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The Union Version Project

The 1890 General Conference: A Milestone in the History of Chinese Bible Translation

THE SECOND GENERAL CONFERENCE of Protestant Missionaries in China was held in Shanghai from May 7–20, 1890.¹ Bible translation, which had provoked so much discussion and division in the past, was the first subject to be discussed. From the conference records, we learn that William Muirhead (1822–1900) of Shanghai and John Wherry of Peking presented their papers on “Historical Summary of the Different Versions, With Their Terminology, and the Feasibility of Securing a Single Standard Version in *Wenli*, With a Corresponding Version in Mandarin Colloquial.” They both gave a brief historical account from the Nestorians to their own time. A paper on “Translation of the Scriptures into Chinese” by Samuel I. J. Schereschewsky was presented in his absence, in which he appealed for the desirability of a *Wenli* version in a lower classical style. These presentations were followed by an intense discussion.

Two committees were appointed to prepare reports for the conference: one, with twenty-four members, “on the Feasibility of a United *Wenli* Version of the Scriptures,” and another, with twelve members, “on the Feasibility of a United Mandarin Version of the Scriptures.” After several

1. The General Conference was held in China three times: in 1877, in 1890, and in 1907. These conferences provided forums for the Western missionaries to meet, discuss, and coordinate matters related to missionary policy.

days of full discussion in the committees, the vast majority came to see the need for a union version in Chinese. On the ninth day of the conference, two reports suggesting a “translation of the Bible into simple but chaste *Wenli*” and an “improved version of the Old and New Testaments in Mandarin” were presented to the conference and were unanimously accepted. A supplementary report proposing a “translation of the whole Bible in the higher classic style” was presented on the following day and was accepted to the same degree.²

By the 1880s there were more than forty versions in use, including translations in local dialects. The debates and divisions surrounding Bible translations were increased by the rival translations which were being issued by a variety of translators. Although there was a general desire among all missionaries for a uniform, standard version, only in 1890 did they realize that its time had arrived. When the Conference unanimously adopted these reports and decided to have “one Bible in three versions”—*Wenli*, *Easy Wenli*, and Mandarin, the whole audience rose and sang the Doxology.

Reports of Committees

It was recommended in the reports that the conference should elect an executive committee for each of the translations, and that these committees should then choose translators. The executive committees were to work according to plans consisting of eight articles.

The first three articles were different due to each committee’s particular tasks:

Article one was about selecting members of the translation committee. Two *Wenli* versions committees were to be formed of not fewer than five competent translators each, and no less than seven men for the Mandarin committee. The Mandarin committee was to be known as the Committee on Mandarin Revision, not “Translation.” This was because the pre-existing Peking Version had been produced with great care and labor, and its popularity was great. The executive committee’s suggestion that there should be a revision instead of a new translation reveals the Peking Version’s excellence and success.

Article two provided for the quality of translators. They had to be competent scholars who would represent different denominations and

2. *Records 1890*, 587.

nationalities. Only the Easy *Wenli* committee had three translators nominated by the conference.

Article three was concerned with the basic version. For Easy *Wenli*, no existing version, or even partial versions, was to be made the basis of the new version. For *Wenli*, they were to base their translation of the Old Testament on the Medhurst/Stronach translation and the Bridgman/Culbertson translation. The New Testament was to be based on the Delegates' version, and the Bridgman/Culbertson Version as well as Goddard's version were to be employed wherever available. For both testaments, all other existing material was to be used at the discretion of the translators. For Mandarin revision, three versions were recommended for the New Testament: the Peking Version, Griffith John's version, and the Nanking Version. For the Old Testament, they were to use the Schereschewsky translation. All questions concerning translation were to rest with the translators, not with the executive committees, which was the principle applying to all three committees.

Articles 4–8 were identical for each committee:

- 4) That the text which underlies the revised English versions of the Old and New Testaments be made the basis, with the privilege of any deviations in accordance with the Authorized Version.
- 5) That in order to secure one Bible in three versions, the Executive Committee is instructed to enjoin upon the translators [or revisers], that in settling upon the text and in all questions of interpretation, they act in conjunction with the Committee on Mandarin [or Easy or *Wenli*] and higher *Wenli* [or Mandarin or Easy *Wenli*] revision [or translation], and for these purposes they constitute one Committee.
- 6) That this Executive Committee shall continue to act and to superintend the work until its completion. If any of the first Committee of translators shall cease to act before the completion of the work, the Executive Committee shall, if they think best, select others in their places.
- 7) That in the case of the absence from China, or other disability of any member of the Executive Committee, he has the right to name his proxy or successor, but that if he fails to exercise this right it shall revert to the Committee.
- 8) That the Executive Committee ask, in the name of this Conference, the concurrence and financial help of the Bible Societies of Great Britain

and America in carrying forward this work; and that when completed it be the common property of the societies which have given their patronage to the work, each having the right to publish such editions as it may choose, and with such terms for God, Spirit and baptize, as many be called for, and also to add explanatory readings, page, chapter and sectional headings, maps and such other accessories as it may deem expedient.³

Executive Committees for Three Projects

Three executive committees were elected on May 19, the day before the conference ended. They were elected by ballot in order to give the participants the best opportunity to express their unbiased wishes. The executive committees for the *Wenli* and *Easy Wenli* versions were formed of twelve men: five British, five American, and two German. Three British and one German had responsibilities in both committees. The Mandarin version committee consisted of ten men: five British, four American, and one German. The ballot results were surprisingly unanticipated, as these ten people happened to represent ten different mission societies.⁴

The three committees involved twenty-five missionaries who were from fifteen mission societies, six American, six British and three German. The Briton T. Bryson was the only one who was a member of all three committees.

The amended resolution of “one Bible in three versions” was regarded as the great achievement of the conference. The conference record reads:

The most distinguishing feature of the Conference was the spirit of harmony that prevailed. This spirit not only characterized the discussions but was essentially exhibited in the unanimity with which various important and delicate practical measures were acted upon. Conspicuous amongst these was the subject of Bible translation and revision. It was known beforehand that this subject, which had been the source of so much discussion and division in the past, would come up for consideration . . . Many felt very skeptical as to the possibility of reaching any practical result, and few felt sanguine of success. When the large representative committees appointed to consider this subject, brought in unanimous

3. *Ibid.*, xliii.

4. See Three Executive Committees in Appendix 2

reports, proposing practical schemes for realizing the end desired, there was a general feeling of surprise; and when twenty-four hours later, the Conference unanimously adopted these reports, the high-water mark of unanimity and of enthusiasm was reached. This achievement was no doubt the *great* work of the Conference, the attainment of which alone is worth far more than all the Conference cost.⁵

That the conference would smoothly reach such a satisfactory result so quickly far exceeded the general expectation.

Union Versions: The New Testament Translation

When all the three executive committees had elected their own translation and revision committees, they met together in Shanghai, from November 18–23, 1891. The purpose of the meeting was to arrange for the work of translation and revision of the Scriptures and to define the principles of translation. Based on former experience in Chinese Bible translation, principles of translation were fully discussed. The three groups launched their work according to eighteen rules adopted in the meeting.

The three committees also adopted the same system of working procedures: The text of the New Testament was divided into several parts, then assigned to each translator. Each one translated his own portion on a specifically prepared sheet with parallel blank columns, and sent it around to the others, who then could add their suggestions in their assigned columns.⁶ Having received the emendations of all, the original translator was to make out his second proposal written on the same sheet. The last column was for the final rendering determined by the whole committee, which would meet for that purpose.

The work of each of the three committees will be examined in turn.

Easy Wenli Translators and their Translation

According to the 1890 conference resolution, the Easy *Wenli* translation committee was to consist of at least five competent translators. The three translators recommended by the conference were: H. Blodget, G. John,

5. *Records 1890*, xi.

6. The traditional Chinese was written from top to bottom, from right column to left.

and J. S. Burdon. The other two elected were the German missionary, Ernst Faber (1839–99), of the General Evangelical Protestant Missionary Society, who had been in China since 1865, and the American missionary, Rosewell Hobart Graves (1833–1912), of the American Southern Baptist Mission, who had worked in Canton since 1855. John and Faber both declined to serve on the committee for their own reasons, however.⁷ The committee finally consisted of two Britishers: J. C. Gibson (Chairman) and J. S. Burdon; two Americans: H. Blodget and R. H. Graves; and one German: Gottlieb I. Genähr (1856–1937), of the Rhenish Mission Society, who had resided in Dongwan (Guangdong) since 1890. The following table includes their mission societies and mission stations.

Easy *Wenli* translators and their stations

Nation	Translator	Mission Society	Station
Britain	J. C. Gibson (1849–1919)	English Presbyterian Mission (EPM)	Shantou
	J. S. Burdon (1827–1907)	Church Missionary Society (CMS)	Hong Kong
America	H. Blodget (1825–1903)	American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM)	Peking
	R. H. Graves (1833–1912)	American Southern Baptist Mission (ASBM)	Guangzhou
Germany	G. I. Genähr (1856–1937)	Rhenish Missionary Society (RMS)	Dongwan

It took about five years for the initial translations and suggestions to be completed. During that period, Blodget returned to America and retired from both the Easy *Wenli* and Mandarin committees in 1894. John Wright Davis of the American Southern Presbyterian Mission, who had been in Suzhou since 1873, filled the vacancy. The first meeting of the committee was held in Hong Kong in the summer of 1896. From then on, they met once every year, which indicates that the translation process went smoothly. Different parts of the New Testament were dealt with at each meeting:

1896/7–8: Matthew and Mark

1897/7–8: Luke, John, and the book of Acts

1898/7–8: Romans and 1 Corinthians

7. Detail see Zetzsche, *Bible in China*, 206–208, 209–12.

1899/1–2: Second Corinthians through Ephesians and Hebrews

1899/7–8: James through Revelation

1900/1–2: Philippians through Philemon

Six meetings took place in five years, either in Hong Kong or Shantou, Guangdong. All members of the committee lived in Southern China, which made their gathering easier and enabled the work to be completed as soon as possible. When the Easy *Wenli* New Testament was published in 1902, the *Wenli* committee had not yet had its first meeting.

Wenli Translators and Their Translation

The *Wenli* Committee as first constituted by the Executive Committee consisted of J. Chalmers (Chairman), J. Edkins, J. Wherry, D. Z. Sheffield, and Martin Schaub (1850–1900). The following shows their mission societies and mission stations.

Wenli translators and their stations

Nationality	Translator	Mission	Station
British	J. Chalmers (1825–99)	LMS	Hong Kong
	J. Edkins (1823–1905)	CMS	Shanghai
American	J. Wherry (1837–1918)	American Presbyterian Mission (APM)	Peking
	D. Z. Sheffield (1841–1913)	ABCFM	Peking
German/ Swiss	Martin Schaub (1850–1900)	Basel Mission	Hong Kong

After the 1891 meeting in Shanghai, the work seemed to have started off well. In 1892, some parts of the New Testament were completed by individual translators. From that time on, however, progress was slow. No full committee was able to meet. This was partly because of the immense distances between the translators. It was also due to the furloughs of Chalmers, Schaub, Sheffield, and Wherry at different periods between 1895–1902, and the death of three members.⁸

Sheffield became the chairman of the committee after the death of Chalmers in 1899. In 1901, Edkins, Sheffield and Wherry met in Peking. The work proceeded slowly. After three months, they had only produced

8. Chalmers died in 1899, Schaub in 1900, and Edkins in 1905.

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a tentative translation of Matthew. In 1903, successors for Chalmers and Schaub were chosen: T. W. Pearce (1855–1938) of the London Mission Society, in Canton since 1879; and L. Lloyd (1850–1931) of the Church Missionary Society, in Fuzhou since 1876. When Edkins died in 1905, no successor was elected to take his position and the vacancy remained.

The first meeting of the full committee was held in 1905 in Beidaihe, attended by the four remaining translators, working in great harmony. The four Gospels, Acts, and Romans were translated and published in the same year. The rest of the New Testament was translated in the following year. Thus, the completed *Wenli* New Testament Union Version was published just before the 1907 General Conference.

The Mandarin Revisers and Their Revision

The Mandarin Revision Committee consisted of seven men, five American and two British, as prescribed by the 1890 Conference. The following table shows their missions and stations.

Mandarin Revisers and their Stations

Nationality	Revisers	Mission	Station
American	C. M. Mateer (1836–1908)	APM	Dengzhou
	J. L. Nevius (1829–93)	APM	Shandong
	H. Blodget (1825–1903)	ABCFM	Peking
	C. Goodrich (1835–1925)	ABCFM	Tongzhou
	J. R. Hykes (1852–1921)	Methodist Episcopal Church	Jiujiang
British	T. Bramfitt (1850–1923)	Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society	Hankou
	G. S. Owen (1847–1914)	LMS	Peking

The individual preliminary revision, as there were seven members to circulate the work, took a number of years before the first meeting was called in 1898. Mateer, the chairman of the committee, gave the reason in his report to the 1907 General Conference as follows:

The work went on very slowly, owing largely to the fact that none of the translators were free from other engagements and obligations, literary, educational, or otherwise. During these years it is doubtful whether as much as half of the time of any translators was

given to this work. In the meantime, changes were taking place in the constitution of the Committee, which interfered seriously with the progress of the work.⁹

Mateer went on to give an account of the changes caused by deaths and retirements of translators.

The first meeting was not held until 1898 and took place in Mateer's home in Dengzhou (now Penglai), Shandong. After over two months of meeting together, the only result was the translation of the book of Acts, which was far from what they had expected. They had hoped to revise up to one-half of the New Testament. A wide difference of opinion as to the style of Mandarin to be used, and the differences in the Chinese dialects of the translators, caused a large amount of discussion and consumed a great deal of time. Goodrich described almost every verse they discussed as a battle.

Despite its rough start, the committee was able to meet once a year, each time focusing on different parts of the New Testament:

1898: Acts

1899: Mark and John

1901: Matthew and Luke

1902: Romans through Philippians

1903: Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, and Hebrews

1904: 1–2 Timothy through Revelation

1905: Revision of the Four Gospels

1906: Final meeting, held in Zhifu (now Yantai); completion of New Testament

The committee of translators originally consisted of seven men, but as time went on, many changes in personnel took place on account of death, retirement, illness, and other causes,¹⁰ so that, when the New Testament was ready for publication in October 1906, there were only four members: C. Mateer, C. Goodrich, F. W. Baller and Spencer Lewis (1854–1939) of the Methodist Episcopal Church (see Fig. 4). They had been on the committee from its beginning, except Lewis, who joined in the committee in 1904.

9. *Records 1907*, 278.

10. Nevius died in 1893; Blodget resigned in 1894, Bramfitt in 1897, and Hykes in 1898.

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The Mandarin Union New Testament went through many revisions and was in circulation for several years before the Old Testament was completed.

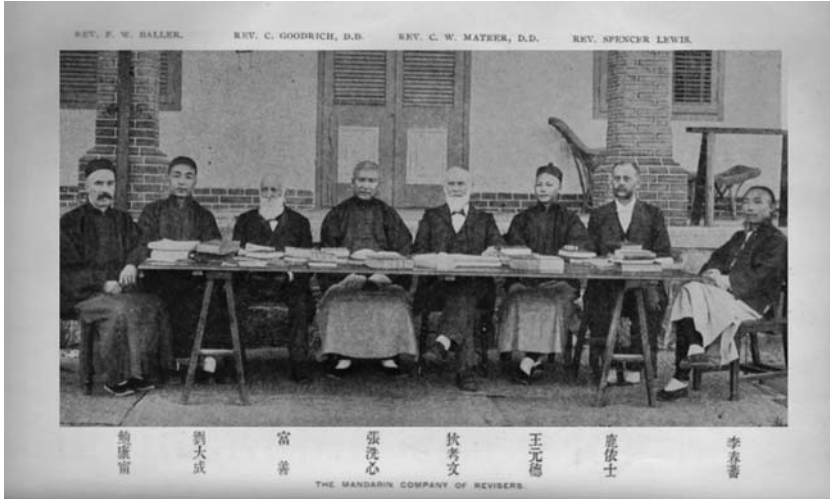


Figure 4: Mandarin Union Version (NT) translators with their Chinese assistants

Union Versions: Old Testament Translation

The Resolution of the 1907 Conference

The third General Missionary Conference in China was held in Shanghai from the 25th of April to the 8th of May 1907. Reports were given by the committees on Easy *Wenli*, *Wenli*, and Mandarin Versions on the 4th of May. The question arose as to whether it was necessary or desirable to have both *Wenli* and Easy *Wenli* versions of the Old Testament.

A great deal had happened in the seventeen years since the resolution was made to prepare one Bible in three versions. The very language had changed. *Wenli* and Easy *Wenli* were tending towards a common ground. The Conference therefore decided that there should be only one *Wenli* version instead of two.

Other decisions about further work on the Old Testament translations were also made:

- That two executive committees of seven men each, one for *Wenli* and one for Mandarin, should be elected by the conference to supervise

the work of producing one Union Bible in Chinese in two versions—*Wenli* and Mandarin.

- That each Executive Committee should select a translation committee of five qualified missionaries to translate the Old Testament into *Wenli* and Mandarin.
- That appeals should be made to the various mission societies to give more support in relieving the selected translators from other duties in order to better secure the work of translation.
- That the three Bible societies working in China should be requested to provide full financial support for this work; each society should appoint an agent as an *ex officio* member of each executive committee, and the societies should print the three issued union versions of the New Testament for three years before any changes were made to them.

The Re-selection of Committees

Two executive committees were selected by the conference to make adjustments for further Old Testament work. They were similar in many ways:

- The size of both committees was reduced to seven.
- Both committees contained five American and three British missionaries.
- No German missionaries were now considered for the new committees.
- Six out of seven were new to this union project, all except their chairmen.

The chairman of the *Wenli* committee was the American missionary A. P. Parker of American Southern Methodist Episcopal Mission, who once took part in the Easy *Wenli* translation as the successor to Blodget. The chairman of the Mandarin committee was the British missionary Bryson of the London Mission Society, who had served on all of three New Testament executive committees.

The election of *Wenli* and Mandarin translation committees was different from that of the Executive Committee. Of the five men in each committee, four were members of their New Testament committee; only one was new to the group.

The Wenli Old Testament Translators and their Work

The *Wenli* Old Testament committee consisted of Sheffield (chairman), Wherry, Lloyd, Genähr, and P. J. Maclagan (1865–1958), the new member. Maclagan, who also served on the executive committee, was a missionary of the English Presbyterian Mission in Shantou.

When the first committee meeting was held in 1908, it was without Genähr, who had resigned at the end of 1907. T. W. Pearce was elected to take his position. Sheffield resigned in Oct. 1912 because of ill health. He eventually died in Beidaihe on July 1, 1913. The German, Nagel, was elected to take his place. Wherry became the chairman after Sheffield. Maclagan left in 1912 for his furlough and was unable to continue translation work due to his election as secretary of the Foreign Missions Committee of the English Presbyterian Mission in 1914. The vacancy he created remained. After 1912, four remaining translators carried on the work to its completion: Wherry, Lloyd, Nagel, and Pearce.



Figure 5: *Wenli* Union Version translators with their Chinese assistants
The Western translators are: (front row, from left to right) J. Wherry, T. W. Pearce,
(back row) L. Lloyd and A. Nagel. The names of the Chinese are unknown.

The Proceedings of the Wenli Old Testament Work

The work on the Old Testament was carried out in a manner similar to that of the New Testament translation. Each translator had an assigned portion to translate on the prepared sheets and these were circulated among the other members of the committee for suggestions. After the original translators had finished their second revisions, the whole committee met together to determine the final rendering. The initial individual work took almost two years. The first committee meeting was held in April 1909. By the second meeting in 1912, their membership had stabilized, and they worked together with unprecedented harmony and success. Wherever different translations needed agreement, they discussed them amicably. Pearce recorded, "We realized more than ever before the sacred sanctions of friendship and fellowship, the outcome of joint endeavor."¹¹ Zetzsche comments: "No other phase of any translation committee in the process of the Union Version translations had ever reached such a degree of agreement and effectiveness."¹² Five times they met either at Tongzhou or Fuzhou to deal with different parts of the Old Testament:

1909: Job, 1 Samuel 1–14: Tongzhou

1912: Proverbs: Tongzhou

1913: The five books of the Pentateuch: Fuzhou

1914: Twelve books from Joshua to Esther, a few Psalms: Fuzhou

1915: The remaining 20 books of the Old Testament: Fuzhou

Different parts of the Old Testament were dealt with at each meeting, but before the completion of the whole Old Testament, there were no tentative translations published. In 1919, the first edition of the *Wenli* Union Version was published, which consisted of the 1907 *Wenli* New Testament and the *Wenli* Union Old Testament.

The Mandarin Old Testament Translators and Their Work

It took about twelve years for the Mandarin Old Testament committee to fulfill its task. The committee membership experienced a number of changes over the years. At first, it consisted of: Mateer, Goodrich, Baller, Lewis,

11. *London Missionary Society Report* 1916, 104.

12. Zetzsche, *Bible in China*, 302.

and C. W. Allan (1870–1958), the new member. Allan was a missionary of Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in Hanyang. Mateer was again elected chairman of the Mandarin Translation Committee. This group of translators had sad and unpleasant experiences in the first two meetings at Zhifu. In the summer of 1908, Mateer called the first meeting of the translators, but he had to leave the meeting early because of illness and eventually died on his way home to Dengzhou. A. Sydenstricker (1852–1931) of the American Southern Presbyterian Mission from Zhejiang was elected in his place. The second meeting was held from June until October 1909. On July 26, Sydenstricker withdrew from the meeting because of disagreements with others about the principles of translation, and then submitted his resignation a month before the meeting was ended in October.

James Walter Lowrie (1856–1930) of the American Presbyterian Mission joined the committee as the successor of Sydenstricker. Lowrie, a member of the executive committee, had come to China in 1883 and was working in Baoding. In 1911, he resigned and proposed as his successor Edwin E. Aiken (1859–1951) of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, who had been in Tianjin and Peking since 1885.

With the support of the Bible societies, all the translators were settled in Peking in 1913, which made it possible to work speedily through the whole year. They started committee work in April 1913. A few weeks later, Allan resigned because of ill health. No successor for Allan was elected. Four translators, similar to those of the *Wenli* Old Testament committee, did the remaining translation. They were Goodrich, Baller, Lewis, and Aiken. Goodrich, the only member who had been with the committee from its beginning, was elected chairman of the committee in place of Mateer.