christianity in the Chinese religious heritage, that is, the Christian faith took up Buddhist elements as it took root in China. Such syncretic presumption resulted in various scholarly responses to Assyrian Christianity in China, ranging from condemnation of its deviating from orthodox Christian faith to appreciation of its effort in inter-faith dialogue,[9] yet all agree on the Buddhist origin of the lotus.



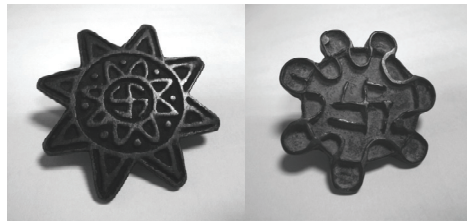
Picture 3. A cross on the top of a lotus, the Nestorian Stele. Taken by the author, 2007.

[8] Lo Hsiang-lin, *Nestorianism in the T'ang and Yuan Dynasties* (Hong Kong: The Institute of Chinese Culture, 1966), 11.

[9] For such discussions, see Lau Hua-teck, "The Cross and the Lotus," *Church and Society* 6, no. 2 (2003): 85–99. Lau had given a nice summary of the arguments of different scholars regarding the lotus and a Buddhist symbol used by the Nestorians. The arguments are about value judgment of using Buddhist symbols, yet the common consensus is that the lotus symbol comes from Buddhism. See also Lo Hsiang-lin's definitive work: *Nestorianism in the T'ang and Yuan Dynasties*.



Picture 4 and 5. Bronze cross with swastika sign[10]



Picture 6 and 7. Bronze cross with swastika sign.
Taken by the author, 2007.

In the beginning of the twelfth century, some bronze crosses with swastika sign were unearthed in Northern China (picture 4 to 7) and were later suggested as talismans wore by Assyrian Christians during the Yuan Dynasty when Mongolia ruled over Asia from the twelfth to fourteenth century. These Christians were known as "Arekhawiun," a Mongolian corruption of the Arabic "Rekhabiun" (follower of God).[11] Because of the consensus among scholars on the strong Buddhist influence over Assyrian Christianity in China in the Tang Dynasty several centuries earlier, the presence of the swastika, a popular Buddhist symbol, on the bronze cross was interpreted as further evidence of the Buddhization of Christianity in China,[12] a theory arising from a seemingly circular argument generally accepted by the academia as no new interpretation of the origin of swastika on these crosses had since risen. Scholars further suggested that there was a close relation between

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[10] Sketches drawn by the author. See "China - Mongols and the Nestorian Bronze Cross," September 19, 2003, Swastika - The Symbol of the Buddha, http://www.swastika-info.com/.

[11] Lo, *Nestorianism in the T'ang and Yuan Dynasties*, 23.

[12] For example, see P. Y. Saeki, "The Swastika Cross Badges Unearthed in Sui Yuan Province," Nestorian Cross Special Number, *Chiloo University Journal* (December 1934): 187–95. In this paper he had cited several authors with such interpretation. No new interpretation has been raised since then.

Buddhism and Christianity in China serving as a paradigm for inter-religious dialogue or religious contextualization.[13]

This paper, however, will re-examine some of the evidences supporting the thesis of strong Buddhist influence over Assyrian Christianity in China, namely the appearance of lotus on the Xi'an Nestorian Stele and the swastika found on Nestorian bronze crosses, as these two symbols, along with the usage of Buddhist vocabulary in translating Assyrian Christian texts into Chinese, laid a strong foundation for such interpretation. Since this study focuses on symbols, it will not deal with the Buddhist language used by Assyrian Christians in China. As regards the lotus and swastika symbols, it is suggested that the ones used by Assyrian Christians in China needed not be the result of a syncretic borrowing from Buddhism. Rather such usage can be attributed to the Persians, descendants of Aryan, who had these symbols as part of their cultural repertoire and would use them naturally in religious expression. What were used in China by Assyrian Christians, such as lotus and swastika, could possibly be attributed to the influence of Aryan-Persian culture than that of Buddhist culture in China. It could be a coincidence that both cultures used similar symbols as these symbols might be rather common among ancient civilizations.

1. IS THE LOTUS SYMBOL EXCLUSIVELY BUDDHIST?



In the ancient Egypt, lotus was a popular flower called "se-shen" with its hieroglyphic character. As lotus opens in the morning with the sun and closes at night, the ancient Egyptians believed that lotus symbolized formation, revival, and rebirth[14] (picture 8). It also symbolizes life after death or resurrection, as it was often found in relief of tombs. There are several types of lotus in Egypt—white, blue, and pink. The pink one (*Nelumbo nucifera*), or true lotus, was introduced to Egypt from Persia around 700 BC to 400

[13] Dale Johnson even suggests that Guanyin 觀音 of Chinese Buddhism originated from Mary of Orthodox Christianity as Buddhists also took Christian elements from Nestorian Christians in China. See Dale Johnson, "Syriac Christianity in China during the Tang Dynasty," *Syriac Orthodox Christian Digest* (August 2005): 1–19.

[14] Cebah, "The Sacred Lotus Flower," July 5, 2009, the website of Scienceray, http://scienceray.com/biology/botany/the-sacred-lotus-flower/.

BC.[15] In fact the very same type of lotus was introduced to the Indian continent in 3000 BC perhaps by the Aryans (Persians) and later became the sacred lotus in Hinduism and Buddhism.[16] It seems that lotus was found in Persia and then spread to the Hindu Valley as well as the Nile Delta.



Picture 8. Egyptian portrait of lotus[17]

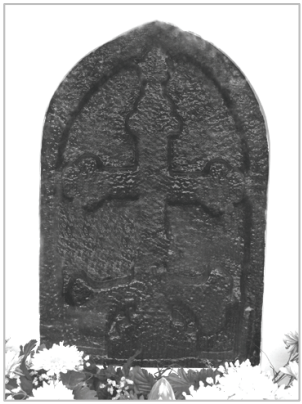
Early Christians also used lotus as a symbol of holiness and purity. As the Nestorians found refuge in Persia around the fifth century, they began to take root in the Aryan-Persian culture. It is interesting to note that the Assyrian Church in Persia had a cross placed on the top of leaves or lotus to symbolize resurrection or life (tree of life). However crosses of this design had been almost all destroyed in Persia due to Islamization. Yet many of these Persian crosses were still found in India as the Assyrian missionaries went to both India and China since the seventh century. They might have arrived at India much earlier than those who had gone to China. The Christian communities that they built in India still survive today using the very same Syriac liturgy as the ancient Assyrian Christians had since a thousand and five hundred years ago. They brought along with them the Persian cross, some of which still survive today and are venerated by believers (picture 9 to 11). The crosses in picture 9 to 11 with the inscriptions in Middle Pahlavi (Middle Persian) are dated before AD 800. These crosses are still venerated by Mar Thoma Christians in India. It is interesting to note that these ancient Christian crosses from Persia stand on leaves or a lotus, a religious symbol that is not from Buddhism. Rather it is an expression of Persian Christianity.

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[15] "Lotus (seshen)," the website of Ancient Egypt: the Mythology, http://www.egyptianmyths.net/lotus.htm.

[16] "Lotus in History," the website of The Lotus Shop, http://www.thelotusshop.com/#.

[17] Sketch drawn by the author. See Cebah, "The Sacred Lotus Flower," the section on "Ancient Egypt," July 5, 2009, the website of Scienceray, http://scienceray.com/biology/botany/the-sacred-lotus-flower/.





Left Picture 9. A bona fide symbol of ancient Indian Christianity.[18]

Right Picture 10. A Persian cross at the north altar of a church in Valiapally (Varapoly), circa AD 800–900, Kerala, India.[19]





Left Picture 11. Stone cross from the shrine of St. Thomas, Chennai (Madras), date unknown, possibly circa AD 800–900, St. Thomas Mount, Chennai Tamil Nadu, India.[20]

Right Picture 12. Cross and lotus symbol with Syriac inscription in an ancient Assyrian Christian tomb, Central Asia.[21]

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[18] Saint Thomas cross at St. Gervasis and Prothasis Church, Kothanalloor, taken by Martin Thomas Antony, see the website of NCS Network, http://nasrani.net/nggallery/page-790/album-1/gallery-1/. Used by permission. The editorial team would like to thank Mr. Antony for taking a new photo of this cross in summer 2010.

[19] See the website of the Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, The University of San Francisco, http://www.usfca.edu/ricci/events/lotusandcross. Used by permission of Ken Parry.

[20] Ibid. Used by permission of Ken Parry.

[21] See the website of Genghis Khan Exhibits and ExhibitsRex, http://www.genghiskhanexhibits.com. Used by permission of Inner Mongolia Museum.

Picture 12 is from an ancient Assyrian Christian tomb with Syriac inscription found in Central Asia. It is significant to note the lotus symbol both at the bottom and in the centre of the cross, which is a Persian legacy without any contact with Buddhism. These pictures suggest that the lotus, a religious symbol used by the Persians as well as the Egyptians long before Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, has also been a symbol for Assyrian Christians in Persia representing re-birth, life, and resurrection. It was used along with the cross to signify resurrection and salvation in Christ. Such legacy is still carried on in the Mar Thoma Christians' public display of their faith in a more vivid form of lotus-cross (picture 13).



Picture 13. Free-standing stone cross, Kuravilangad, date unknown, circa 1599, but possibly based on pre-Portuguese models, Kerala, India.[22]

It is therefore suggested that Persian Christians going to India and perhaps to China introduced this lotus-cross independent of the lotus symbol found in Buddhism or Hinduism. Even though the symbol of lotus was abundantly found in India while Persian Christian missionaries arrived at India around AD 500, there is no evidence that the Persians took any Buddhist or Hindu symbol in their Christian expression; even the liturgy had been preserved in Syraic till today. The Persian-Assyrian Christian missionaries in China came from the very same church tradition and liturgy, and tomb inscriptions dated as late as AD 1500 are still found in China. It seemed that other than some Chinese translations of hymns and catechetic materials, perhaps for the sake of

[22] See the website of the Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, The University of San Francisco, http://www.usfca.edu/ricci/events/lotusandcross. Used by permission of Ken Parry.

promoting the doctrines to the Han Chinese, the main language among the Assyrian community in China was still Syraic. Should it be the case, the lotus-cross in the Xi'an Stele may simply be a Persian Christian expression rather than a Buddhist element taken by the Nestorian missionaries to propagate Christian faith among the Chinese who were familiar with Buddhist symbols. It is suggested that the sinicization or Buddhization of Christianity in China might be overstated should the lotus found in Assyrian Christian artefacts in China be attributed to non-Buddhist, or in this case Persian-Aryan, origin. The very fact that both Persian Christians and Chinese Buddhists use lotus as a religious symbol suggests perhaps the existence in the human subconscious of a stock of symbols common to humanity to express the archetypes of human ethos in the realm of religion.

2. IS THE SWASTIKA EXCLUSIVE BUDDHIST?

Another common argument for the syncretic use of Buddhist symbol by Assyrian Christians in China is the appearance of swastika in Nestorian bronze crosses around AD 1300 to 1400 among Christians, mainly Mongols, who are also known as Arekhawiun.[23] This argument is based on the popular appearance of swastika in Chinese Buddhism and the speculation that Assyrian Christians in China used Buddhist symbols to express their faith and therefore the swastika found on those bronze crosses might originate from Buddhism.

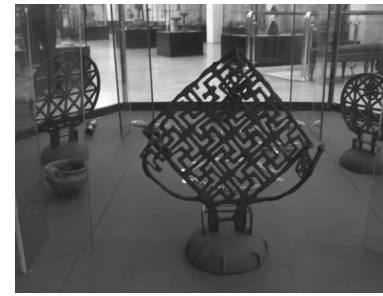
The swastika has a long history in Asia dating back from the Neolithic period. One of the earliest findings was in Southwest Iran around 5000 BC. In 3000 BC, more swastika signs were found in the Indus Valley[24] and swastika was later extensively used in Hinduism and Buddhism. Picture 14 shows a swastika found in Kakht-I-Soleiman, Iran, on a marble stone from around 4000 BC. It is probably a sign of the Aryans and later, unfortunately used by the Nazis to denote the Nazi brand of Aryanism.

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[23] Saeki, "The Swastika Cross Badges Unearthed in Sui Yuan Province," 192.

[24] "Swastika," the website of Wikipedia, http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swastika.





Left Picture 14. A swastika found on a marble stone dated around 4000 BC in Kakht-I-Soleiman, Iran. Taken by the author, 2009.

Right Picture 15. Swastika signs in Anatolia from the Chalcolithic period (3000–5500 BC), The Historical Museum of Turkey, Ankara. Taken by the author, 2007.





Left Picture 16. Religious altars in Sabratha, Libya, about 1000–1500 BC. Taken by the author, 2008.

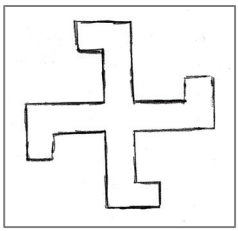
Right Picture 17. Religious altar in Cyrene, Libya, about 1500–2000 BC. Taken by the author, 2008.

Swastika signs were also found in Anatolia from the Chalcolithic period (3000–5500 BC), now displayed in the Historical Museum of Turkey, Ankara (picture 15). Picture 16 and 17 are religious altars in North Africa dated probably around 1000 to 2000 BC. It is noted that swastika was already widely used as a religious symbol denoting the sun or other life-giving forces. Furthermore, similar cross was found in the small Jingjue State 精絕國—under the influence of the Aryans from Northern India—at the Neya River 尼雅河 (now Xinjiang 新疆) around AD 100 (picture 18).

During the Christian era, the Christians called it "gammadion cross." It was a design of Christian cross among many others. In the secular world, such design was rather popular across many different cultures in

the ancient times. Picture 19 and 20 are Christian adaptations of such design as a cross. Picture 21 and 22 are designs commonly found in the Roman Empire from AD 300 to 400 which may denote no specific meaning. It seems that during the period of the Roman Empire, swastika was already a popular religious symbol and artistic design motif in the ancient world before Buddhism and Hinduism. Therefore Nestorian Christians might already have used this symbol not only in religious expression but also as a common design in daily usage other than religious connotations.







Left Picture 18. Neya (Xinjiang) of Jingjue State, AD 100.[25]
Middle Picture 19. Gammadion cross[26]
Right Picture 20. Gammadion cross design[27]





Picture 21 and 22. Design commonly found in the Roman Empire, Sbeitla, Tunisia, AD 200–300. Taken by the author, 2008. Digitally amended by the editor.

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[25] Illustration from Ding Xiaolung 丁曉侖, *Niya yizhi: Xiyu jingjue bangguo wenming de xianxian* 尼雅遺址——西域精絕邦國文明的顯現 [Neya Site: Emerging of the Civilization of the Jingjue State of the Western Regions] (Urumqi: Xinjiang Art and Photograph Press, 2006), 30.

[26] Sketch drawn by the author. See the website of "2012," http://www.aumdasabout 2012.com/svastika/2.gif.

[27] Sketch drawn by the author. See the website of Paul Hopkins ("Not so fast"), http://www.flickr.com/photos/ paul_hopkins/857873828.

As mentioned above, it was speculated that the use of swastikas on the bronze crosses unearthed in Northern China was an adaptation of Buddhism by Assyrian Christians in China. Such hypothesis was based on three basic assumptions: First, these crosses belonged to Assyrian Christians. Second, swastika was an exclusive symbol of Buddhism. Third, Assyrian Christians from Central Asia had never used swastika. Thus they might have borrowed this design from the Buddhists whom they encountered in China.

The first assumption was based on the fact that those crosses were discovered in the Ordos region where the Keraite and Onguit tribes (Mongols) were the main inhabitants. Furthermore many members of these two tribes were Christians. Therefore, it was suggested that the crosses from Ordos were Nestorian crosses.[28] A recent study of these crosses by a scholar from the Syrian Church suggested while some of these crosses might be of Assyrian origin, many of them might be bronze talismans of Mongolian religion (animist) and perhaps even of Manichean religion, which was also rather popular among the Mongols during the fourteenth to fifteenth century.[29] Uncritical examination of these crosses might lead to misled interpretation of their origin and hence the symbols contained in them. As for the second assumption, there is no conclusive evidence to make an exclusive claim of Buddhist origin for the swastika. On the contrary the swastika might appear earlier in Western Asia, such as Persia, be introduced to the Indus Valley by Aryan migrants and later be used by the Buddhists. As for the third assumption, swastika was already a common sign symbolizing "sun," "sky," and "life" among the inhabitants in Central Asia with whom the Mongols had more interaction than Chinese Buddhists.

Furthermore, should this swastika sign be a religious symbol borrowed from Buddhism by Assyrian Christians in China, it should not only appear among Mongolian Christians in the north (Ordos), but also in Southern China where Assyrian Christians should have had a much greater exposure to Buddhism than their counterparts in the north. However, among all the Assyrian Christian tombstones excavated in Southern China where Buddhism was flourishing, there are ancient

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[28] Saeki, "The Swastika Cross Badges Unearthed in Sui Yuan Province," 189–90.

[29] Dale A. Johnson, "The So Called Nestorian Crosses," *The Syriac Orthodox Christian Digest* (October 2005): 1–8.

Persian scripts, old Turkic scripts, crosses and lotus, angels, but no swastika[30] (picture 23 to 24).

Please note picture 24 where there is a Buddhist canopy on a tombstone. It is the only Buddhist symbol found in so many Assyrian Christian tombstones, indeed a rarity. This is the only evidence available that suggests the adoption of Buddhist elements in Assyrian Christianity. However the swastika symbol is totally absent.

Finally, this paper will make another interesting note of the symbols found in the bronze crosses and the implication on their origin. Please take note that the Nestorian cross on picture 5 (page 31) contains two multi-lined crosses on both sides of the swastika.





Left Picture 23. Tombstone with a cross and a lotus over an inscription[31]

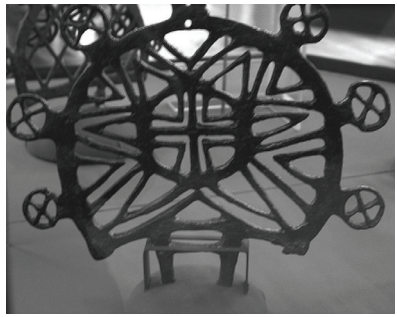
Right Picture 24. Tombstone with a cross and a lotus beneath a canopy with four hanging tassels or streamers[32]

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[30] See Sam Lieu, "Manichaean and (Nestorian) Christian Remains in Zayton (Quanzhou, South China)," ARC DP0557098, 1–36, http://www.anchist.mq.au/doccentre/CFM.htm.

[31] See Iain Gardner, Samuel Lieu and Ken Parry, *From Palmyra to Zayton: Epigraphy and Iconography*, Silk Road Studies X (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 221 and plate 6. Used by permission of the authors.

[32] Ibid., 225 and plate 16. Used by permission of the authors.





Left Picture 25. Multi-lined cross in Anatolia from the Chalcolithic period (3000–5500 BC), the Historical Museum of Turkey, Ankara. Taken by the author, 2007.

Right Picture 26. Bronze medallion commonly wore by the Indo-Europeans, the National Historical Museum, Armenia.[33]

Picture 25 is a cross with the same design found in Anatolia. It is dated the same period as the swastika signs in picture 15, namely the Chalcolithic period (3000–5500 BC). Picture 26 is a bronze medallion commonly wore by the Indo-Europeans and is one of the commonest sign of divinity in ancient times to protect people from demon and evil eyes. It was found in present-day Armenia and is now displayed in the National Historical Museum, Armenia. This design is very common among the Armenians and gained popularity in the Roman era (picture 27). As one compares the designs of these crosses with the Ordos cross (picture 28), which was classified as Nestorian cross, one cannot help but wonder if this Ordos cross should be regarded as Armenian cross rather than Nestorian cross. After all, were it not true that the Armenians had been trading along the Silk Road with the Chinese at the same time as, if not earlier than, the Persians? Could this cross, found among the Mongols in the Ordos region, be influenced by the Armenians rather than the Buddhists? In fact Armenia was the first Christianized nation since AD 300 and all Armenians were hitherto Christians. Could it be possible that they, not the Persians, were the first Christians who came to China? Could the cross on picture 5 be an Armenian-Aryan design as swastika sign was found in ancient America as well? The above example of Armenian cross could be an evidence to suggest an

[33] Illustration from Elisabeth Bauer, *Armenia Past and Present* (New York: The Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America, 1981), 24. Reproduced with permission by Elisabeth Bauer.

alternative interpretation of the origin of the signs on Chinese Assyrian artefacts, in this case Armenian, rather than Buddhist.





Left Picture 27. Cross design common among the Armenians and popular in the Roman era, Sbeith, Tunisia, AD 200–300. Taken by the author, 2008.

Right Picture 28. Ordos cross. Taken by the author, 2007.

Base on the above reasons, it is suggested that the swastika found on the bronze crosses might owe its origin from the cultural symbols popular among Central-Western inhabitants rather than exclusively from the Buddhists. Therefore the swastika on these crosses might not be Buddhist symbols and could not be used to suggest a syncretic relation between Buddhism and Assyrian Christianity in China. Furthermore those Ordos bronze crosses, allegedly Nestorian in origin, might come from other sources, such as the Armenians, rather than exclusively from Assyrian Christians. Further critical studies are needed to identify the origin of these so-called Nestorian crosses.

CONCLUSION

Scholars had long held that the lotus and swastika signs found in Assyrian Christian artefacts in China suggested a syncretic relation or an inter-religious exchange between Assyrian Christianity and Chinese Buddhism in China. This paper suggests that these signs might be of Aryan origin and be carried to China through Central Asians, such as the Persians who had long used these symbols. Therefore, Assyrian Christians in China needed not copy these symbols from the Buddhists whom they encountered, but rather used these symbols as part of their

cultural-religious heritage. Should that be the case, there is far less exchange between Assyrian Christianity and Buddhism in China than scholars wished to acknowledge. Also it is suggested that the design found in those Ordos crosses might suggest the presence of Christian tradition in China other than that of Assyrian Christians, perhaps such as Armenian Christians. It may open a new line of enquiry about the early Christian presence in China.

The appearance of lotus and swastika in Nestorian artefacts in China does not necessarily prove anything about the interaction and dialogue between Assyrian Christianity and Buddhism in China. The coincidental usage of lotus and swastika by the Nestorians and Buddhists in China may point to the existence of a pool of religious symbols among Eurasians in ancient times and the existence in the human subconscious of a stock of symbols common to humanity which express the archetypes of human ethnos in the religious realm not being monopolized by any single religious system. These symbols may be disseminated to ancient Eurasian civilizations through the ancient World-Wide-Web network, as suggested by Professor Alan Hunter,[34] and they have been used by various belief systems in their own contexts.

[34] Alan Hunter, "An Early World-Wide Web: Religions of Eurasia," paper presented at the International Conference on Christian-Buddhist Dialogue, October 16–18, 2009, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China.