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The Beginnings of Chinese Bible Translation

WHEN DID THE BIBLE come to China? When was it translated into Chinese? These questions are closely connected with the beginnings of the Christian mission in China. A beautiful legend has it that St. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, reached China from India. In China, he preached the gospel and saw many conversions to Christianity. Many Chinese Christians are still convinced that this is true. There is nothing inherently impossible in the idea of Thomas in China. He might have travelled, as Paul did, around the Mediterranean, but also gone on through Asia to India, or even further to some place in China. Possibilities do not make history, however. Moreover, there is no mention that Bible translation was involved. So, while these stories may preserve an authentic tradition, in the absence of reliable concrete evidence, they will have to remain a legend. There is no certain proof of the existence of Christianity in China until the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907). In this chapter, the discussion of the beginnings of Chinese Bible translation falls into two subsections: 1) The Nestorians and Lost Translations, and 2) The Roman Catholics and Their Endeavors.

The Nestorians and Lost Translations¹

The Nestorians in the Tang Dynasty

The first direct evidence of Christian missionary activity in China is that of Nestorian missionaries who travelled along the Silk Road and arrived at Chang'an (now Xi'an), the capital of China, at the beginning of the Tang dynasty in the seventh century.

The Tang dynasty in Chinese history was an era of glory and splendor. In the eyes of the Chinese, it stands for the "golden age" of China. The "men of Tang" once became a proud title for the Chinese. To this day, "China town" abroad is known in Chinese as "the street of the men of Tang," for this name recalls the time when China was a world power.

Tang dynasty China was cosmopolitan and tolerant. Emperor Tai Zong (AD 626–49) was the most illustrious figure of the Tang dynasty and one of the greatest men who ever sat upon the throne of China. During his reign, international trade flourished between China and the lands to the west. Visitors were to be found from many distant parts of the world. The missionaries of a variety of faiths were hospitably received. It was under these circumstances that the Nestorian missionary, Alopen, made his way to China. He came from a country named Daqin and arrived in Chang'an in AD 635. Emperor Tai Zong paid him great honor, sending one of his chief ministers to receive him. He was directed to the palace, and there the Christian books that he had brought with him were translated. Later, as a result of the emperor's decree, Nestorians were given the right to propagate their faith and a monastery was built in the capital. Yet, all historical traces of such an event have been lost in the dim mists of antiquity and were completely forgotten until 1625, with the unearthing of a stone monument known as the Nestorian Tablet.

1. The term "Nestorian" is used simply by convention. Many scholars now employ the term, "Syrian Church of the East" instead, since that is the name used by these Christians, who were separated by geography from the churches in the Roman Empire. Furthermore, "Nestorianism" was condemned as a heresy. That charge was dropped in 1994, when the Roman Catholic church and the Assyrian Church of the East issued a "Common Christological Declaration." See Charbonnier, *Christians in China*, 39–51. See also Moffett, *History of Christianity*, 301–314, and Covell, "Confucius," 20–35.

The Tablet and the Naming of Jingjiao

The Nestorian Tablet was discovered in a town about thirty miles east of Xi'an, when workmen were laying the foundations for a building.² It is a single block of fine-grained limestone that stands some nine feet high, about three and a half feet across, and a little less than one foot thick. The date of its erection was AD 781. Despite having been long buried, the stone, with its inscription, is almost in perfect condition. Chinese characters arranged in neat, vertical columns covered the broad face of the Tablet. At the bottom of the inscription, on both the left and the right sides of the slab, there was a long list of names in Syriac and Chinese, which refer to the clergy of that time.³

The main inscription includes a heading, a statement of Christian doctrine, an account of the Apostolic Age, the story of Alopen's arrival in China, the edict of the emperor, and the history of Nestorian missionaries during a period of 150 years of the Tang dynasty. The inscription ends with a statement of who set up the stone and when. All of this was written in about 1,900 characters, in both prose and verse, and composed by Adam Jingjing, a monk of the Daqin Monastery.

The crown of the Nestorian Tablet is richly carved with a cross and the title of the inscription reads: "The Tablet of the Spread of the Daqin Luminous Religion in China."

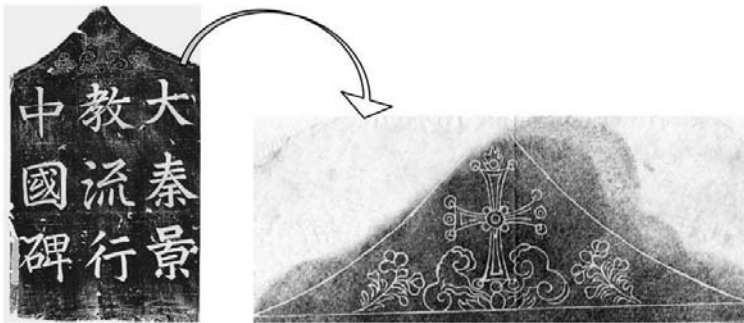


Figure 1: The crown of the Nestorian Tablet
(This combined diagram was designed by the author.)

2. For different stories about the finding of the stone, see Moule, *Christians in China*, 28; Saeki, *Nestorian Monument*, 27.

3. The Syriac portions were translated by J. Terrenz in about 1629, which is still of value in revealing the existence of Syriac names on both sides of the stone.

When Christian missionaries arrived from Persia and first set up monasteries, “Persian Religion” was taken as the name for this “new” religion. In 745, an imperial edict was issued that the official Chinese name for the Christian monasteries be changed from “Persian” to “Daqin.” The edict reads:

The Luminous Religion of Persia was originally started in Ta-Ch'in [Daqin]. It is a long time since this religion came to be preached here. Now it is practised by many, spreading throughout the Middle Kingdom. When they first built monasteries we gave them the name of “Persian Temple” (because of their supposed origin). But in order that all men might know the (real and true) origin of what are commonly known as “Persian Monasteries” in the two Capitals, (the names) are henceforth to be changed to the “Ta-Ch'in Monasteries.” Let those also which are established in all parts of the empire follow this example.

The reason for such a change might be that it was necessary to distinguish the “Luminous Religion” from some of the other Persian religions which were also active in China at that time, such as the Zoroastrians, or the Manicheans, or the Muslims. The Nestorian Tablet also records how the Nestorians were given the name “*Jingjiao*” or “Luminous Religion,” thus:

This ever True and Unchanging Way is mysterious,
and is almost impossible to name.
But its meritorious operations are so brilliantly manifested
that we make an effort and call it by the name of “The Luminous
Religion.”⁴

Chinese naming is always meaningful. The name presents the nature and character of its bearer. “We make an effort and call it by the name. . .” which is enough to suggest that the name of “*Jingjiao*” or “Luminous Religion” had been carefully chosen to suit it. Wang Weifan, professor at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, with his profound knowledge of Chinese culture, states that “Jing” means blessed, auspicious, propitious, peaceful, harmonious in Chinese.⁵

Thus, the name “*Daqin Jingjiao*,” which appears on the Nestorian Tablet, has been known to this day as the name of Christianity in the Tang dynasty.

4. The edict and this quote were translated by Saeki, *Nestorian Documents*, 457.

5. Wang, “Shengjing Yiben,” 63.

Evidences of the Impact of Translation

The Nestorian Tablet is the earliest evidence of the coming of Christianity to China and of the translation of the Scriptures into the Chinese language. This history is inscribed on the Tablet thus:

When Tai Zong, the polished Emperor, was beginning his prosperous reign in glory and splendour with light and wisdom ruling the people, there was in the land of Ta-ch'in [Daqin] one of high virtue called A-lo-pen, who, auguring by the blue clouds, carried the true Scriptures; watching the harmony of the winds, hastened to meet difficulties and dangers. In the ninth Cheng Kuan [Zhen Guan] year (635) he came to Ch'ang-an [Chang'an]. The Emperor sent the Minister of State, Duke Fang Hsuan-ling [Fang Xuanling], to take an escort to the west suburb to meet the guest and bring him to the palace. When the books had been translated in the library and the doctrine examined in his private apartments, [the Emperor] thoroughly understood their propriety and truth and specially ordered their preaching and transmission.⁶

Alopen was received with honor by the emperor, translations of the sacred books were made in the imperial library, and the emperor himself studied the religion and found it excellent. He acknowledged that it meant the salvation of creatures and the benefit of man and was worthy of being spread over all the empire. Thus, he gave orders for its propagation. It was an auspicious beginning. Three years later, in AD 638, a monastery was built in the capital and twenty-one monks were appointed there as a result of the emperor's edict. The edict stated on the Tablet:

The way has no unchanging name, sages have no unchanging method. Teaching is established to suit the land, that all living may be saved. The man of great virtue, A-lo-pen of the land of Ta-ch'in [Daqin], bringing books and images from afar has come to offer them at the upper capital. If we carefully examine the meaning of the teaching it is mysterious, wonderful, full of repose. If we look at the fundamental principle it fixes the essentials of production and perfection. In its speech there is no multitude of words; in its principle there is [perfect accomplishment,] forgetting the means. It is the salvation of living beings, it is the wealth of men. It is right that it should have free course under the sky. Let the local officers

6. Translated by Moule, *Christians in China*, 38.

therefore build a Ta-ch'in monastery in the I-ning quarter at the capital with twenty-one men as regular monks.⁷

In the edict, it is said that Alopen had “brought books and images from afar.” The “books” refer to the Bible and the “images” refer to portraits of the figures in the Bible which were preserved until at least the ninth century. When Ibn Wahab, an old Christian from Arabia, visited the capital of China, he was shown the portraits of Noah, Moses, Jesus and his disciples, and had an interesting conversation with the emperor. The Bible brought by Alopen comprised “the Old Law as it was declared by the Twenty-Four Sages” and “the Scriptures, left in twenty-seven books.” The “Old Law” refers to the Old Testament. The “Twenty-Four Sages” refer to the authors of the Old Testament and “twenty-seven books” refer to the New Testament.⁸

Tai Zong's toleration made the Nestorians' success possible. In the eulogy that forms the principal part of the inscription, there is a record of incidents during the reign of Tai Zong. It states: “They translated books, they built monasteries.” One question which concerns us here is, how much of the Bible was translated?

Wylie asserts: “From these various notices, preserved to us in the durable records of a stone tablet, we gather with much confidence the impression that the New Testament, at least, was translated into Chinese during the first half of the seventh century.”⁹

The important discoveries of Nestorian manuscripts by Paul Pelliot at the Dunhuang grottoes in 1908 seem to confirm Wylie's assertion. Among them, the *Zunjing* (Honored Sutra) is in reality a listing of names and books. Moule gave a more suitable title: “Honoured Persons and Sacred Books.”¹⁰

Among the list of twenty-two saints and holy men, seven of them are reckoned as follows:

- *Yuhannan*: John
- *Lujia*: Luke

7. *Ibid.*, 39.

8. Moule, *Christians in China*, 77. Wang Weifan (“Shengjing Yiben,” 62) believes that “Twenty-Four Sages” refers to the Old Testament prophets of which Moses is the first. No satisfactory explanation has yet been given as to why the orthodox Western canonical number of twenty-seven is used for the New Testament instead of the Syriac canonical number of twenty-two. Yang Senfu (*Zhongguo Jidujiao*, 358) believes it is because *Jingjiao* was independent of the Syriac Church.

9. Wylie, *Chinese Researches*, 89.

10. Moule, *Christians in China*, 55.

- *Mojuci*: Mark
- *Mingtai*: Matthew
- *Moushi*: Moses
- *Duohui*: David
- *Baolu*: Paul

Among the thirty-five Sacred Books ten are identified as follows:

- *Duohui sheng wang jing*: The Psalms of David
- *A si qu li rong jing*: Evangelion/Gospel
- *Hun yuan jing*: Genesis
- *Chuan hua jing*: The Acts
- *Baolu fawang jing*: Pauline Epistles
- *Shan he lu jing*: Zechariah
- *Moushi fawang jing*: Exodus
- *Efulin jing*: Ephesians
- *Wu sha na jing*: Hosea
- *Qi zhen jing*: Revelation¹¹

This shows that not only parts of the New Testament, but also some of the Old Testament books were translated into Chinese in the seventh century. The above list may also give some indication of the liturgical and theological priorities of the Nestorians missionaries.

These are the first Chinese translations of the Bible. It is regrettable that none of these early translations survived. It could be that the purpose of their translation was for the examination and understanding by the ruler rather than for dissemination and evangelization. Meanwhile, we should bear in mind that the art of printing was not practised at that time in China. The Nestorian Church completely disappeared from the stage of church history in China when the mighty Tang dynasty collapsed in AD 907. Not a building which the Nestorians erected, nor a Bible portion that they had translated into the Chinese language, has been preserved, not even in oral tradition.

11. Yang, *Zhongguo Jidujiao*, 350–52.

Reasons for Lack of Permanent Influence

The reasons why the first Christian mission to China failed to achieve a lasting position in Chinese society have been much debated. No one has yet given a completely satisfactory answer. In days past there have been those who attributed the failure of the Nestorian Church to its “heretical” basis, as it was banished from the Roman Empire at the Council of Ephesus in 431. This assertion runs counter to history, which shows that the Church of the East, as the Nestorian Church preferred to call itself, was the most successful church between the seventh and eleventh centuries.¹² J. Foster also argues that this attitude needs to be corrected. He writes: “The significance of Nestorianism lies rather in its freedom from connection with the Roman Empire than in any marked difference of faith. It was only because of such freedom that it was possible for the Church of the East to undertake such widespread missionary work.”

Latourette, however, believes that there could be a further reason for the failure: the Nestorian Church appears to have compromised its message. He states: “To the average Chinese, Nestorianism may have appeared to be another of the Buddhist sects that were so flourishing under the Tang . . . The Nestorians, in other words, in trying to clothe their faith in dress familiar to the Chinese, may have sacrificed in part its distinctiveness and defeated their own aim.”

His suggestion seems to be supported by the unearthed Nestorian documents discovered at Dunhuang in 1908, which show that the author of the Nestorian inscription was also a translator of Buddhist sutras. Some of the documents suggest a degree of syncretism; others reveal a creative use of Taoist and Buddhist terminology to serve Christian ends. This strategy can also be seen in the figure on the crown of the Tablet. As Saeki points out: “Beneath the Cross, —i.e., supporting the cross—, there is the cloud, which the Chinese describes as a “flying cloud” or “white cloud.” The cloud is the characteristic symbol of Taoism. Underneath this cloud there lies a lotus-flower, the characteristic emblem of Buddhists. The design was doubtlessly used to denote that ‘the three Religions are one.’”

Such a mixture seems closer to syncretism than to missionary contextualization. It can be argued, however, to the contrary, namely that the three symbols show that the Nestorians attempted to adapt their message to the Chinese context and made the Cross superior to the other two symbols.

12. Whyte, *Unfinished Encounter*, 40.

The most common cause given for the disappearance of the Nestorian Church in ninth century China was religious persecution. The church had first encountered hostile voices from Buddhists during the reign of Empress Wu (624–705), who declared Buddhism the official state religion in AD 691. After this attack focused mainly on Taoism, the most severe opposition arose in AD 845 when Wu Zong (814–46), the emperor of the time, came under the influence of the native Taoist monks, and launched an attack on Buddhism that embroiled all foreign religions. The Christian monasteries, together with those of the Buddhists and Manicheans, were suppressed.

Another popular belief has it that the Nestorian Church never became Chinese but remained a church of foreigners. With the expulsion of the foreign missionaries as the result of the edict in 845, the church simply vanished since it lacked the native leadership and strong Chinese following necessary for its survival.

Moffett believes that the decisive factor was none of those previously mentioned, “but rather the fall of an imperial house on which the church had too long relied for its patronage and protection.”¹³ Is this the only reason? The experience of the Church in China in the twentieth century speaks of a different kind of historical influence. New political power replaced the old with a complete rejection of Western imperialism and the expulsion of all foreign missionaries, but this time the results were different: The Church did not disappear but remained. Persecution alone was not sufficient to explain the Nestorian failure. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) there was severe persecution, but the Church did not vanish; on the contrary, it grew stronger and greater.¹⁴ There were two important factors which were present in this later period but absent in the Nestorian period: 1) the Church, no longer foreign, had sunk its roots into the Chinese soil and become Chinese, and 2) the whole Bible had been translated, widely distributed, and widely read, which attests to the fact that the Bible’s translation into vernacular language is very important to mission and to churches’ survival in their trials.

13. The argument points of the scholars in this section are excerpted from their works: Foster, *Church of the Tang Dynasty*, 24; Latourette, *History of Christian Missions*, 59; Saeki, *Nestorian Documents*, 26; Moffett, *History of Christianity*, 313.

14. There were about four million Chinese Christians (including Roman Catholics) when the missionaries left China, but after the Cultural Revolution the number grew at least 4 times.

So, all of the above tentative conjectures are reasonable but no single one can be considered definitive.

The Roman Catholics and Their Endeavors

Franciscans in the Yuan Dynasty

The history of Chinese Bible translation now takes a leap of some four hundred years, during which time little to nothing is known of Christianity. This brings us to the powerful Mongol or Yuan dynasty (1271–1368).

In the midst of the thirteenth century, a new page in the history of Chinese Bible translation was opened by Roman Catholic missions when Franciscans, travelling by land and sea routes, came from the West to the Mongol Court at Khan-baliq or Cambulac, the Mongols' name for Peking.

New Testament and Psalms by Montecorvino

The honor of being the first Roman Catholic Chinese Bible translator belongs, as far as we know, to an Italian Franciscan, John of Montecorvino (1247–1328). In 1289, Friar John, then forty-two years of age, was sent by Pope Nicholas IV to the court of Khubilai (1215–94). When he arrived in Cambulac in 1294, Khubilai had recently died. The friar presented the pope's letter to the new emperor, Timur (1265–1307), who courteously received it.

In 1299, Friar John was allowed by the emperor to build his first church in the capital. Making converts steadily, he had, as he said in his second letter home, baptized about six thousand converts by 1305.¹⁵ In the same year, he began to construct a second church near the gates of the Imperial Palace. For many years, Friar John labored alone. He had heard nothing from the pope or the Franciscans in Europe for twelve years. In 1307, Clement V appointed John as Archbishop of Cambulac and Patriarch of the East. His life had been both eventful and courageous. Latourette spoke highly of him:

He had, almost single-handed, established the Roman Catholic faith in the capital of the mightiest empire of his time and to do so had journeyed farther from his home than ever any missionary of any religion is known to have done before him. When measured by

15. The letter was reprinted in *The Mongol Mission* ed. by Christopher Dawson New York 1980, [1955].

the effect of his life upon his contemporaries and the succeeding generations, he is by no means the greatest of Christian apostles, but for single-hearted devotion and quiet persistence he deserves to be ranked with the foremost pioneers of all faiths and times.¹⁶

Friar John never returned to Europe and died at his post around 1328, when he was over eighty years of age.¹⁷ He was the first Roman Catholic archbishop in China.

Our knowledge of his Bible translation is derived from one of John's own letters written from Cambulac and dated January 8, 1305, in which he wrote: "I have an adequate knowledge of the Tartar language and script, which is the usual language of the Tartars, and now I have translated into that language and script the whole of the New Testament and the Psalter and have had it written in beautiful characters. And I bear witness to the Law of Christ and read and preach openly and in public."¹⁸

The "usual language of the Tartars" would have been Mongolian, the language of the court during the time of the Yuan dynasty. This was the first Mongolian translation of the Bible in China—New Testament and Psalms. Like the Nestorian translation, this manuscript was lost and ceased to exist, along with the Franciscan mission, which ended in 1368 when the Yuan dynasty collapsed. Today, no known portion of this work exists. With the expulsion of the Mongols, Christianity vanished from China even more completely than it had after the fall of the Tang. This was the second disappearance of Christianity in China. When Ricci and his Jesuit companions reached China two centuries later, they could find no trace of the ancient Christians among the inhabitants, not even a memory.

Again, as with the Tang period, the question arises, why did the Christian communities disappear so utterly? Why did the Franciscan mission have so little effect upon the Chinese? It is difficult to judge. Here are some probable causes of their failure: 1) The long distance and the dangers of the journey made survival difficult, many missionaries never reaching their destination. Friar John had to work alone for twelve years before he received any reinforcements. 2) Roman Catholic missions seem to have been very much a "foreign mission," for they received their church orders from outside China and used a foreign language in their liturgy. 3) The Mongol overlords of the Yuan dynasty, on whom the missionaries and their

16. Latourette, *History of Christian Mission*, 71–72.

17. The date of his death is variously given as 1328, 1329, 1330, and 1333.

18. Dawson, *Mongol Mission*, 227.

converts were dependent, were themselves foreigners. So, to the Chinese, Christianity appeared as a foreign religion protected and supported by a foreign government. When the native Chinese Ming dynasty won its way to the imperial throne, an anti-foreign reaction wiped out all that was foreign. It is no surprise that the church fell with the old dynasty.

The Jesuits in the Late Ming and the Early Qing Dynasty

When the Yuan dynasty was overtaken by the Ming in 1368, and the second wave of Christianity had totally vanished from Chinese history, there was a long period of absence during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was in the late sixteenth century when Christianity again entered China. This time, it was in the form of the Jesuits, later followed by the Dominicans and the Franciscans.

Matteo Ricci and the Jesuits

Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), an Italian Jesuit, was one of the outstanding missionaries of the Church in China. In 1582, he arrived in Macao and began to study the Chinese language. The following year, he moved to Zhaoqing, China, along with Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), and there they set up the first Chinese base of the Society of Jesus. Ricci immersed himself in the culture of China. He shaved off his hair and beard, wore the dress of a Buddhist monk, and identified himself with Chinese ways. He later adopted the dress and manners of a Confucian scholar.

After nineteen long years of visiting cities all over China, with avid and intense study of its language, history, and culture, Ricci entered Peking in 1601. He lived there for the rest of his life, dying in 1610 at the age of fifty-seven. During his twenty-eight years of labor in China, he achieved a considerable reputation and was much respected by the literati and upright officials. He succeeded in winning a number of converts, among them a man of distinction in official circles, Paul Xu Guangqi (1562–1633).¹⁹

In 1584, when he and Ruggieri wrote their first catechism in Chinese, *Zuchuan Tianzhu shijie* (Ten Commandments of Lord of Heaven), Ricci had

19. Xu, the strong supporter and defender of the early Roman Catholic Church in China, served as a Ming court official from 1610 until his death. He collaborated with Ricci and other Jesuits to translate Western mathematical and scientific works into Chinese and polished or rewrote most of Ricci's writings in Chinese.

his first experience of wrestling with the critical problem of finding suitable Chinese words for expressing Christian ideas. He noted Chinese names for the Deity: *Shangdi* (Supreme Ruler) and *Tian* (Heaven). For instance, *Tian*, an ancient term indicating a transcendental power and originally used by scholars to denote a somewhat non-personal Being, could be personalized to “Heavenly Lord,” thus becoming Christian in content. Believing the new faith would certainly seem less strange if familiar words could be employed to express its leading concepts, Ricci adopted the controversial method of adapting to Chinese culture and used *Tianzhu* (The Lord of Heaven) for God. Among his other labors, he wrote the famous apologetic work *Tianzhu shiyi* (*The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*) in 1603.

In 2001, Pope Paul II praised Ricci in his speech for the Fourth Centenary of the Arrival in Peking of Father Matteo Ricci, saying, “Ricci forged a Chinese terminology for Roman Catholic theology and liturgy, and thus created the conditions for making Christ known and for incarnating the Gospel message and the church within Chinese culture.”²⁰

In the late Ming dynasty and the early Qing dynasty, Ricci and his Jesuits developed an approach to evangelization which was unique in their time, one based on an understanding of, and respect for, Chinese civilization. They used their knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, and mechanics to win the respect of the educated, while attempting to adjust the Christian faith further to its Chinese environment. They even found it possible to adjust themselves a little to the Chinese reverence for ancestors. From this accommodation arose the bitter “Rites Controversy” (involving the term to be used for God), which lasted for more than a century and involved the pope, the emperor, and the various Roman Catholic orders in China. Noteworthy, however, is that in 1704, Pope Clement XI announced his approval of *Tianzhu* for God, but prohibited the use of *Tian* alone, and also that of *Shangdi*.

The news reached Emperor Kangxi (1662–1723) that a foreign power without first-hand knowledge of the Chinese language and culture had settled the controversy. This he interpreted as an infringement of his sovereignty and he became suspicious of the political aims and ambitions of the missionaries. As a result, in 1721, the emperor issued an edict banning Christianity. In 1724, Emperor Yongzheng (1723–36) banned all Europeans

20. *Message to the International Conference Commemorating the Fourth Centenary of the Arrival in Beijing of Father Matteo Ricci* (Oct. 24, 2001) by John Paul II http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2001/October/documents. See also Zhao, *Yijing Suyuan*, 12.

from China except those employed by the court because of their scientific expertise. Such an incident is a salutary reminder to future revisers of the Chinese Bible of the difficulties involved in settling Chinese questions.

The issues raised by the whole lengthy controversy during the Jesuit period deserve further consideration. For instance, we may ask why the proposal made by Paul Xu Guangqi for Ricci to translate the Bible came to nothing. Ricci excused himself from the task of translation because of other duties, pleading pressures of work, the difficulty of the task, and the need to secure papal approval before commencing.²¹

We have to remember that in China, as in other regions of the world, the liturgy was celebrated in Latin; to say Mass in the vernacular, permission had to be obtained from Rome. In 1615, Pope Paul V permitted Chinese translations of the liturgy and Bible, as requested by some Jesuits working in China. However, this permission was never officially sent to China for practical action because the religious superiors in Macao believed the task to be too difficult, dangerous, boring, and unnecessary. This may be considered the main reason why Jesuits did not dare translate the Bible or publish translations already completed.

Obviously, Bible translation was not the center of mission at the time. The Jesuits preferred to write Chinese catechisms (such as “Ten Commandments of the Lord of Heaven”), general introductions to the Christian faith (such as “The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven”), Scripture explanations (such as “A Direct Explanation of the Holy Scripture” by Emmanuel Diaz in 1636), and narratives of Jesus’s life (such as “Short Record of the Words and Deeds of God’s Incarnation” by Giulio Aleni in 1635), etc. These contained Bible passages but were not full translations of any books. They can hardly be called Bible translations. We need to look further at these difficulties.

Early Unpublished Translations in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Translation by Basset

Jean Basset (ca. 1662–1707) a French Catholic missionary, arrived in Canton in 1689. From 1702 on, he was a missionary in Sichuan. He translated the first part of the Small Catechism, which was very useful to the mission. He also translated parts of the New Testament, from the Gospels to the first

21. Standaert “Bible in Early Seventeenth Century China,” 37–38.

chapter of the letter to the Hebrews. It was only in 1945 that a manuscript in the British Museum was identified with Basset's translation by Bernward H. Willeke, a Franciscan missiologist. The proof was found in the diary of Andrew Ly (1692–1774), a Chinese priest from Sichuan, who may have been Basset's helper in his work. In the diary, published in the day-by-day journal of a Chinese Roman Catholic priest in Sichuan in 1924, Ly clearly referred to Basset's translation: "Father Joannes Basset had translated . . . also the New Testament from the Latin into the Chinese idiom, beginning with St. Matthew, up to the first chapter of the Letter of St. Paul to the Hebrews. Prevented by death, he was unable to finish the wonderful work he had undertaken."²²

In 1738, the Englishman, Hodgson, who worked for the East India Company, found a Chinese manuscript containing the New Testament in Canton, where Basset died in 1707. Hodgson had a copy of this manuscript made and presented it to Hans Sloane (1660–1753) of the Royal Society in London; the latter, in turn, donated it to the British Museum. This manuscript, which includes a harmony of the Gospels, the book of Acts, the Pauline Epistles, and the first chapter of Hebrews, is today known as "Basset's version" or "Sloane Manuscript #3599."

Basset's version later became essential for the history of Protestant Bible translation as Robert Morrison, with the help of Yong Sam-tak, a Chinese from Canton, had a new copy made of this text when he left for China in 1807, and it became a reference for his own translation.

Translation by Poirot

A complete translation of the New Testament and a partial translation of the Old Testament were made by the French Jesuit Louis de Poirot (1735–1813) who arrived China in 1770 and worked as a painter and translator at the court in the service of the Qianlong Emperor. He adopted the Chinese name He Qingtai. The translation he made, also based on the Vulgate, consisted of 29 books in 42 volumes, and was entitled *Guxin Shengjing* (Old and New Holy Scripture). It contained the whole Bible with the exception of the Song of Songs, Jeremiah, Lamentation, Ezekiel, and the Minor Prophets.²³

22. Translated from Latin by Willeke, "Chinese Bible Manuscript," 451.

23. Zhao, *Yijing Suyuan*, 14–15; Camps, "Father Gabriele," 56.

According to the decree of *Propaganda Fide* in 1655, any printing of books by missionaries without written permission was prohibited.²⁴ Poirot reported his translation to officials of the *Propaganda* in 1803; his passion for translation was praised but his request for publication was denied. This manuscript was never printed in his time, and it was stored in the Beitang library in Peking, where it was destroyed in 1958. Fortunately, a copy had been made for the Xujiahui (or Zikawei) Library in Shanghai but was lost for a while.²⁵ With the changes of regime and several political movements, it was unaccounted for until it was dramatically found in 2011. In 2014, it was edited into nine books by two scholars, Li Shixue (Taiwan) and Zheng Haijuan (Beijing), and published by Zhonghua Shuju, Beijing. Poirot's *Guxin Shengjing* was banned by Roman Catholic authorities. About two centuries later, it has been published outside of Roman Catholic jurisdiction, and entitled *Guxin Shengjing Cangao* (Old and New Holy Scripture Incomplete Manuscripts, or Remnant Old and New Holy Scripture). Since then, Poirot's translation has become a popular research topic in academic circles as it is reckoned as the earliest Bible translation so far in vernacular—*baihua* style.

Translation by Others

During this early period, there were three other Roman Catholics who started to translate the Bible or parts thereof into Chinese. They were the Portuguese missionary, Joaquim Alfonso Goncalvez (1781–1841), who lived in Macao from 1814 and translated the New Testament. Two Chinese priests are also known to have translated parts of the Bible: The Gospels (1875) and Acts (1883) by Thomas Wang (Wang Duomo), and at around the same time, the four Gospels by Francis Xin (Xin Fangji). Wang and Xin's manuscripts are stored in Xujiahui library.²⁶

These are the translations which never saw the light of day. Thus, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic church in China did not possess a printed version of the Bible in the Chinese language.

24. *Propaganda Fide*, in charge of all mission areas, was established in 1622.

25. Both the Beitang and Xujiahui Libraries were original to the earliest Jesuit missionaries. The Xujiahui Library, donated by Paul Xu Guanqi, was a part of the Jesuit mission complex begun in 1847. Now it is a unit of the Shanghai Library.

26. Bondfield, "Bible in China," 468.