Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Art, Design and Social Sciences
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.HT28527

# *Eastern Christianity's Role in Legitimizing Silk Road Commerce: A Study on the Syriac Christian Monastery Ruin at Shüipang, Turfan*

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***Abstract.*** Liu Wensuo's 2021 archaeological survey relocated the Syriac Christian monastery first discovered by Albert von Le Coq a century earlier; more importantly, it confirmed that Eastern Christianity endured in the Turfan Basin for five centuries (7th–13th c. CE). This is nothing short of a miracle, given that the Turfan Basin had no widespread Christian tradition. Instead, the Syriac Christian community remained small, insular, and entirely separate from the dominant groups—the Sogdians (7th–early 9th c.) and the Old Uyghurs (mid-9th–13th c.). How this foreign minority (whose existence we know of by their monastery) survived and pertained to their traditions for over five centuries in a highly volatile region along the Silk Road forms the central question of this paper. Drawing exclusively from primary sources, this study concludes that Eastern Christianity—through providing legitimacy to currencies—afforded its adherent communities commercial advantages along the Silk Road. These benefits motivated Christian communities to maintain their faith over five centuries, until the 13th-century Mongol conquests unified the Silk Road from the Far East to the West, unifying the currency of transcontinental trade.

***Keywords:*** Turfan Basin, Syriac Christian Monastery, Eastern Christianity, Silk Road, 7th–13th c. CE.

## 1. Introduction

The 2021 archaeological report by Liu Wensuo re-examined a Syriac Christian monastery ruin at Shüipang, Turfan, originally documented by Le Coq a century earlier [1]. The ruin was determined to be an independent monastery belonging to the Church of the East [1]; tellingly, there were no secular finds at the site, suggesting it was used exclusively for religious purposes [2]. Liu's study dates the monastery's activity from the 7th century to the 13th century, and within that span it identifies two distinct periods: the Tang-Sogdian period (7th–9th c.) and the Qocho Uighur period (9th–13th c.) [3]. In these successive eras the ethno-cultural identity of the local population changed drastically—from Sogdian to Old Uighur—despite the community's continued practice of the Christian faith. This raises several questions about the continuity of the monastery across five turbulent centuries, about how Uighur Christians integrated into the earlier Sogdian Christian community in the early 10th century, and about interactions between groups of different faiths who shared ethno-linguistic backgrounds [1]. These questions are natural and pressing, and they point to a phenomenon that defies common sense: how could a Syriac Christian monastery of only a few hundred square meters [1],

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.HT28527

sustained by a Syriac-speaking foreign community, survive for over five centuries with little to no interaction with local populations or attempts at proselytization? [1] The focus on this monastery is not meant to suggest an exclusive interest in Syriac Christianity in the Turfan Basin; rather, the monastery's case serves as a starting point for examining how Eastern Christianity in general persisted in foreign communities along the Silk Road, where its insular presence would seem non-essential and even ephemeral. To achieve this goal, the scope of this study is not limited to the primary sources found at the Shüipang monastery itself. Instead, the monastery's longevity is treated as an unexplained problem, and other primary sources are critically examined in order to resolve it.

## 2. Reassessing Conventional Narratives

Surface-level explanations that attribute the enduring Christian presence to circumstantial factors, such as the region's supposed tranquility or political independence, are not only oversimplified but outright mistaken. Medieval western China, despite its distance from major political centers, was a place of constant warfare between nomadic tribes and agriculturalists [4]; it also underwent major population upheavals, for instance, with the Qocho Uighurs' conquests in the mid-9th century. By understanding that external conditions could not have been responsible—or were of lesser importance—for Christianity's endurance, it becomes clear that the explanation must be sought in the religion itself. Rather than searching for external factors to explain Syriac Christianity's longevity, one should examine what Eastern Christianity offered its adherent community that made the faith's survival in their interest.

The only contemporaneous textual record of Syriac Christianity in medieval China is the Xi'An Stele titled "Eulogizing the Propagation of the Illustrious Religion (denoting Nestorianism, i.e. Eastern Christianity)". Concerning the endurance of the Syriac Church in Tang China, the stele's author Ch'ing Tsing suggests that the Church's longevity stemmed from the righteous and superior doctrine of Syriac Christianity—qualities which naturally attracted Tang court patronage [5] [2]. However, this narrative is highly idealized: it presumes an objective righteousness of doctrine and overlooks that this is merely a moral judgment. More critically, it fails to explain the survival of the religion after Emperor Wuzong's infamous suppression of foreign faiths (840–846) [6] [3], a state-led repudiation that directly contradicts the stele's core claim of sustained imperial favor. In this way, the Xi'an Stele is less a neutral chronicle than a self-legitimating instrument that retroactively appeals to Tang authority even after that authority had withdrawn its support. One clear piece of evidence for the stele author's self-legitimization is Ch'ing Tsing's tampering with Emperor Taizong's 638 edict. When the stele's version of the edict is compared to the version preserved in the *Tang Hui Yao* (唐會要)—which Antonio Forte has noted is closer to the original [7], the differences are revealing. In a specific line addressing the Christian missionary Alopen (who introduced the faith to China), Ch'ing Tsing wrote "The Great Virtuous One (bhadanta) Alopen of Persia (Da Qin)" (大秦國大德阿羅本), whereas the *Tang Hui Yao* version of the same line reads "Persian (Bosi) monk Alopen" (波斯僧阿羅本). As Max Deeg points out, "Persian (Bosi)" (波斯) carried negative connotations for Chinese audiences while "Persia (Da Qin)" (大秦國) did not, and the honorific title bhadanta which means "The Great Virtuous One" (大德) added by Ch'ing Tsing creates a positive impression not found in

[1] This claim will be thoroughly explained on page six, where I will determine the presence of proselytization from the perspective of manuscriptal evidence.

[2] On Tsing's Stele: "Deeply understanding its truth, he specially ordered it to be transmitted and taught." (深知正真。特令傳授。)

[3] Emperor Wuzong's Edict on the Suppression of Buddhism: "Finally, we have ordered more than 2,000 men of the Nestorian and Mazdean religions to return to lay life and to cease polluting the customs of China."

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.HT28527

the *Tang Hui Yao* version[4] [5,8]. These alterations show that the Xi'an Stele is not a reliable source for explaining Eastern Christianity's success in western China.

Even as it distorts the past, the Xi'an Stele leaves an unanswered question at the outset: why did Alopen arrive at Tang China to proselytize? This draws out a question with significance to this paper, scrutinizing the survival of the Christian community, which is why this Syriac-speaking Christian community emerged in China in the first place. Ch'ing-Tsing's untenable claim was that this arrival was divinely driven, that Alopen was "riding the azure clouds to bear the True Canon; discerning the winds and rhythms to overcome perils." (佔青雲而載真經。望風律以馳艱險。) [5]. A more plausible explanation emerges when one widens the scope to consider contemporaneous developments: the Arab Muslim conquests in the late 7th to early 8th centuries triggered a large-scale diaspora, particularly affecting Sogdians, many of whom were Christians [9]. This chronologically aligns with the first materials traces of long-term Sogdian Christian settlement, which Liu situates to the 7th century [1][5]. This addresses the first part of our question: the Syriac Christian communities in western China were autonomous, diasporic settlements, neither dependent on nor tethered to the Middle East; thus, they were compelled to form long-term communities in exile. However, this explanation remains partial to the central question. While it makes the longevity of the Syriac Christian monastery more conceivable, it does not fully account for how the monastery endured for five centuries.

Nonetheless, this understanding remains important, as it undermines the conventional narrative that frames Silk Road commercial networks as the primary cause for the emergence of Sogdian Christian communities in China. While the Sogdians undoubtedly played an active role in Silk Road commerce, such activity does not fully account for the establishment of permanent and autonomous communities in regions such as the Turfan Basin. The causality here appears reversed: rather than trade driving settlement, survival—from the Arab conquerors—dictated settlement, and trade became a means to sustain that settlement. It was not commerce that led to their arrival, but it was commerce that enabled the Sogdian Christians' continued presence.

Returning to the question of how a Syriac Christian monastery could have been sustained for over five centuries with the singular purpose of Christian worship[6], we must first recognize that over such a temporal scale, the original community of adherents, particularly the Sogdian Christians, could not have endured intact[7]. Thus, to understand the endurance of Eastern Christianity in this region, we must look beyond the survival of a single ethnic-religious community. Specifically, we must consider how the faith transcended its original Sogdian base. To begin this inquiry, we may set aside one patently flawed yet frequently assumed explanation: that Eastern Christianity maintained and expanded its adherent base through proselytization. This fallacy comes from equating Eastern Christianity with the Christianity in the west which makes every effort to proselytize. However, this is not true for the Church of the East, which remained relatively insular during the Sogdian period, making little or no attempt at proselytization. This claim is corroborated by manuscript evidence recovered from the monastery—virtually all Christian texts from the 7th to 9th centuries are written in Syriac, Uighur, or Sogdian instead of Mandarin which belonged to the dominant community in the Turfan Basin [1]. If the Sogdian religious community was truly engaged in proselytization, translated Christian scriptures should have been produced, yet none of such documents were recovered.

[4] Max Deeg overlooks this comparison because he consulted an incorrect translation of the *Tang Hui Yao*. This conclusion was reached through my own comparison of the two sources' original texts e.g.,

[5] Liu 2021: 430 "The Shüipang site (monastery) may have originally been established during the Tang dynasty." With Tang Dynasty denoting the period 618 CE to 755 CE, up to the An Shi Rebellion.

[6] Previously explained. See Sims-Williams 1992 page 54

[7] Indeed, as with the Sogdian Christians, the demographic upheavals of the 10th century—the displacement of the Sogdians by the Old Uyghurs—led to significant cultural and linguistic shifts. This is evidenced by the replacement of the Sogdian language with Turkic as the lingua franca in Christian manuscripts of the Syriac Christian monastery after the 10th century. See in Ashurov 2013: 20

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## 3. The Numismatic Perspective

As previous explanations does not suffice to answer the central question, we are compelled to acknowledge that Christianity itself was able to present to its followers an incentive strong enough to uphold the faith for over five centuries. A previously deemed irrelevant primary source may shed light to this incentive: a Sogdian-Chinese coin.

Figure 1. Naymark Type II Sogdian-Chinese Coin [10]

This Sogdian-Chinese coin originates from Central Asia (Figure 1). It features the Chinese character *yuán* (元) on the obverse alongside a tamgha (dynastic/tribal emblems) and two strands of Sogdian legend, and on the reverse a Christian symbol—the *croix pattée* (equal-armed cross). Similar Sogdian coins bearing cross-like symbols were widely circulated along the Silk Road region and was uncovered in the Bukhara oasis (a Silk Road region located in modern-day Uzbekistan) [10]. The numismatic presence of Eastern Christianity can be explained by two possible scenarios. The first possibility is that including the Christian cross on currency increased the currency's acceptability in areas frequented by Sogdian traders. The second possibility is that the cross symbol represented the rulers' declaration of their religious affiliation and an attempt at proselytization. Regardless of the motive, the very presence of the *croix pattée* on currency indicates that a Christian affiliation was broadly acknowledged among the Silk Road populace (or at least that the issuing authority believed this to be the case). By the nature of money, a coin is meant to circulate widely; in this instance, the use of both Chinese and Sogdian script on the coin demonstrates that it was intended for circulation in a multicultural region. The acceptance of this currency by both Chinese and Sogdian users suggests that Christian symbolism held a unifying or trust-conveying significance across cultural lines.

In the previous paragraph, two possibilities were proposed for the appearance of the *croix pattée*. It is unlikely, however, that this phenomenon was due to an official Christian allegiance of a ruler or state. To begin, Christianity was never the state religion (nor even a state-sponsored religion) of any known state in Central Asia, the realm from which this coin issue is thought to have originated [10]. Furthermore, a ruler's personal faith cannot account for why dozens of coins from other origins also bore the cross symbol discovered in Central Asia [10]. The only reasonable explanation for the widespread use of a Christian symbol on these coins is a general understanding that the symbol conferred greater acceptability among the intended users of the currency. In other words, the Christian emblem gave the currency additional legitimacy. Typically, a coin's legitimacy derives from two factors: belief in the issuing authority's reliability (to mint coins of consistent weight and value), and the expectation that other merchants will accept the coin[8]. The Christian emblem deals with the second factor by increasing the acceptability of the currency, which is particularly important as a Silk Road merchant. As they must resupply along the Silk Road to travel trans-continental distances, their currency needs to be accepted by merchants in Central Asia. At this point, Christianity's presence on

[8] This came from the author's personal theorizing.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.HT28527

currencies seems detached from the Syriac Christian monastery's longevity. Thus, it becomes necessary to understand how Christianity links to commercial legitimacy.

To begin, it should be noted that Christianity was not originally native to Silk Road commerce—its presence was initially confined to the western reaches of the trade network. However, the Sogdian diaspora triggered by the 7th century Arab Muslim conquest pushed Christianity eastward into regions such as the Turfan Basin (where the Syriac Christian monastery is located) [9]. This development meant that Eastern Christianity came to exist along the Silk Road. Once long-distance trade between East and West was underway, religion (in this case Christianity) became one of the few reliable means of establishing trust in an environment where interpersonal relationships were effectively absent across vast distances. Specifically, this trust meant that a single merchant could believe the currency he carried would be accepted at his destination, and critically, that it would be accepted at waypoints along his journey for resupply. Currencies marked with the Christian cross could have served exactly this purpose—bridging the trust gap. This is especially plausible given that the Turfan Basin, a crucial midpoint on the overland route, had a strong Christian affiliation as evidenced by its long-standing monastery.

This dynamic can be described as a self-reinforcing cycle. Silk Road merchants, believing that coins marked with the Christian cross would be accepted *en route* to destinations like Chang'an or Byzantium, chose to carry such coins. This, in turn, restricted their commerce to towns and cities that were also aligned with Christianity, since those were the places where their money would be honored. Trade thus brought profit to Christian communities, which in turn justified those Christian communities' prosperity. By reaping tangible commercial benefits from their religious affiliation, existing Christians remained steadfast in their faith while other ethnic groups—such as the Old Uyghurs—were naturally drawn to convert. The commercial interest Christianity made possible allowed its presence along the Silk Road to transcend its native Sogdian Christian population and take a leap at eternity. Conversely, when Christianity along the Silk Road eventually declined, it coincided with a transformation in the Silk Road trade model. After the 13th century, Silk Road commerce came to be dominated by Islamic states and Muslim merchants. Islam, now, replaced Christianity's communication of trust. Consequently, affiliation with Christianity was no longer key to profitable exchange, and the practice of Christianity in Central Asian trade settlements gradually waned. To remain critical, this perspective should be taken with a grain of salt due to the lack of direct textual evidence—as none of such documents exist in the present, which means the theorizing of this narrative is only based on numismatic evidence. As a result, further scholarly examination with evidence currently unknown to the author is critical, and by no means should this numismatic perspective be the sole explanation to the rise and demise of the Eastern Church along the Silk Road.

## 4. Conclusion

This essay has sought to pique scholarly interest in an overlooked interpretation of the role of religion in Silk Road commerce. The extraordinary endurance of Christianity in the East should not be dismissed as merely a by-product of diaspora or mercantile activity. Instead, new evidence should invite us to consider how the religion itself—through mechanisms of trust and symbolic authority—played a pivotal role in commercial life. The persistence of Eastern Christianity in Central Asia and China was not an accidental relic of trade; it was an active factor that facilitated trade. The religion provided a trans-regional language of trust (for example, through the Christian cross on widely circulating coinage) that helped bridge cultural and commercial divides. In this way, faith and commerce reinforced one another: Christianity conferred legitimacy and mutual confidence to economic exchanges, and those economic benefits in turn motivated communities to sustain the Christian faith.

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