

The “Barbarian Sky”: Chinese Knowledge and Records of Zoroastrianism Prior to the Tang Dynasty

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Abstract: As a terminal for the Silk Road, China is one of the largest countries affected by Zoroastrianism, a religion that once flourished across this channel. However, there are vague points on the extent of Chinese knowledge of the faith, especially before the Tang Dynasty when a specific word was invented to describe it. In historical documents, various depictions of a similar religion were shown, from which a connection can be found that links the descriptions with the Zoroastrian deity, Ahura-Mazda. This paper evaluates such evidence and concludes that the Xianbei Northern Wei dynasty, in which Zoroastrianism held a significant position in society, contributed the most to Chinese knowledge of the religion at that time. Similar depictions of Turkish tribes were then evaluated with archaeological evidence to show that Zoroastrianism did appear in Turkish nations at the time. The limitations of Chinese knowledge were also discussed, and probable reasons were given.

Keywords: Zoroastrianism, Northern Wei, Xianbei, Religion

1. Introduction

Since the time when the first merchants traveled along the brief trails explored and opened by the steppe nomads, the religion of Zoroastrianism spread along with them, and unsurprisingly, the faith left its tracks in China, one of its terminals and most important outpourers along this “Silk Road,” named after the significant good supplied mainly by Chinese weavers. Therefore, naturally, Chinese documents wrote extensively about the religion, with indications that the belief was in place as early as the Three Kingdoms period recorded in a biography in which a Buddhist monk first worshipped a “fire religion” but later converted to Buddhism when the holy fire in his home was gone extinguished [1].

In Chinese official records, the religion is most commonly named “Xian Jiao (祆教),” with the character Xian (祆) used, according to the Song dynastic phonological dictionary *Ji Yun*, as a local indication for “holiness granted by sky” [2]. However, such names were only used after the Tang dynasty [3], while in earlier documents, there were no exclusive, proprietary names for Zoroastrianism in China. Therefore, a question can easily be given around the extent that the Chinese know about Zoroastrianism and its spread around China before the Tang Dynasty (by the late 6th century).

2. Xianbei and Northern Wei

By tracing the earlier sources of Tang dynasty records, one may locate another book in the Twenty-four Histories: the *Wei Shu*, or *Book of Wei*, recording Xianbei (a Proto-Mongolic nomadic nation) polities of Northern and Eastern Wei, along with other nomadic tribes at around the same period. In the document, one noticeable phrase of a deity—"Sky God"—was frequently mentioned, although sometimes in slightly different ways, such as "Barbarian Sky God (胡天神)," "Barbarian Sky (胡天)" or simply "Sky (天)." The deity seems highly important in Xianbei and Northern Wei societies, demonstrated by the event that when Empress Dowager Ling abolished all the prostitutes, the document specifically mentioned that the "Barbarian Sky God" is not one of them [4].

Revising the meaning of the character Xian (祆) in later Chinese records, the name has already hinted at some connections between this "Sky God" and Zoroastrianism. Still, the *Wei Shu* have given more information that directly links the name "Sky God" with the exact religion of Zoroastrianism. In one passage, the word "Sky God" was explained that the religion served stars, the moon, and the sun, and as the religion also served fire, the god can also be named "the god of Fire and Sky (火神天神)" [4]. This excerpt serves as an intermediate text linking two names for one deity, which the latter was directly mentioned in another part of the book: "The Persian people worship the god of fire and sky. In the middle of Holy Tortoise, its king Juhe sent envoys to write letters and pay tributes. [4]" The phrase "Holy Tortoise" is a reign title used in traditional Chinese calendars to indicate the year; in this case, the "Holy Tortoise" indicates that such situations were at present in about 518-519 CE, when Persia was under the rule of Sassanid Empire, in which Zoroastrianism is the official religion. Such proof extracted from the same document (which ruled out naming coincidences by different authors), along with the similarity between the name "Sky God" and later "Xian," is convincing to say that Zoroastrianism is distinguished and did not play a peripheral role in Xianbei Society, for the fact that the deity is essential enough for historians in the period to mention that it is not seen as a prostitute to be abolished.

When the Xianbei nation conquered northern China and established the regional regime of Northern Wei, they reformed their hierarchy. They adopted the official system of the Chinese Empire, which had a firm root in the core regions of China. Northern Wei also created new officials in respect to their needs, and many of them were inherited by later polities in the area, along with Sui and Tang dynasties which unified China under one government. One of the officials of particular attraction when discussing Zoroastrianism in this period is the *Sa Bao* (萨宝), recorded as a fifth-grade official in *Tong Dian*. This Tang Dynasty official record includes descriptions of government organs and officials [5]. The name itself may seem to be of no interest, but the book also recorded several subordinates of the official, including one "Xian Zheng of the Sa Bao Mansion (萨宝府祆正)" [5]. Notice that the title directly used the exact character "祆," which in Tang Dynasty is used only to indicate the Zoroastrian religion, and the character *Zheng* in this context has the specific meaning of "the government official managing a specific business" [6]. Such setting and continuity of officials, combined with the situation of Zoroastrianism under Empress Dowager Ling, may show that the Xianbei people have extensive knowledge of the religion and have given Zoroastrianism a high value. As they settled in China as Northern Wei, they incorporated such knowledge. They brought into the Chinese society to be inherited by later Chinese polities through official history records and specific administrative organs.

3. Zoroastrianism in Turkic Tribes

The term "Sky God" did not appear only in records about Xianbei and Northern Wei. In another Chinese official historical document, *Bei Shi*, an excerpt about Turkic Tribes used the exact same

term to record times when nobles and the Khan held activities to worship their ancestors and gods, in which the ritual of worshipping “sky god” was held in around mid-May (of the Chinese lunisolar Calendar) [7].

However, as *Bei Shi* and *Wei Shu* have different authors and were done in different periods, there cannot be made a strong statement by this source itself that the “Sky God” means Zoroastrian deities. Luckily, modern archaeological excavations in Mongolia have provided information that may be used as proof for this statement. Russian archeologists S. G. Klyashtorny and V. Livsic have translated the inscriptions on Turkic steles excavated in Mongolia, in which a specific sentence was present: “The ruler Mugan Khan and the ruler Mahan Teqin... have been the saviors of the world for a long time.” with the word “savior” is written in the specific form “swshwyn’tt” [8]. This form is noticeable because a remarkably similar form of the word “Saoshyant” is used for the exact same meaning in *Avista*, one of the most essential documents of Zoroastrianism [9]. Such archaeological proofs have proved that even if the Turkic tribes did not worship Zoroastrian deities directly, there must be extensive influence from Zoroastrianism on the Turkic people to the extent that they even used the critical word “savior” in the ways of Zoroastrian texts. Furthermore, the relations proved by the archaeological excavations have also demonstrated that Chinese records about Zoroastrianism in the Turkic tribes are at least partially, if not totally, accurate.

4. Mistaken views about Zoroastrianism in Chinese records

Although the previous evaluations supported that the Chinese have extensive knowledge of Zoroastrianism thanks to Northern Wei and that Chinese records about the spread of Zoroastrianism in neighboring tribes are mostly correct, there are some mistaken views about the religion in Chinese documents in this time period; among them, the false connections between Zoroastrianism and Buddhist figures are the most obvious.

In *Tong Dian*, such connections are shown directly, with the book claiming that “Xian, the god of the Western Regions, is the so-called Masheshoro in the Buddhist scriptures. [10]” “Masheshoro” is a form of Mahesvara, the other name of Shiva in Sanskrit. Although Shiva is more commonly known as the world-creating god in Hinduism, Buddhism also accepts the figure as the ruler of all three realms of samsara.

Two possible reasons may be given for such a mistake, deriving from one of the Chinese names for Zoroastrian deities discussed before: “god of fire and sky.” One is that the Chinese believed that both religions served a sky god; apart from the “sky god” in Chinese views of Zoroastrianism evaluated before, the Chinese name for Mahesvara, “大自在天,” also leads to a figure of “sky god.” Another is that both religions served fire; Ancient Hindi has a deep-rooted worship of fire, with the example that the first volume of *Rigveda* is the eulogy of Agni, the fire god [11]. On the other hand, Zoroastrianism also puts fire worship in a significant position; the fire god, Atar, is recorded as the son of the main deity, Ahura-Mazda [11]. Those two reasons combined may lead to why Chinese records believe that the worship of Zoroastrianism is the same as that of specific Buddhist figures.

5. Conclusion

Based on all the previous evaluations, a conclusion may be drawn that the Chinese do have an extensive range of knowledge of Zoroastrianism and its spread around China by the late 6th century, with the major contributor being Northern Wei’s knowledge; however, there are still many mistaken views from that time such as the standard connection of Zoroastrianism with specific Buddhist figures. Of course, such a conclusion needs to be supplied with more historical, mainly primary, supplement information; this supplement is left for more archaeological discoveries in the future.

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