



A HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE RISE AND FALL OF CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA DURING THE TANG AND YUAN DYNASTIES

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China is a communist country that is multi-ethnic and multi-religious. Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Chinese folk religions, and Christianity are among the different religions and beliefs that exist in China. China has been ruled by several dynasties throughout its history. According to the historical and literary sources on China, Chinese church history can be traced back to the Tang dynasty in the seventh century. After the decline of the Tang dynasty, Christianity disappeared from China. Once more Chinese Christianity was restored and expanded during the Yuan period in the thirteenth century. After the collapse of Yuan dynasty, Christianity once more disappeared in China. My research problem is “What are the historical factors that influenced the absence of a history of Christianity in China that continuously existed and spread during the Chinese imperial reigns ruled by different royal dynasties?” The main objective of this study is to examine the historical factors that influenced the disappearance of Christianity in China during the Tang and Yuan dynasties. The study of the Tang dynasty's archaeological findings of the beginning of Chinese Christianity, as well as the Yuan dynasty's origins and spread of Christianity during the Yuan dynasty, are the other objectives of the research. The historical research method was used for this qualitative study. After taking the historical evidence into consideration, the causes of Chinese Christianity's rise and fall throughout the Tang and Yuan dynasties were critically examined. At the end of the research, it was determined that the political support and religious freedom of each dynasty played a vital role in how quickly Christianity expanded. After the collapse of those dynasties, Christianity did not receive political patronage and religious freedom. And the Nestorian missionary service centers of the missionaries in Persia who spread Chinese Christianity were attacked by Islamic invaders. As a result, following the Tang and Yuan periods, Christianity vanished from China.

Keywords: China, Christianity, Dynasties, Church History, Tang, Yuan

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INTRODUCTION

China faced political unrest following the end of the Han dynasty in 220 AD. As a result of this Political unrest, the tribal people who lived outside of China's Great Wall got a chance to reach the southern region of China. A group of Nestorian Christians who were living with those tribes possibly managed to enter China as well (Balagalla, 2022). At that time, the area beyond the Great Wall of China belonged to the nomads, not to the Chinese. These nomadic tribes are thought to have introduced Christianity to China informally before the 7th century (Muffert, 2005). If these tribes introduced Christianity to China, the missionary pattern that led to the conquest of Europe was completely reversed. Because fourth-century tribal invasions of the Roman Empire, especially the Western Roman Empire, set the path to the spread of Christianity in the areas of Europe inhabited by tribes from outside the Roman Empire. There, Christianity spread from a civilized community (Roman Empire) to a tribal society that was seen as less civilized. What has happened in China is the spread of Christianity to China, which was the heart of the past civilization, by a tribal community called nomads (Muffert, 2005).

However, the Tang Dynasty's official record of the arrival of Christian missionaries in China dates from 635 AD. With the discovery of the Xiang stele in 1623, modern academic studies and discussions of Chinese Christianization during the Tang dynasty were initiated (Evers, 2005). The city presently known as Xiang was known as Chang'an during the Tang dynasty. The Xiang stone pillar is about nine feet high and about 3 feet wide. It has a black limestone slab with many carvings. In the center between the carvings, a cross appears above the Chinese characters. The large Chinese characters below the cross refer to the spread of Tachin or Nestorian Christianity in China ("A monument commemorating the propagation of the Ta'chin (Syrian) luminous religion in China"). This monument was erected in 781AD and officially, it is stated that the arrival of Nestorian missionaries during the Tang Empire took place in 635 AD. It clearly mentioned the arrival of the Alophen's mission (In Chinese sources: *Aluoben* 阿羅本; Probable Syriac name: *Alopheno*) in that year and it was the first archaeological evidence of Chinese Christianity in the Tang dynasty (Standaert, 2001).

After the Tang period, Chinese Christianity is mentioned again during the reign of the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan (1260-1294 AD). When Genghis Khan became emperor in 1206 AD, he turned that state into an empire, which rose to prominence among the nearby states. At the same time, his grandson Kublai Khan established the Yuan dynasty in China after conquering the country. As a result, the Mongol Empire ruled over China in the thirteenth century. Kublai Khan's father was a Mongolian prince named 'Tolui' and his mother was a Christian princess named Sorkaktani who belonged to the Kerites caste (Kerites had converted to Nestorianism around the tenth century) (Malek, 2021). Apart from that, various religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism and Islam spread in the empire with religious freedom during the Yuan Dynasty.

Franciscan missionaries came to China after Kublai Khan's death at a period when the Nestorian mission was also in decline. John of Montecovino was the first Franciscan missionary to China. John of Montecovino is credited with converting roughly 6,000 people



to Catholicism by the year 1305 AD. Pope Clement V appointed John of Montecovino the archbishop of Peking (at the time, the city of Kambalek) and the "Patriarch of the Far East" in 1307 AD (Muffert, 2005).

When researching the history of Asian Christianity, it is important to note that different Asian nations, including Japan, China, Korea, India, Sri Lanka, etc., experienced Christianity's spread at different times and in different ways. Chinese Christianity had not existed continuously in China since the arrival of Christianity. My research problem is what are the historical factors that influenced the absence of a history of Christianity in China that continuously existed and spread during the Chinese imperial reigns ruled by different royal dynasties? The main objective of this study is to examine the historical factors that influenced the disappearance of Christianity in China during the Tang and Yuan dynasties. The history of the encounter of Christianity in China can be divided into five periods. This study primarily focuses on Christianity during the Tang and Yuan dynasty periods and Christianity during the Ming, Qing, and Republic periods were excluded from the study. This study will be important for scholars, critics, and readers who study the history of Chinese Christianity, as well as missionaries who wish to better understand the cultural mood of China and overcome past problems.

METHODOLOGY

In order to collect both primary and secondary data (such as Chinese and non-Chinese sources, archeological inscriptions, and books) on early Christianity in China throughout the Tang and Yuan dynasties, this qualitative research used the historical research method. The reasons and consequences for the rise and fall of Chinese Christianity throughout the Tang and Yuan dynasties were critically analyzed after considering the historical evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

How quickly Christianity spread, depended on the degree of imperial recognition, patronage and religious freedom. I would like to draw attention to those factors that contributed to the expansion of Christianity in the Tang and Yuan dynasties.

Imperial recognition and Religious freedom of the Tang dynasty - Buddhism was well-established in northern China during the time of Kao-tsu, the first emperor of the Tang dynasty, and the royal family of the emperor were strictly Buddhist. However, Emperor Kao-tsu subsequently rejected Buddhism and embraced Confucianism. After that he accepted Confucian justifications, Buddhist practices were persecuted and treated as a foreign religion that did not belong in China. Similar to how Emperor Kao-tsu neglected Buddhism as a foreign religion, there was a tendency to do the same with Christianity. Emperor Kao-tsu was succeeded by his second son, Emperor T'ai-tsung came to power in 627AD and it was during his reign that Alopen's accession took place. He abandoned the anti-Buddhist policies followed by his father and extended his support to millions of Buddhist monks. He provided the opportunity to build Buddhist temples and train about three thousand Buddhist monks. During his twenty-second reign, religious freedom was widely granted. During this period of religious freedom, Persian beliefs also came to China. Apart from that, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, which were the three main religious faiths in China at that time, were also given priority. Apart from political and religious activities, Emperor T'ai-tsung was also interested in education and art. He built a library near his palace. It is said that there were a large number of books. There were about eighteen scholars in that library and they were



engaged in the task of editing Confucian texts according to a proper standard. During this period, when the Persian missionaries introduced the Nestorian faith as a written tradition (scripture), the emperor showed great interest in it. The emperor treated Alopen as a distinguished guest and escorted him to his library and ordered him to translate the scriptures. It was an auspicious omen for Chinese Christian missionary work.

“Emperor T’ai-tsung (627-649) began his magnificent career in glory and splendour..... behold there was a highly virtuous man named Alopen in the kingdom of Ta-ch’in. Auguring from the azure sky he decided to carry the true sutras with him, and observing the course of winds, he made his way through difficulties and perils” (Muffert, 2005). “In the ninth year of the period named Chen-Kuan (635) Alopen arrived at Chang’an. The emperor despatched his minister, Duke Fang Hsuan-ling, with a guard of honour, to the western suburb to meet visitor and conduct him to the palace. The sutras were translated in the imperial library” (Nicholini-Zani, 2022).

The Religious freedom of Yuan dynasty - Islamic rulers have to rule Persia Under the Mongol Empire in the 13th century. Nine Mongol rulers ruled China after Kublai Khan's passing until the end of the Yuan dynasty. The rule of each of these emperors was more passive than that of his predecessor. The passive rule of the nine made the empire gradually weaker. Timur, who became the emperor after Kublai Khan, tried to maintain the same religious and communal freedom that existed during Kublai Khan's time. Prince George, one of Kublai Khan's great generals, supported Christianity by protecting its northern border. By this time, in an era when Islam was spreading in other parts of Central Asia, Timur began to welcome non-Muslims to his capital. He also helped the Italian Franciscan missionaries build their first Catholic church. During the time of Kublai Khan, all religions such as Judaism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity spread freely in the Mongol Empire. According to a letter written by Bishop Andrew in 1326 AD, the spread of Catholicism even received the state support of the emperor. He built a monastery in China with the money received from the government. Thus, religious freedom during the Mongol Empire was supportive for the spread of Catholicism.

According to this study, both external and internal factors had an impact on the fall of Christianity in china. Ecclesial factors were categorized as internal factors and political factors were categorized as external. After the collapse of Tang and Yuan dynasties, Christianity did not receive imperial patronage and religious freedom. As a result, following the Tang and Yuan periods, Christianity vanished from China. I prefer to emphasize that the fall of Christianity after the Tang and Yuan dynasties was caused by both internal and external reasons. The following are the reasons that caused to collapse of Christianity in china.

Political factors (external factors)

1) Loss of imperial support of Dynasties

Loss of imperial support of Tang Dynasty – A young man of about fourteen years old served as the Tang Empire's last emperor during a time of weak leadership and decline. Civil wars and other unrest led to the destruction of the Tang Empire falls in 907. The Nestorian religion also gradually vanished from China at the same time. From then until the discovery of the Xiang stele in the 16th century, there is no record of early Chinese Christianity. Thus, the first phase of Chinese Christianity that depended on the political support of the Tang Dynasty faded away with the end of that dynasty.

Loss of imperial support of Yuan Dynasty – According to the Mongolian Peace Treaty (*pax mongolica*) implemented during the time of Genghis Khan, the Mongol Empire included



China, Central Asia, Russia and Persia. Their political authority was divided between four Khans. Those four khans had control over the regions known as Yuan, Chagatai Khanate, Golden Horde, and Ilkhanate. Till the time of Kublai Khan, all four of these regions were united. However, after his passing, the United Mongolian Empire started to fall apart as a result of civil wars, the dispersal of the Khans, and epidemics (Black Death). Kublai Khan's passing marked the beginning of the empire's collapse. Furthermore, Christianity did not suddenly vanish from China. Several of his successors preserved Christianity after him. However, that defense did not hold up for very long. The Ming Dynasty, began with the collapse of the Yuan Dynasty in 1368 AD. The Ming dynasty's first emperor is regarded as being known as Hongwu (Hongwu alias Zhu Yuanzhang 1328-1398). He drove out of China foreign government officials and clergy alongside the Mongols.

2) Islamic invaders of Persia

Persia is the home of Nestorian Christian missionaries. As a result of the Arab invasions, two powerful empires, the Sassanid Empire of Persia and Constantinople, were almost completely conquered by the Muslim invasions. The country that used to be called Persia is now called Iran. Persian emperors are called Iranian emperors. The Sassanid Persians were the last royal dynasty of Persia. Later, with the Arab Muslim invasions of Persia, it became a Muslim empire. The Muslim invasions of Persia also contributed to the decline of Chinese Christianity in the seventh century, which slowed Persian missionary work. After the Islamic invasions in the 7th century, Persia began to spread Islam as an Islamic state. Around 636 AD, the Arab invasions moved towards Persia and the Arabs captured the Persian capital (Seleucia- Ctesiphon).

At the time of the death of Kublai Khan of China, the protector of the Christian Church and the unified ruler of the Mongol Empire in 1294, the Ilkhan of Persia was Geikhatu. He was succeeded by Ghazan Ilkhan (1295-1304 AD). He was the VII Ilkhan of Persia and embraced Islam. After Ghazan's conversion to Islam, the Persian part of the Mongol Empire that belonged to the Mongolian Peace Treaty (*pax mongolica*) became a Muslim state. Thus the religious freedom under Kublai Khan's Mongol Empire was lost and those areas became Muslim areas. Kublai Khan's death marked the end of the Great Khans not only in Persia, but also the disintegration of the Mongol Empire in the Far East.

3) Imperial edict in 845 AD

According to the Tang dynasty official sources in 845, an imperial edict ordered all monks of foreign religions to return to laity in the empire. Although most historians take this edict as mainly aiming at Buddhism, the persecution that ensued had drastic consequences for Christianity. Three thousand foreign monks, including Christians and Zoroastrians, were forced to return to laity. It seems Christianity, totally disappeared from the Empire until it was reintroduced during the Yuan dynasty (Standaert, 2001). That edict was taken for economic reasons in Chinese society. Chinese authorities tried to control the fiscal system, but the fact that none of the numerous goods belonging to monks and monasteries were subject to taxation led to many abuses. When the dynasty in 747 decided to establish a system of official ordinations sponsored by the state, the situation became even worse. After the Lushan rebellion, the imperial coffers were empty. However, it appears that the 845 edict's goal was to drastically reduce the number of monasteries in order to achieve a beneficial outcome rather than to completely eradicate Buddhism. However, it had a negative impact on foreign religions, though.



Ecclesial factors (internal factors)

1) Loss of Christian missionaries

At the end of the Tang dynasty, there was a disappearance of Christian communities, their places of worship, and ecclesial structures. Nestorian Christians lost contact with the center of Syriac Christianity in Persia, from which they had originated, due to changes in Central Asian geopolitics and the spread of Islam. Other reasons for the decline of those missions not only in China but in the East, in general, are related to Friars Minor itself, which had become internally divided and suffered heavily from the black plague in 1348, and to the papacy, whose incentives to send missionaries to the East dissipated. Under the Ming dynasty, Nestorian Christianity and Catholicism were excluded as foreign religions. At that time, almost all the Christian missionaries in China were foreigners. Chinese clerical leadership, forever felt foreign, not at home. Without this support, Christianity could not take root in the soil of the dominant culture of the time. In 1369 AD all Christians were expelled from China. Accordingly, the Christianity began to disappear from China for the second time.

2) Syncretism and loss of Christian Identity

In China, Buddhism and Taoism were both widely practiced at that time. Although many Buddhists and Taoists converted to Christianity, the practice and language of Chinese Christianity, which was comprised of both Buddhist and Taoist adherents, partly diminished the Christian identity. Even though they were allowed to preach Catholicism without interference, the circumstances of those who converted to Christianity were not very favourable. "Juda and Saracen people could not be converted to Catholicism, and even if a great number of Buddhist idolaters were converted to Christianity, they are not going on the correct Christian path". Without a doubt, the surviving (stele of Xi'an) manuscripts demonstrate how Christian missionaries underwent a language adaptation process and embraced a vocabulary derived from Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Christian translators and teachers had to borrow their vocabulary from Daoist and Buddhist concepts and accommodate them as far as possible to their needs (Malek, 2021). It's possible that such borrowings may lead to weakening the core message of Christianity and missions. Christianity, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism were all formally tolerated by China but never actively promoted them. However, the majority of foreign religions tried to influence Chinese culture. Even the Manichaeans tried to combine their religion with Buddhism. After undergoing a language adjustment process, Christian missionaries embraced a vocabulary that was derived from Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. (Standaert, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The Christian missionary service was able to spread Christianity in China throughout the Tang and Yuan periods. After the collapse of those dynasties, Christianity failed to gain political support and religious freedom. As a result, Christianity gradually declined and vanished from China. The dominance of any religious monopoly, the religious freedom under a strong and egalitarian political monopoly, and the relationship between the religious monopoly and the state (political monopoly) all frequently have a favourable impact on the expansion of religions in many nations. Additionally, poor control over a religious monopoly, chaotic political structures, and a particular state's adherence to a particular religious' ideology can all hinder the spread of religions. There's a culture in China that excludes everything foreign. Christian communities and missionaries had always been at risk in China



because of their interactions with foreign entities. There is still very little interaction between Chinese Christians and churches in other countries.

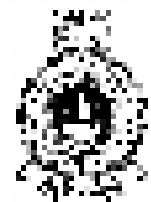
My opinion is that the critical requirement to securely establish the local Chinese Christianity can be realized by understanding and responding to the mind-set that causes religious violence in china.

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