

INVESTIGATION OF THE IDEA OF NESTORIAN CROSSES— BASED ON F. A. NIXON’S COLLECTION

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ABSTRACT

It is generally agreed that the study of the Nestorian Cross (a kind of bronze piece believed to be an early Chinese Christian relic), has great significance both for the developing study of Jingjiao and for ethnographic studies of the Nestorian Mongol people. The most important question that we should ask, however, is, “Are these so-called Nestorian Crosses part of the Mongolian Nestorian heritage?” In other words, before starting to interpret the pieces in question, we need to ask if the identification, made at the first step of examination, is convincing enough as a basis upon which to build the interpretation. This paper focuses on issues concerning all aspects of the concept of Nestorian Crosses, looking first into the history of such an idea, then investigating its inner logic, and finally challenging its hard evidence. It is hoped that the conclusions of this paper will initiate a paradigm shift in the current study of this topic.

Introduction to the Study

The Jingjiao and the Yelikewen

The name “Nestorian Crosses” clearly reveals that the religious dimension has been the primary consideration in the existing identification of these items, an identification which subsumes them as relics of Chinese Nestorianism, or more accurately, of the Jingjiao and the Yelikewen.

Although controversies surround the identity of Nestorianism, the most commonly accepted description is as follows: At the Ephesus Council of 431 A.D., the Patriarch Nestorius was deemed heretical and his teaching anathematized due to his insistence that Mary should be called “Christotokos (Christ-bearer)” instead of “Theotokos (God-bearer).” This insistence is thought to emphasize a distinction between Christ’s divine and human natures instead of their unity. Later, the followers of the Patriarch Nestorius were given the name Nestorians and their theological practice was called Nestorianism.¹

“Jingjiao” and “Yelikewen” are the indigenized names for Nestorianism after it was accepted and disseminated in ancient China. According to the famous Xi’an Stele, which is believed to be inscribed with the earliest doctrine and missionary record of Nestorianism in

¹ Glen L. Thompson mentions that in an East Syriac theological book the author comments that the Church of the East “never changed their faith and preserved it as they had received it from the apostles, and they are called Nestorians unjustly, especially since Nestorius was not their Patriarch, and they did not understand his language” (Thompson 2009, 417). The discussion on the origin of Nestorianism is not the major concern of this article, however.

China, “Jingjiao (景教)” is the name Persian missionaries gave to Nestorianism in Chinese, because the word connotes with the meaning of “light,” and literally means “The Luminous Religion.”

In A.D. 845, the fifth year of Huichang in the Tang dynasty, Emperor Wuzong issued an edict banning all foreign religions in China in order to protect the local religion of Daoism. After that, Jingjiao seemed to fall into a long-term silence in China, until a hundred years later when the Nomadic Mongolian entered the terror of China and set up the Yuan dynasty, under the name of Yelikewen (a term denoting both the name of the religion and the followers of that religion).² The ancient religion, originating from the Church of the East, showed its vitality again in the region of modern-day Inner Mongolian Province (or, to give it another less political name: Southern Mongolia).³

Concerning other names for the Yelikewen during the Yuan dynasty, Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang comment as follows:

[O]ther names such as the “Daqin Religion,” “Persian Religion” were also found in Chinese sources. During the Mongol-Yuan period, Christians were called either Diexie (迭屑) in pre-Kublai time or Yelikewen during the Yuan period. Diexie is a phonetic translation of Persian word Tarsā; and Yelikewen is a Chinese phonetic translation of the Turco-Mongolic word *ärkägün* whose etymology is still debated. (Winkler and Tang 2009, 6)

The study of Christianity in China is well-developed and well-informed, but within its field, the study of the history of the Jingjiao/Yelikewen started quite late with the hallmark publication in 1993 of Qianzhi Zhu’s *The Nestorianism of China* (1993). Qianzhi Zhu, along with many scholars of this subject, adopts a traditional historical methodology which focuses on reading and applying the textual materials to the historical hypotheses.⁴ Contemporary scholars realize, however, that interdisciplinary methodologies need to be employed in this study, as Halbertsma has advocated:

The complex nature of the Nestorian remains requires a broad and interdisciplinary cooperation from scholars of several disciplines, including History, Art History, Theology, Turkology, Syriac Studies and other fields to further understand this heritage. Only this cooperation of interdisciplinary research can reveal the different aspects of the intercultural encounter of the Church of the East with Chinese and Mongol cultures and the theological value of this material. (Halbertsma 2008, 236)

Halbertsma has his reasons for saying this, because for 12 years he studied Inner Mongolian relics that are believed to be of Nestorian origin, including grave sites, mural paintings, reliefs on tombstones, etc.. These relics are not limited to textual materials, and textual study cannot be sufficient for the study of Jingjiao. The situation which Halbertsma and other scholars in this field are facing is the relative deficiency of historical materials of Jingjiao, or as Pierre Marsone puts it:

² Although there is controversy around whether Yelikewen at that time refers to the Mongolian Nestorians alone, or if it also refers to the Catholic Christians or Christians from other Orders, that argument is not the main concern of this article. I will adopt the most simple and clear way of referring to the Mongolian Nestorians with the name “Yelikewen,” and to Chinese Nestorianism before the Yuan dynasty with the name “Jingjiao.” See Zhu (1995, 57) and Yin (2009).

³ Some scholars argue that the Jingjiao of Yuen dynasty did show some sort of succession from that of the Tang dynasty. For example, Jiang (1982, 98); Li (1998, 360); Tang (1993, 421); Chen (2007, 59-60); Bao (2007, 130-132); Yang (2001, 167-173).

⁴ In the discipline of Art History, the traditional historical study focusing on textual evidences alone is criticized by scholars such as Paul Corby Finney as being biased. As Finney comments: “An anthology is not a history” And “Life and literature are not the same thing” (Finney 1994, 9, 103).

“the silence of the historical and literary sources” (Marsone 2013, 231),⁵ although here the textual resources are considered better organized than the non-textual.

The F. A. Nixon collection

There are more than one thousand so-called Nestorian Crosses, which, as a confluence, include the cross-shaped pieces, the geometrical pieces, the seal-shape pieces, and the bird-shape pieces, possessed by different museums and institutions around the world. These artefacts attract global attention due to the uniqueness endowed by their identity as Nestorian relics from the Chinese Yuan dynasty.

Among them, the F. A. Nixon collection is the largest, with 979 pieces in its original paraphernalia (according to James M. Menzies), and 935 pieces presently in storage and on exhibition in the University Museum and Art Gallery of the University of Hong Kong (UMAG). Studies have been made of them; and conferences and other activities have been held to promulgate their significance, since Silk Road studies have been promoted to new levels during recent years. The Nestorian Crosses are perceived as significant materials not only for Silk Road studies but also for the study of Chinese Christianity, especially in light of the current poor availability of historical data of Jingjiao as mentioned above.

The Idea of Nestorian Crosses

Literature Review: the study of the so-called Nestorian Crosses

As the name of the F. A. Nixon collection suggests, all these pieces were collected and later donated⁶ by a Mr. F. A. Nixon, who used to work as a postman in the northern region of China before he moved to Shanghai. According to his article—a record of the talk that he delivered at the University of Hong Kong to accompany his donation—his interest in these small bronze artefacts “was aroused by an article by Rev. P. M. Scott in the February 1930 issue of the *Chinese Recorder*. Rev. Scott, while on famine relief work at Paotow in 1929, had come across a few specimens in a curio shop and designs that he he collected a number and made an intensive study of them” (Nixon 1952, 31-34). Mr. Nixon followed Rev. Scott in calling these bronze pieces Nestorian Crosses, although sometimes the name “Yuan Ya (元押)” was added to the name (Nixon 1952, 32). This is very important since it represents the traditional identification of these bronze pieces based on several elements that are regarded as critical: the region of Ordos (the sedentary area of the legendary Mongolian Nestorians), the Christian background (Nestorianism), the function as seals (referencing Yuanya), and most fundamentally, the presumption that these diverse pieces bear a unitary identity: Nestorian Seals with the Cross design, hence the Nestorian Crosses.

After a month of intensive recording, printing, sketching and investigating, James M. Menzies (1934) published a comprehensive and unprecedented survey entitled “979 Ink Impressions of F. A. Nixon’s Collection of Nestorian Bronze Crosses” in the Cheeloo (Shantung) University Journal. In the article, Menzies divided the 979 pieces of Nixon’s Collection into four major groups: crosses with identical arms and flat ends, crosses with leaf-shape arms and round ends, bird-shape crosses, and geometrical crosses (Menzies 1934, 165-167). His categorization of the crosses following the mainstream concept of Nestorian Crosses became a classic. Some other similar collections of this kind, such as the Mark Brown Collection, the British Museum

⁵ Similar views can be found also in for example Zhao (2010).

⁶ It is worth noting that the donation of the so-called Nestorian Crosses to UMAG by F. A. Nixon is just part of his massive collection. His original possession might have exceeded 979 pieces. Some other institutions claim that they received or purchased Nestorian Crosses from F. A. Nixon directly or indirectly. An informative investigation of Nixon’s curation will be part of my future study, since such work may have great significance for the study of the archive.

Collection, the Columbia University Collection, and the Toronto Royal Ontario Museum Collection, all share the characteristics of the F. A. Nixon Collection. For instance, they all represent the four Menzies categories, although unusual additional pieces are also found in the respective collections.

The scholars holding this mainstream concept of Nestorian Crosses include P. M. Scott (1930), A. C. Moule (1931), Paul Pelliot (1931-32), Zoltán de Takács (1931-32), Mark Brown (1933), James M. Menzies (1934), P. Y. Saeki (1937), and W. R. Taylor (1938). These can be considered the first group of scholars to have dealt with the identification of the bronzes in question.

Falling into this mainstream category from a relatively late date—from the 1970s to the present—are S. Drake (1962), Chuntang Yang (1978), Boqin Jiang (2004), Weimin Gu (2003), and Kim-Kwong Chan (2010).

Certainly not all the scholars from the above two periods agree on the concept of Nestorian Crosses. Some scholars in past decades have questioned this mainstream concept with diverse reasons, and that is where the argument of this article begins.

The Debate

For example, in his article dealing with what he calls the “Nestorian Seal-Amulets,” Louis Hambis parallels the bronze pieces with Steppe Art rather than with Christian iconography:

Unless we find these bronzes with a much older origin from the sedentary civilisations that were flourished between the Indus and Mesopotamia, that is, several thousand years before the Christian era, it seems that Steppe Art had shown two great influences to the forms and techniques of both ends of Eurasia. (Hambis 1956, 286)

Similar to Louis Hambis, Raffaele Biscione doubts the validity of the classical concept of Nestorian Crosses. Moreover, he proceeds beyond where Louis Hambis stops, and compares these bronze pieces with artefacts from the civilization of Central Asia in general. In an article published in 1985, he parallels the 17 pieces of so-called Nestorian Crosses with the Bactria seals found in present-day Afghanistan, presented by Countess de Bylandt to the IsMEO, and then points out convincing similarities between these two groups. For better understanding, he draws in the archaeological record of the Chinese Yinshang (殷商) culture to highlight the historical condition between the two cultures, namely the ancient Chinese and the Central Asian one. Supporting his hypothesis, the historical evidence shows that at the time of the second Millennium B.C., the commercial route between Bactria (大宛) and ancient China was already well established and flourishing (Biscione 1985).

As to more recent studies, Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit adopt an anthropological view in stating that these motifs might just be charms used by Turkish and Mongol tribes (Gillman and Klimkeit 2006, 230). The more distinctive voice is from Tjalling H. F. Halbertsma. After 12 years’ study of the Mongolian Nestorian relics in Southern Mongolia, he suggests that, first of all, no clear archaeological record has been found yet concerning these “Ordos Bronzes.” Secondly, there could be a merely coincidental resemblance between the design of the so-called Nestorian Crosses and those of other assemblages, for example, the decorative patterns found as early as the Han dynasty. Lastly, the “problems regarding a Nestorian identification of customs and objects” (Halbertsma 2008, 299) should be dealt with more rigorously than simply being subordinated to missionary passion (Halbertsma 2008, 297-299).

It worth noting that Halbertsma points to an intense “Christian appropriation” in earlier studies of the Nestorian relics in China, and he believes, taking Nicolini-Zani’s observation that the Xi’an Stele is a “mirror interpreting its interpreter” (Halbertsma 2008, 299) as an illustration, that “the identification of objects as Nestorian has, in other words, at times proved to be problematic and highlights the importance of understanding the author’s background and, indeed,

motivations” (Halbertsma 2008, 299). I will talk more on what Halbertsma has called the “Christian appropriation” by digging into the curation process and some other relevant factors later in this article.

Regarding the identity of the bronzes in question, and following Louis Hambis, Raffaele Biscione, and Tjalling H. F. Halbertsma, I also hesitate to subsume them under the elusive Mongolian Nestorian category. Moreover, in my next research articles, new evidence and new comparisons will be invoked to show that at least some of the so-called Nestorian Crosses, that is to say, some pieces with cross shapes, bird shapes, and flower and star shapes, might have been closely related to Central Asian cultural relics. Others, from the same collection, bear the distinguishable Jingjiao/Yelikewen iconographical characteristics that might grant them a more decisive identification as Mongolian Nestorian artefacts.

In that direction, Hambis opens up a new horizon; Biscione stops after the cross pieces are compared to their possible counterparts in general; and Halbertsma, in his informative survey of the Mongolian Nestorian relics in Southern Mongolia, leaves the study of the Ordos Bronzes out of his scope. It is obvious that further study is desired, so that a more comprehensive understanding of the artefacts and their cultural, theological, and ethnographical meaning might be procured.

The Christian appropriation and the missionaries' accounts

First-hand information about these bronzes has for a long time come mainly from dealers and intermediaries. As Biscione observed in 1985, the existing dating information, except for that drawn by scholars from the problematic syllogism, is mainly from dealers' attributions (Biscione 1985). This can make things really complicated, because dealers' information about the treasures might be nothing more than a mixture of legend, pragmatic knowledge, and ingratiation towards customers. As for the “syllogism” that Biscione mentioned, he puts it thus:

They [those scholars' arguments] were made on the basis of what, according to classical and medieval logic, was a barbara syllogism, that could be enunciated in this way: 1. Major premise: Christian often uses the symbol of cross. 2. Minor premise: inhabitant of Ordos often uses the symbol of cross. 3. Consequence: the inhabitants of Ordos were Christians. (Biscione 1985, 96)

Biscione here presciently points to a critical element which had influenced the forming of the idea of Nestorian Crosses, and that is what Halbertsma calls “the Christian appropriation,” which I will elaborate a little here.

Schuyler Cammann, a contemporary scholar of F. A. Nixon and Mark Brown, in answering the inquiry of Robert J. Bull about the Nestorian Crosses, commented: “Missionaries were trying to prove the previous extent of Christianity by the presence of these un-Christian relics, speaking of eagles as ‘doves’, and ‘pagan’ symbols of the universe as ‘crosses’.”⁷ What Schuyler describes is true. As F. S. Drake asserts: “...but Pelliot among others came out strongly in favour of their Christian origin, expressing a view which now predominates” (Drake 1962, 11).

Halbertsma, as already noted, lists evidences of such a Christian appropriation in the discoveries of the Christian relics in the region of Southern Mongolia. For example, he raises the case of “a curious Chinese document” which was believed by the C.I.C.M. missionaries to be teachings that “expressed Nestorian origins and thus represented a connection between the twentieth-century sect and the Nestorian Christians under Mongol rule some seven centuries earlier” (Halbertsma 2008, 296). He comments on this case that “these conclusions, and their

⁷ Schuyler Cammann to Robert J. Bull, 19 October 1962. The university archive, the Methodist Historical Center, Drew University.

presentation as relevant to a missionary's cause, can perhaps be best understood as a 'Christian appropriation' of the Nestorian past" (Halbertsma 2008, 296).

The curation process of the so-called Nestorian Crosses was also intimately entangled with such a Christian appropriation, and eventually influenced the very idea of Nestorian Crosses. This process will be discussed later in this article.

Some other historical records given by merchants and missionaries may not be directly related to the bronze pieces, but were believed to have provided the historical context for constructing such a Nestorian identity. F. S. Drake has made a survey of these. For example, he mentions Odoric of Pordenone and John of Montecorvino who had given records of the Christian Öngüt, and the famous Marco Polo who "found Nestorian Christians, usually in the service of the Court" and who also "confirms the existence of a Nestorian Christian tribe with their Christian King George" (Drake 1962, 201-21). But usually the missionaries' records are full of contradictions and one should deal with the contradictions before adopting the records as clear evidence. For example, F. S. Drake considered Friar William of Rubruck's dairy about the existence of the Mongolian Nestorians as important evidence in justifying the idea of Nestorian Crosses (Drake 1962, 18-20). Mongolian Nestorians, whose existence is proved by the diary, must have been fully Christianized, he argued, since they showed great understanding of their Christian identity by employing the Christian symbols widely in their iconography, e.g. a cruciform for a Christian cross, a bird for the Holy Spirit, etc.. Yet others may get a different picture from Rubruck's record, which is that the Mongolian rulers of that time did not know the doctrine of Christianity, nor did they care about the prayer. What they were really concerned about Christianity is that they believed that prayer made by the clergy could grant them good fortune (Li 2013, 17).

Conclusion: the significance of the study

The literature review shows that, in the study of Nestorian Crosses, the logic underlying the mainstream idea of Nestorian Crosses goes like this:

1) Since the seal-like pieces in the collections are confirmed to be Yuanya, having been affirmed thus by dealers and missionaries, 2) then the rest of the pieces, namely the cross-shaped and zoomorphic ones, should be in accordance with the seals, both in terms of dating—so as to be the Yuan dynasty—and function, 3) which means that the cross-shaped and zoomorphic pieces should be a kind of Yuanya too, although a broad spectrum of diversities of the shape, design, plastic style and usage exists across all the pieces in the collection. And finally, 4) with the foregoing argumentation/logic, the idea of Nestorian Crosses, as a relic from Nestorianism and as a kind of seal, came into being.

In this article I argue that a correlation is to be found between a) the cursoriness of the construction and justification of the idea of Nestorian Crosses, and b) the readiness to apply this heedless idea as a legitimized authority to the data analyses to come, and eventually to the interpretation of the cultural/religious meaning of the data, in this case, of the artefacts. Since the ultimate purpose of the data analysis in this study is to configure a comprehensive picture of the Mongolian Nestorians so that their religiosity, cultural environment and all other aspects of their life might be accessible, thus the correlation, occurring in the traditional study, inevitably leads to conclusions which are problematic and hence may undermine the whole research. Simple examples can be raised here for the sake of better understanding:

In interpreting the bird-shape pieces among the Nixon collection, scholars such as Peliot, WeiminGu, and Chuntang Yang, have all concluded that the bird shape is the dove motif, and hence should be referred to as the Holy Spirit (Gu and Li 2011, 43; Moule 1930, 106; Yang 1978, 65). This assertion generates many appurtenances, among which is the saying that the Mongolian

Nestorians had already embraced Western Church's iconographic tradition,⁸ and hence there was a strong liturgical, if not theological, connection between them and the center of the Church of the East in faraway Eastern Europe. This assertion not only contradicts the fact that the tradition of the Church of the East, was itself for quite a long time unfamiliar with the dove-representing-the-Holy Spirit iconography pattern,⁹ but also falters for lack of supporting evidence. For instance, the book: *Zhishun Zhenjiang Zhi* (The Annals of Zhenjiang of the Zhishun Period) contains a survey about the Mongolian Nestorians' iconographic practices during the Yuan dynasty, but no other symbol besides the cross is mentioned (Yu 1279-1368). According to this book, it seems that the pattern of the dove-representing-the-Holy-Spirit was not as well perceived as what the scholars conclude from the amplitude of bird-shape pieces in Nixon collection. As to the second part of the inference, the relationship between the Mongolian Nestorians and the Central Church is still a matter for debate.

Because of its importance, I remain focused on the foregoing correlation, and inquire further about the logical ground for the idea of Nestorian Crosses, examining some of the hard evidence and also some investigations from the discipline of Art History. I leave the material, archaeological and art historical identification of these pieces as Nestorian Crosses for my next research paper. Hopefully this article will serve as the starting point for future Jingjiao/Yelikewen art history study, while keeping an open attitude to some possibly diverse results from the identification of the bronzes in question. In consequence, the idea of Nestorian Crosses, in spite of its problematic logic ground, might find approval from an entirely different direction.

For the logical ground of the idea of Nestorian Crosses, we should start with the collectors' background, although here the relevant information is very sparse.

The collectors' background

We have learnt from scholars such as Biscione, Cammann and Halbertsma that the earlier figures entangling with the bronzes in question held to a Christian appropriation in their interpretation. The collectors' background, as a kind of indirect context for the bronzes, will further reinforce this opinion.

First of all, Christian interest in the curation process is worth noting. As a pioneer of the connoisseurship of the so-called Nestorian Crosses, Mark Brown taught systematic theology in Beijing and saw himself as a devoted Christian—a missionary. Not only this, he also shared his understanding of and interest in the so-called Nestorian Crosses with his peers, according to his sister's recollections,¹⁰ although the reliability of the memory is debatable. For example, she might have said this to attract the curator's attention to her brother's treasure. But there is one thing that is clear from that account, and that is that Mark Brown's theological identity, starting with his training at Drew University and thereafter the chair in Beijing, no doubt granted him superiority of theological knowledge among his peers. His article, published on the subject of the

⁸ On the pattern of the dove-representing-the-Holy-Spirit, Western Christianity holds very different traditions from Eastern Christianity (Didron, Millington, and Stokes 1886, 459).

⁹ Thomas F. Mathews, Avedis Krikor Sanjian, scholars who studied an Armenian manuscript called Gladzor Gospel from the thirteenth to fourteenth century, give an explanation of the pattern of dove-representing-the-Holy-Spirit seen in this manuscript. This is an example that has no precedent and has been followed by none among the Byzantine and Armenian art history. It could have been influenced by the idea of "Adoptionism," but that does not mean the artisans were necessarily followers of that idea (Mathews and Sanjian 1991, 96-97). Since Armenia is considered to be the junction between the Central Church and the region of Mongolian Nestorians, their opinion is also relevant to the Mongolian Nestorian iconographical tradition because they probably inherited the tradition of the Central Church, namely the Church of the East, through Armenia's transition to that tradition.

¹⁰ Mark Brown's sister stated he "was the pioneer in collecting these crosses, among his coterie of friends. What they know about their origin is probably what they learnt from him." See: Mabel B. Lerrigo to Robert J. Bull, 22 October 1962. The university archive, the Methodist Historical Center, Drew University. This idea also has been supported by Mark's friend, Mr. Aeschiman's wife, Myrle Patterson Aeschiman. See Myrle Patterson Aeschiman to Robert J. Bull, 17 November 1962. The university archive, the Methodist Historical Center, Drew University.

so-called Nestorian Crosses, is a result and also an evidence of such a position (Brown 1933). Thus his infatuation with the Christian identity of the bronzes won taken-for-granted support from early collectors and even scholars.

Secondly, both F. A. Nixon and Mark Brown learnt the idea of Yuanya mainly from dealers, and the idea of Nestorian Crosses mainly from existing Nestorian studies, e.g. Scott's article, while more importantly, the scholars themselves from that study were mostly missionaries and Christians. In other words, the collectors and the scholars of the same subject were all from a Christian background, which makes the circular argument of the Nestorian identity inevitable.

Thirdly, neither F. A. Nixon nor Mark Brown participated in excavations or collected the objects directly from the Mongol people. Furthermore, according to F. A. Nixon's narrative, he had a "rival" competition with Mark Brown in collecting these objects,¹¹ which casts doubt on the motivation for their collecting and hence leads to the possibility that their collecting was an arbitrary action. As to the question why they collected those seals without Christian symbols, that is to say, those which did not fall into their criteria for collection, along with the cross and bird pieces that are fervently believed to be Christian relics, the answer is quite simple and reasonable. The seal pieces were confidently recommended as Yuanya by those self-same dealers, and hence served well as dating materials and an indirect archaeological context for the idea of Nestorian Crosses.

All the abovementioned factors imply that there has been poor records management since the very beginning of the collection, and because of this, the endogenic diversity of this eclectic package of bronzes, which has been ignored for so long in past studies, should have been considered as the rallying forth point for future investigations. This article elaborates on that notion.

The cross and the bird: further questions

The passion of collectors and scholars for the Christian religion could be perceived as the catalyst in the composition of the idea of Nestorian Crosses, while the symbols, in this case the cross and the bird, enthusiastically believed to have derived directly from, or been related to, Christianity, are the diagnostic features.

Many aspects must be taken into consideration in the identification process, for instance, an understanding of the possible post-deposition factors, along with an examination of the original curation or excavation.

F. A. Nixon, and some other major figures adopting the idea of Nestorian Crosses, mainly lived in the 1930s to 1960s, which is the period of the dominance of what Trigger calls the "Midwestern Taxonomic Method" (Trigger 2003, 4)¹² and of the emergence of the later so-called Processual Archaeology. Thus in this case, the oversimplified identification, namely the idea of Nestorian Crosses applying to the whole package of bronzes, implies an epistemology driven not only by personal reading of the archaeological data, but also influenced by archaeological trends of that time.

The cross—from the cross-shaped (十字) to The Cross (十字架)

The most distinguished diagnostic feature for the idea of Nestorian Crosses is the cross-shaped piece. This is understandable. After all, the symbol of the cross is the most important icon in Christianity, for it represents, commonly speaking, the salvation work of Jesus Christ. It is not surprising that collectors and earlier scholars were so overwhelmingly impressed by the abundant

¹¹ F. A. Nixon to Robert Bull, 20 November 1963. The university archive, the Methodist Historical Center, Drew University.

¹² Trigger gives the term "Midwestern Taxonomic Method" the following definition: "The main task of archaeologists was to define artifacts types and use these types to distinguish archaeological cultures, which they equated to prehistorical peoples. Culture change attributes to diffusion and migration. There was no awareness of significant changes coming about as a result of processes occurring with cultures" (Trigger 2003, 4).

and distinct cross-shapes found among these bronze pieces, although their reading of the cross-shaped as unmistakably Christian is problematic.

Take F. A. Nixon as an example. I believe that F. A. Nixon has employed, although not necessarily consciously, an insufficiently executed formal-typological method which shows a subjective use of analogy in this case.¹³ In his article, Nixon firstly tried to categorize the symbols seen among the bronze pieces according to their frequency: “The most frequent recurring symbols on the crosses” (Nixon 1952, 32) (see fig. 1).

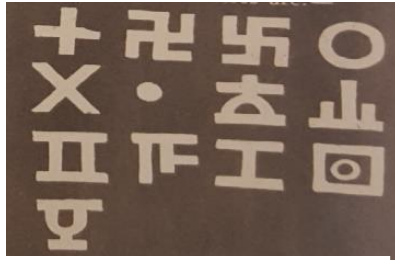


Fig. 1 The symbols highlighted by Nixon in his article. Photo © Chinese Recorder.

Secondly, he quoted P. M. Scott, a scholar who stimulated Nixon’s interest in collecting these crosses. In drawing the analogy between Christian symbols and those from the bronze pieces: “[Rev. P. M. Scott] interpreted some of the frequently occurring symbols as definitely Christian, e.g., representing the (Trinity, a chalice, and a cross on a hill)” (Nixon 1952, 33) (see fig. 2).

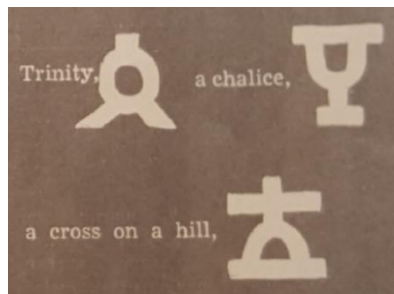


Fig. 2 The symbols highlighted by Nixon in his article. Photo © Chinese Recorder

The mainstream scholars who confirmed these bronze pieces as Nestorian Crosses based on the belief that the cross-shaped must be a Christian symbol,¹⁴ relied on a similar method in their identification. When they mentioned the cross-shaped pieces in their works, they called it a

¹³ As to the definition of “formal-typological method,” see Klein (1982, 153).

¹⁴ Although the scholarly voices on the origin of the so-called Nestorian Crosses remained diverse all through the study, the preference for a Christian origin has been dominant (Drake 1962, 11).

“Christian Cross” and even a “Maltese Cross”¹⁵ without hesitation, and then they continued to develop this belief into a retrieval of the history of the Mongolian Nestorians.

Taking Chuntang Yang’s article as an example, since he used to be the director of UMAG where the collection is held, when he talks about the cross-shaped pieces of the Nixon collection, we find:

Thus from the evidences of the historical texts and excavated relics, the “Nestorian Crosses” found in Ordos must be strongly connected to the Jingjiao of its time. Its shape has many similarities with those crosses inscribed in the tombstones and religious steles that are found. (Yang 1978, 63; my translation)

Notice that Yang has quoted a book in support of his hypothesis of the perceived homogeneity of the Nestorian Crosses with those Quanzhou religious relics (although he does not indicate the exact page of the relevant content of that book). However, the fact is that the book he quotes does not parallel the Nestorian Crosses with the Christian relics discovered in Quanzhou, nor does it compare the cross-shaped from the two categories. In other words, the book does not draw the analogy so readily between the two categories. On the contrary, the author of that book strongly advocates a more comprehensive study of the inter-influencing schools of arts in the Christian art history of China,¹⁶ which is exactly what is missing from Chuntang Yang’s article.

Wu’s work demonstrates well how a data record and an elementary data analysis should be carried out in archaeological historical study. His prudent attitude toward the identification of the data is a consequence of a well-functioning methodology. By contrast, in the current study, lack of a well-defined methodology is widely apparent, especially in the way in which the idea of Nestorian Crosses is born.

When employing a Formal-typology data analysis of the crosses, there existed a belief that was rooted in missionary passion, which served as the rational, if not the theoretical, ground. When the analogy was drawn between Christian cross shapes in the field of Christian iconography, and the cross shape that was observed among the mysterious bronze pieces, early scholars legitimized this analogy by taking for granted that all cross shapes must have had a Christian background. By so doing, they neglected the fact that cruciform shapes do not belong exclusively to Christian culture.

In fact, the cruciform shape has been observed in other cultures far from the place where Christianity originated.¹⁷ Furthermore, long before Christianity was born and carried along the Silk Road to eastern Asia, the people who used to dominate the vast area from the region of the Black Sea to the Altai Mountain, had already a pervasive propensity for the cross-shaped in their symbolic and semiotic system, for which, and based on different cultural heritages and archaeological contexts, I will provide a comprehensive study in articles to come. Emphasizing the cross shape as a cultural phenomenon, its popularity is found to belong to a grander culture scope. In this way I will argue that the cross-shaped pieces in F. A. Nixon collection should have been considered more thoroughly in terms of their origin and genre, and hence their identification should have rendered plural rather than singular results.

¹⁵ The “Maltese Cross” is believed to belong exclusively to the Church of the East (Ge 2013, 169).

¹⁶ Addressing the cross shape of the Quanzhou religious relics, the book includes this statement: “We have to ask that among all these crosses that this book collected, which are from the Western Christianity (St. Francis) and which are from the Eastern Christianity (Jingjiao)? It is not an easy job to differentiate them only by their sculpture characteristic, because they are inter-influenced ... As to the Tombstone sculptured with both the cross and the lotus, it is very hard to decide what sect, the west or the east, they belong to, due to the inseparable style characteristics of the west and east sculpture art. Thus, it requires further study” (Wu 1957, 38; my translation).

¹⁷ Hope B. Werness mentions “Although in Western culture, the primary association of the cross is with Christianity, it has been a universal archetypal symbol from the most ancient times. Some cultures attach specific significance to the cross, but generally speaking it is a symbol of the CENTER and of the FOUR/SIX DIRECTIONS” (Werness 2003, 72).

It is not surprising that the scholars who executed their studies based on the abovementioned data analysis pattern applied the same rational/theoretical pattern to another important diagnostic feature—the bird-shape pieces. After all, from their viewpoint, the more Christian symbols there were in the collection, the more supportable became the idea of Nestorian Crosses. It is interesting to note that in its logic, the reading of the bird-shape as a Christian symbol always follows the cross-shaped reading in a way that seems to imply that the two logically endorse each other. This, as will be demonstrated next, is a circular argument.

The bird—from the shape to the interpretation

Weimin Gu, quoting from Pelliot, states that the bird-shape pieces are most likely the representations of the Holy Spirit (Gu 2003, 43). This is the dominant interpretation of the bird-shaped pieces in the collections, and is followed by many because of its attribution of the theological connotation. For this reason, study of the bird-shaped pieces concerns Jingjiao/Yelikewen studies probably even more intensely than that of the cross-shaped pieces.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity can be read from the famous Xi'an Stele inscription and other classical Jingjiao manuscripts found in China. It seems that the Jingjiao followers were well informed in their knowledge of the Holy Spirit, according to these textual evidences.¹⁸ Furthermore, a liturgical book discovered in the Khara-Khoto (黑水城) shows that the Yelikewen, the Jingjiao followers of the Yuan dynasty in north of China,¹⁹ also highlighted the knowledge of the Holy Spirit in their daily religious practice (Tang and Winkler 2013, 382-386). In this theological context, the popularity of the idea of the bird-as-dove-representing-the-Holy Spirit among scholars is understandable. Given the above theological context is well studied, and the understanding thereof reliable, several fundamental questions underlying the argument of the bird-as-the-dove and hence representing the Holy-Spirit, can be seen in the following gradual steps.²⁰

Firstly, what is Jingjiao/Yelikewen's iconographical tradition?²¹ Does it, as has been assumed by scholars such as Weimin Gu (2003, 43), have the same appropriation of dove-representing-the-Holy-Spirit as can be found in Western Christian iconography?²² I discuss the answer to the latter briefly in one of my previous works (Chen 2015), and will consider it further in my future research. Suffice here to say that the above two traditions are very different with regard to the pattern of dove-representing-the-Holy-Spirit, since in this case, a difference already exists between the traditionally-defined Western and Eastern Christianity. The divergence is also supported by the fact that the Christian image of crucifixion, ample in the Western tradition, remains scarce in Jingjiao/Yelikewen's iconography (Malek, Hofrichter, and Monumenta Serica Institute 2006, 36-37).

Secondly, given the Yelikewen community shared the iconographic tradition with the Latin Church, we still need to ask if these bird-shaped pieces are exclusively and prevalingly manufactured, although in smaller quantities than the cross-shaped pieces, for such a purpose that

¹⁸ For example, according to A. C. Moule's analysis, the "Three Majestics" of the three scrolls: *Daqin Jingjiao Sanwei Mengdu Zan* (Praise of the Pāramitā of the Three Majestics of the Illustrious Teaching) refers to the Holy Trinity. This view has been broadly accepted in the study (Moule 1930).

¹⁹ Some other scholars allege that the term "Yelikewen" could have applied to ethnic groups other than the Mongolians. See, e.g., Gu and Li (2011).

²⁰ Due to the focus of the current article, I will elaborate later on the last question which functions as the ground for the others. Detailed discussion of the other questions will appear in future articles.

²¹ Because the intrinsic difference between the Jingjiao and the Yelikewen is not the major concern of the current article, whenever the two terms are paralleled in this article, what is referred to is just the general sense of the so-called Chinese Nestorian phenomenon, rather than specific sects of that religion.

²² As to the dove-representing-the-Holy-Spirit tradition found in Western Christianity, see Didron, Millington, and Stokes (1886, 459).

the bird symbol might be elevated above all other theological symbols, even the most popular lotus-plus-cross pattern? A positive answer to the above question has been at least partially refuted by the curation process, since the process, being highly tendentious and poorly managed, proves that the present paraphernalia, although called a collection, do not have a singular identity. Thus, before any conclusive evidence appears—for example, the discovery of the original archaeological assemblage in which a decisive quantity of the bird or cross pieces are unearthed—one cannot guarantee that the presently-observed prominence of the bird-motif in the relevant collection reflects a Christian iconographical reference.

Thirdly, given that it is possible that the bird motifs/shapes is dominant in Jingjiao/Yelikewen's iconography, can we find its parallel or counterpart in other Jingjiao/Yelikewen relics? Some would say that plenty of the steles, tombstones and one or two frescos excavated from Quanzhou, the Southern Mongolia, and Dunhuang respectively, might have provided glimpses into this question. But that surely leads to the next question from the Art History point of view, i.e., do the bird-motifs/shapes found in the collection belong to the same category as the ones mentioned above? This question is also applicable to the cross-motif situation. Nevertheless, there is a deeper question underlying this one, and one which should be regarded as the ground of the whole argument: does the fact that all the bird-shaped pieces in the relevant collection have the same artistic style, plastic characteristic, symbolic connotation, function, etc., mean they belong to the same category—i.e., the Jingjiao/Yelikewen iconography? By asking that, we come back to the starting point of this investigation, and after the above discussion, the answer to this fundamental question is now quite clear: they are not homogenous. I will elaborate on this further with more archaeological evidence, but for now it is worth noting that there are diverse bird-shaped pieces, different in all these aspects.

Such diversity can set a challenge to the existing scholarly interpretation of the bird-shape pieces. For example: if the single-headed bird-shaped piece is meant to represent the Holy Spirit, then what about the double-headed bird-shaped piece? And if the double-headed bird-shaped piece is meant to convey the idea of the two natures of Jesus Christ, as suggested by scholars such as Weimin Gu, Chuangtang Yang, and Peilliot, then how do we understand this conflict in their argument that two disparate symbolic meanings conveyed by the same pattern in one iconographical system could be so divergent?

This is not to mention the derivatives of the foregoing single or double-headed bird-shape group. For example, there is the single-headed-bird (fig. 3²³), which may find counterparts in Central Asia art, the unmistakable Chinese phoenix (fig. 4), the typical Ordos Bronze style (fig. 5), the peculiar figure with birds' wings and fire-shaped head that might suggest the Zoroastrian tradition (fig. 6), etc.. The diversity is not limited to the preferred Christian symbols, but can also be observed in other pieces in the collection, for example, in those which are considered less Christian, and in those unmistakable Yuanya pieces as well. In this respect, the collection itself is diverse.

²³ It is noted that without further solid evidence, and for the sake of communication, the location of the artefacts shown in this article will follow the label currently issued by the host museum and institution, and that the location here does not refer to the original or authentic excavation site of the artifacts.



Fig. 3 Bird-shape piece with swastika on front, bronze, Ordos region, China. Collection of the University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo © The University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong.



Fig. 4 Mysterious bird with long cloud-like tail resembling to Chinese phoenix motif, bronze, Ordos region, China. Collection of the University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo © The University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong.



Fig. 5 Paired-bird motif decorated object with one bird missing, bronze, Ordos region, China. Collection of the University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo © The University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong.



Fig. 6 Standing bird with spreading wings, little dots on each wing and with a fire-shaped head, bronze, Ordos region, China. Collection of the University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo © The University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong.

Yuanya and their inscriptions

Chinese seals went through several artistic stages which span over 3,000 years, although the basics of the seals remain largely unchanged (Sun 2004, 3). In a most general sense, Chinese seals are usually categorized per their functions: private or official (私印, 官印); the presentation of the script: positive or negative (朱文, 白文); the technique of making: curving, casting, etc. (雕刻, 鑄造等); and the styles, including formal, exquisite, or romantic, etc. (Sun 2004, 3-4).

Yuanya, as the name reveals, is a seal or a group of seals prevalent in the Yuan dynasty, although the naming of such seals is considered “unscientific” by some since the “Ya” (押) is not restricted to the Yuan dynasty (Zhou 2001, 7). Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that the Yuanya evolved from the function of “Ya” (押), which welcomes pictorial forms of signature, and that is why the earlier format of the Yuanya is called “flower-ya” (花押).²⁴ As to why the

²⁴ As to the evolutionary trend of “Ya” to “Flower-ya” and finally to “Yuanya,” Zhou has an informative introduction in his book (Zhou 2001, 7-9). As for the “Flower-ya,” Ye Mengde commented that “there was no ‘Ya’ in the early period of the

pictorial seals were embraced in the Yuan dynasty, the generally accepted idea is from the book *Nancun Chuogeng Lu* (南村輟耕錄) that Yuanya is a kind of seal invented for/by the “illiterate” Mongolian Semuren.²⁵ The discussion about the origin of Yuanya falls outside of the scope of the current article, however, and the commonly accepted description of Yuanya mentioned above highlights a few of its characteristics relevant for present concerns: the encrypted script, the pictorial decoration, the function as seals, and their possible privileged existence in the Mongolian community.²⁶

As discussed previously, the circular argument of the so-called Nestorian Crosses being Yuanya, or vice versa, has been carried through or embedded as the postulation for over a century by scholars such as Yang Chuntang, Jame Menizes, Xiaojing Yan,²⁷ etc.. This article has

challenged the logic underlying this circular argument. In future efforts, more evidence from Yuanya studies, for example the art historical approach to the style, technique, function, aesthetic ideal, possible lineage and the evolutionary trend of the Yuanya,²⁸ should also be included.

Most of the Yuanya in Nixon’s collection, namely, the pieces with identifiable characteristic



Fig. 7 Bronze seal with loop on the top, inscribed Chinese character “Wu” (五) which could be the family name or a military officer title, bronze, Ordos Region, China. Collection of the University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo © The University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong.

Fig. 8 Bronze seal with loop on the back, inscribed Chinese character “Fu” (福) refers to “the blessing” along with a deer motif which phonetically means “Lu” (祿), so this combination is a typical Chinese auspicious pattern “Fulu” (福祿) which means all the blessings and successes, bronze, Ordos Region, China. Collection of the University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo © The University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong.



seals, are typically Yuanya style, and hence they fit well in the Chinese seals categories and also with the four characteristics of Yuanya as listed above. Some of them have only one character inscribed (fig. 7), or have one character combined with a pictorial cipher or zoomorphic motif (fig. 8).²⁹ A very small number of the seals are executed in typical

Tang dynasty, but only cursory writing of the names as personal signature. That is why it was called ‘Flower-ya’ at that time. (唐人初未有押字，但草書其名，以為私記，故號花書)” (Ye and Yuwen 1983, 109).

²⁵ Tao commented in his book that “Nowadays Mongolian and Semuren who serve in the court are mostly illiterate thus they cannot write signature with characters, and hence they carve the seals with ivory or wood to print. Only those who serve as high officers reaching the first class, after received the imperial edict of permission, they are able to use the jade to make the seals. No exception exists. (今蒙古色目人之為官者，多不能執筆畫押，例以象牙或木刻而印之。宰輔及近侍官至一品者，得旨，則用玉圖書押字，非特賜不敢用)” (Tao 1998, 30-31). Although Tao’s linking of the usage of the seals among Mongolian Semuren with their “illiteracy” has a lack of historical support, at least his description gives evidence of the existence of the seals with non-character signatures among the Mongolian Semuren during the Yuan dynasty.

²⁶ See studies of Yuanya, such as Zhou (2001).

²⁷ In his article presented in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters*, he adopts the common idea of the Nestorian seals (Yuanya) and thus describes these bronze pieces as follows: “Such bronze crosses were often used as seals” (Yan 2009, 388).

²⁸ According to James S. Ackerman, in *Art History*, a more appropriate term which should be used to replace the term “evolutionary trend” is the “context of creating.” I agree that the excessive concern of art historians with the so-called “historical development” of the artworks might have muffled both the artists and the works. Thus more attention to the context of the works and the artists should be more revealing. But in this case, the research object is not a single artwork reflecting an artist’s autonomy and an approachable context of creation. Instead, the context of the artworks in question refers more to a collective preference from a historical perspective, namely, the Chinese art history perspective (Ackerman 1960, 258-259).

²⁹ This is an interesting piece. The inscription “Fu” (福) might have led to the preferred Christian connotation since “Yelikewen” in Mongolian means “the blessing” or “the blessed one,” but when the “Fu” is combined with the phonetical

four-square composition (fig. 9), while some of the seals are designed freely without restrictions (fig. 10). Bronze is the main material, although some other copper alloys exist as well. Zinc alloy can be seen only in several pieces, with a bright yellow color which might lead to a relatively late dating, such as the Ming dynasty.

The inscriptions on these pieces are quite consistent with the well-studied pieces of Yuanya. For instance, there is the most common pattern of a family name decorated with a pictorial sign, indicating a private use of “Ya”—the private signature. Another popular pattern consists of two or four characters in Phags-pa inscribed on the pieces, sometimes in positive form, with the shape of a musical instrument such as Pi-pa or Bell (fig. 11), or of an animal, in this case, hares and possibly also birds, but the latter needs further study.



Fig. 9 Bronze seal with loop on the back, in four-square composition inscribed one lotus motif, one swastika, and two unidentifiable characters, bronze, Ordos Region, China. Collection of the University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo © The University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong.



Fig. 10 Bronze seal with loop on the back, two Chinese characters “Jiu” (九) and “Ri” (日) inscribed, which means nine days in combination, Ordos Region, China. Collection of the University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo © The University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong.

Generally, the inscriptions are mainly in 1) Phags-pa, 2) Chinese characters, 3) an ethnic language, and 4) an unidentifiable character or pictorial pattern.^{30,31}

First, and consistent with the Yuanya genre, it is very rare to see deep-carve and hollow-out techniques executed on seals or on the casting

model of the seals, but they are very commonly seen on the cross-shaped pieces, where the incision on the casting model is so deep that the depth of the engraving can reach 4mm and only leaves 0.5mm thickness for the backboard.

Furthermore, compared with the abovementioned Yuanya pieces, the cross-shaped ones, if they are really seals, are of a genre that is extremely rare in Chinese seal history. Some may explain the unusualness as a debt to the printing medium, since some believe that the cross-shaped “seals” are



Fig. 11 Bronze seal with loop on the back, Phags-pa character “Ji” (記) indicating to a private seal function on the lower part of the inscription with the phonetic Phags-pa family name on the above, Ordos Region, China. Collection of the University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo © The University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong.

designed to be printed on mud instead of paper, and they may find themselves supported by evidence such as Fr.

“Lu” as seen in this case, the “Fulu” should be interpreted as the traditional Chinese pattern, which is seen abundantly in Chinese fine art history, and that history should be retrieved to the Western Zhou period in its literary form, and the Warriors States period in seals (Gao 2004; Ma 2006).

³⁰ Gratitude here to professor Bao Xiang (包祥) from the Inner Mongolia University who has given generous help in identifying the Phags-pa inscriptions and has also confirmed the overt seal pieces to be Yuanya.

³¹ Some further studies could be made in the future as a microstudy of the interpretation of these Yuanya. For example, some of the inscriptions seem to be related to the Western Xia and Jin dynasty, while some seem to have similarities with ancient Sanskrit or ancient Tibetan, and some of the Chinese characters indicating Chinese first names such as 伍 and 呂 might have been echoed in historical records, and the other Chinese characters such as: 神 (god), 天 (day), 日 (sun), and 月 (moon) might have religious connotations if they are tested in the field of the history of folk religion. For example, a peculiar piece inscribed with the character for the sun and the moon, seems in its Daoist composition to have been influenced by Zoroastrian iconography.

Mostaert's witness, which will be mentioned later in this article. But this hypothesis still cannot give a satisfactory answer to the redundancy of the worked-out design, since the deeply-curved one has already facilitated the printing on hard mediums such as mud. And not only so, the distinctive reprocessing traces, especially with those worked-out pieces, on the surface of the backboard where the loop/loops were attached, and in some cases, the lack of harmony caused by the sullied worked-out design where the attached loop/loops stick out of the purposed hole (fig. 12), drives us to query the originality of the loop/loops, or of the worked-out design. Therefore, before more evidence is interrogated, we should not jump so readily from the hypothesis of the medium to an overall interpretation.



Fig. 12 Cross shape piece with loop on the back which sticking out of the hollowed area, Ordos Region, China. Collection of the University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo © The University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong.

Having discussed the feeble logic behind the idea of Nestorian Crosses, I will now introduce more hard evidence to further challenge its rationale.

Inadequate archaeological context: an original assemblage?

It must be highlighted here that scholars such as P. M. Scott and A. C. Moule make the identification of these bronze pieces greatly dependent on the presumption that most, if not all, of the artefacts were excavated/picked up in the region of Ordos. In their understanding, the Ordos region used to be occupied by the Nestorian tribe, Öngüt, as Moule stated: "These bronze Crosses are said to be quite common in the district (Ordos), which was it will be remembered the home of the Christian tribe of the Öngüt in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries ...". Thus, in terms of their logic, the abundance of pieces discovered in that region makes the attribution of a Nestorian origin necessary.

An examination of the foregoing presumption must therefore be made here. The archaeological context for this collection, and for other collections of this kind around the world, is inevitably lost. Some indirectly-related information can be gleaned from informal records, for example, from the letters exchanged between the involved scholar and the collectors or the collectors' contemporaries. In one letter, Mark Brown's friend, Arthur B. Cool, who had greatly helped F. A. Nixon in collecting these bronze pieces and who was himself a numismatic expert, gives some information about the archaeological context, saying that "most of these Nestorian crosses were taken from excavations in Shansi province,³² often there were coins, bronze flower vases, etc. dug up at the same time."³³

Another more direct archaeological record shows that some of the so-called Nestorian Crosses were excavated in the region of present-day "Shaanxi" (Wang 1990, 109-112). But as usual, this record does not provide any precise information besides the name of the excavation site: Suide (綏德). More investigation of this record will be carried out in my future research.

³² It is noteworthy that the "Shanxi" province in Cool's statement refers to present-day "Shanxi" province, which means it is not in any danger of being confused with the "Shaanxi" province of his time as well as of today, because at the time of the letter and in the earlier period when Cool befriended Nixon, the "Shanxi" remained "Shanxi," while nowadays "Shaanxi" has changed from its old name "Shenxi." This clarification is important for the further investigation of the excavation location.

³³ Arthur Becool to Robert J. Bull, 16 October 1962. The university archive, the Methodist Historical Center, Drew University.

For now, it is sufficient to conclude that the generally accepted account that most, if not all, of these pieces were found in Ordos region, is problematic. Halbertsma is generally right when he comments that “to my knowledge, no ‘bronze Ordos Crosses’ have been excavated in Nestorian graves north of the Daqingshan mountains”(Halbertsma 2008, 298). Indeed, very few of the currently available excavation records of the relevant bronzes mention the Ordos region, except a contemporary missionary’s biographical narrative, which mentions very fleetingly that during one excursion to an “old city of Mongolia plains,” where “crosses were engraved on the corner stones of the foundations of their once big buildings,” he found a “Nestorian Crosses in bronze” which later became his personal possession (Mielke 2011, 86). He also comments that “the Nestorian cross in bronze has been found in many places there in Mongolia” (Mielke 2011, 86). Unfortunately, he does not provide more information about the treasure trove or how he found it. Furthermore, he does not mention where he got the idea of the “Nestorian cross in bronze” which would have been important information. For example, if he had read Fr. Mostaert’s testimony of contemporary Mongolians picking up the pieces from the desert and using them as seals on their doors with mud, his own narrative of picking up that piece should be questioned about whether or not it is a shaped narrative.

It is more likely that he might have got the idea from his good friend and companion, Dr Erickson, the Duke of Mongolia, who was commonly regarded as the expert on Mongolian history and hence on Mongolian religions and arts.

Given this missionary’s account is reliable and accurate, only one inference should be drawn, which is that the discovery of so-called Nestorian Crosses occurring in the region of Southern Mongolia is just one, and a very scarce one, of the records concerning this kind of discovery, thus it cannot be referenced as the necessary and sufficient condition for the heuristic link between the identity of the artefacts and the Ordos region.

As to why the so-called Nestorian Crosses were said to be found abundantly in the region of Ordos, there is a possibility that they were mostly found in the market or as possessions of local people, which has nothing to do with their excavation condition. Furthermore, one must notice that perhaps it was the demand for the bronze crosses among collectors and interested figures which expedited the maturity of the market in the Ordos region. In that sense, F. A. Nixon’s mention of his first stage of collecting in one of the letters should be taken into consideration. According to his recollection, after being inspired by Scott’s article, he went to the Ordos region for the treasure but found none. Later he ran across some of the pieces in Beijing’s market and curio shops.³⁴ This is also consistent with the fact that the earliest piece Menzies bought was in Peking in 1927 rather than in Ordos, long before Moule’s record (Menzies 1934, 5). On this, Menzies comments that before the year 1929, the so-called Nestorian Crosses phenomenon had already attracted the Chinese archaeologists’ attention (Menzies 1934, 5). From the above we know that the Ordos market of the so-called Nestorian Crosses became increasingly profitable all of sudden, probably due to its appeal to the buyers; and there is no decisive evidence to prove that it was the original market.

Interesting information provided by W. R. Taylor talks about “the natives who hand them down from father to son as heirlooms or bury them piously with their dead are ignorant of their origin and call them ‘arrows of Heaven’” (Taylor 1938, 58). But Taylor does not attribute this piece of information to any oral or written resource, which puts its credibility at stake.

Another piece of information considered as being directly related to the archaeological context, and one that is absorbed by many scholars, such as Yang Chuntang,³⁵ in their

³⁴ F. A. Nixon to Robert Bull, 20 November 1963. The university archive, the Methodist Historical Center, Drew University.

³⁵ In his article, he jumps from Fr. A. Mostaert’s description to his hypothesis of the original function of the so-called Nestorian Crosses, which is that the ancient Nestorian Mongolians sealed their doors with these bronze seals and for this purpose they created them. Obviously he has adopted Fr. A. Mostaert’s description as direct archaeological evidence, and by doing so, has reached the anachronistic conclusion. See Yang (1978, 66).

argumentation, is the frequently-quoted missionary's description from Fr. A. Mostaert. According to A. C. Moule, Fr. Mostaert gave the following information:

The Mongols constantly dig them up from old graves and elsewhere; they know nothing about their history, but wear them on their girdles, especially the women. When they leave home to take their sheep to graze, they close their doors, and seal them with mud or clay, in the same way as other people use ordinary seals. (Moule 1930, 92)

However, to employ archaeological thinking, I argue that it is more appropriate to take Fr. Mostaert's witness to be to one of the post-depositional processes which have affected the distribution pattern, along with some other disturbances, e.g., the authentic excavation information has been destroyed by dealers and by their circulation of the bronze pieces as discussed above. Furthermore, one should be sceptical about taking Fr. Mostaert's information as evidence for an anthropological analogy to approach to the possible original function of these bronze pieces, because there is no necessary cultural and liturgical link between the Mongolians of Fr. Mostaert's time and the original creators of these bronze pieces.

Furthermore, if these bronze pieces are really crosses and indeed belong to Mongolian Nestorianism of the Yuan dynasty, one can still look to two resources: firstly, the record of how Mongolian Nestorians³⁶ were using the cross icon during the Yuan dynasty, as preserved in the *Zhishun Zhenjiang Zhi* (The Annals of Zhenjiang of the Zhishun Period), as mentioned previously. This work gives a very different picture from the one witnessed by Fr. Mostaert, and most importantly, it does not mention the "cross-shaped seals" at all.³⁷ Secondly, one can look at the developing study of the gravesites of the Mongolian Nestorians, which testifies that the iconography of Mongolian Nestorians is quite different from that of the bronze pieces in question. I will elaborate on the second point in future articles.

Another case perceived by many as side-evidence for the archaeological context of F. A. Nixon's bronze pieces, and which hence could be used as an indirect analogy, is the cross-shaped bronze item excavated from the north grotto of Dunhuang. Dunhuang is not far from Ordos and was once the most important town on the silk route and hence brought together both western and eastern cultural influences in its religious art. According to Peng Jinzhang and Jiang Boqin, the Dunhuang bronze cross should belong to the Nestorian heritage possessed by and then buried with the owner, who was probably one of the Dunhuang artisans. The dating of this Dunhuang Nestorian Cross is of the Western-Xia period, using relative dating by the funeral coins.

In identifying this piece to be a Nestorian Cross, Peng and Jiang's rationale is problematic. Firstly, they took for granted that the cross-shaped exclusively belongs to Christianity, the erroneous presupposition previously mentioned. Secondly, they paid insufficient attention to the assemblage, such as bronze bracelets, which was discovered along with the Nestorian Cross in the

³⁶ The idea of Mongolian Nestorian comes because the book mentions belief in a "long-live-heaven (長生天)" in the relevant community and also names the community as "Yelikewen (也里可溫)." All these points refer to a Mongolian Nestorian identity. See Yu (1279-1368, 367).

³⁷ The book mentions that "the cross-shaped, resembling the human body, is decorated on architecture and painted in the hall; worn on the hat, or worn as breastplate. It sets the standard (center) for the four directions (or for the whole universe). (十字者，取像人身，揭於屋，繪於殿，冠於首，佩於胸，四方上下，以是為準)" (Yu 1279-1368, 367). My translation "四方上下，以是為準" into "It sets the standard (center) for the four directions (or for the whole universe)" is based on verses found on the well-known Daqin Jingjiao Stele inscription which is in harmony with the former one: "Set out the cross as the center for the four directions (or the universe) (判十字以定四方)" and "testify the cross as the center to unite without limitation the four lights from four directions (印持十字融四照以合無拘)." Some scholars have compared the above two inscriptions already (Zhu 2002, 630). The second sentence has been translated by A. C. Moule as "The figure of ten which is held as a seal lightens the four quarters to unite all without exception" (Moule 1931, 79). But in ancient Chinese, "印持" does not mean "held as a seal." This needs to be formally discussed in an article about the relations between the different texts, including written and visual texts, concerning the "cross" icon in Nestorianism.

same pit, and which could have reinforced or undermined the Christian identity of the so-called cross. Thirdly, they did not appeal to the famous Nestorian Crosses collections around the world for comparison, such as the well-studied Mongolian Nestorian relics in Southern Mongolia, and the Nestorian relics in Quanzhou. The comparative approach is usually regarded as one of the useful methods in the Art History, especially in a case with such a poor original context. Fourthly, they did not find enough evidence for suggesting a seriation of the material culture or art history of the Western-Xia or Nestorian Nomads, thus the relative dating they adopted depending wholly on the coin is weak in evidence. And lastly, on the data analysis level, they did not sufficiently conduct the micro-analysis, for example, examine the back surface of the cross, or the crack on the edge, etc..³⁸ Based on all the unfinished work listed above, before more solid conclusions about the identity of the so-called Dunhuang Nestorian Cross is made, the Dunhuang Cross, no matter whether an authentic Nestorian relic or not, cannot be taken as the reference point for other Nestorian relic study at the current stage, nor can its archaeological record, although it is relatively clear so far.

Conclusion

It is worth mentioning that although the discussion about the diversity of the cross-shaped pieces has been relatively brief in this article, this does not imply that the cross-shaped pieces in the relevant collection are not diverse, nor does it suggest that this discussion is less important in the cross-shaped topic. The current arrangement of the argumentation is because, compared to the other two groups, namely the bird-shaped pieces and the Yuanya, the prevailing interpretation of the cross-shaped pieces relies heavily on the unwarranted presupposition that “all cross-shapes refer to Christianity.” Analysis of the innate characteristics of the cross-shaped pieces in the relevant collection, (diversity is one of them), will receive full treatment in my next article.

In the above discussion I have scrutinized the logic of the idea of Nestorian Crosses and its application to the identification of the bronze pieces in question, the influences co-working on the forming of such an idea, and the fundamental question about its legitimacy from the point of view of hard evidence. During the discussion, the methodology issue has been raised only slightly, but it certainly deserves full consideration, since, as briefly suggested, the major challenge to the mainstream practice of the study of the Jingjiao artefacts results from inadequate methodology. To this end, I have suggested in another article that the iconographical methodology, the interdisciplinary art historical methodology, and other methodologies commonly adopted in the study of religious art should be taken seriously in relation to the present study (Chen 2015). Only with systematic and rigorous interrogation and with abstinence from the permeating propensity, can one pay the appropriate respect to the idea of Nestorian Crosses. By eliminating unwarranted assertions, one can envisage not only the challenge, but also those elements which might eventually serve as supporting evidence for the idea.

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³⁸ For more detailed discussion on this topic, see Chen (2015, 15-17).

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