

# Digging out God from the Rubbish Heap:

## The Chinese Nestorian Documents and the Ideology of Research

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Research in humanities and cultural studies have undergone a change in recent years. There is an increasing awareness of the fragility of such concepts as (the positivist's) objectivity on the one side, and on the other of the dependency of scholars on their own personal background and academic tradition, which influence the method and way of research and even the choice of topics. The conclusion should be to look at these preconditions under which research was and is undertaken in order to appreciate one's own position as a researcher and—whenever necessary—to correct deficiencies stemming from this situation.

My paper will endeavour to trace some of these ideological and cultural presuppositions with the resulting problems in connection with the so-called Chinese Nestorianica from the Tang period. These documents in some respect represent an ideal material basis for such an undertaking because two cultural traditions and academic fields are involved: Theology in the broadest sense of the term and Orientalism in the most neutral sense. There is a remarkable gulf between those working in missiology, who make constant use of translations of such Chinese documents, and, for instance, the Chinese specialists who have discussed the authenticity and—to a certain extent—the contents of these texts. A point of contact is the English translation of the Chinese Nestorian texts by the Japanese Christian scholar Peter Yoshirō Saeki.

By way of some examples from the Nestorian stele of Xi'an and from the so-called Dunhuang-texts I will try to show how and why there is lack of communication between the two groups of "users" of the documents. I will concentrate on the non-specialists, mainly theologians (Gerhard Rosenkranz, Peter Chiu, Samuel Moffett, Martin Palmer), and on specialists of Religious Studies or Sinologists (Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, Li Tang) who, in the well-established tradition of Saeki, try to read Christian ideas and terms into the texts. They seek a sinicized interpretation of Christian concepts in Daoist, Buddhist or Confucian disguise—thus trying to "dig out God from the rubbish heap". I will also try to demonstrate the underlying ideology of this way of reading the texts in the broader context of the debate about Orientalism. In our case these interpretations are not done in a Colonialist discourse of power but rather in a specific discourse of all-pervading religious "truth", represented through Christianity and eventually to be found at any time and at any place in the world—a phenomenon which I label as "trans-orientalism" because it detects the West's own religious superiority in Asian cultures of the past.