CHAPTER 6

Translating and Transplanting the Word of God in Chinese

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With the exception of John of Montecorvino O.F.M. (1274–1328), who translated the New Testament and the Psalms into the Mongolian language, the first Christian missionaries arriving in China (Nestorians in the seventh century; Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) did not engage in Bible translation. Their limited knowledge of the Chinese language and the perceived difficulty of the task were among the main reasons for them not attempting it. Additionally, the pastoral and missionary choices made by Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits in China were largely influenced by “the broader context of missionary policy” and “the background from which they came.”

The Catholic Church by and large used to discourage Bible translation into vernacular languages, promoting the use of the Latin Vulgata for Mass and liturgical purposes. Later missionaries in China either had priorities other than Bible translation, or were unable to publish their translation works because of the restrictive policies of the Propaganda Fide. As a result, Catholic missionaries only had partial translations and mostly based on the Vulgata up to 1968, when the first complete Bible translated into Chinese from the original texts was published by the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum (the Sigao Shengjing 思高聖經/思高圣经). This edition still remains the most authoritative and commonly used Chinese Catholic Bible because of its accuracy and rigour, especially in formal renderings.

By contrast, Protestant missionaries considered Bible translation to be a priority of their missionary activity in China. As soon as they arrived in the country in the nineteenth century they dedicated themselves to translation work, publishing the first complete Bible versions from the original texts in the early-1820s. After various attempts to produce a common Bible for all the

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1 Nicolas Standaert, “The Bible in Early Seventeenth-Century China,” in Bible in Modern China: The Literary and Intellectual Impact, ed. Irene Eber et al. (Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Monograph Series XLII, 1999), 33–35.
2 Ibid, 39.
Protestant denominations present in China, the Union Version (Heheben 和合本) in Mandarin was eventually published in 1919, and has since been considered the Chinese Bible *par excellence*. While the above mentioned Bible translations were produced by foreign missionaries, albeit with the crucial – and often unknown – contribution of local translators, over time Chinese translators have increasingly engaged in Bible translation, with some also being knowledgeable of the biblical languages. Additionally, new trends emerged in Bible translation, such as the use of translations in modern languages or even in Chinese as a textual basis, and the adoption of new principles of translation. Most recent editions, including those produced by Chinese translators, placed stronger emphasis on “functional” translation principles to render content and meanings and on using the features of the recipient language, in the attempt of reducing the cultural gap between the biblical and Chinese worldviews, rather than on formal renderings. These translations, which are the most recent ones examined here, in addition to the Union Version and the translation by the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, include:

1) The Bible translated from the original texts by pastor Lü Zhenzhong (1970), who was well acquainted with the Biblical languages and produced a very rigorous translation that is formally very faithful to the textual basis;

2) The *Today's Chinese Version* (Xiandai Zhongwen Yiben 现代中文译本), an interconfessional translation with a Catholic and Protestant edition, which was produced by Chinese translators. The Protestant

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3 As noted by Zetzsche, probably also due to its publication in conjunction with the May Fourth Movement, the Union Version in Mandarin was taken as a model for the standard baihua and Zuo Zuoren believed that it influenced the modern Chinese language. See Jost Oliver Zetzsche, *The Bible in China: The History of the Union Version or the Culmination of Protestant Missionary Bible Translation in China* (Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Monograph Series XLV, Monumenta Serica Institute, 1999), 333.

4 According to Eugene Nida's translation theory, the principle of formal correspondence focuses on formal fidelity and attempts to match as closely as possible the formal elements of the original language, such as the lexical details, grammatical structure, consistency in word usage, and meanings in terms of the source cultural context. By contrast to formal correspondence, the principle of functional or dynamic equivalence is to reproduce “in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source-language message”. This principle emphasizes more the transmission of the message or the content of the original text, as well as a more natural rendering in the receptor language, than the preservation of the original grammatical structure and formal reproduction of the original text.