

Mysteries Behind Jingjiao's Decline

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Abstract. This article examines the history of Jingjiao (Nestorian Christianity) and its development in 7th-century China, focusing on the factors contributing to its disappearance. It critically evaluates three prevailing explanations: Wuzong's suppression of foreign religions during the Tang Dynasty, Jingjiao's reliance on foreign missionaries, and the Chinese populace's rejection of its teachings. While these theories shed light on specific challenges faced by Jingjiao, they fail to fully account for its decline. This article argues that the primary reason for Jingjiao's disappearance lies in its deep integration with the Tang government, which left it vulnerable to political shifts and upheavals. By analyzing historical records and contextualizing Jingjiao's development within broader sociopolitical and cultural dynamics, the article offers a nuanced understanding of its rise and fall, highlighting the importance of independent adaptability for religious survival in imperial China.

Keywords: Christianity History, Tang Dynasty, Jingjiao

1. Introduction

In 635 AD, during the reign of Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty, Alopen, a Christian missionary from Persia, arrived in Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an), marking the introduction of Jingjiao to China. Emperor Taizong, known for his openness to different religions, supported the coexistence of Buddhism, Daoism, Jingjiao, and Zoroastrianism, fostering a diverse and religiously plural society. Christianity, though new to China, had significant growth potential. The Stele of the Spread of the Daqin Jingjiao, composed during Emperor Gaozong's rule, records the flourishing of this faith and highlights the emperor's support for the construction of Jingjiao temples in Chang'an, viewing the religion as beneficial to both the state and its people.

Jingjiao, or the Luminous Religion, was notable for its adaptability within the Chinese cultural context. The name "Jingjiao" itself reflects how this form of Christianity was integrated into the religious fabric of Tang China. Missionaries translated essential Christian teachings into Chinese and blended aspects of local traditions while preserving the fundamental beliefs of their faith. This ability to contextualize Christianity allowed Jingjiao to coexist alongside other religious traditions. The Jingjiao practitioners brought texts that were translated into Chinese, combining elements of Buddhist and Daoist terminology, which helped make their ideas more comprehensible to the Chinese audience. Their message was conveyed through syncretic language, but the mission remained rooted in its Christian foundations.

However, despite its initial promise, Jingjiao disappeared from China roughly two centuries later, coinciding with the collapse of the Tang Dynasty. There is no clear historical record explaining why this religion, once supported by the state, suddenly declined. Scholars have speculated on the reasons, and W. R. Taylor suggests three main causes: (1) a lack of demand for a new faith in China at that time, (2) Jingjiao's reliance on foreign support and leadership, and (3) a reactionary movement against foreign cultures led by Emperor Wuzong in 845 AD [1].

In this paper, I will examine these three views and express my own opinion on them. While each hypothesis provides a plausible explanation, they all suffer from limitations and cannot definitively explain the decline of Jingjiao. I will critique the historical limitations of these views, provide counterexamples from historical texts, and propose a new hypothesis. My argument is that Jingjiao's demise was primarily due to its close ties with Tang politics. The fall of the Tang Dynasty and the collapse of Jingjiao were closely linked, and the religion's overreliance on political support weakened its ability to survive independently.

2. Emperor Wuzong's suppression of foreign religions

Emperor Wuzong's Huichang Suppression of Buddhism in 845 AD was a large-scale campaign against religion, primarily targeting Buddhism. Although other religions, including Jingjiao, were not the primary focus of the suppression, they were affected by the weakening of religious institutions in China. Some scholars argue that this event marked the end of Jingjiao's legitimate presence in the country [2].

The suppression stemmed from Wuzong's concern over the growing influence of Buddhism, particularly its economic power and the vast lands held by Buddhist temples. Influenced by the Daoist priest Zhao Guizhen, Wuzong initiated policies that included banning Buddhist activities, demolishing temples, and confiscating their property. According to the New Book of Tang, "Upon Wuzong's ascension, he abolished Buddhist law, destroyed 4,600 temples across the nation, and demoted 265,000 monks and nuns to civilian status, confiscating their land and property." The text also notes, "the number of Zoroastrians and Christians in China totaled around 2,000."

Some interpret this as evidence that Jingjiao, like other foreign religions, had already dwindled by this time. However, the Stele of the Spread of the Daqin Luminous Religion describes "temples filled cities across the empire," suggesting that Jingjiao had spread widely, even if not to the extent claimed on the stele. Additionally, Jingjiao clergy, unlike Buddhist monks, were allowed to marry, further facilitating the religion's spread.

Despite the Huichang Suppression of Buddhism, the impact on Jingjiao was not as catastrophic as some scholars suggest. For instance, Muslims, another foreign group in China at the time, were also minimally affected by Wuzong's policies. Like Muslims, Jingjiao Christians kept a relatively low profile, with fewer large temples or extensive lands. This raises the question: if Jingjiao was as inconspicuous as some argue, why did it still appear in official records, grouped with other foreign religions that were subject to suppression?

The Old Book of Tang records a decree by Emperor Wuzong: "The Daqin and Zoroastrian temples shall not be allowed to exist after the abolition of Buddhist law. Their clergy shall return to secular life, or if they are foreigners, they shall be sent back to their native lands." This undoubtedly weakened the spread of Jingjiao, but it did not completely extinguish it. Evidence of Jingjiao activity can still be found after this period. For example, in 878 AD, during Emperor Xizong's reign, Jingjiao Christians were mentioned in connection with the mass slaughter of foreigners by Huang Chao in Guangzhou. The fact that Jingjiao was present in a location so far from its center in Chang'an suggests a wide geographical spread.

3. Reliance on foreign missionaries

Another prominent theory is that the dependence on foreign missionaries limited the growth of Jingjiao in China. Both Mong and Charbonnier note that, "The absence of a local clergy was a critical factor in the failure of organized Christianity. [3]" Evidence from historical texts, such as the Luoyang Pillar, supports the idea that clergy in Jingjiao temples were primarily foreigners. For example, it records, "The clergy of the Da Qin Monastery: Xuanying, head of the monastery, whose secular family name is Mi; Xuanqing, Great Virtue of Respect-Inspiring Department, whose secular family name is Mi; Zhitong, Great Virtue of the Nine Grades, whose secular family name is Kang. [4]"

The fact that many clergy had Sogdian surnames, such as Mi [4], suggests that the priesthood was dominated by foreign groups from regions like Persia and Sogdiana. However, this alone does not prove that these missionaries lacked zeal for spreading Christianity in China. In fact, these foreign missionaries were highly committed to spreading their faith. For instance, the very name "Da Qin" [5] reflects an attempt to localize the religion, translating terms and concepts into Chinese and combining different cultural elements.

This cultural localization is also evident in the fusion of Jingjiao religious texts with Buddhist terminology. The Xi'an Stele quotes Buddhist phrases to express Christian ideas. As Deeg notes, "Although it abounds in Buddhist terminology, the text is highly critical of Buddhism and tries to demonstrate the superiority of its own teaching.[5]" Jingjiao missionaries were not blending their faith with Buddhism but rather using familiar language to convey their message. This suggests that they maintained a distinct identity, which would have been clear to the Chinese populace at the time.

4. The Chinese people's rejection of Jingjiao

A third hypothesis is that Jingjiao failed to gain popular acceptance among the Chinese people. The argument is that despite government support, the religion did not spread widely enough to ensure its survival. The lack of direct evidence showing the widespread popular practice of Jingjiao supports this claim. Critics argue that Jingjiao was an inward-looking religion, limited to foreign communities and clergy [6].

However, counterexamples suggest that Jingjiao had a more significant presence among the general populace than previously thought. While there is no concrete data on the number of Chinese converts, the social influence of Jingjiao is well documented. During the An Lushan Rebellion, Jingjiao Christians played a key role in providing medical care and relief to those in need. The Xi'an Stele emphasizes their charitable work: "They fed the hungry, clothed the cold, healed the sick, and buried the dead." These acts show that Jingjiao was actively involved with the wider Chinese community rather than an isolated religious group. On the mid-8th century, traditional Buddhist charity systems, such as the "Benevolent Fields" for aiding the sick and poor, had weakened. Jingjiao Christians stepped in to fill this gap, earning public support through their humanitarian efforts; they were attuned to the needs of ordinary people.

5. New hypothesis: the political connection

It can be seen from Taizong's high praise of Jing religion that most of Jingjiao's behaviors were highly politicized. In other words, many things Jing missionaries did were to please the authorities, so when they lost their authority, they could easily be replaced by other religious forces. Finally, even if Jingjiao may have been active at the end of the Tang Dynasty and during the Five Dynasties

and Ten Kingdoms, it was inevitable that it would gradually die out in such an environment since its relationship with official authority was almost gone.

When Aroben first entered China, he tried to get close to Tang Taizong in various ways. Although the Xi 'an Stele was erected by the Jing priest, according to the records of the Xi 'an Stele, he praised the virtues of the five emperors of the Tang Dynasty, ingratiate himself with them, and honored the emperor as "saint". This kind of flattery is a very clear expression of Jingjiao's missionary strategy in China, that is, relying on the rulers to protect themselves and reduce the difficulties and obstacles of their own survival. This was confirmed by the official response that the emperors' protection of Jingjiao was evident, with the portraits of successive emperors hanging in the Daqin Temple. First, Emperor Taizong "ordered you to take a picture of the emperor and turn the temple wall", and then Emperor Xuanzong "ordered General Gaolis to send the Five Saints to be placed in the photo Temple", and Emperor Xuanzong also invited the bishop and 17 Jing priests to sing Syriac Christian hymns in the prayer ceremony for Emperor Xuanzong in Xingqing Palace, and personally wrote the temple gate plaque.

In addition, Jingjiao also assisted the Tang emperor in the military field to suppress the rebellion. Chore Piscopo Issu was instrumental in assisting Emperor Su during the Anshi Rebellion and following General Guo Ziyi in the southern and northern campaigns. It is confirmed that because of Issu's credit, the "Chinese Tablet of Jingjiao in Daqin" funded and engraved by him as a "big donor" can be placed in Chang 'an City, and at the end of the inscription, he eulogizes the emperors of the Tang Dynasty, showing the mentality of Jingjiao monks to adhere to and please the court.

In the aspect of culture, Jingjiao brought various influences to the Tang Dynasty, such as medicine, science and technology, mathematics, etc., especially the achievements of Jing teachers in medicine. Qin Minghe, a Jingjiao, used bloodletting to treat eye diseases for Emperor Gaozong, and Chongyi treated Emperor Xuanzong's elder brother Li Xian. Jingjiao used these as missionary skills to win the favor of dignitaries, and through the exchange of interests, religious discourse was in a favorable position in politics.

But this over-reliance was also fatal, because not all emperors liked it. For example, Emperor Wuzong of the Tang Dynasty, who was very antipathy to paganism, was expelled in his campaign to destroy Buddhas in Huichang, and has never been revived since. Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty, who came to the throne of Emperor Wuzong, promoted Buddhism and restored temples and monks back to the temples, but seemed to ignore the situation of Jingjiao. Buddhism maintained its influence despite these disturbances, especially during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period after the fall of the Tang Dynasty. Although there were frequent changes of government, many local governments supported the development of Buddhism. This diverse political relationship and the government's emphasis on Buddhism helped Buddhism as a religious system to continue to develop in China for a long time.

However, Jingjiao was not so lucky. It had lost its right to speak at the end of the Tang Dynasty, and it could not continue to use the means of political attachment that it could use before. It could only allow Buddhism and other religions to be focused on by the government, and then completely lost a huge protection umbrella that it could rely on when various political upheavals of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms were taking place.

6. Conclusion

The history of Jingjiao in China highlights the challenges of sustaining a religion in the face of shifting political dynamics. Initially embraced under the Tang Dynasty's open policies, Jingjiao flourished with imperial support and made a significant impact. Its ability to adapt to Chinese

culture—translating key concepts into local languages and aligning with Buddhist and Daoist ideas—demonstrated its flexibility. However, its success was closely tied to the political climate, which shifted dramatically during Emperor Wuzong's suppression of foreign religions, leading to its decline. This dependence on imperial favor ultimately made Jingjiao vulnerable when political support was withdrawn.

As discussed in this paper, the three main theories—Emperor Wuzong's crackdown, excessive reliance on foreign missionaries, and the alleged lack of popularity—offer plausible but incomplete explanations for Jingjiao's decline. While each of these factors contributed to the weakening of Jingjiao, its close ties to the Tang political system were the primary reason for its eventual downfall. This dependence on imperial support rendered the religion vulnerable when that backing was withdrawn.

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