

# An Overview of Bible Translation History in Asia with Focus on the Regions of Chinese-Character Cultures<sup>1)</sup>

Daud Soesilo\*

## 1. Introduction

Bible translation in Asia dates back to the mid-second century of the common era when the Gospels were translated into Syriac. The Peshitta (literally “simple”) was the authorized Bible of the Syrian Church dating from the latter fourth or early fifth century. It was carried by evangelists to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and China during the sixth century.

The discovery of some Scripture portions mentioned on a monument in Xian (781 C.E.) is evidence that the Nestorian (Persian) Christians who went to China during the seventh century may have engaged in some Bible translation. Otherwise, little is known of their work.

Other early translation work in Asia is recorded, but there is no existing evidence to attest to this work. Pope Benedict XII in 1335 referred to a Mongolian Bible, presumably a translation of the New Testament and Psalms for liturgical purposes prepared by a Franciscan monk at the court of Kublai Khan in 1306.<sup>2)</sup> However, no trace of this text remains. Presumably, Bible translation into Chinese was undertaken by the Jesuits in the early sixteenth century, but none of their work survives. A Japanese New Testament was translated by Jesuit missionaries in Kyoto in 1613, but no copies remain.

It is the Malay translation of Matthew’s Gospel by Albert Cornelisz Ruyl, printed in 1629, which is the earliest attested translation into an Asian language. Ruyl’s translation is also significant as the earliest example of the translation and printing for evangelistic purposes of a portion of the Bible in a non-European

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\* United Bible Societies Asia Pacific Area Translations Coordinator

1) This constitutes a section of a larger article which will be published in the History of Bible Translation volume.

2) See Graham Ogden, “Bible Translation,” Scott W. Sunquist, ed., *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 79.

language.<sup>3)</sup>

However, it is Chinese Bible translation that has impacted on Korean and Japanese Bible translations. As other Chinese, Korean and Japanese scholars will present detailed history of Bible translation in Chinese, Korean and Japanese respectively, this overview will present a sketch of the Bible translation history in these three languages and a brief treatment how divine names have been translated in these Chinese-character cultures.

## 2. Chinese Bible Translation

Let us start by overviewing the history of Bible translation into Chinese.<sup>4)</sup>

<i>Shen Tian ShengShu</i> (“Divine Heaven Holy-Book”); by Robert Morrison, and W. Milne (OT)	NT: 1814 (Canton); OT-NT: 1823 (Malacca)
<i>Marshman’s Version</i> ; by Joshua Marshman and J. Lassar	NT: 1816 (Serampore); OT: 1822 (Serampore)
<i>Medhurst’s Version</i> , also known as <i>Si Ren XiaoZu YiBen</i> (“Four People Small-Group Version”); by Walter H. Medhurst, Karl F.A. Gützlaff (chief translator for OT), Elijah C. Bridgman, and John R. Morrison	NT: 1837 (Batavia, now Jakarta); OT: 1838 (Singapore ?)
<i>JiuShi Zhu YeSu Xin YiZhao Shu</i> (“Saving-World Lord Jesus New Testament Book”; revision of <i>Medhurst’s Version</i> ); by Karl F.A. Gützlaff	NT: 1840 (Singapore ?)
<i>Delegates’ Version</i> ; by Walter H. Medhurst, John Stronach, W.C. Milne, and Elijah C. Bridgman	NT: 1852 (Shanghai, BFBS-LMS); OT: 1854 (Shanghai, BFBS ?)

3) Eugene A. Nida, ed. *The Book of a Thousand Tongues*. 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), 269.

4) I am indebted to Dr Simon Wong for this helpful list. Please note that the names of the translations are not always the official titles; many translations only bear the name *ShengJing* (“Holy Book”) or alike without further specifications. Information on the table are based on Spillett’s *Catalogue of Scriptures* (1975).

<i>Goddard Version</i> ; by Josiah Goddard	NT: 1853 (Ningpo, AFBS)
<i>Nanking Version</i> , also known as <i>Medhurst's Southern Mandarin Version</i> ; by Walter H. Medhurst and John Stronach	NT: 1857 (Shanghai, BFBS)
<i>Bridgman's Version</i> ; by Elijah C. Bridgman and Michael S. Culbertson	NT: 1859 (Ningbo); OT: 1863 (Shanghai)
<i>Peking Version</i> , also known as <i>Northern Mandarin Version</i> or <i>Beijing GuanHua YiBen</i> (“Beijing Mandarin [Official-language] Version”); by William A.P. Martin, Joseph Edkins, Samuel I.J. Schereschewsky, John S. Burdon, and Henry Blodget	NT: 1872 (Peking; BFBS)
<i>John Version</i> (Easy Wenli), by Griffith John	NT: 1885 (Hankow, NBSS)
<i>Schereschewsky Version</i> (Easy Wenli), also known as <i>Er Zhi Ban</i> (“Two Fingers Edition”); by S. I. J. Schereschewsky	NT: 1898 (Tokyo: The Shueisha); OT-NT 1902 (Shanghai: ABS)
<i>Qian Wenli Hehe Yiben</i> (“Easy Wenli Union Version”); by John S. Burdon, Henry Blodget, R.H. Graves, etc.	NT: 1904 (Shanghai, ABS)
<i>Shen Wenli Hehe Yiben</i> (“High Wenli Union Version”); by John Chambers, Joseph Edkins, John Wherry, etc.	NT: 1905 (Shanghai, BFBS, ABS, NBSS); OT: 1919 (combined with Easy Wenli)
<i>GuoYü Hehe Yiben</i> (“National-language Union Version”), also known as <i>Union Mandarin Version</i> ; by Calvin W. Mateer, J.L. Nevius, Henry, Blodget, etc.	NT: 1907 (BFBS); OT-NT: 1919 (BFBS)
<i>Wang Xuan Chen Version</i> (or Wang Hsüan-ch'en); by Wang Xuan Chen	NT: 1934
<i>Sydenstriker Version</i> ; by A. Sydenstriker (and Zhu Baohui ?)	NT: 1929 (Nanking, Theological Seminary)
<i>Lü Zhenzhong Version</i> ; by Lü Zhenzhong	NT: 1952 (HK: The Bible Book and Tract Depot Ltd.); OT-NT: 1970 (HK: HKBS)

<i>Xinyi Xinyue Quanshu</i> (“New-Translation New-Covenant Whole-Book”); by Theodore E. Hsiao (Chinese: Xiao Tiedi)	NT: 1967 (HK, Spiritual Food Publishers)
<i>Sigao ShengJing</i> (“Sigao” = Franciscanum); by Studium Biblicum Franciscanum	NT/OT: 1968 (HK: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum)
<i>Today’s Chinese Version</i> (Chinese: <i>Xiandai Zhongwen Yiben</i> ); by Moses Hsü; I-Jin Loh, Zhou Lianhua, etc.	NT: 1975 (HK; UBS); OT: 1979 (HK; UBS)
<i>Chinese Union New Punctuation</i> (Chinese: <i>Xin Biaodian Heheben</i> )	NT/OT: 1988 (HK; UBS)
<i>ShengJing Xin YiBen</i> (“Holy-Book New Version”)	NT: 1976 (HK; TianDao); OT-NT: 1992 (HK; TianDao)
<i>Revised Today’s Chinese Version</i> (Chinese: <i>Xiandai Zhongwen Yiben Xiudingban</i> )	NT/OT: 1995 (HK, UBS)
<i>Revised Chinese Union Version</i>	NT 2006 (HKBS)

The first Protestant missionary to China, Robert Morrison of the London Missionary Society, arrived in Canton in 1807. As an official translator for the East Indies Company, Morrison completed his translation of the New Testament in 1813 and the Bible in 1819, though it was not published until 1823. A few years earlier Marshman and Lassar were working on their Chinese Bible translation in Serampore, India. Their Chinese Bible was published in 1822, but unfortunately it was not widely used.

These early texts which were in the literary classical form known as *Wênli*, or later in the more modernized form *Easy Wênli*, were becoming less comprehensible to general readers by the end of the 19th century; eventually these early translations needed revision. The revision project was known as the Chinese Union Version. The aim was to publish three versions: higher classical *Wênli*; and lower classical Chinese *Easy Wênli*, and Mandarin. However, as it turned out, only the Mandarin “Union Version” was widely accepted.

Disagreement on how to translate divine names had always plagued the history of Chinese Bible translation. Even prior to the Union Version, it was an issue, but only when there was an effort of collaboration did this problem became a real

controversy. One of the historians calls it “one of the most bizarre yet serious controversies of the modern missionary movement”.<sup>5)</sup>

There are two major terms (*shen* and *shangdi*) used for the Christian God. The side supporting *shen* held that it was the only true translation for the biblical “God,” even though it never had this meaning historically because of the absence of a Chinese monotheistic faith. However, it was comparable to the Greek *Theos* and the Latin *deus*, as it was a generic term describing the highest class of Chinese gods, including *shangdi*. This also made it possible to use this term in the plural. For these reasons, *shen* was held to be the term which could best be adapted to the meaning of the Christian God. *Shangdi*, on the other hand, was understood as a name rather than a generic term, which could not be used in the plural. Additionally, it was also used as a term for the Chinese Emperor *huangdi*, and could thus not be considered for God.

The other side maintained that the Christian God had revealed himself in ancient China, especially during the time of the Zhou dynasty (ca.1122-255 BCE). Belief in him had been set forth even in the Confucian classics, where *shangdi* was described as the highest deity. *Shangdi* was regarded in Chinese mythology as the creator of all things, including *shen*, which in most cases meant spirit and in only very rare cases deity, although it was used for false gods. *Shen* could not be used for God, but only for the Spirit, another person of the Trinity. This final point complicated the matter immensely, and made a compromise much more difficult because the *shen* advocates had determined *ling* to be the right term for Spirit.

Those who argued for *shen* were convinced that the Chinese had never known the Christian God, and had therefore no equivalent term to describe him; they believed, however, that *shen* could grow into a suitable term.

The *shangdi* advocates represented an Old Testament belief that God had revealed himself even in China, and had been to some extent known throughout Chinese history. They believed that it was only necessary to “reawaken” the Chinese knowledge of Christianity, whereas the other side had to introduce a whole new concept.

The conflict often also had the appearance of a national struggle, because to a

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5) See Jost Oliver Zetzsche, *The Bible in China: The History of the Union Version or the Culmination of Protestant Missionary Bible Translation in China*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series 45 (Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institute, 1999), Section 4.1.3, fn. 34.

great degree, the lines were drawn between British and German (pro-*shangdi*) and American missionaries (pro-*shen*). Hence, in his thesis, Paul Bartel asked: “Could it be that the imperial mind naturally inclined to the term related to such thought forms such as *shangdi*, whereas democratic Americans favored the term without imperial or rulership connotation?”<sup>6)</sup>

The British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) decided in November 1848 against the use of *shen*, whereas the American Bible Society (ABS) in November 1850 formed a subcommittee, which finally decided on *shen*.

Apart from the suggestion of *shen* and *shangdi*, there were still other suggestions for the rendering of God. The British delegates who so strongly advocated *shangdi* wrote a letter to all the missionaries in China in January 1850, suggesting the Nestorian term *aluohe* (found in the Nestorian Tablet), a transliteration of the Hebrew *elohim*, as a compromise solution. However, this term was never actually used in Protestant Bible translations. In the Catholic and Russian Orthodox translations, they use: *tianzhu* “Lord of Heaven” (a term that was actually used in Schereschewsky’s famous translation, published by ABS in 1909); *shengshen* “holy *shen*”; *shangzhu* “Lord above” (this term is still in use in Today’s Chinese Version); or *zhenshen* “true *shen*”.

It is interesting to point out that the *Peking Version* (1872) was published in five different editions (each one using one of the following different terms for God: *tianzhu*, *shen*, *zhenshen*, *shangdi*, and *shangzhu*).

Although most Protestant Bible translations that were published after the *Union Version* have employed *shangdi*, Baptist editions and most editions for mainland China still use *shen*. A modern analysis of the conflict, now that both terms are established to some degree, even reveals a positive aspect of the use of two terms. According to this view, *shen* represents a concept of divine immanence, while *shangdi* represents transcendence.

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6) Paul H. Bartel, “The Chinese Bible, being a historical survey of its translation” M. A. thesis (University of Chicago, 1946), 51.

### 3. Korean Bible Translation

There have been five major Korean Bible translations to date:<sup>7)</sup>

- 1) Korean Revised Version (1961)
- 2) New Korean Revised Version (1998)
- 3) Common Translation (1999)
- 4) Revised New Korean Standard Version (2001)
- 5) Catholic New Translation (2005)

Korean Bible translation has faced a similar challenge. Since the 1890s, the term for “God” has been a serious matter in Korean translation, because of the issues involved in translating the Greek word, *Theos*. John Ross from Scotland was the first person to translate the Bible into Korean. The New Testament was translated in 1887 with the help of John McIntyre and certain Korean believers, and a committee completed the full Bible in 1911. Ross translated it using the traditional Korean term of *Hananim* “Lord of Heaven”, whereas Soo-Jung Lee, a Korean living in Japan, in his *Chinese New Testament with suffixes in Korean*, translated it as *Shin* “God”. In 1893, the American missionary, L.H. Underwood, originally translated it as *Sangje* “Supreme Being”, but after he became a member of the Board of Official Translators, he reverted to using *Hananim*.

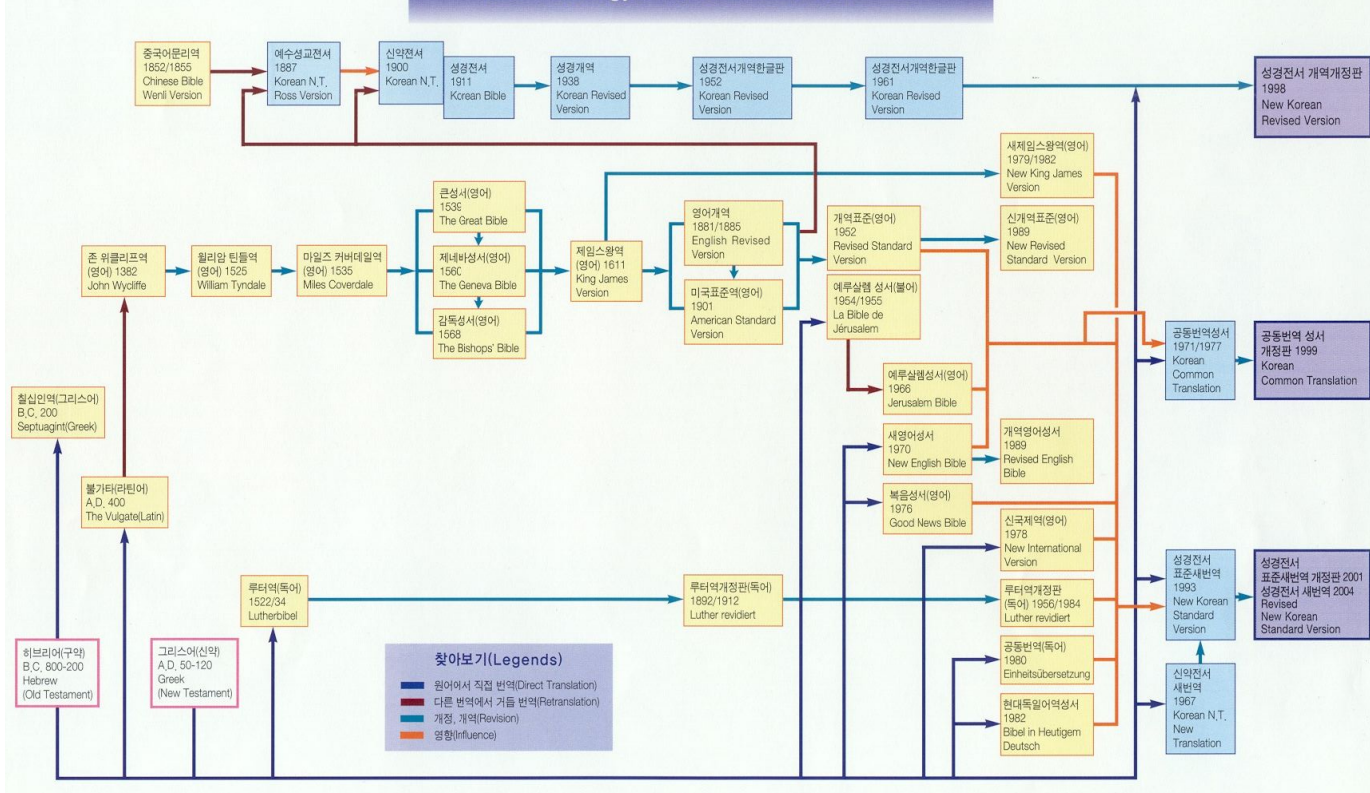
Another American missionary, Appenzeller, was influenced by Ross’ translation and used the term *Hananim* from the beginning. However, the Catholic Church, which came to Korea a hundred years earlier than the Protestant Church, used the term *Chonju* “Heavenly Lord”. Because the BFBS preferred this term, Korean Scriptures were published in two versions, the *Chonju* Translation and the *Hananim* Translation, from 1804 till 1904. When *The Korean New Testament* was published in 1904, *Hananim* was finally settled on as the term for God, especially among the Protestants, while the Catholic Bible translation has been using *Haneunim*.

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7) I am indebted to Korean Bible Society for this excellent chart.

# 우리말 성서 번역 계보도

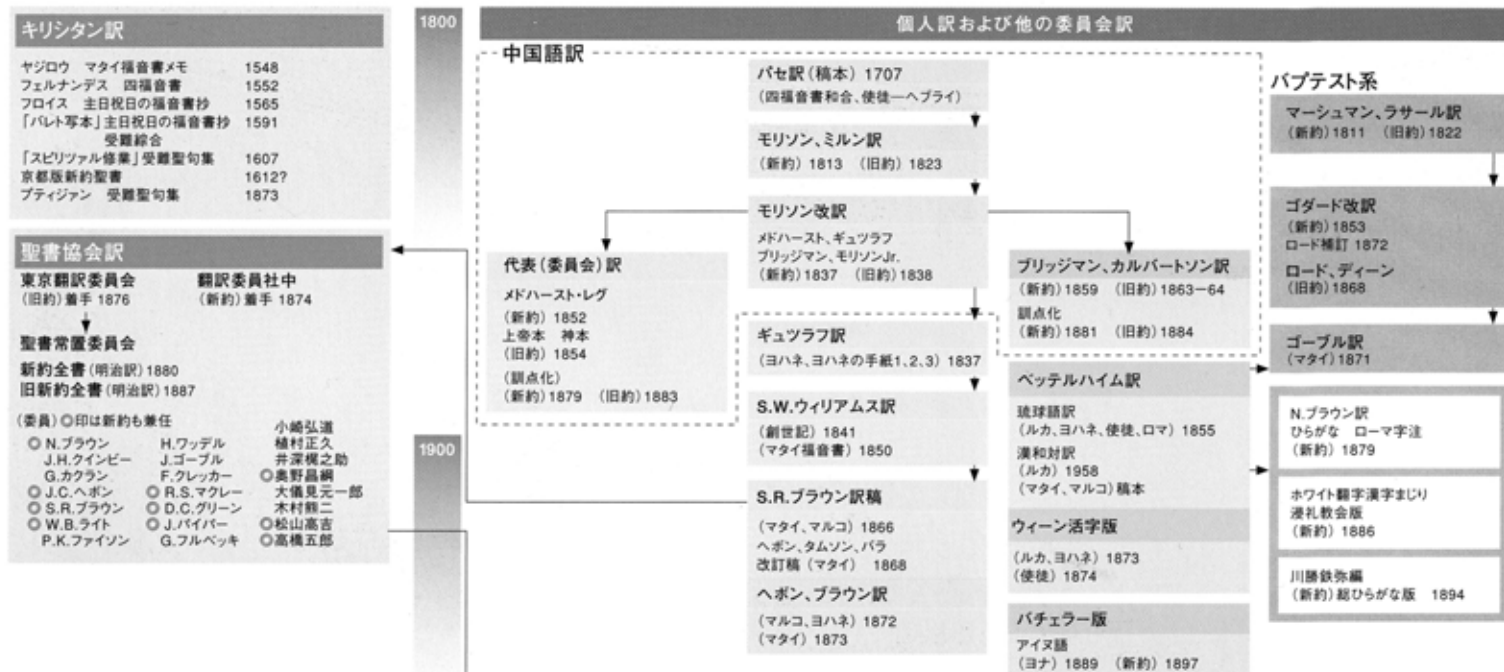
## The Genealogy of Korean Bible Translation





# The Genealogy of Japanese Bible Translation

## 日本語訳聖書の系図 付関連中国語訳聖書系図



### 聖書改訳委員会

(大正訳新約) 1917

(委員)

H.J.フォス	C.S.デビソン	藤井寅一
松山高吉	別所梅之助	川添万寿得
J.C.グリーン	C.K.ハーリントン	D.W.ラーネッ

### (ヨブ記、詩編等) 文語

#### 旧約改訳委員会

口語訳聖書(旧約)  
1955

(旧約委員)  
都留信次、遠藤敏雄  
手塚儀一郎

#### 新約改訳委員会

口語訳聖書(新約)  
1954

(新約委員)  
松本卓夫、山谷香吾  
高橋 虔

### 共同訳聖書実行委員会

新約聖書共同訳 1978  
聖書 新共同訳 1987

(実行委員)

岸 千年	山田 薫	相馬信夫
高橋 虔	寺西英夫	前田護郎
小出 忍	平田三郎	後藤 真
Z.イェール	B.シュナイダー	東ヶ崎潔
竹森清佐一	P.ネメシキ	

1980

### カトリック系

小嶋準治訳  
(旧約抄) 1879 (新約抄) 1880

マラン訳  
(四福音書和合) 1880

高橋五郎訳  
(福音書) 1897

ラゲ訳  
(新約) 1910

E.プライトン訳  
(旧約) 1954-59

バルバロ訳  
(新約) 1953 改訂 1957  
(旧約) 1964 改訂 1980

フランシスコ会訳  
(新約) 1979 (旧約) 1958-2002

### 左近義弼訳

(マタイ) 1907 (詩編) 1909

### 永井直治訳

(新約) 1928

### 組織(教派)訳

#### 日本聖書刊行会訳

新改訳聖書(新約) 1965  
新改訳聖書(聖書) 1970

#### 新約・旧約聖書翻訳委員会 (岩波書店)訳

(新約) 2004 (旧約) 1997-2004

### ハリストス正教系

上田 符訳  
(マタイ) 1892

### ニコライ訳

(詩編) 1884 (新約) 1901

### 戦後個人訳

渡瀬主一郎・武藤富男 共訳  
(新約) 1952

### 関根正雄訳

(旧約) 1956-73.93-95

### 塚本虎二訳

(福音書) 1963

### 前田護郎訳

(新約) 1983

### 尾山令仁訳

(聖書) 1983

### 柳生直行訳

(新約) 1985

## 4. Japanese Bible Translation

Bible translation works into Japanese can be divided into three major groups: <sup>8)</sup>

- 1) Pre-Meiji Catholic missionary translation – mid 16<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> century
- 2) Various Missionary translations – 19<sup>th</sup> century
- 3) Japanese individual and denominational translations – 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century

As the Christian Bible was introduced to Japan by way of China, Japanese Bible translation depended heavily on Chinese Bible translations. In the early 16<sup>th</sup> century the word for God was translated as *Dinichi Nyorai*, some used the Latin *Deus*, others used the word *Tenshu*. However, Morrison's Chinese Bible translation was a major influence on the decision to choose the Japanese word for God, *Kami*. The word had long been used in Japanese native religion, and beginning with Meijimotoyaku's New Testament (1880) and Old Testament (1887) all the way to the Interconfessional Japanese Bible translation (1987), *Kami* has been accepted the common word for God among Christians.

## 5. Conclusion

We have now learnt that in the regions of Chinese-character culture that translating divine names is an area of real debate. Chinese is an example for which discussion and debate regarding the translation of divine names and certain key theological terms has lasted as long as the work of Bible translation in that language. This debate has spilled over to Korean Bible translation, and to Japanese Bible translation.

Although there are foreign missionaries who think that adopting local divine names can lead to confusion and syncretism, Lamin Sanneh, the West African theologian and Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale University has noted that there are important differences between Christianized African societies in which indigenous names for God have been retained and those in which it was

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8) I am indebted to Japan Bible Society for this excellent chart. See *The Panoramic Bible* (Tokyo: Japan Bible Society, 2005), 202.

thought necessary to borrow a foreign word. The former shows greater levels of church growth, Christian stability, and of social vigor and engagement within the churches. This is true not only in African context, but also in Asia and other parts of the world.

<Keyword>

Chinese Bible Translation, Chinese-Character Culture, Korean Bible Translation,  
Japanese Bible Translation, Divine Names in Chinese

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<Abstract>

## 아시아에서의 성경 번역의 역사 - 한자문화권을 중심으로

다우드 소실로

(세계성서공회연합회 아시아태평양 지역 번역 책임자)

아시아에서의 성경 번역은 복음서들이 시리아어로 번역되었던 서기 2세기 중반으로 거슬러 올라간다. 페쉬타(문자적 의미로 “단순한 번역”)는 4세기 후반 혹은 5세기 초반 시리아 교회의 공인된 성경이었다. 이것이 전도자들에 의해 6세기에 스리랑카와 중국으로 건네졌다.

시안(西安)(781 C.E.)의 어느 한 기념비에 언급된 일부 단편 성서들의 발견은 7세기 동안 중국으로 간 네스토리우스파(페르시아인) 기독교인들이 어느 정도 성경 번역에 관여했을 것이라는 증거이다. 그 외에는 그들의 사역에 대해서는 거의 알려진 것이 없다.

아시아에서 이루어진 또 다른 초기 번역 작업이 기록되어 있지만, 이를 뒷받침할 증거가 없다. 교황 베니딕트 12세는 아마도 쿠빌라이 칸의 조정에서 프란체스코회 수도승이 1306년에 예배를 목적으로 번역한 신약성서와 시편으로 추정되는 어느 몽골어 성경을 1335년에 언급하였다. 그러나 이 텍스트의 흔적은 아무것도 남아 있지 않다. 예수회 선교사들이 교토에서 일본어 신약성서를 1613년에 번역하였으나 이 성서도 오늘날까지 전해지지 않고 있다.

알버트 코넬리즈 뢰(Albert Cornelisz Ruyl)이 말레이어로 마태복음을 번역하여 1629년에 인쇄한 것이 현존하는 가장 오래된 아시아 언어로의 성경 번역이다. 뢰의 번역은 또한 비유럽계 언어로 된 성경의 일부분을 전도의 목적으로 번역하고 출판한, 가장 오래된 사례로서 큰 의의를 갖는다.

이 글은 아시아에서의 성경 번역의 역사 중 중국어, 한글, 일본어 성경 번역의 역사를 도표로 살펴보고, 한국 중국 일본의 성서 번역에 있어서의 “신명” 문제를 간략하게 다루고 있다.