

*The Story of a Stele: China's Nestorian Monument and Its Reception in the West, 1625–1916.* By Michael Keevak. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008. Pp. ix + 195. \$39.50.

Michael Keevak begins his story of the stele known as the “Nestorian monument” with the basic facts:

One day in 1625, in the ancient Chinese capital of Xi’an in the province of Shaanxi in northwestern China, a group of workers accidentally unearthed a large limestone stele. An enormous black tablet about three meters high, one meter wide, and half a meter deep, the front and sides were exquisitely carved with a long inscription that included both Chinese and a Syriac script known as Estrangelo. The text, dated 781, eulogized the history and spread of a religion it referred to as *jingjiao* (the “luminous” or “illustrious” or “brilliant” teaching), which had come to China from a faraway land called *Da Qin*. (p. 5)

Among the doctrines described on the stele were a god who created the world, a being named “Sadan” who deceived human beings into committing evil, and a three-in-one god born of a virgin, who left scriptures allowing for human salvation. A cross was engraved above the text. The “jingjiao” religion was later identified as a sect of Christianity known as Nestorianism, a branch that had spread eastward along the silk route. The tablet goes on to explain how this religion arrived in China in 635 and how it eventually received official recognition and support.

*The Story of a Stele* is a study of how this monument was taken up in the European imagination, where what Keevak refers to as “little more than an obscure piece of eighth-century limestone” (p. 61) came to be called “one of the greatest monuments of the world” (p. 115), attracting the attention of almost everyone interested in China for the next several centuries. Keevak limits the scope of the book, choosing not to discuss what the stele is (he never gives a translation of the text engraved on it), but rather how it *appeared* and *functioned* in the European discourses that constructed “China.” As he puts it:

The thesis of this book is that when Westerners discussed the stone they were not really talking about China at all. The stone served as a kind of screen onto which they could project their own self-image and this is what they were looking at, not China. The stone came to represent the empire and its history for many Western readers, but only because it was seen as a tiny bit of the West that was already there. (p. 3)

Keevak’s history of this “screen” is divided into four main parts. The first chapter focuses on the discovery of the monument, including a basic description of the stele and the problems involved with determining and constructing its meaning. In particular, Keevak shows how the importance of the stele derived from its role in responding to one of the most common Chinese doubts about Christianity—if it were necessary for salvation,

why did it reach China so late (p. 12)? The stele was used by the Jesuits to argue not only that Christianity had arrived at least a thousand years earlier, but also that it had enjoyed official recognition from the emperor. The second chapter concentrates on the widespread dissemination of “knowledge” of the stele in Europe in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, centring on the role of Athanasius Kircher, a German Jesuit based in Rome. Kircher approached China through his interest in Egypt and hieroglyphics, hypothesizing that China was originally a colony of Egypt. He first mentioned the stele in a book on Coptic and Egyptian, but it took center stage in a later work, the widely read *China Illustrata* (published in 1667), which included two translations of the text of the monument along with the original Chinese and a Romanized transliteration of all the characters (images of which are included in Keevak’s book). Kircher’s presentation of the monument drew widespread reaction from people across Europe, including many who thought the whole thing was a Jesuit forgery.

The third chapter considers the function of the monument in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a time marked by increased interest in China but also by a narrowing of European access to China itself (following the expulsion of missionaries in 1724). As a result, little new information about the stele entered Europe at the same time that presentations of it increased and diversified. This chapter includes discussions of how the stele was used during the Enlightenment, particularly by Voltaire, as well as the broader shift in Europe toward more explicitly imperialist attitudes. The fourth chapter follows the return of missionaries to China and the ultimate resolution of debates about the stele in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time in which Western demands on China become more open and violent. One finds at this time a growing desire to acquire the stele, which would, in the words of Frederic Henry Balfour, “be more worthily housed in the British Museum than left to rot unnoticed and uncared for in a dirty Chinese town” (p. 111). The power of the monument in the Western mind would seem to have ended in the early twentieth century, with the original preserved in the Bei Lin (Forest of Stele) museum in Xi’an and a number of copies existing around the world; in an epilogue, however, Keevak addresses one more appearance of the monument: the recent work of Martin Palmer on Chinese-Christian texts from the Tang dynasty, which Keevak situates in the context of the long history of uses of the monument.

The breadth of Keevak’s account allows the reader to see the history of the stele as a series of themes and variations, coordinating more to changes within Europe than to facts about China. A particularly illuminating example is the split between those who believed the monument was genuine and those who believed it a forgery. There was little evidence available outside of Xi’an, so responses were determined by broad prejudices and European agendas. Initially, one’s stance toward the monument followed from one’s stance toward the Jesuits: their opponents took the monument as a fake, partly because it seemed to so conveniently support the Jesuit’s own goals. At an early phase in the debate, attitudes toward the monument coordinated with attitudes toward the Chinese. In that context, a “positive” attitude toward the Chinese required seeing Chinese culture as

at least compatible with Christianity, a position that the stele could be used to support. In contrast, those who saw Chinese culture as being entirely opposed to Christianity (and thus in need of eventual elimination) concluded that the monument must be fake. In one of the more interesting twists in the debate, these positions realigned as attitudes toward Christianity changed. Voltaire was enthusiastic about the Chinese because they *avoided* the superstitions of European Christianity; thus, for him, a positive view of the Chinese entailed *denying* the authenticity of the stele. As Keevak puts it:

But the real problem [for Voltaire] was that the stele did not fit his preconceptions about the Middle Kingdom, and therefore he was simply unable to accept the possibility of Christianity in an empire that had to remain morally untainted and completely free from the deficiencies of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The monument could not be genuine since China—the world of rationality, continuity, and order—could never have been contaminated at such an early date. (p. 71)

One's stance on the authenticity of the stele could be determined by all kinds of strange prejudices, the most bizarre of which probably comes from Charles William Wall, who believed that non-phonetic writing could not accurately retain its meaning over time and so could not preserve historical records (pp. 81–85). He thus concludes that the Chinese portion of the monument had been faked, not by the Jesuits but by Chinese embarrassed by their shortage of written records!

Keevak's history of the stele sheds light on the peculiarities and contingencies in how knowledge of China was constructed and disseminated. For example, although Athanasius Kircher had never left Europe, knew no Chinese, and mostly just reworked already published sources, his book resonated with a broad audience and had a determinative influence on how the monument was viewed for centuries to come: his version of the Chinese text was still being published as late as 1845 (p. 80). Kircher's book in an odd way parallels that of Martin Palmer, whose recent work on the "Jesus Sutras" has been widely read and translated while more scholarly work has been ignored—because, like Kircher before him, his construction of the monument (this time as a symbol of religious tolerance and syncretism) resonates with a broader public. Keevak's history insightfully reveals the mutual influence between changing circumstances in Europe and the meaning of the stele at any given time. In this construction, contingent factors often take on great significance. For example, for over a century, the only sample of written Chinese to which most Europeans had any access was Kircher's publication of the text of the monument. Thus an obscure Tang-dynasty text from a marginal foreign religion became the standard (and often only) source for those interested in the Chinese language. As a result, the Chinese-Latin glossary compiled by the Berlin librarian Christian Mentzel in 1685 consisted only of words used in the text of the monument (complete with Kircher's errors) (pp. 55–57), and as late as 1815 the French sinologist Abel Rémusat recommended using the text of the monument as a way to learn Chinese grammar (p. 77).

*The Story of a Stele* covers almost four hundred years of history in less than two

hundred pages, so some important figures are necessarily left out (for example, Leibniz and Legge are both only briefly mentioned). Overall, though, Keevak presents an engaging account that is both thorough and extensive, drawing on an impressive range of European materials in several languages. Because the stele stood so large in the European conception of China, Keevak's story of the stele also conveys a history of European perceptions of China. Keevak includes well known figures but also more obscure sources, such as the placement of discussions of the monument in the Vatican's collection of Chinese materials, or comparisons of the various ways in which the appearance of the monument was described and represented in images. The book includes nearly fifty illustrations. Moreover, Keevak has a story-teller's gift for finding interesting anecdotes and characters, such as Andreas Müller, a seventeenth-century German orientalist who claimed to have invented a "key" that would allow for the easy deciphering of the Chinese language and who devised a system in which Chinese characters were coordinated with musical notations (an image of which is included); or the Marquis D'Argens, a freethinker and libertine who used an imaginary Chinese perspective to criticize the superstition and corruption of Christianity, praising Confucius as "the greatest man the universe has ever produced." (p. 67) Another interesting anecdote Keevak includes is the story of Frits Holm, who became something of a sensation after traveling to Xi'an in 1907 and making a full size stone copy of the monument. Holm had hoped to acquire the stele itself and Keevak speculates on what his plans may have been. Whatever they were, Holm's actions resulted in the movement of the original into the Bei Lin museum, where it could be protected both against the elements and against foreigners hoping to acquire it.

As the history of a European perception, *The Story of a Stele* is both entertaining and revealing. Keevak presents the book, however, as not just recounting this history but also as making a broader point about the nature of cross-cultural interpretation. In this aspect, the book has an unfortunate polemical tone that distracts from a more nuanced engagement with the genuine difficulties and dangers of trying to understand another culture. To some degree, the attempt to stick close to the story of the stele itself leaves little room to analyse or comprehend the broader European contexts in which the stele is approached. Largely, though, Keevak does not even attempt to look at things from the perspectives of those he interprets, showing no appreciation for, or interest in, the genuine difficulties that someone raised in a seventeenth-century European culture would have in trying to make sense of China. With this attitude, he enacts the same one-sided hermeneutics he criticizes in those he examines.

At times, this polemical focus leads to misleading claims. For example, Keevak slides from suggesting that Martin Palmer's account of the stone's discovery is *uncertain* to saying it is *inaccurate* (pp. 131–32). Another example involves Frits Holm. In a rare moment of praise for Palmer, Keevak writes: "Unlike Holm, Palmer wants to protect rather than pillage" (p. 131). If we turn back to the discussion of Holm, though, the only details we are offered is that he tried to buy the monument and when he failed, he made a copy instead. Moreover, Keevak writes: "I have no doubt that Holm really believed that

he was acting on behalf of the advancement of science, and he was quick to condemn people who simply stole relics or cut the heads off statues for a quick profit” (p. 123). This account does not support the later formulation that what Holm “wanted” was to “pillage,” and the shift seems to obfuscate more than illuminate. At other times, Keevak simply overstates his case. For example, he writes:

To see a cross on the Xi’an monument, similarly, seemed to be necessary for Europeans to be able to understand it at all. Chinese culture was readable precisely insofar as it was also, in its distant past, Christian. (p. 28)

Europeans did usually take their orientation toward China from points which resembled their own views, but “Europeans” had been reading China long before the discovery of the monument, and for centuries after there were many Europeans who believed the monument was a fake and that Chinese culture was never Christian—yet they continued to “read” China. These examples appear trivial, but such slippages and exaggerations permeate the book, forcing the reader to exercise vigilance.

The problem with the exaggerated rhetoric is that it portrays the European approach as homogenous and all equally reducible to “the lenses of religious intolerance, colonial ambition, or Eurocentrism” (p. 3). Keevak’s own historical analysis brings out the diverse ways in which China was used, but when it comes to commenting on cross-cultural understanding, his reduction of every position to Euro-centrism creates an unhelpful night in which all cows are black. For example, while both wanted to bring about something like the “conversion” of the Chinese, there remains a contrast between the Jesuits, who immersed themselves in Chinese culture and envisioned a Christian-Confucian synthesis, and the openly imperialist view (which Keevak associates with Wall) that China “required Western intervention in order to understand its *own* history and culture, both of which had fallen into a period of stasis” (p. 81). The superficial use of China by Voltaire or D’Argens differs significantly from the sinological studies of T. S. Bayer or Etienne Fourmont, even while all of them took China as a mirror for their own perceptions. Finally, while Kircher and Palmer both construct images of China that resonate with their audiences, there surely are relevant differences between Kircher’s construction of the monument as Catholic and Palmer’s decentering European Christianity by presenting its Chinese version as equally “authentic.” It would, of course, be naïve to divide these positions into “good” and “bad,” into those directed toward disinterested knowledge of China and those simply using China for their own purposes, or those who want to learn from China and those who want to teach to it. The goal of Keevak’s rhetoric (I assume) is to undermine such a simplistic view by emphasizing that *all* of those approaching China had their own interests and lenses, and in this sense, they all shared a kind of Euro-centrism. Yet simply equating them while pointing out over and over again that Europeans are Euro-centric is not very illuminating and no longer surprising or controversial.

At times, Keevak appears to simply apply a basic truth about hermeneutics—we all interpret from some particular place, which shapes the questions we ask and the “facts”

we select. Alongside this claim about hermeneutics, Keevak makes the claim that the Europeans were oriented by “religious conversion, cultural superiority, and monetary profit” (p. 28). This claim, though, remains always ambiguous: were the Europeans particularly bad, deliberately setting out to impose their own values and to make a profit? Or were they simply doing what any interpreter must do: making sense of things by relating them to their own concerns and views? The tone of the book implies the first, since it certainly suggests that the Europeans are to *blame* for their mistakes; yet the historical analysis usually only establishes the second. In fact, Keevak’s polemics depend on a constant slippage between the two, on one side taking the most egregious examples of Euro-centrism and associating them with all European interpreters, while on the other side suggesting that Europeans were foolish for actions that are a necessary part of any process of interpretation. For example, perhaps Keevak’s most emphatic point is that Europeans (and Christians) were more interested in the monument than were the Chinese themselves, but why should this be surprising or noteworthy? In the end, one cannot tell if the Europeans are being held up by Keevak as an illustration of how *not* to go about engaging another culture, or if they are meant to show that cross-cultural interpretation is always imperialist and should simply be avoided. Keevak’s nuanced history of how the stele was interpreted in Europe suggests that the truth lies at some complex middle ground between these two positions, even while his rhetoric tends to obscure this complexity.

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*The Talented Women of the Zhang Family*. By Susan Mann. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007. Pp. xvi + 322. \$55.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

Historians are in the habit of asking the question, “How do we know what we know?” Much less often do we ask the question, “How do we tell what we know?” Or, to put it another way: how do our modes of communication structure and inform our modes of knowing? What might happen if historians practised “thinking like a storyteller” in their everyday practice of writing history? Susan Mann has written a rich and imaginative book which shows her working and thinking like a storyteller and a scene setter; the book invites commentary on these questions, and should provide inspiration for future work on many levels.

*The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* looks at three generations of talented women in the Zhang family of Changshu. The narrative progresses with each chapter title taking the name of a central figure in each generation: first, Tang Yaoqing; second, her