

# A Chapel by the Name of Alopen

By Dr. K.C. Wong Dec 2020 <sup>1</sup>

In Early 2018, when major renovation works started at the Chapel of Bishop Hall Jubilee School (BHJS), the architect asked me how to position a new memorial at the entrance of our Chapel. While I was looking at the old sign, a totally different question came to my mind. Why was our Chapel at BHJS named Alopen in the first place?

Alopen was a name inscribed on the old *Nestorian Tablet*, which is now standing in the Stele Forest of Xi'an. <sup>2</sup> From this Tablet, we learn that Alopen was a Bishop of the Nestorian Church, a branch of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Syria. He was the first on record who took a long missionary journey, of great hardship and danger across mountain and desert from Persia via the Silk Road, to spread the message of the Christian faith to China. In 635 AD, Tang Dynasty Emperor (Tai-Zong) met with Alopen and allowed him to translate Christian books in the Imperial Library, and to preach.

The grace and deeds of Alopen<sup>3</sup>, and of his fellow Syriac missionaries over a century, were inscribed on this Tablet. Today the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Ma Tau Wai still keeps a rare rubbing edition. (Fig. 1)

The original Tablet stands 3.2 meters. The top of it is in the shape of a gable, on which a little cross of about 10 cm is drawn in a special flowery shape (Fig. 2). It is the same cross as the one in front of our own Alopen Chapel (Fig. 3), but ours is a few times bigger and cast in iron. This *Nestorian Cross* is special. There seems to be a flower at the center, and the four arms of this cross are

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<sup>1</sup> This monograph is based on the Report I gave in Chinese at the thanksgiving service upon the completion of the chapel renovation (SKH Echo. 2018.8.12. Issue 2214. page 4). The service was led by Bishop Timothy Kwok, Venerable Mark Tang, Rev. Ross Royden, Rev. K.K. Chan, and Rev. K.K. Lee on 2 June 2018. I have to thank Principal Mrs. Clara Lau, Principal Ms. Brenda Mau, Dr. Y.B. Lee; Barrister Mr. Michael Liu, and Ms. Jessica Wong for reading my earlier drafts. Without their encouragements and corrections, I would not have finished this English version. All remaining errors are mine.

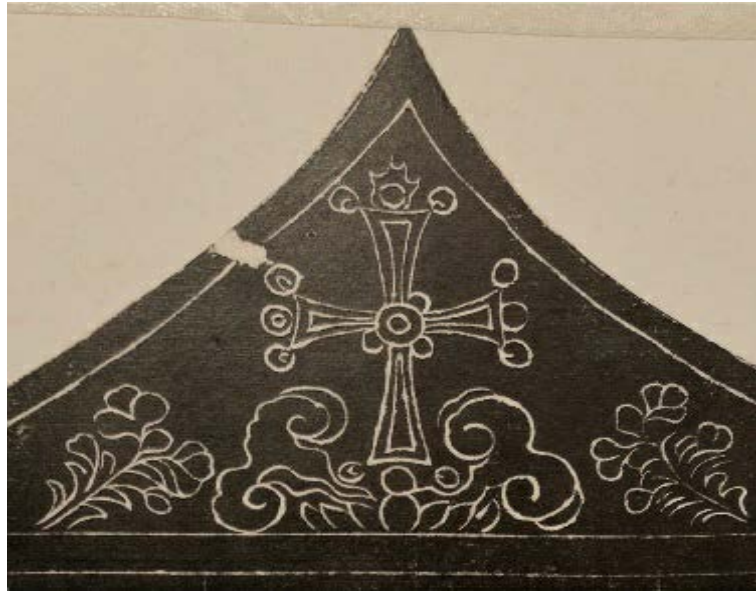
<sup>2</sup> I read these inscriptions during a visit in 2007.

<sup>3</sup> The name "Alopen" was the Syrian transliteration of the name "Abraham".

growing as if they are leaves around the center flower. We call this a *Leaf Cross*. This is the typical version of the cross adopted by the Nestorian Church.



**Fig 1. The Nestorian Tablet: A Rubbing Edition in the Holy Trinity Cathedral**



**Fig 2. The Leaf Cross on the top of the Nestorian Tablet**



**Fig 3. The Leaf Cross in our Alopen Chapel**

Let us take a closer look at this little Cross on the Tablet (Fig. 2). There are clouds from which the Cross rises, and there is also a lotus flower underneath the clouds. On both sides of the clouds are flowers and leaves. In China, lotus represents purity. But of course there is also the legend of the Buddha rising from a lotus. Hence, lotus could be a symbol of Buddhism. Moreover, in Taoist Classic *Free and Easy Wandering*, Master Zhuang says "*He rides on the clouds and drives the dragons...*" Hence, riding on the clouds might have been a Taoist idea. Yet looking purely from a Christian point of view, riding on the clouds could simply mean "*descending from Heaven*"...

Of course the author of the Tablet never explained the meaning of clouds and lotus. One can only speculate. However, judging from the Leaf Cross riding on the clouds and rising from the lotus, we could see that the first Christians arriving China tried so hard to *contextualise*: i.e. to put in a Chinese context so that western Christianity could be understood by Chinese people.

The contextualisation of Christianity has been ongoing for more than 1,300 years. Today in Hong Kong, Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre is a leading example. Sheng Kung Hui Holy Trinity Cathedral and St. Mary's Church in Causeway Bay are fine examples of churches built in Chinese styles. Our Alopen Chapel at BHJS was simply named after Bishop Alopen, and its style the Nestorian Tablet.



**Fig 4. 256 small clouds hovering above the Lotus**

Now let us look at our Chinese style altar closely (Fig. 4). The lotus underneath the original Nestorian Cross is now resting instead at the center along the bottom edge. The two clouds, on which the Nestorian Cross originally rides on, now propagate into 256 smaller clouds, hovering above the lotus<sup>4</sup>. The flowers and leaves beside the Nestorian Cross grow on the two sides of this altar instead. The holy grail in Christianity now becomes a Chinese style bronze ewer supported by three splayed legs; the four strong wooden legs supporting this altar were constructed as if they were four little dragons climbing up onto the altar.

Notice also the back rests of the pews. They were crafted in Chinese Manji grids. You may now appreciate how far our ancestors did go to contextualise when designing our Alopen Chapel. Incidentally according to Ms. Fiona Wong<sup>5</sup>, all the Chinese style furniture in this Chapel were hand-crafted by teachers and students of Holy Carpenter Practical Training Centre.

Now the important question for us is: why were these valuable legacies left with BHJS, but not with other schools. Bishop Ronald Hall was appointed Bishop of Victoria, Hong Kong in 1932. On the Jubilee Anniversary in 1957, the church decided to commemorate his dedicated service to God and fellowmen by naming a new school in Kowloon Tong as Bishop Hall Jubilee School. Bishop Hall learned and spoke fluent Chinese; and offered his life for missionary mission into China, as Alopen did. It is therefore most appropriate to keep these legacies in Bishop Hall Jubilee School.

Many lectures and seminars on Chinese culture and Christianity were in fact conducted here in this Chapel. I remember attending seminars by Rev. Canon Ho Sai Ming right here in Alopen Chapel in the 1970s...

For more than 50 years, there had been no major renovation. There were leakages and concrete spalling in recent years. Our architect discovered that most of the raised floors were not in the original drawings. The School therefore decided to raise funds for a major renovation, and along the way, to retell the history of Alopen Chapel to our students.

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<sup>4</sup> 148 clouds on the front elevation, and 54 on each side.

<sup>5</sup> Daughter of our founding Principal Mrs. Helen Wong.

When this major renovation was designed, no effort was spared to keep the Alopen Chapel neat and original. The cast iron Nestorian Cross was original; the altar and all Chinese style furniture, steel windows, and brass handles were all old and original. They were reclaimed from corrosions and some even from broken fragments. They were mended, fixed, polished, repainted, and reinstalled with numerous hours of sweat and labour.

You may notice that some of the pews you are sitting on have been newly pieced together. There are joints midway along the lengths of the pews. And the lengths of these pews are not the same. They range from 269 to 274 cm. Only the back rows have a 3 cm sideways projection beyond the timber seats. These are all visible signs of thoughtful details in the process of reclaiming our fifty years old seats and putting them in order. We went so far as to mend and join four broken Manji grid backrests, and put them vertically outside the Chapel entrance. You may see them on the left hand side of the memorial stone, covering the stainless steel at the construction joint (Fig. 5).



**Fig 5. Manji grid backrests & the memorial stone**



**Fig 6. The Stained Glass**

Let us now look at this stained glass wall at the front of this Chapel (Fig. 6). These steel window grids were original. Should we look at the top 2 grids carefully, we will notice 6 (out of the 14) wider vertical mullions have been cut and replaced by thinner steel bars one-third the original widths. These are remnants of installing old window type air conditioners, and are preserved as they were. The only new installation was these 182 pieces of stained glasses. After months of laborious search, we had to concede that suitable glasses could not be found in Hong Kong. We eventually had to order these stained glasses all the way from Shanghai. Our architect skillfully designed the color patterns to allow our Cross to glow.

We are grateful for the donation from the class of 1967, without which this renovation could not have been possible. They wish to honor Reverend Joyce Bennett, the teacher they love. Their affections to the School and to Rev Bennett are touching. We have gratefully inscribed onto the memorial stone outside this Chapel to thank them.<sup>6</sup> On this stone the six Chinese characters for the name

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<sup>6</sup> We should thank the Principal Ms. Lily Wong for her strenuous effort in following the renovation project, without which it might not have completed on time. We thank Bernard, Eric, Attic and Tom of Z-Architects for their designs; Catty, Alex and all master craftsmen of Firwood Engineering for their tedious labour and master craftsmanship.

Alopen Chapel were replicas of characters on the rubbing editions of Ouyang Xun, a leading calligrapher during Emperor Tai-Zong's time. Students of calligraphy may wish to study them in detail.<sup>7</sup>

Right here fifty-five years ago, on Oct 11<sup>th</sup> 1963, Bishop Hall consecrated this Chapel. The sermon then was given by Canon Theologian Reverend Lee Shiu Keung. Reverend Lee studied in Oxford and Cambridge and was a scholar of Chinese church history. He explained the origins of Alopen, and at the end of his sermon he concluded:

*“In the lotus-cross we find a great symbol that the Christian Faith had been planted on Chinese soil for more than thirteen hundred years... We who are worshipping in this Chapel have been blessed with a very rich inheritance.”*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 5) 歐陽詢書法字出處。「阿、羅」二字：《心經》。「本」字：《九成宮醴泉銘》。「小、聖」二字：《黃帝陰符經》。「堂」字：《虞恭公溫彥博碑》。

<sup>8</sup> Appendix A, last paragraph.



Appendix A.

**Sermon by the Revd. Lee Shiu Keung at the Consecration of  
Alopen Chapel on 11th October 1963.**

**ALOPEN**

In 635, Bishop Alopen arrived in Chang-An, after a long journey of “hardship and danger” across mountain and desert from Persia. The Nestorian Tablet expressly stated “The Emperor (Tai-Chung) sent the Minister of State, Duke Fang Hsuan-ling to take an escort to the Western suburbs to meet the guest and bring him to the Imperial Palace.” It is clear that Alopen’s mission had been carefully prepared and no doubt there had been Nestorian Christians in Chang-An before the arrival of Alopen. Trade still flourished between Persia and China in the 7th century and there must have been some Christians among the numerous Persian merchants in China.

Alopen was fully aware of China’s long literary tradition. He realized that he must present the Christian doctrine in the written language before he preached it to the people. The Emperor granted him the privilege of translating Christian books in the Imperial Library. The first book was completed in 638, after three years of arduous preparation. The Emperor, having examined its contents, gave his approval and commanded its propagation. A Nestorian Monastery known as the Persian Monastery was accordingly built. In the I-ning quarter at the capital with 21 men as regular monks.

The book which Alopen produced in 638 was the Sutra of Jesus the Messiah. It took the form of a catechism. The first part was devoted to an exposition of the Doctrine of God and the Ten Commandments. The second part was devoted to the Life of Christ from the Nativity to the Passion. The narrative, however, ended rather abruptly with the Crucifixion. Many Buddhist terms were borrowed in the Translation. There is every reason to believe that Alopen was dictating his book to a Chinese scribe who was a Buddhist or at least well-versed in the Buddhist scriptures. In 641 the second book appeared – the Sutra of the Messiah Doctrine on Charity. Again the book falls into two parts. The first part was devoted to an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount (especially the 5th &

6th Chapters of St. Matthew's Gospel) while the second part was a continuation of the Life of Christ from the Resurrection to the Ascension. Apparently Bishop Alopen picked up the narrative where he had left unfinished in his first book.

Under Kao-Chung (650–683), the Nestorian Church prospered. According to the Nestorian Tablet “the religion has spread over ten provinces.....Monasteries occupied on hundred cities”. This is no doubt an exaggeration but the fact remains that foundations of Nestorian monasteries in Kansu and Honan had been traced to the second half of the 7th century.

In the reign of Kao-Chung, Alopen was made Archbishop or in the words of the Nestorian Tablet “Great Spiritual Lord, Protector of the Empire”. Although his Metropolitan See was still Chang-An, he had jurisdiction over monastic Churches in Kansu, Honan and even Szechuen.

We learn from the Nestorian Tablet that the early Christians in China had the two sacraments – Baptism and the Eucharist. Besides, the time-table of the Nestorian monks was regulated with the performance of the “Opus Dei”, the recital of the seven canonical hours.

The Nestorian Tablet mentioned that Bishop Alopen had not only brought books to Chang-An but also images. The Nestorian crosses may very well be included in the gifts. We do not know when the Nestorian cross on the pedestal of the lotus was first introduced. But the leaf-cross was very popular in Syria and Mesopotamia in the 7th and especially the 8th century. According to Dr. Talbot Rice, “this motif consists of a cross with tall stem, from the base of which leaves rise up to form a balancing pattern on either side”. We may perhaps, trace beginning of the lotus cross to the leaf-cross of Syria.

The lotus has always been the symbol of purity in China. But man by himself can never attain the perfection and the beauty of the lotus. To the cross of Christ he must lift up his heart. In the lotus-cross we find a great symbol that the Christian Faith had been planted on Chinese soil for more than thirteen hundred years ago. We who are worshipping in this Chapel have been blessed with a very rich inheritance.