

## The Nestorian Steles in China and Japan

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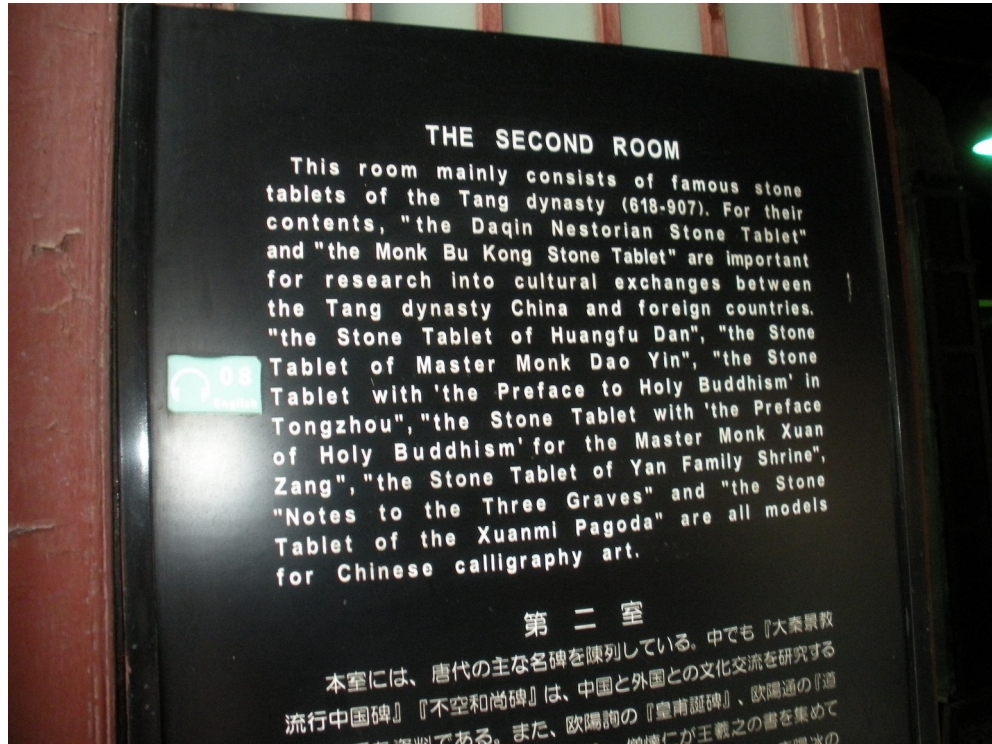
April 18, 2019

In the latter parts of May 2013, I traveled to China with one main purpose of visiting the famous Church of the East Monument, also known widely as the Nestorian stele, in the city of Xi'an. The stele is said to have been erected on January 7, 781 during the reign of the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) by the missionaries of the Church who have traveled to the western region of Xi'an. The black marbled stele was unearthed in the late Ming Dynasty (1623 - 1625) beside Chongren Temple outside of Xi'an by farmers working on the land. They were scared and alerted the authorities of their finding.



From the late 19th century, a number of European scholars were in favor of getting this amazing stele and what it represents out of China. In 1907, the Danish scholar and adventurer Frits Holm arrived to

Xi'an with real plans and intentions to move it to Europe. The local authorities were alerted and they intervened. The stele, complete with its turtle base, was soon after moved from its location near Chongren Temple where it was in the open for three centuries to its permanent Room No. 2 location in the Beilin Museum (Forest of Steles Museum). The museum is constructed within the intact ancient walls of the city of Xi'an. With this move, the Chinese authorities ensured the safeguarding of the stele.



Disappointed from not being able to move the stele out of China, Holm wrote that he made a facsimile of it and took it with him to New York where he later made an exact replica. Holm's replica was displayed in New York for about 10 years. It was finally purchased by a wealthy New Yorker and sent to the Pope as a gift. Another replica from this replica is on display in the Bunn Inter-cultural Center on the campus of Georgetown University in Washington, DC.

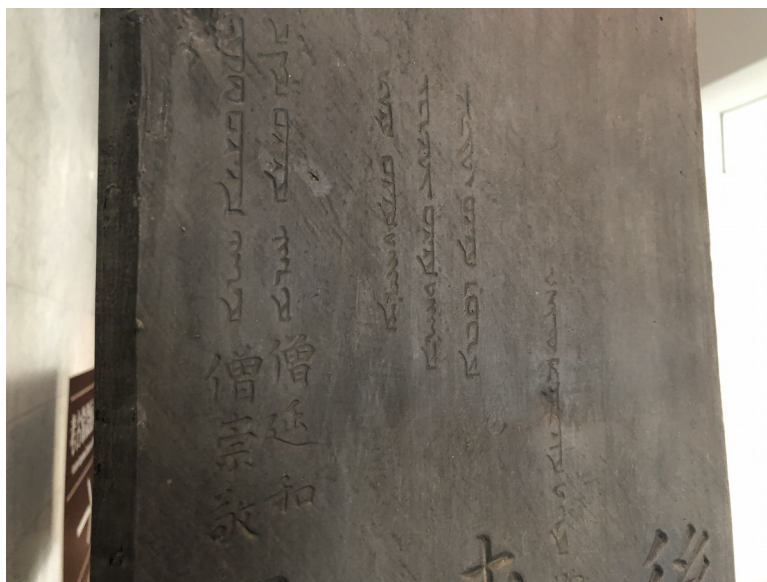
The inscriptions on the stele are in both Chinese and Syriac scripts. The Syriac inscriptions include words and names and tell how one A-lo-pu arrived in Ch'ang-an AD 635 bringing along the sacred scriptures, how he proceeded to eulogize the various emperors and dynasties, and tell how the former issued edicts and ordered their portraits to be taken and transferred to the walls of the churches. The inscriptions, according to Assemani, also consists of sixty seven names, including one bishop, twenty eight presbyters and thirty eight others, most of whom are designated as monks. The Syriac inscriptions are mainly at the bottom of the stele and on its two sides.

Earlier, and as I was studying about the history of the Nestorian Monument in Xi'an, the replicas erected in later times began to surface. Two replicas existed in Japan – one very popular sitting on top of Mt. Koya and the other in a museum in Kyoto.

In March 2019, I traveled to Japan with plans to see both replicas. I had some idea where to go in order to find the Mt. Koya replica; however, I did not know where to start the search for the one in Kyoto; however, I recalled an earlier communication with Ken Joseph when he stated that looking in museums



was the best path to take. When I got to the ancient Christian city of Kyoto, I sought help from the very polite and helpful hotel receptionist. She began calling the museums in the city after I suggested to her to ask for the Nestorian stele, use the term Christian monument or perhaps use the Japanese term Keikyo that means Christian. After several phone calls, the stele was located. I was excited beyond description. The next day, I took a taxi to Kyoto University Museum, where the stele is showcased in the large lobby as one enters the museum for a moderate fee.



This replica seems very close in size to the original Xi'an stele; however, it lacks the turtle base which the original stele sits on. This replica is mounted on top of a normal block. The museum receptionist did not have any brochure that I could retain. She was not able to provide any information about it either. I have written to the museum requesting information about the circumstances that prompted the museum to acquire this replica and any information about its origin. I am still waiting for a response.

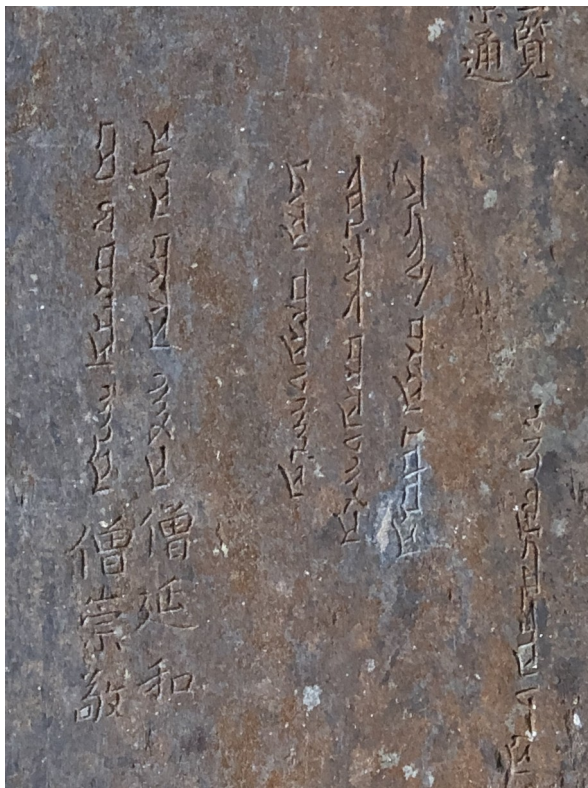
The second replica of the Xi'an's Nestorian stele stands on top of Mt. Koya (Koyasan) — the Holiest mountain in Japan. This replica was erected on September 21, 1911. Mt. Koya is a secluded town where visitors could use a cable car to get to it. The famous Kobo Daishi, the Great Teacher of the Law and the most honored of Japanese saints wanted to built a monastery for him and his monks that would be peaceful, quite and hard to reach. He founded the monastery of Konga-buji in the year AD 816 where he preached the tenets of a new sect of Buddhism known as Shingonbu. This became the largest Buddhist sect in Japan. Interestingly, Kobo Daishi had traveled to Xi'an earlier in AD 806 and it is said that he was so impressed with the Church of the East teachings that he incorporated some of its Christian tenets into his esoteric Buddhism. Thus, it is safe to argue that Shingonbu is a mix of Christianity and Buddhism. The exact circumstance for the erection of this replica is debatable; however, it seems that this Christian-Buddhism connection could have been the reason for later plans to have a replica of the Nestorian stele placed on the holy Buddhist mountain. The replica sits at the entrance to Kobo Daishi's mausoleum. Worth mentioning that half a million pilgrims of all ages and classes climb the Holy Mountain to visit the tomb of Kobo Daishi.

I was elated to visit Mt. Koya (Koyasan) to see this important replica and to learn about Kobo Daishi. With Internet search, many questions in Japan and with good luck the stele was located. I was surprised to find offerings present at the base of the stele that included coins, small statue and a small cup of Saki. Offerings such as these are very typical in Japanese culture, I was told. So, I placed my own coin as my personal offering and said a prayer.

It is obvious and clear that this copied stele could not be called a genuine replica since it is not an exact and it lacks the dimensions of at least the width and depth of the Xi'an original stele. However, the inscriptions may have been produced via facsimile and perhaps accurate.



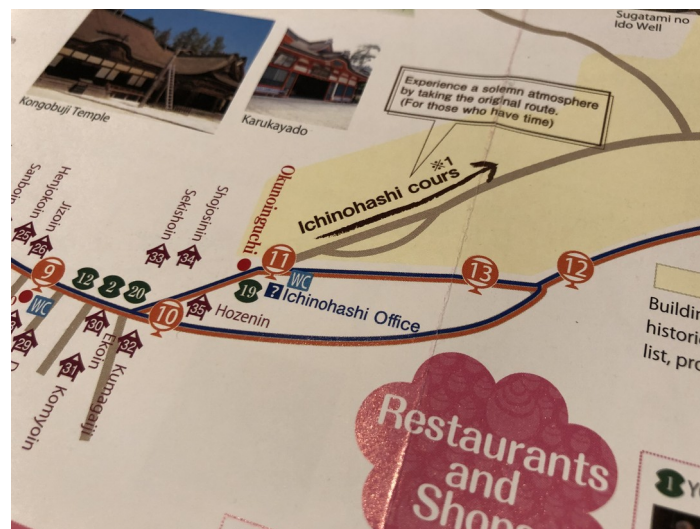




According to Rev. Arimasa Kubo, in his “Keikyo (Syrian Christianity) and Japan” an account of Nestorianism’s development in Japan is put this way: “Keikyo” is a Syrian Christianity and is also called “Nestorian Christianity.” The Japanese name “Keikyo” (in Chinese “Jingjiao”) was used to call this teaching when it came to China and meant the “luminous teaching.”

And according to Professor Sakae Ikeda of Kyoto University, there was a Nestorian aide to Shotoku Taishi or Prince Shōtoku (February 7, 574 – April 8, 622). The prince was a semi-legendary regent and a politician of the Asuka Period in Japan who served under Empress Suiko and was the son of Emperor Yomei. During the time of Shotoku Taishi, there were some Nestorians unofficially present in Japan. Professor Ikeda says the name of this Nestorian aid was “Maru Toma.” In Aramaic “Maru” means lord and “Toma” is Thomas. Thus, “Lord Thomas.”

If you decided to visit this stele, take the train to Koyasan. As the train reaches Mt. Koya, a cable car is there at the base of the mountain to take the visitors to the top. After reaching the top, buses drive the visitors to town. Get off at either bus stop 11 or 12, look for Ichinohashi course at a fork or road split, which is very close to where the stele is.



As I turned my back and left the Nestorian stele on Mt. Koya behind me, a picture of the other replica at the University Museum in the ancient city of Kyoto that I touched couple days before came to my mind as well. Then I saw myself gazing at that amazing original stele in Xi’an, China some six years earlier. I shivered with joy. I realized then that what I just experienced was something exclusive that very handful have been fortunate to witness. How lucky, I said to myself. I wondered how many out there have lived this amazing exposure? Most exciting was to be able to witness the three steles in both countries: China, where I felt determination and greatness and in Japan where I lived with graceful, discipline and divine people.

The Nestorian Stele is arguably one of the most important artifacts in the history of Christianity. The fusion of Christian theology and Chinese philosophy added to the existence of two distinct scripts within this unique monument, the Nestorian Stele can serve as the foundation for future studies of East-West relationship. Our forefathers were great people as civilizations were being built, they became mighty as they established their empire and lastly but not least during post empire as they converted to Christianity and became great missionaries to Far East Asia. We must work hard to educate the world about it, about what it stands for and follow in their monumental footsteps.

## **FURTHER READINGS**

John Stewart, "Nestorian Missionary Enterprise" (A Church on Fire)

Alexander Wylie, "Researches in China"

P. Y. Saeki, "The Nestorian Monument in China"

Dr. Fritz Holm, "My Nestorian Adventure"

Ibid, "A Japanese author on the Chinese Nestorian Monument"

Abbé Huc, "Christianity in China"

Abraham Yohannan, "The Death of a Nation"

Joel E. Warda, "The Flickering Light of Asia"

<https://www.atour.com/religion/docs/20040521a.html>