

A Brief History of Bible Translation into Chinese and its Contemporary Implications

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1. Introduction

This paper provides a brief survey of the history of translating the Bible into Chinese. The Nestorian Christians were the first to translate the Bible into Chinese, followed by the Roman Catholics and the Protestants. The high point of the Roman Catholic translation is the publication of the Bible by the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in 1968. The Protestants, however, carried out the most extensive work. Numerous translations into Wenli, Easy Wenli and Mandarin appeared, culminating in the publication of the Union Version in 1919. The launching of the revised Chinese Union Version New Testament in 2006 marks another significant milestone. This paper concludes by drawing some implications for contemporary efforts in Bible translation.

In 2007, Chinese churches around the world will be celebrating the 200th anniversary of Robert Morrison's arrival in China. Gatherings of various sorts have been planned to commemorate this event. Robert Morrison is remembered as the father of Protestant Missions in China. He worked together with William Milne and translated the entire Bible into Chinese, thus leaving behind an important legacy to the Chinese churches.

Morrison and Milne are important links in the long chain of translating the Bible into Chinese. Dedicated individuals from various countries, including local Chinese, have given their time and energy to this noble cause. In this paper, I will look at the fruit of some of these individuals and committees, focusing on the translation of the Bible into Mandarin. I will not deal with translation of the Bible into the vernacular dialects or into minority languages in China. For the sake of convenience, the discussion will focus on Bible translation activities carried out by the Nestorians, the Roman Catholics and the Protestants.

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2. Nestorian Translations

The earliest reference to Bible translation into Chinese is mentioned in the Nestorian Stele. Around the year 1625 CE, some Chinese digging the foundations of a house near Xian, China's ancient capital, chanced upon a black marble Stele. The Chinese characters inscribed at the top said, “The Stele Commemorating the Propagation of the Luminous Religion from Daqin in the Middle Kingdom” (大秦景教流行中國碑).¹⁾ The Stele, set up in 781 CE, described the arrival of Alopen, a Nestorian missionary, in 635 CE. The text also named Chinese emperors who had supported this religion and listed the leaders of the religion, including one bishop, 28 presbyters, and 38 others (most likely monks). It also mentioned about the Canon of the Old and the New Testaments, and the translation of the Bible into Chinese. Unfortunately, no such translated portions have been discovered. Based on the Nestorian church canon Zunjing (尊經) discovered in Dunhuang (敦煌) in 1907-08, Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, Hosea, Zechariah and most of the books in the New Testament have been translated into Chinese.²⁾

Nestorian Christianity thrived in China for about 200 years during the Tang dynasty (635-845). Unfortunately, the movement was wiped out when the emperor tried to get rid of Buddhism in the country. The first wave of mission endeavor in China ended, and the scriptures that had been translated into Chinese disappeared.

The Nestorians made a second attempt in China some 400 years later. They reentered China during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). This time, they translated parts of the Bible into Mongolian. Portions of the Mongolian texts have been discovered.

3. Roman Catholic Translations

Roman Catholic missionaries entered China during the Yuan dynasty. John of Montecorvino (1246-1328) arrived in Beijing in 1294. He translated Psalms and the

1) This Stele is kept in “The Stele Museum” in Xian. About 6 other similar Steles are located in various parts of the world.

2) Chiu Wai Boon, *Tracing Bible Translation - A History of the Translation of Five Modern Chinese Versions of the Bible* (Hong Kong: China Graduate School of Theology, 1993), 9-10.

entire New Testament into Mongolian.³⁾ Unfortunately, no manuscript of his translation has been discovered.

In the 16th century, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and P. M. Ruggieri translated the Ten Commandments and some selected portions into Chinese. The Jesuit missionary Giulio Aleni (1582-1649) wrote an eight-volume work on the “Life of Christ” which contains a harmony of the Gospels between the years 1635-1637. The early Protestant missionaries to China often consulted this written work.⁴⁾ In 1642, Jesuit missionary Manuel Diaz (1574-1659) produced a series of 14-volume commentaries on the Sunday Gospel readings (Lectionary) that included translations of the Gospels into Chinese and the commentaries.⁵⁾ At that time, the Roman Catholic authorities did not encourage any systematic translation of the Bible, though the missionaries were actively involved in the translation and publication of Christian literature into Chinese.

Jean Basset (1662-1707), a Catholic priest from Paris, translated the New Testament into Chinese. His work was based on the Latin Vulgate. Unfortunately, this translation was never published. A copy of the manuscript was later discovered in Guangzhou by John Hodgson, brought to London and kept at the British Museum. This is also known as the Sloane Manuscript. Robert Morrison studied this manuscript in the British Museum and relied on it for his work. The early Protestant translations of the New Testament into Chinese relied heavily on this manuscript.⁶⁾

In the 18th century, Jesuit priest Louis De Poirot (1735-1814) translated most of the Old Testament and the New Testament into Chinese, but his work was never published. The translation was based on the Latin Vulgate. The manuscript was kept at the Beitang (北堂) Library in Beijing until it was destroyed in 1949. Fortunately, some copies of the translation were preserved elsewhere.⁷⁾

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Bible translation activities continued. Fr. Dejean

3) However, the Catholic Encyclopedia states that the translation was into Chinese, see <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08474a.htm>.

4) *Bible 2000 Exhibition* (Hong Kong: Studium Biblicum Hong Kong and Hong Kong Bible Society, 2000), 39.

5) Ibid., 40.

6) Ibid., 42.

7) Jost Oliver Zetzsche, *The Bible in China: the History of the Union Version or the Culmination of Protestant Missionary Bible Translation in China*, Daniel K. T. Choi, trans. (Hong Kong: International Bible Society, 2002), 16.

published his work on the Four Gospels in 1892. Fr. Lawrence Li Wenyu (李問漁) published his New Testament in 1897. Fr. Xiao Jingshan (蕭靜山) published his translation of the Four Gospels in 1919, followed by the New Testament in 1922. A revised edition was published in 1948. Mr. Wu Jingxiong (吳經熊) published his translation of the New Testament in 1949. Another New Testament version, translated by a team of four persons led by Fr. George Litvanyi, appeared in the same year.⁸⁾

The most significant achievement, however, is the translation produced by the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum. Translation work started in 1945. The New Testament was published in 1961, and the entire Bible (including the Deuterocanonical books) appeared in 1968. This is the only Catholic translation into Chinese that is based on the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. It remains the most commonly used version among the Chinese speaking Roman Catholic churches.

Bishop Jin Luxian (金魯賢) of Shanghai published his translation of the Four Gospels in 1986, and the entire New Testament (with annotation) in 1994. The work is based on the French version of the New Jerusalem Bible. The translation of the Old Testament is still in progress.

4. Protestant Translations

The history of the Protestant Bible translation into Chinese is usually linked to the arrival of Robert Morrison in China. Since then, other missionaries have also devoted their time translating the Bible into Chinese. Protestant missionaries laid heavy emphasis on Bible translation, producing a great number of versions. To facilitate our discussion, we will classify the various translations into Wenli (Literary) Versions, Easy Wenli Versions and Mandarin Versions.

4.1. Wenli (文理) Versions

Early translations of the Bible into Chinese used the literary language. This is the written language used by the educated Chinese.

8) I-Jin Loh, "Chinese Translations of the Bible," Chan Sin-wai and David E. Pollard, eds., *An Encyclopedia of Translation* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1995, 2001), 59, 64.

4.1.1. Joshua Marshman (1768-1837) and Johannes Lassar

Marshman translated the New Testament based on the Greek text, but Lassar prepared his draft based on the KJV (1611). They carried out their work in Serampore, India. The New Testament was completed in 1811 and published in 1816, and they had the honor of issuing the first complete Bible in Chinese in 1822.⁹⁾ But this version did not exert much influence on subsequent translation of the Bible into Chinese.

4.1.2. Robert Morrison (1782-1834) and William Milne (1785-1822)

Robert Morrison is often called the father of Protestant Missions in China. He arrived in Canton in 1807 and teamed up with William Milne in 1813. Milne eventually settled in Malacca.¹⁰⁾ Their translation is based on the original Greek and Hebrew texts, but relied on the KJV as a textual base and leaned on the Roman Catholic Basset Version as language guide.¹¹⁾ The New Testament appeared in 1814 and the entire Bible was published in Malacca in 1823.

The early missionaries encountered great difficulties in China. To discourage the translation of the Bible into Chinese, the Beijing government forbade, under pain of death, the teaching of Chinese to foreigners. Morrison's language instructor carried poison and was ready to commit suicide if necessary. Later, the government decreed the death penalty on foreigners preparing or distributing Christian literature in China.¹²⁾ In light of these difficulties, some missionaries chose South East Asian countries as their base of operation.

While Marshman and Lassar completed their Chinese translation in India, Morrison and Milne carried out their work in Chinese contexts and their product is a better translation. Morrison and Milne's work also gained the support of the Bible Societies. This has helped to make their work an influential version and it became the basis for subsequent translation activities. Both Marshman and Morrison translated God as Shen (神), and Holy Spirit as Shengfeng (聖風). Morrison translated baptism as 洗 (to wash), while Marshman, being a Baptist, used 蘸 (to dip in).¹³⁾

9) Chiu Wai Boon, *Tracing Bible Translation*, 17-18.

10) Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of The Expansion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 6: 297-299.

11) I-Jin Loh, "Chinese Translations of the Bible," 55.

12) Eugene Nida, *The Book of A Thousand Tongues* (London: United Bible Societies, 1972), 71.

4.1.3. Medhurst-Gutzlaff-Bridgman-Morrison Version

The Morrison-Milne version temporarily met the needs for mission outreach. But with more and more missionaries coming to China and the increasing demand for Chinese scriptures, the need to revise the Bible was felt. Shortly after the death of Robert Morrison in 1834, his son John Robert Morrison, Walter Henry Medhurst (1796-1857), Karl Friedrich Gutzlaff (1803-1851) and Elijah Bridgman (1801-1861) formed a revision team to revise the Morrison-Milne version. The revised New Testament was printed in Batavia in 1837, and the revised Bible published in 1840. Gutzlaff did most of the Old Testament revision.¹⁴⁾

Karl Friedrich Gutzlaff was a charismatic visionary. He ignited the enthusiasm and imagination of missionaries for the work in China. He was instrumental in forming the Chinese Evangelization Society. Hudson Taylor first came to China under the auspices of this organization.¹⁵⁾ Gutzlaff revised the New Testament prepared by Medhurst, Morrison and Bridgman and published his own version of the Bible in 1855. This was the version adopted by Hung Xiuquan (洪秀全, 1814-1864) who inaugurated the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (太平天國, 1851-1864). This peasant movement was later put down by the combined forces of Britain and America.

Besides translating the Bible into Chinese, Gutzlaff also translated portions of the Bible into other languages, including Siamese and Japanese. His translation of the Gospel of John and the Johannine letters inaugurated the history of Protestant Bible translation in Japan.

4.1.4. Delegates' and Post Delegates' Versions

After the Opium War (1839-1842), Britain and China signed the Nanjing Treaty in 1842. China was forced to open five treaty ports to Western powers and Hong Kong came under British rule. Missionaries took advantage of this opening and burst into China. The American and Europeans missionaries felt it was important to publish a Bible for common use among the Chinese churches. Delegates met in Hong Kong and committees were set up. Unfortunately, controversy about how to translate some key terms (God, Holy Spirit, baptism) soon erupted. Unable to reach a consensus, the

13) I-Jin Loh, "Chinese Translations of the Bible," 55.

14) Ibid., 56.

15) Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of The Expansion of Christianity*, 6: 306.

delegates decide to leave blank spaces to be filled by the respective publishers. The American Bible Society opted to use Shen (神) for God, and Shengling (聖靈) for the Holy Spirit; the British and Foreign Bible Society opted for Shangdi (上帝) and Shengshen (聖神). The New Testament was published in 1852.¹⁶⁾

For the revision of the Old Testament, controversy erupted again with regard to principles and styles of translation, and the general committee was split into two groups. The British group, led by Walter Henry Medhurst, assisted by the Sinologist James Legge (1815-1897) and a few others, finished revising the Old Testament and published the whole Bible in 1855. This is known as the Delegates' Version, written in good Chinese.

The American group, headed by Bridgman and Culbertson, produced a new version of the whole Bible in 1864. This version uses Shen (神) for God, and Shengling (聖靈) for the Holy Spirit and was published by the American Bible Society.¹⁷⁾ Besides its circulation in China, this version also exerted some influence on the Japanese Bible.

Meanwhile, the Baptist delegates could not agree on the translation of the term for "baptism." They wanted to use 蘸 (to dip in) rather than 洗 (to wash). They subsequently withdrew and decided to revise the Marshman-Lassar Version. The complete Bible was published in 1868.

Though the missionaries had wanted to publish a common version with standardized key terms, the aim did not materialize. Controversies about key terms and translation principles led to splinter groups and the publication of several Bible Versions.

From 1850 to 1900, missionaries and various agencies in China translated and published several dozens of Bible Versions.¹⁸⁾ The vision of producing a common version proved to be illusive, and its realization will have to wait for a later time.

The publication of the Wenli Union Version marks a significant milestone in the cooperation among the missionaries working in China. This will be discussed later under the Chinese Union Version.

4.2. Easy Wenli Versions

16) I-Jin Loh, "Chinese Translations of the Bible," 57.

17) Ibid., 58.

18) The basic details of these versions can be found in Zetzsche, *The Bible in China*, 401-405.

Easy Wenli is a simpler and more direct form of the literary language. It is understood by Chinese of limited classical education and was customarily used in official documents. Missionaries who are concerned to reach more people with the gospel started to translate the Bible using Easy Wenli. These versions are mostly the work of individual translators rather than committees. Griffith John (1831-1912) published his New Testament in 1885. John Burdon and Henry Blodget published a New Testament in 1889.¹⁹⁾ Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky (1831-1906), the son of Jewish parents who later became the bishop of the Episcopal Church in China, translated the whole Bible. Though stricken with paralysis, he persevered with his translation work. He sat in his chair for over twenty years and typed the last 2,000 pages of his translation with the finger of one hand: all of his other fingers had stopped moving.²⁰⁾ The New Testament was published in 1898, and the whole Bible appeared in 1902. The Easy Wenli Union Version New Testament, the work of a translation committee, was published in 1904.²¹⁾

4.3. Mandarin/Chinese Versions

The Wenli and Easy Wenli versions could only meet the needs of a limited segment of the society. The language level was too difficult for the common masses. One way to overcome this obstacle is to translate the Bible into Mandarin. Mandarin is the official language used by the government officials in China. It is basically a spoken language based on the Beijing dialect. It was eventually adopted as the written language. It is also known as the common language (普通話).

4.3.1. The Nanjing Mandarin Version

Following the publication of the Delegates' New Testament, two of its translators, Medhurst and Stronach, adapted the text into Nanjing Mandarin. This Nanjing Mandarin Version was printed in 1857.²²⁾

19) Chiu Wai Boon, *Tracing Bible Translation*, 23.

20) See <http://chi.gospelcom.net/DAILYF/2002/10/daily-10-15-2002.shtml>. Others, however, thought that he typed with one finger of each hand and called his work the "Two-finger Edition."

21) The Easy Wenli project was discontinued in 1907. The Translation Committees found that the Easy Wenli and the Wenli translations were so closed that they decided to prepare a single Wenli Union Version instead.

22) Chiu Wai Boon, *Tracing Bible Translation*, 24.

4.3.2. The Beijing Committee Version

This work appears to be an adaptation of the Nanjing Mandarin Version into the Beijing dialect. The New Testament came off the press in 1872. Marie Taylor, wife of Hudson Taylor, was involved in this adaptation. This is the first time that a woman was involved in translating the Bible into Chinese. Apparently, this is also the first New Testament published in diglot form together with the King James Version, printed in 1885.²³⁾

Unfortunately, due to the controversy in translating the terms for “God” and “Holy Spirit”, four editions had to be printed, using the following terms:

- Shangdi (上帝) and Shengshen (聖神)
- Tianzhu (天主) and Shengshen (聖神)
- Tianzhu (天主) and Shengling (聖靈)
- Shen (神) and Shengling (聖靈)

4.3.3. The Schereschewsky Mandarin Version

Joseph Schereschewsky produced a Mandarin Old Testament on his own, published in 1875. His work is based on the Hebrew Bible, with reference to the KJV and De Wette’s German Bible. This Old Testament translation was later combined with the Beijing New Testament in 1878.²⁴⁾ It became the standard Mandarin Bible until the appearance of the Chinese Union Version in 1919.

Schereschewsky also translated the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer into Easy Wenli.²⁵⁾

4.3.4. The Griffith John New Testament

Out of the consideration that Beijing Mandarin may not be readily understood by those living in central China, Griffith John was asked to embark on a new translation. He did this by adapting his Easy Wenli New Testament into Mandarin, published in 1889.²⁶⁾

23) I-Jin Loh, “Chinese Translations of the Bible,” 61. A Chinese Japanese diglot on the Gospel according to Luke was published in Japan in 1855. It is part of a larger collection which formed the New Testament, but it is not clear when the New Testament was published.

24) Chiu Wai Boon, *Tracing Bible Translation*, 25.

25) Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of The Expansion of Christianity*, 6: 320

26) Chiu Wai Boon, *Tracing Bible Translation*, 25.

4.3.5. Chinese Union Version

The need for a common Bible Version that can be used in all the churches has been felt for a long time. Earlier attempts to do this have not been successful. In 1890, American and European missionaries held a consultation in Shanghai. American Bible Society, British and Foreign Bible Society and the National Bible Society of Scotland proposed the translation of a Union Version of the Bible. There were differences in opinion on the language level that should be used. The compromised solution was to produce one Bible in three versions (Wenli, Easy Wenli and Mandarin) in order to meet the needs of different target audience. This was a remarkable achievement, especially in light of the earlier attempts and failures. The translation was modeled on the REV, with reference to the AV. The publishing agencies could choose their preferred terms for God, Holy Spirit and baptism in the final publication.²⁷⁾ Words with dots beneath them indicate that these are added to clarify the meaning in Chinese but are not found in the original text.

To facilitate the work, three different committees (Wenli, Easy Wenli and Mandarin) were established to carry out their respective translations. After years of dedicated hard work, the Easy Wenli New Testament was published in 1904, the Wenli and Mandarin New Testaments were published in 1906. In 1919, the Wenli and the Mandarin/Chinese Union Versions were printed.

After the publication of the Chinese Union Version, it soon became the most popular version in China. G. W. Sheppard (1874-1956), a representative of the British and Foreign Bible Society in China, wrote in 1929 that since the publication of the Chinese Union Version, more than 1 million copies of the New Testament and 500,000 copies of the whole Bible have been sold.²⁸⁾ From that time onwards, the Chinese Union Version has become the standard version used in the Chinese churches until today. The desire to produce a common version for the Chinese churches has at last become a reality.

Various factors contributed towards the success of the Chinese Union Version. The endorsement by the different mission agencies and organizations put the project on a firm footing. The committee of scholars has done an excellent job in producing a translation of high quality. The fact that this is a formal translation also helped towards its acceptance. China has a long history of translating sacred texts. Buddhist

27) Zetzsche, *The Bible in China*, 195-196.

28) Ibid., 331.

scriptures were continually being translated into Chinese for about a thousand years (148-1037 CE). The dominance of the translation of sacred texts in China has resulted in the emphasis on fidelity as the prime factor in dictating standards of excellence.²⁹⁾ Chinese Union Version, being a carefully prepared and readable formal translation, fitted in well with this long established tradition.

In addition, the publication of the Chinese Union Version coincided with the May Fourth Movement. This is a movement that emphasizes the use of Mandarin as the spoken and written language. The Chinese Union Version, in using the common language, fitted in nicely with this language shift in China.³⁰⁾

Though the Chinese Union Version has achieved a remarkable level of success and acceptance by the audience, the missionary translators knew its limitations. In the history of translating the Bible into Chinese, the Union Version is no doubt the greatest achievement produced by the missionaries. But a translation carried out by the missionaries will have its own shortcomings. Eventually, Chinese scholars who are fluent in Mandarin and the biblical languages may need to revise or produce a new translation.³¹⁾ That vision is yet to be fulfilled.

4.3.6. Post Union Versions³²⁾

Efforts to translate the Bible into Chinese continued after the publication of the Chinese Union Version. Most of these versions are produced by Chinese translators. Absalom Sydenstricker, assisted by Zhu Baohui (朱寶惠), published their New Testament in 1929. After the death of Sydenstricker in 1930, Zhu Baohui studied New Testament Greek and published a revised New Testament in 1936.

Wang Yuande (王元德, also known as 王宣忱), not entirely satisfied with the style of the Union Version, began translating the New Testament in 1930. His translation was based on the Latin text and the ASV (1901). His emphasis is on the lucidity of the Chinese text. The New Testament was published in 1933. The translation of the Deuteronomonical books, prepared by H. F. Lei, appeared in the

29) Lin Kenan, “Translation as a Catalyst for Social Change in China,” Maria Tymoczko & Edwin Gentzler, eds., *Translation and Power* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 173.

30) Unfortunately, there was no Chinese Christian who had the stature of Martin Luther or Calvin at that time to give the language movement a positive view of Christianity. Some of the leaders of the May Fourth Movement were quite negative about Christianity in China.

31) Zetzsche, *The Bible in China*, 335.

32) The details in this section is based on Loh’s “Chinese Translations of the Bible,” 63-64.

same year.

Both Zhu Baohui and Wang Yuande were the committee members of the Union Version. Their works represented responses to the Union Version, seeking to improve its style and lucidity.

H. Ruck and Zheng Shoulin (鄭壽麟) produced a concordant type of the New Testament in 1939. It is based on the Greek text, and each word in the Greek text is translated using the same Chinese word, regardless of the context.

Another individual translation of the New Testament appeared in 1964, translated by Xiao Tiedi (蕭鐵笛), also known as Theodore E. Hsiao. It was later revised by Zhao Zhiguang (趙世光).

Lü Zhengzhong (呂振中) produced his own versions as well. His New Testament, based on the Greek text edited by A. Souter, was printed in 1946, and the whole Bible appeared in 1970. This is a literal version and is useful as a reference resource. He is also the first Chinese to have single-handedly translated the entire Bible into Mandarin.

4.3.7. Recent Versions

Changes in the Chinese language and the increasing awareness of the dynamic/functional equivalence translation principle led to the publication of several new versions in the 1970s and beyond. All these translations are the product of committees and are translated by Chinese scholars. The Chinese Living New Testament, sponsored by the Living Bible International, appeared in 1974. This version is based on the Living Bible (English) produced by Kenneth Taylor. The entire Bible, known as “The Contemporary Bible,” was published in 1979. This version tries to clarify ambiguities in the text and provide explanations to help the readers.

At about the same time, Asian Outreach published another paraphrase of the New Testament in 1974, and the entire Bible appeared in 1979. It is also known as “the Contemporary Bible.”

The Today’s Chinese Version New Testament appeared in 1975, and the complete Bible was published in 1980. This project is sponsored by the United Bible Societies and is modeled on the English Good News Translation. This version follows the Functional Equivalence principle advocated by Eugene Nida and seeks to reproduce the meaning of the original text in a clear and lucid manner. Some key

terms have also been modified to avoid misunderstanding.³³⁾ A Roman Catholic edition was printed in 1986. A revised edition of the Bible came off the press in 1995. This version is particularly helpful for new believers or seekers.

The New Chinese Version New Testament appeared in 1976, sponsored by the Lockman Foundation. The entire Bible was printed in 1992. In recent years, the publisher has changed its name to Worldwide Bible Society. This change in name has created considerable confusion among the readers. It is to be noted that the Worldwide Bible Society has no connection whatsoever with the historical Bible Society Movement, which has been involved in the ministry of translating the Bible for over 200 years.

Another New Testament, “The Recovery Version,” appeared in 1987. The entire Bible was completed in 2003. This version has copious notes aiming at bringing out the spiritual meaning of the text.

4.3.8. Revision of the Chinese Union Version

All the different versions that were translated after the remarkable success of the Chinese Union Version indicated that there is still a need for a revised edition or a new translation. However, none of the recent versions produced thus far has been able to take the place of the Union Version, which still remains as the authoritative version in the Chinese churches.

There were several attempts at revising the Chinese Union Version. Two separate attempts were made in the 1920s, but both did not bear fruit.

The American Bible Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society agreed in 1958 that there is a need to revise the Chinese Union Version. Eugene Nida visited Hong Kong and Taiwan and he also met the leaders of the churches in China. The proposal involved a two-step revision: a minor revision first, followed by a more comprehensive revision. In 1965, Nida, in consultation with the church leaders and scholars in Taiwan, agreed on a limited revision of the Union Version, focusing on stylistic improvements. The key terms will be maintained as far as possible. A Revision Committee and an Advisory Board were established.³⁴⁾

Unfortunately, this attempt at revising the Chinese Union Version also suffered

33) For instance, the following names were changed to make them sound better in Chinese: 流便 → 呂便, 尼哥底母 → 尼哥德慕, 友阿爹 → 友阿蝶.

34) Zetsche, *The Bible in China*, 348.

miscarriage. The priority on the functional equivalence method and the publication of the Good News Translation shifted the focus of the project. In addition, the attempt to produce a Chinese version that is acceptable to both the Roman Catholics and the Protestants meant that the Chinese Union Version (a Protestant translation) would not be suitable as the foundation of the project. Eventually, the Good News Translation was adopted as the model text. A new translation project commenced in 1971, which eventually resulted in the publication of the Today's Chinese Version.

The result of the change of focus is the publication of Today's Chinese Version, but this is done at the cost of the lost opportunity to revise the Chinese Union Version. In due time, the Chinese Union Version lost its copyright, and various organizations have since published the text of the Union Version with their own modifications.

In 1979, Bishop Ting of China Christian Council gathered a group of scholars in Nanjing Seminary to embark on a revision of the Union Version. The revision of the Four Gospels was completed in 1981. The Acts of the Apostles, Pauline Epistles and Psalms have also been revised. Unfortunately, these books never saw the light of day, and the revision work fizzled out.³⁵⁾

Despite all these failed attempts, the need to revise the Union Version did not go away. A small-scale revision was completed in 1988, resulted in the publication of the Chinese Union Version with New Punctuation.

In 1983, leaders of the Bible Societies met in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore to gauge the need for a revision of the Chinese Union Version. The participants concluded that a minor revision of the text was needed. The fact the Chinese language has gone through tremendous changes over the decades is another reason for the revision. The revision will strive to be faithful to the original Greek and Hebrew text. At the same, it seeks to preserve the characteristics and style of the Chinese Union Version. The revision of the New Testament is based on the 4th edition of the Greek New Testament published by the United Bible Societies in 1993. The revision of the Old Testament is based on the BHS published in 1984. Trial editions of the Gospel according to Matthew (1986), the Letter to the Romans (1991) and the Four Gospels (2000) were printed. The official launching of the Revised Union Version New Testament will be held in Hong Kong on April 24, 2006. The entire Bible is scheduled for completion around 2010.

35) Ibid., 356-358.

After several false starts and failed attempts since the 1920s, finally the revision of the Chinese Union Version is bearing fruit. This revised version, while preserving the lineage and the characteristics of the Chinese Union Version, has incorporated the fruit of recent biblical scholarships as well as the changes in the Chinese language. It is hope that the revised version will continue to be a medium of blessings to the Chinese community.

5. Contemporary Implications for Bible Translation

We have briefly surveyed the long history of translating the Bible into Chinese. Most of the translation activities have been carried out by missionaries, who spent years learning Mandarin and gave their lives for the Chinese people. The Chinese Union Version represented the climax of their achievement and this translation is still the most authoritative version in the Chinese churches. It is only after the publication of the Union Version that more and more Chinese scholars began to be involved in translating the Bible. As we conclude this historical survey, what are some of the implications for contemporary efforts in Bible translation?

5.1. Language Level

Translators often have to struggle with the language level that should be adopted in their work. Prior to the publication of the Chinese Union Version in 1919, translators have published scriptures using Wenli, Easy Wenli and Mandarin, with varying degrees of success. The publication of the Chinese Union Version was the culmination of over a century of Protestant efforts in translating the Bible. The Chinese Union Version opted to use the common language that can be readily understood by the masses. It avoided colloquialisms and jargons. The adoption of the common language coincided with the tremendous language change inaugurated by the May Fourth Movement in China. This has in part helped to make the Chinese Union Version the standard Bible Version in Chinese churches. In comparison, the Wenli Union version, the same Bible but with the literary language level, failed to make much impact. This contrast illustrates the importance of language change in society and the appropriate language level that should be used in a translation. These factors deserved careful consideration in any translation project.

5.2. Translating Key Terms (Names and Titles of Deity, People and Places, Key Theological Terms)

Translating key terms is a complicated issue, and it has often led to controversies and hindered cooperation among the stakeholders. This is an issue that continues to confront translators today. Ideally, it will be great to have a list of key terms that all the interested parties can agree upon, but this may not be always possible. The decision to publish the same Chinese Bible with different editions (Shen edition and Shangdi edition) is a creative solution to resolve the impasse. This has helped to avoid conflicts and antagonism among the stakeholders. This solution has been well received in Chinese churches, and there is mutual acceptance of the versions. For translation projects facing the same issue, other creative solutions may need to be worked out.

5.3. Translation Principles

There are various ways of translating the Bible. Some may opt for an interlinear type of translation, and this may be of some help to those who are learning a foreign language. The Formal/literal translation focuses attention on both the form as well as the content of the source text. This type of translation may be useful in seminaries and in Bible studies. The dynamic/functional equivalence approach seeks to convey the meaning of the source text more directly into the target language. It focuses on the lucidity and naturalness in the target language. The paraphrase version clarifies and simplifies the text even further in an attempt to help the readers.

All these approaches have their own values and purposes. The dynamic/functional and the paraphrase versions may be suitable for outreach, for young people, or for those who are learning or using Mandarin as a second language, but it may not be suitable for research or for serious Bible study. The brief survey above shows that the perceptions of the readers need to be carefully considered. China has a long history of translating Buddhist sacred texts using the formal/literal translation principle. This has colored the audience's expectation regarding the translation of sacred text. The formal translation principle adopted in the Chinese Union Version fits in well with this long established tradition. It helps towards the readers' acceptance of the Version. The readers' preference for a specific type of translation needs to be carefully considered.

5.4. Translators' Command of the Source Language and the Target Language.

Missionary translators may have better access to the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, but their command of the target language may be somewhat lacking. Missionary translators in China realized this, and they included native Chinese speakers in their work. However, the native speakers only played a secondary role. Missionary translations tend to lack stylistic naturalness and elegance. Various attempts have been made to improve on missionary translations, including the Chinese Union Version. If the native speakers are allowed to play a more active role, they might be able to improve the elegance of the translation. To overcome this challenge, Bible Societies prefer to use mother tongue translators, though missionaries can play an important role as members in the translation team.

5.5. The Psychological and Theological Position of the Audience.

Chinese churches are theologically conservative in nature. The Chinese Union Version has long been regarded as the authoritative and standard version. Many Chinese Christians have an instinctive protectiveness about this version, as if they are protecting God's original words. It is therefore difficult for Chinese churches to accept a version that is markedly different from their authoritative sacred text. This psychological and theological position of the target audience needs to be carefully considered in revising an established version. In addition, the nature and the scope of revision need to be clearly spelt out.

5.6. The Need for Broad-based Support

Several Bible Societies and a broad spectrum of mission agencies and interested parties supported the Union Version project. This general support placed the Union Version in a firm footing and helps towards its widespread acceptance. Bible Societies existed to serve the churches, so we seek to cultivate broad-based support for our Bible translation projects. This will help to avoid the mistake of working in isolation, producing a version that does not meet the needs of the churches, or a version that meets the needs of a small segment of the churches.

5.7. Marketing and Relationship Building

Marketing often plays an important role in the success or failure of a publication.

Churches need to be aware and be convinced of the quality of the product. In this regard, good relationships between the publishers and church leaders are crucial. Marketing involves advertising the product as well as developing good relationships with the churches. In recent years, some versions have made inroads into some Chinese churches largely through aggressive marketing and relationship building with church leaders.

5.8. Copyright

The history of the Chinese Union Version shows the importance of preserving the copyright of the version. Chinese Union Version lost its copyright a few decades ago. Since then, various agencies have published the text of the Union Version with their own modifications, resulting in some confusion among the readers. It is extremely important to preserve the copyright so as to protect the integrity of the text and to avoid confusing the users.

Chinese Churches will be celebrating the 200th anniversary of Protestant missionary work in China. As we looked back, we are thankful to God for the lives and dedication of the missionaries as well as the local Chinese who have given their lives for the Bible cause. At the same time, we look ahead to the future. Chinese scholars are working hard at revising and improving the Chinese Union Version, seeking to let God's word speak more clearly to contemporary readers. It is hoped that the Revised Chinese Union Version will continue to be a source of blessing to the Chinese communities worldwide.

<Keyword>

Bible Translation into Chinese, Nestorian Translations, Roman Catholic Translations, Protestant Translations, Contemporary Implications for Bible Translation

Appendix A: Nestorian and Catholic Translations

C7-8 CE	Nestorian translations - Most of the NT and some OT books	
C13-14 CE	Nestorian translations (Mongolian)	
C13-14 CE	Montecorvino's translation (Mongolian) – NT and Psalms	
C16 CE	Matteo Ricci and Ruggieri's translation of the Ten Commandments	祖傳天主十誡
1635-1637	Giulio Aleni - "Life of Christ" with a harmony of the Gospels	天主降生言行紀略
1642	Manuel Diaz – Lectionary of the Gospels plus commentary	主日福音註釋 (日課)
1676	Roman Catholic Liturgical texts	已亡日課
~1700	Basset version - NT	
~1800	Louis de Poirot – OT + most of NT	古新聖經
1892	Dejean – Four Gospels	
1897	Lawrence Li Wenyu – NT	
1919	Xiao Jingshan – Four Gospels	
1922	Xiao Jingshan – NT; revised ed. in 1948	
1949	Wu Jingxiong - NT	
1949	George Litvanyi and colleagues	
1961	Studium Biblicum - NT	
1968	Studium Biblicum – whole Bible	思高譯本
1986	Jin Luxian – Four Gospels	
1994	Jin Luxian – NT with annotations	新約全集 (注釋本)

Appendix B: Protestant Translations

	Wenli Versions	
1822	Marshman and Lassar	NT 1816
1823	Morrison and Milne	NT 1814
1840	Medhurst-Gutzlaff-Bridgman-Morrison Version	NT 1837
1855	Karl Gutzlaff	NT 1840
1855	The Delegates' Version	NT 1852
1864	Bridgman and Culbertson	NT 1859
1868	Goddard	NT 1853
1919	Union Version	NT 1906
	Easy Wenli Versions	
1885	Griffith John	NT only
1889	Burdon and Blodget	NT only
1902	Schereschewsky	NT 1898
1904	Union Version	NT only
	Mandarin Versions	
1857	Medhurst and Stronach (Nanjing Version)	NT only
1872	Marie Taylor et all (Beijing Version)	NT only
1875	Schereschewsky	OT only
1878	Schereschewsky (OT) + Beijing Version (NT)	
1889	Griffith John	NT only

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1919	Chinese Union Version	NT 1906
1929	Sydenstricker and Zhu Baohui	NT only
1933	Wang Yuande	NT only
1936	Zhu Baohui	NT only
1939	Ruck and Zheng Shoulin	NT only
1964	Xiao Tiedi (Theodore Hsiao)	NT only
1970	Lü Zhengzhong	NT 1952
1979	Contemporary Bible (Living Bible)	NT 1974
1979	Contemporary Bible (Asian Outreach)	NT 1974
1980	Today's Chinese Version (The revised Edition appeared in 1995)	NT 1975
1988	Chinese Union Version with New Punctuation	
1992	New Chinese Version	NT 1976
1995	Today's Chinese Version (revised edition)	
2003	Chinese Recovery Version	NT 1987
2006	Revised Chinese Union Version	NT only

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<Abstract>

간략한 중국어 성경 번역사와 그 현대적 의미

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(세계성서공회연합회 아시아태평양 지역 번역 컨설턴트)

이 글은 성경이 중국어로 번역되는 역사의 간략한 개관을 제공한다. 성경을 처음으로 중국어로 번역한 이들은 네스토리우스파 기독교인들이었으며, 그 뒤를 이어 로마 가톨릭 교인들이, 그 다음에는 개신교인들이 중국어로 성경을 번역하였다. 로마 가톨릭에 의한 성경 번역의 절정은 1968년 스튜디움 비블리쿰 프란시스카눔(Studium Biblicum Franciscanum)에 의한 성경의 출판이다. 반면에 개신교인들은 가장 폭넓은 작업을 했다. 문리, 쉬운 문리와 만다린어로의 수많은 번역본이 등장하였고, 이러한 노력들은 1919년의 화합본(Union Version)의 출판으로 완결되었다. 2006년의 개정된 중국어 화합본 신약성서의 출판은 또 다른 기념비적인 사건이다. 이 글은 중국어 성경 번역에 있어서 몇 가지 현대적 의미들을 진술함으로써 결론을 맺고 있다.

2007년에는 세계 곳곳에 있는 중국인들을 위한 교회들은 로버트 모리슨의 중국 도착 200주년을 기념할 것이다. 이를 기념하기 위해 다양한 유형의 모임들이 계획되었다. 로버트 모리슨은 중국의 개신교 선교의 아버지로 기억되고 있다. 그는 윌리엄 밀른(Milne)과 함께 사역하였으며, 성경의 모든 책을 중국어로 번역함으로써 중국 교회에 중요한 유산을 남겼다.

모리슨과 밀른(Milne)은 성경을 중국어로 번역하는 기나긴 고리의 중요한 연결점이다. 중국 본토 출신들을 포함하여 다양한 나라로부터 온 헌신적인 개인들이 이 고귀한 목적을 위해 시간과 열정을 바쳤다. 이 글에서는 이러한 몇몇의 개인들과 위원회들이 맺은 결실을 만다린어로의 성경 번역에 초점을 두어 조명한다. 소수의 지방 방언이나 중국의 소수 민족들이 사용하는 언어로의 성경 번역은 다루지 않았다. 편의상 논의는 네스토리우스파 교인들, 로마 가톨릭 교인들, 개신교인들의 성경 번역 활동에 초점을 맞추는 것이다.