

### The Christian Faith of a Sogdian Family in Chang'an during the Tang Dynasty\*

Epigraphical studies are very important in research on Chinese history in general, but they are particularly relevant in research on religious history during the Tang dynasty, and are indispensable in studies on Tang dynasty Christianity. The Xi'an Christian stele of 781 is the most notable example. Because of the shortage of materials concerning this first period of Chinese Christianity, epigraphical sources gain in value. In fact, apart from the historical account of the Xi'an stele and a few references to Christianity in Chinese historical sources, for a long time no other sources were available to scholars engaged in research in this field.

Tomb epitaphs of foreigners were already studied in the past, for example by Xiang Da in 1933 (Xiang Da 1957). However, no epitaph related to Christianity had been noted until recent years. In the 1990s, Chinese scholars have examined more attentively some tomb epitaphs of foreigners who lived in China during the Tang dynasty. Among these epitaphs, they found precious indications of the presence of Christians among the Persian and Central Asian peoples who had settled in China.

In a study published in 1998, Professor Rong Xinjiang identified the Persian Li Su 李素 (741-817), whose Chinese courtesy name (*zi* 字) was Wenzhen 文貞 (Rong Xinjiang 1998), with the *seng* Wenzhen 僧文貞, who is listed among the Christian clergy and monks on the Xi'an stele, and who also bears the Syriac name Lūqā.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting, as his epitaph declares, that he was a married Christian cleric, and a member of the Sasanid royal family (his grandfather came to China as a *zhizi* 質子, for 'hostage', in the mid-eighth century), and that he held an official position as astronomer at the Tang court.

Professor Ge Chengyong 葛承雍, in his study of the epitaph of the Sogdian gentleman Mi Jifen 米繼芬 (714-805) has now discovered that his son was a Christian monk and is convinced that his family too was Christian. As in the case of Li Su, Mi Jifen as well was the descendant of a foreign *zhizi*, held an important position at the Tang court, and a very high military title.

\* [English translation by Matteo Nicolini-Zani of the Chinese article: Ge Chengyong 葛承雍, Tangdai Chang'an yige sute jiating de jingjiao xinyang 唐代長安一個粟特家庭的景教信仰. *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究, 2001/3, 181-86, Beijing; reprinted in Ge Chengyong (2006). Translator's notes and integrations are enclosed in square brackets. The translator wishes to thank Prof. Antonino Forte (Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"), who encouraged him in this work, and who read his draft, bringing some very precious corrections and additions].

<sup>1</sup> Left side, third row. See Pelliot (1996: 502).

If Rong Xinjiang's study, while adding new evidence, essentially confirms what we already know about Christians in Tang China, namely that foreign Christians who settled in Chang'an 長安 during the Tang dynasty came from Persia, to the point that Christianity in China was first called 'Persian teaching' (*Bosijiao* 波斯教), Ge Chengyong's inquiry shows that another Iranian group, the Sogdians of Māymurgh, was probably not indifferent to Christianity. It is still too early to say that Christianity was widespread among Sogdians,<sup>2</sup> but the case studied by Ge Chengyong here is worth keeping in mind. The epigraphical sources studied by the two Chinese scholars also confirm that the sending of official embassies to the Tang court, and the presence in the Chinese capital of the so-called *zhizi* with their families, were closely linked both to the arrival of Christianity in Tang China and to the survival of a Christian presence in the Chinese Empire between the seventh and the ninth centuries [M. N.-Z.].

Contacts between Chang'an and lands to the west were extremely frequent during the Tang dynasty. Due to their engagement in the flourishing trade along the Silk Road, to wars and other reasons, a large number of Sogdians from Central Asia moved to Chang'an and formed there their own colonies, which were distributed in many quarters of Chang'an, such as the quarters of Liquan 禮泉, Buzheng 布政, Chonghua 崇化, Puning 普寧, and Jinggong 靖恭. Following their own religious beliefs, Sogdians also built foreign temples (*hu si* 胡寺) there, namely, Zoroastrian shrines (*xian ci* 祆祠), Christian monasteries (*jing si* 景寺), and Manichaean temples (*moni si* 摩尼寺), introducing thus foreign religions into the capital of the Tang Empire.

For many years Chinese and foreign scholars have carried out detailed investigations of Sogdian tomb epitaphs<sup>3</sup> unearthed in Chang'an, and have investigated in depth the religious beliefs of Sogdians living in Chang'an and the influences of their activities. In particular, scholars have focused their attention on the 'Luminous religion' (*jingjiao* 景教), that is, Nestorian Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Yet, apart from the Nestorian stele, which is universally acknowledged in academic circles (and is kept today in the Forest of Steles Museum in Xi'an), there is little first-hand material available for analysis. Professor Rong Xinjiang has published an article (Rong Xinjiang 1998), which deals with the epitaph of the Persian Li Su and his wife, Lady Beishi 卑失, unearthed in Xi'an; this is undoubtedly a new discovery and a breakthrough in research. There is, however, another epitaph worth studying, that of Mi Jifen 米繼芬.

<sup>2</sup> For a bibliography on this subject, see Nicolini-Zani (2003).

<sup>3</sup> [As some scholars have pointed out, translating the Chinese word *muzhi* 墓誌 (or also *muzhiming* 墓誌銘) with the English word 'epitaph' is not entirely correct, because this ritual object was located inside the tomb and not outside, as the English word suggests. We maintain this translation because it is short, easily understood, and because English has no better equivalent].

<sup>4</sup> Luo Xianglin (1966); Zhu Qianzhi (1993); Saeki (1935); Klimkeit and Lin Wushu (1995); Li Boyi (1994). For other works on the subject, see the bibliography included in Zhu Qianzhi (1993: 231-46).



This article intends to pursue the research on this epitaph, which other scholars have already begun.

## 1

Mi Jifen's epitaph (pl. I), which was unearthed in 1955 at Sanqiao 三橋, in the western suburbs of Xi'an, is square in shape. Its cover is 47 cm long and 45 cm wide, with the title in seal characters, *Da Tang gu Mi fujun muzhiming* 大唐故米府君墓誌銘 [Epitaph of the late gentleman Mi of the great Tang]. All around the cover, a 'four spirits' decoration is carved.<sup>5</sup> The inscribed stone is 48 cm long and 47 cm wide. The characters cut in the stone are written in cursive handwriting. There are twenty lines, with between twenty and twenty-six characters in each line. On the four sides of the tablet, the pattern of the twelve animals [of the Chinese calendar] is carved. This epitaph contains some confused characters, but for the most part it can be read clearly, without major errors. I copy the text here:

大唐左神策軍故散副將游騎將軍守左武衛大將軍同正兼試太常卿上柱國  
京兆米府君墓誌銘並序

鄉貢進士翟運撰並書

公諱繼芬，字繼芬，其先西域米國人也，代爲君長，家不乏賢。祖諱伊西，任本國長史；父諱突騎施；遠慕皇化，來於王庭，邀質京師，永通國好。特承恩寵，累踐班榮。歷任輔國大將軍，行左領軍衛大將軍。公承襲質子，身處禁軍；孝以敬親，忠以奉國；四善在意，七德居心；信行爲遠邇所稱，德義實閭里咸荷。風神磊落，度量宏深；愛以尊年，因嬰疾疹。何圖積善無慶，奄從逝川去。永貞元年九月廿一日終於禮泉里之私第，春秋九十二。以其年十二月十九日，安厝於長安縣龍門鄉龍首原，禮也。夫人米氏，痛移夫之終，恨居孀之苦。公有二男，長曰國進，任右神威軍散將，寧遠將軍，守京兆府崇仁府折冲都尉同正。幼曰僧思圓，住大秦寺。皆號慕絕，哀毀過禮；攀恩罔極，悶擗崩摧。慮陵谷遷移，以貞石永固。遠奉招紀德，實慚陋於文。銘曰：國步頌艱兮，忠義建名。雄雄英勇兮，膺時間生。嘗致命兮，竭節輸誠。殄凶孽兮，身授官榮。位崇班兮，是居禁營。壽既尊兮，遭其疾苦。去高堂兮，永歸泉戶。列松柏於鳳城之西，封馬鬣於漕渠之滸。

Tomb epitaph, with a preface, of the gentleman Mi of Jingzhao,<sup>6</sup> formerly Inactive<sup>7</sup> Vice-General of the Left Guard for the Divine Strategies<sup>8</sup> of the great Tang and then

<sup>5</sup> [Sishen wen 四神紋: decoration with figures of the four spirits, i.e. Qinglong 青龍, Baihu 白虎, Zhuque 朱雀 and Xuanwu 玄武. This type of decoration was common on tiles, mirrors, tombs and funerary objects during the Han dynasty and the first half of the Tang dynasty].

<sup>6</sup> [The capital of the Chinese Empire].

<sup>7</sup> [San 散: a prefix formerly awarded to men without official status or prescribed duties, or added to a man's official title for honorific purposes only. It then began to be added to the ti-

General of the Mobile Cavalry, Acting<sup>9</sup> General-in-chief of the Left Militant Army<sup>10</sup> assimilated to a Regular, Concurrently Probationary<sup>11</sup> Chief Minister of the Court for Imperial Sacrifices,<sup>12</sup> Supreme Pillar of the State.<sup>13</sup>

Composed and handwritten by Zhai Yun, Prefectural Presented Scholar.<sup>14</sup>

The gentleman had the taboo name of Jifen, his courtesy name was Jifen. His ancestors were people from Míguo (Māymurgh) in the Western Regions; for generations they were rulers, and there was no lack of virtuous men in the family. His grandfather, who had the taboo name of Yixi, held the office of *changshi* in his native country. His father, who had the taboo name of Tuqishi, admiring from afar the august transformation,<sup>15</sup> came to the Imperial court; summoned to the Chinese capital as 'hostage' (*zhizi*), he constantly kept the [two] states in good relations. He received special favours, accumulating honours according to his rank. He was appointed General-in-chief Bulwark of the State, Acting<sup>16</sup> General-in-chief of the Left Metropolitan Guard.<sup>17</sup> The gentleman [Jifen] inherited [from his father] the status of 'hostage' and held a post in the Imperial Army; he was filial in respecting his parents and faithful in serving the country. The four good intentions were in his mind, and the seven virtues

ties of officials when they were not in active service – between appointments, when disabled or when their age had surpassed the limit for service, etc. – apparently in an effort to boost the social status (and stipends?) of officials in such conditions. This and the following explanations of Chinese imperial titles are taken from Hucker (1985: s.v.).

<sup>8</sup> [The two designated Left and Right Guards for the Divine Strategies were imperial armies stationed at the dynastic capital and known as the Northern Command; from 807 on, they were considered units of the Six Imperial Armies].

<sup>9</sup> [*Shou* 守: prefixed to a title when the appointee's rank was lower than was appropriate for the post, or when there was already a nominal appointee for the post].

<sup>10</sup> [Left and Right Militant Armies were created in 607 among the Twelve Armies (*shier jun* 十二軍) at the dynastic capital. From mid-Tang all the Guards had only nominal existence, meaning that the belonging to this military corps provided grandiose titles for members of the imperial family and other favored dignitaries].

<sup>11</sup> [*Shi* 試: prefixed to titles when an appointee, if fully qualified, was first appointed subject to reconsideration, commonly after a year's service in his post; or when an appointee, if not qualified, was appointed on an emergency basis pending the appointment of a qualified official or his own transformation, upon evaluation, into a regular appointee].

<sup>12</sup> [*Taichang si* 太常寺: one of the Nine Courts (*jiu si* 九寺) of the central government, normally headed by a Chief Minister and two Vice Ministers, which supervised several functionally differentiated Offices].

<sup>13</sup> [High honorific title].

<sup>14</sup> [*Xianggong jinshi* 鄉貢進士: lit. «Local Tribute Presented Scholar». *Xianggong* designates a Prefectural Nominee, i.e. a candidate nominated by a Prefect to participate in the regular civil service recruitment examination].

<sup>15</sup> [Lit. «the country which was civilized by the virtues of its emperors», China].

<sup>16</sup> [*Xing* 行: prefix which indicates an appointee who carries out the duties of an office where there was a temporary vacancy. Usually but not always used when the appointee was of lower rank than was appropriate for the office].

<sup>17</sup> [Created in 622, the Metropolitan Guard was one of the Sixteen Guards (*shiliu wei* 十六衛) at the dynastic capital].

lived in his heart. His honest conduct was praised by people far and near, and all the city was grateful to him for his virtuous morality. His manner was affable and his mind was open and penetrating. Venerable in age, he was hampered by sickness. But what plan which seeks all the virtues is not rewarded? [For that] his departure was delayed. He died on the 21st day of the ninth month of the first year of the Yongzhen era [October 17th, 805] in his private residence in Liquan district, at the age of ninety-two. On the 19th day of the twelfth month of the same year [January 12th, 806], the ceremony of his temporary burial was celebrated on the Longshou plain, in Longmen village, in the subprefecture of Chang'an. His wife, of the Mi family, mourned her husband's death, then she endured the pain of living in widowhood. The gentleman [Jifen] had two sons. The eldest is called Guojin; he has the appointment of Inactive General of the Right Army of the Divine Awesomeness,<sup>18</sup> General of Ningyuan, Acting Assaulting Commandant of the Chongren Area in the Metropolitan Prefecture assimilated to a Regular. The youngest is called monk Siyuan and lives in the Da Qin Monastery. All expressed their love for the departed, and their grief surpassed [the limits of] etiquette; all expressed their extreme gratitude, beating their breasts as a sign of mourning for his death. Hills and valleys were levelled by their grief, till the pure white gravestone was fixed forever. We obediently received the request to record his virtues, and we feel deeply ashamed in carving these vulgar words. Our inscription says: 'When the state's fortunes were disrupted by troubles, his loyalty gained him a name. Heroic in his courage, he bore the brunt of ill winds all his life. In all of his missions he was absolutely upright and always showed sincerity; having exterminated the rebels, office and honours were conferred to his person. The fact that he belonged to a lofty rank gained him a post in the Imperial Encampment. When venerable in his old age, he met the pains of sickness. Departing from this life, he passed forever the door of the [Yellow] Springs'. Pines and cypresses were arranged in order,<sup>19</sup> west of the city of the phoenix; the horse's mane was sealed<sup>20</sup> on the bank of the canal.

Publications of this inscription, from the first one on, have all been partial (Wu Bolun 1959: 107; He Zicheng 1984), and explanations of the whole text have lacunae and errors (Yan Wenru 1989). For this reason I have retranscribed and reexamined the text on the basis of the original epitaph kept in the Forest of Steles Museum in Xi'an [...].<sup>21</sup> The editions of the epitaph rubbing in the *Xi'an beilin quanji* 西安碑林全集 [Complete Collection of the Forest of Steles in Xi'an]<sup>22</sup> and in the *Sui Tang Wudai muzhi huibian* 隋唐五代墓誌匯編 [Compilation of the Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties Tomb Epitaphs]<sup>23</sup> make it possible to check and correct the text. My transcription is offered to the scholarly world in order to avoid spreading past errors.

<sup>18</sup> [Imperial Army of the Northern Command at the dynastic capital].

<sup>19</sup> [This expression indicates the arrangements for the burial].

<sup>20</sup> [This expression indicates the burial].

<sup>21</sup> [Here I purposely omit the translation of two and a half lines, in which the author corrects some characters of the previous editions, on the basis of his own direct analysis of the stone epitaph].

<sup>22</sup> Gao Xia (1999: *juan* 84, 3334-38).

<sup>23</sup> Wang Renbo (1991: I, plate at p. 25).

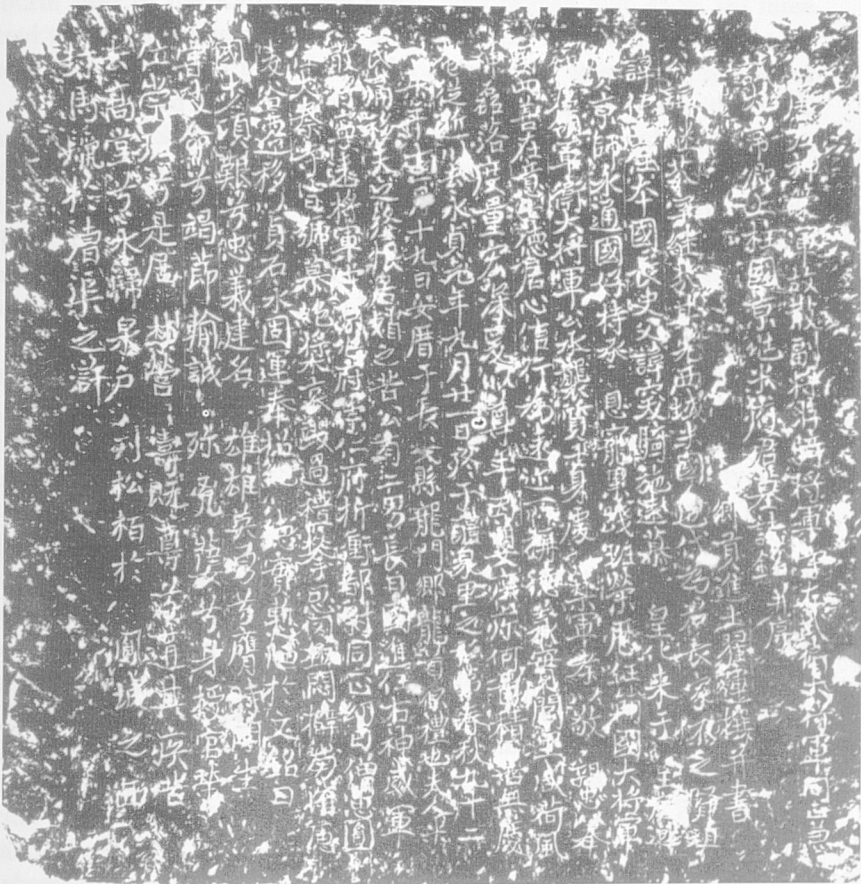
Central Asian city-states in medieval times the highest official position, below that of the king, was that of *lingshi* 令史 («administrator», [Sogdian:] *framandar*), the Sogdian administration officer.<sup>27</sup> Yixi's position as a high official who administered the sovereign's orders, translated [in Chinese] also as *changshi*, shows that he was a highly educated Sogdian. The name Yixi and that of Yisi 伊斯, which is written on the Nestorian stele, are very similar in pronunciation. The question of whether they are names that were common among Syro-Oriental Christians and whether they derive from the Biblical name Isaiah (Yixi 以西), remains open, awaiting further study.

Tuqishi, Mi Jifen's father, as 'hostage' of Māymurgh, «summoned to the Chinese capital as *zhizi*, he constantly kept the [two] states in good relations»; because he was a member of the royal family, he «received special favours, accumulating honours according to his rank». He held the Tang military service prestigious title of General-in-chief Bulwark of the State (second rank, first class), and his official post was that of General-in-chief of the Left Metropolitan Guard (third rank, first class). He was thus a second rank first class official taking office as a third rank, first class official. Since in the Tang system when the rank of a functioning official was higher than his prestige title the appointee was called 'Acting', Tuqishi is called Acting General-in-chief of the Left Metropolitan Guard. The fact that the Tang court gave him a high official title reflects the great value it attached to relations with Māymurgh. I dare not venture a guess as to whether or not Tuqishi was the king of Māymurgh's son, but he was undoubtedly a member of the royal family. In the sixteenth year of the Kaiyuan 開元 era [728] the Great Head of Māymurgh, Mi Huhan 米忽汗, went to Chang'an, and in the eighteenth year of the Kaiyuan era [730] another Great Head of Māymurgh, Mo (Mi?) Yemen 末(米?)野門, went there as well. Such frequent embassies are quite rare in the case of other Sogdian city-states, and they show how fearful Māymurgh was at the prospect of the Arabs' advance. In urgent need of Tang troops to withstand the enemy, Māymurgh could only send Tuqishi, in view of his status, to China as a hostage. Tuqishi arrived in Chang'an in the sixteenth or eighteenth year of the Kaiyuan era, and he was probably on familiar terms with the Great Heads Mi Huhan and Mo (Mi?) Yemen. If this conjecture were to be proved, on the basis of Mi Jifen's death in the first year of the Yongzhen 永貞 era (805) at the age of ninety-two, it could be concluded that when Mi Jifen came to Chang'an he was at least fifteen or sixteen years old, and this would then show that Tuqishi went to Chang'an with his entire family.

It is worth studying the interesting foreign name Tuqishi. Chinese sources record that the Tuqishi were a Western Turk subtribe [the Türgis], who at their origin were one of the five Duolu 咄陸 tribes and in the second year of the

<sup>27</sup> These remarks are quoted from Jiang Boqin (1998: 305, 307, notes 32, 89). Russian originals in Belenickij, Bentovic and Bol'sakov (1973: 113); Bogoljubov and Smirnova (1963: 97).





Mi Jifen's epitaph, Forest of Steles Museum, Xi'an. (Photo by Ge Chengyong).



Shengli 聖曆 era (699) of the empress Wu Zetian 武則天 began to act independently.<sup>28</sup> The Türgis established relations with the Tang court. After their defeat in the second year of the Jingyun 景云 era (711) and their recovery in the fourth year of the Kaiyuan era (716), their qaghan Sulu 蘇祿 led three hundred thousand soldiers and held sway over the Western Regions. He inflicted a heavy blow on the Arabs, who at that time were invading Central Asia, and who called Sulu by the name Abū Muzāḥim, which means 'the rival'. The city-states of Samarkand, Bukhārā, Chāch, Māymurgh, and others, being unable to obtain prompt help from the Tang court, sought alliances one after another with the Türgis in the hope of freeing themselves from the Arab menace. For the Sogdians in the middle of the eighth century, this was the only strategy possible. For this reason the Türgis enjoyed great prestige among *Zhaowu jiuqing* Sogdians. Mi Jifen father's name Tuqishi may not be a Sogdian name, but may actually indicate a position, namely that of the general leader of the army, since the name may have been an honorific or an official title conferred in Māymurgh. In stone inscriptions written in Old Turkish, the name *tugishi* frequently appears as a phonetic translation of the Turkish word *türgis* (Rui Zhuanming 1998: 255), indicating a tribe's name. If the only name used in the epitaph to refer to Mi Jifen's father is an honorific name, this is simply a form of eulogy and praise.

Concerning the name Mi Jifen, according to the research of Professor Cai Hongsheng (1998b: 39-40), *fen* 芬 in Sogdian is a common suffix for Sogdian names. It is read *piugn* and means «honour, fortune». Since *fen* is the most common Sogdian men's name, it occurs frequently: examples are Shi Yanfen 石演芬, Shi Ningfen 石寧芬, Shi Shifen 石失芬, Anhu Shufen 安胡數芬, Cao Mofen 曹莫芬. The question of whether the name Mi Jifen has a religious connotation awaits further analysis, as it is connected with the complex situation of various religions among the inhabitants of Sogdiana. Zoroastrianism and Buddhism coexisted, along with Syro-Oriental Christianity and Manichaeism, and there were also beliefs in local deities.

After coming to Chang'an with his father, Mi Jifen inherited his father's status of *zhizi*, he «held a post in the Imperial Army; he was filial in respecting his parents and faithful in serving the country»; he was formerly Inactive Vice-General of the Left Guard for the Divine Strategies of the Great Tang and then General of the Mobile Cavalry, Acting General-in-chief of the Left Militant Guard assimilated to a Regular, Concurrently Probationary Chief Minister of the Court for Imperial Sacrifices, Supreme Pillar of the State. Since Mi Jifen was a 'hostage' representing the king of Māymurgh, the Tang court had to grant him an official position, in compliance with the rules. Ac-

<sup>28</sup> *Zizhi tongjian*, *juan* 206, under the *guisi* 癸巳 day of the 8th month of the second year of the Shengli era (699). [Sima Guang *et al.* (1956: 206.6540). The Chinese date corresponds to September 10th, 699 of our calendar].

cording to research carried out by Yan Wenru (1989), in the highly developed organization of the imperial army Mi Jifen was not an officer in a position of high responsibility, but only a retired vice-general. His official titles and ranks for meritorious services all show that he was an official in name only, with no effective functions, but he received the official monthly salary. At the end of the inscription of Mi Jifen's epitaph, it is written that «in all of his missions he was absolutely upright and he always showed sincerity; having exterminated the rebels, office and honours were conferred to his person». This could be true. In his younger years (in the fifteenth year of the Tianbao 天寶 era [756] he was forty-four years old) Mi Jifen experienced not only the An Lushan 安祿山 rebellion [755], but also the disturbances that occurred during the reigns of Suzong 肅宗, Daizong 代宗, and Dezong 德宗 (in the city of Chang'an alone there were events such as the great sack by the Tibetans [763] and the Jingyuan 涇原 mutiny [783]). In fact, at this time «the state's fortunes were disrupted by troubles». During all this turmoil, which went on for decades, Mi Jifen certainly made great efforts to be absolutely upright and sincere in front of the Tang court, and this fact would have obtained him great honours after his death.

Mi Jifen's eldest son, Mi Guojin 米國進, was also a military officer in the Imperial Army. He was Inactive General of the Right Army of the Divine Awesomeness, and his official rank was that of General of Ningyuan, fifth rank, first class, appointed by the Ministry of War. His effective rank was Assaulting Commandant of the Chongren Area, which was under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Prefecture, and therefore Mi Guojin was only a Supplementary Official assimilated to a Regular. This plan was arranged after the third year of the Zhenyuan 貞元 era (787), when the 'foreign guests' (*hu ke* 胡客) who had settled in Chang'an were all placed under the jurisdiction of the Left and Right Guards for the Divine Strategies.

The name of Mi Jifen's wife, Lady Mi 米, shows not only that the wives of the Sogdians were all from Māymurgh, but also that among Sogdians, marriages between persons bearing the same surname was common. This was one good way of preserving their own national identity and their state's survival. Probably these marriages were also political, because they united members of the royal family and officials of the upper levels; they were most likely contracted between persons belonging to the same religious faith. Marriage between persons of the same clan, so frequent among the offspring of *Zhaowu* *jiuxing* Sogdians in Chang'an, is one of the 'foreign customs' (*hu su* 胡俗) that was widespread in that era.

In the region of Sogdiana during the Tang dynasty, Zoroastrianism was the most widespread religion. Hyech'o [Chinese: Huichao] 慧超, in his *Wang wu Tianzhuguo zhuan* 往五天竺國傳 [Account of the Five Indian Coun-



tries], describes Bukhārā, Kapūtānā (Caoguo 曹國), Kashāna (Shiguo 史國), Chāch (Shiluoguo 石驪國), Māymurgh, and Samarkand as follows: «All these countries worship the Fire-god (*huoxian* 火祆), and they do not know Buddha's law» (Zhang Yi 1994: 118). *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 [Old Book of the Tang], *juan* 卷 198, records that in Persia «the custom is to worship different deities: the Heaven-god, the Earth-god, the Sun-god, the Moon-god, the Fire-god. The different *Hus* 胡 of the Western regions, who worship the Fire-god (*xian* 祆), have all learned this doctrine from Persia». *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 [New Book of the Tang], *juan* 221B, also says: «The different *Hus* of the Western regions have all learned from Persia the laws for sacrificing to the Fire-god (*xian* 祆)». Moreover, the epitaph of Mi Sabao 米薩寶, Great Head of Māymurgh, dated at the third year of the Tianbao era (744) and unearthed in Xi'an (Xiang Da 1957: 92), gives irrefutable evidence that Māymurgh people who came from their country in Sogdiana to China believed in Zoroastrianism, as did other Sogdians (*Sute hu* 粟特胡) from Bukhārā, Chāch, and elsewhere. Though Zoroastrianism spread as far East as Chang'an, and six Zoroastrian shrines were built in the Tang capital (Lin Wushu 1995), not all of the Sogdian immigrants in Tang Chang'an or members of royal families from Sogdiana worshipped the sacred fire. Some scholars take Mi Jifen's epitaph as evidence that Māymurgh people believed in Zoroastrianism, and place Mi Jifen among Zoroastrian believers. I think that this is a mistake, which, though small, has far-reaching consequences. In Mi Jifen's epitaph we can find nothing related to Zoroastrianism, and no sign of the Zoroastrian faith of the Mi family. On the contrary, the epitaph reveals that Mi Jifen's family believed in Christianity, that it was a Sogdian family in Tang Chang'an faithful to Christianity.

The epitaph records that Mi Jifen had two sons. The eldest son, Mi Guojin was a military official of the Imperial Army in Tang Chang'an. The youngest son «is called monk Siyuan and lives in the Da Qin Monastery», which means beyond all doubt that he was a Christian monk. As is generally known, Syro-Oriental Christianity, as a foreign religion that had arrived in China and was in the process of making its teachings known, was obliged to adopt the policy of 'indigenization'. Since Buddhism and Daoism had at that time already become the two main Chinese religions, Christianity adopted many Buddhist and Daoist technical terms in an attempt to convey Christian doctrines to Tang emperors and their subjects. Christian monks often took Buddhist names. Siyuan's name is an example of this: it means «full intelligence in thoughts», or «fulfillment in meditation»; these ideas are frequently found in Syro-Oriental Christian documents in Chinese of this era (Weng Shaojun 1996: 49, 182). If we take a close look to the text of the Nestorian stele erected in the second year of the Jianzhong 建中 era (781), we cannot find the name 'monk Siyuan' (*seng* Siyuan 僧思圓) in the Syriac-Chinese bilingual list of monks' names. It could be that when the stele was erected, Siyuan was still young, his qualifications were still few, and his level of instruc-

tion was still low. Or it could be that among the Christian monks present in Chang'an at that time, those of Persian origin had a certain preminence, as the tradition of Christian missions to Chang'an led by Aluoben 阿羅本, Pannami 潘那蜜, Jilie 及烈, and others down to Jingjing 景淨 testifies (Rong Xin-jiang 1998); in this case Siyuan, being a Sogdian, would not have been listed among the aforementioned Persian monks. Given that in the first year of the Zhenyuan era (805) Mi Jifen died at the age of ninety-two, his youngest son Siyuan would have been fifty to sixty years old; at the time of the erection of the stele [in 781], then, he would have been between twenty and thirty years old.

The fact that Mi Jifen's youngest son Siyuan was a Christian monk in the Da Qin Monastery implies that his father's and grandfather's generations must have been Christian, and we can also deduce with confidence that Mi Jifen was of Christian faith – otherwise, he would not have allowed his son to become a Christian monk. Religious faith was often a spiritual tie that kept a family or a clan united from generation to generation, and its members could not easily change the religious tradition they had inherited. The Mi family thus could not have abandoned Zoroastrianism at will in order to convert to Christianity. There was uniformity in religious ideas, feelings, rites, and education among members of the same family. Mi Jifen and his wife Lady Mi were both Sogdians from Māymurgh, and since they lived in the Sogdian community of Chang'an and not in their own country, changing their religion would certainly have been a problem. The Mi family's longstanding commitment to the Christian faith thus has a historical basis, and it is certain that at least Mi Jifen's grandfather Yixi and his father Tuqishi were Christians who had received baptism in their country, Māymurgh.

If we read what Mi Jifen's epitaph records about his deeds, we find that «the four good intentions were in his mind, and the seven virtues lived in his heart. His honest conduct was praised by people far and near, and all the city was grateful to him for his virtuous morality». He was probably a benefactor of the common people and the believers around him, and came to their assistance in various ways. In this way he not only earned the praise of the common people living in the quarter, but also created an environment favorable to the survival and growth of his family for many generations.

As for the Da Qin Monastery in which Siyuan lived, I believe that it is the Da Qin Monastery in the Chang'an Yining 義寧 quarter. This monastery, according to the imperial edict of the Tang emperor Taizong 太宗, was built in 638 by the Persian bishop Aluoben (Abraham).<sup>29</sup> It was not only the largest Christian monastery in Chang'an, but was also adjacent to the Liquan quarter where Mi family lived, being separated from it by only one street. Even though there were Christian monasteries in other quarters of Chang'an, Siyuan

<sup>29</sup> [This phonetic reconstruction for Aluoben with Abraham is not sure, and I personally think it is even not probable].

would not have neglected what was near at hand in favor of what was far away.<sup>30</sup> Since Syro-Oriental Christian clergy could marry and have families, it is reasonable that Siyuan lived in one of the quarters near the Western Market, such as Liquan or Buzhen, where Sogdian communities had settled, and that he went to the Da Qin Monastery in the Yining quarter for worship and church services. One author claims that, because Da Qin temples in Chang'an were close to immigrant communities, they were churches in which the clergy and laity held daily worship, while the Da Qin temple in Zhouzhi 整屋, which was located quite far from the city of Chang'an, was a real monastery (Chen Huaiyu 1999: 173). I think that this opinion is absolutely reasonable.

A last remark that should be made is that the history of the spread of Syro-Oriental Christianity into the Central Asian region of Sogdiana dates back to the early sixth through the eighth centuries. In the twentieth century, coins with Nestorian crosses dating back to the sixth through the eighth centuries were unearthed in Chāch (today's Tashkent). At the site of the old Sogdian city of Panjikent, fragments of pottery with Christian Psalms in Syriac have been unearthed. Samarkand has been identified as a metropolitan see established as early as the eighth century. The ruins of a Christian church of the eighth century have been excavated in Suyab (today's Tokmak), on the south bank of the Chu river. In the ancient city of Gaochang 高昌 [Qočo], mural paintings with crosses have been discovered in an Uyghur Christian monastery, and a large number of Christian manuscripts in different languages have also been unearthed. Among these manuscripts, Christian fragments of the Bible in Sogdian have been repeatedly discovered (Asmussen 1999: 349-51), showing that in the Sogdian city-states there was not only a Christian presence, but that there were Christian converts and missionaries among the Sogdians. Though Christians were pressured from all sides – by Zoroastrians, Buddhists and Manichaeans – their strong identity allowed them to maintain and even spread their presence among the Sogdians, and they vigorously expanded their influence by every means. Particulars concerning the spread of Christianity in Māymurgh depend on the discovery of new archaeological material, but if we compare Māymurgh with the other Sogdian oasis-states that

<sup>30</sup> Concerning the question of whether there was a Christian monastery in Liquan quarter, scholars have different opinions. For example, D.D. Leslie (1981-83: 286) thinks that the Bosi husi 波斯胡寺 built in the second year of Yifeng 儀鳳 era (677) in the Liquan quarter at the request of the Persian king Pērōz was a Christian monastery because the king's wife believed in Christianity, and not a Zoroastrian temple as many believe. Chen Yuan (1980) holds a similar opinion, that the Bosi husi in the Liquan quarter was a Christian monastery (*jing si*) which then changed its name into Da Qin si 大秦寺, and that therefore it had no relation to Zoroastrian shrines. But Professor Lin Wushu (1995) thinks that the Bosi si in the Liquan quarter was Zoroastrian. If there actually was a Christian monastery in the Liquan quarter, it must have been the Da Qin si in which Siyuan lived. The question of whether there were two kinds of Christian monasteries, one for Persians and another for Sogdians, remains unanswered for the time being, waiting for the discovery of new historical materials.

have the same history, and if we consider the wider background of the spread of Christianity in Central Asia, the possibility that Mi Jifen's family believed in Christianity gains force.

The Christian faith of Mi Jifen's family provides further evidence that immigrants coming to China from the Western Regions belonged to nationalities that were characterized by different religious faiths and cultures; it also sufficiently testifies that the influence of Christianity in Tang Chang'an was by no means weak. Though it is impossible to guess how many Christians lived in Māymurgh, it is certain that there were many people from Māymurgh living in Chang'an. The question of whether there were Christians among them awaits further clarification and investigation in academic circles.

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