

# Introduction

THIS STUDY EXAMINES IN detail, through the history of Chinese Bible translation, the origin, development, influence, and uniqueness of the Chinese Union Version (UV). It explores the reasons for its being the version most accepted by the Chinese Church worldwide, and its contemporary challenges. It argues that, with the unique authority that history has bestowed, the UV will remain in use, and its dominant status will last until the appearance of the best possible translation of the Scriptures, one that is both more accurate and elegant and that satisfies the expectations of Chinese Christians.

Part I traces the history of Chinese Bible translation. The study critically evaluates the different phases of translation work in the light of historical developments and different Christian traditions. It identifies the significant contribution of Western Protestant missionaries in this field and evaluates the role of Chinese assistants as well.

Part II investigates the principles underlying the UV translation. The case studies demonstrate the nature of these principles. It explores the most heated, unresolved debate among the missionaries, i.e., the Term Question (the debate about which Chinese name for God is most appropriate) and observes its present resolution by Chinese Christians. Various efforts to revise the UV and their latest results are outlined.

Part III identifies the uniqueness of the UV as the most outstanding achievement of Western missionary Bible translation in China, and as a pioneer in the New Culture Movement, where it played a significant role in the reform of Chinese language and literature. It assesses the contemporary challenges to the UV from a historical perspective and concludes that the unique authority that history has given to the UV remains the same and will continue to be indelible.

This study offers a comprehensive history of Protestant Chinese Bible translations, excluding versions in various dialects and in the language of Chinese minority groups, as background to a discussion of the unique characteristics of the UV and the challenges it currently faces. By critically examining the original records of the history of Chinese Bible translations and correcting erroneous assertions, it presents a reliable resource for further research. As well as clearly stating the significant contribution of Western missionary translators, I include an evaluation of the roles and work of Chinese assistants. My advantage in being Chinese is that I am able to work with Chinese characters, contribute a reference list of those assistants that are known, and make suggestions concerning those that are at present unknown for further study and identification.

The history of Chinese Bible translation was first recorded by missionaries Muirhead (1890), Wherry (1890), Broomhall (1934), and Garnier (1934), followed by a Chinese author, Cheng Zhiyi (1947). They give accounts of the history of Chinese Bible translations from the earliest period up to their own time, including versions in the languages of ethnic minority groups in China. Since the 1960s, the specific topic of Chinese Bible translation has drawn more and more interest and concern from a variety of authors in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. There are a number of articles and books written on this subject, such as those published by Yang Senfu (1968), Li Shiyuan (1977), Xu Mushi (1982), Luo Xurong (1988), Wang Weifan (1991), Wen Yong (1992), and I-Jin Loh (1995).

From the 1960s and up to the 1980s, three representative collections reflected the concerns of different periods: (1) *Shengjing Hanyi Lunwenji* (Collection of articles on Chinese Bible Translations), edited by Jia Baoluo (R. P. Kramers), consists of articles on the revision of the Chinese Bible, i.e., the UV and the developments of modern Bible translations in the post-UV era.; (2) *Yijing luncong* (Study Series on Bible Translation), edited by Liu Yiling (1979), comprises several publications concerning the UV that debate new translation issues; and (3) *Shangdi de ai* (The Love of God), primarily edited by Xiao Min (1981), is a collection of articles, papers, and reviews on the Today's Chinese Version (TCV), which represent the opinions of Chinese Christians who support the re-translation of the Chinese Bible, especially the publication of the TCV.

From the 1980s to the 1990s, the most scholarly studies referring to the UV were Thor Strandenaes's dissertation, "Principles of Chinese Bible Translation" (1987), Zhao Weiben's dissertation, *Tracing Bible Translation*

(1993), Jost Oliver Zetzsche's study *The Bible in China: The Culmination of Protestant Missionary Bible Translation in China* (1999). Writing at approximately the same time as Zetzsche, Irene Eber published *The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible* (1999).

Strandenaes compares five mainstream versions from 1814 to 1984, namely Morrison's version (1823), the Delegates' version (1854), the UV (1919), *Studium Biblicum* (1968), and Today's Chinese Version (1979), to discover the main guidelines used in translation. His dissertation contributes to the linguistic understanding of Chinese Bible translation, but the history of Bible translation is not his major focus. Zhao analyzes the history of modern Chinese Bible translations, tracing some earlier history as well. He explores the historical background of Bible translation work, covering the conflict and cooperation between Chinese Roman Catholics and Protestants in translating the Scriptures. His work only focuses on five selected versions published in the twentieth century, however: the UV, *Studium Biblicum*, and Today's Chinese Version, as well as The New Chinese Bible (New Testament, 1976) and the Interconfessional Version (Luke, 1986). Zetzsche provides information on archival material regarding the history of Chinese Bible translation, which none of the previously mentioned works emphasized. As a historian, Zetzsche reveals the conflicts, doubts, and criticisms of the translators and missionary societies that were usually deleted from official reports written for public consumption. His work details the intricacies of Protestant Bible translation work, including full-length biographies of some significant translators who were involved in Bible translations before and during the UV translation. Because he focuses on the history of the UV, Zetzsche only provides a list of versions translated by Chinese Christians after the publication of the UV in the appendices, however. Irene Eber narrates the life and times of Samuel I. J. Schereschewsky, a fascinating figure in the history of Chinese Bible translation. Based largely on archival materials, missionary records, and letters, the book also includes the controversial Term Question and Schereschewsky's techniques of translating the Hebrew text.

First published in April 1919, the UV now has one hundred years of history. To this day it is still the authoritative version accepted by the majority of Chinese Christians. How can one explain the pre-eminence of the UV among the various translations of the Chinese Bible in the last century? This question was neglected until the year 2000, when the first systematic scholarly studies by Zhuang Rouyu from Hong Kong appeared. Using a

method called Descriptive Translation Studies, she broke new ground with a masterpiece entitled *A Study of the Phenomenon of Authoritativeness in the Chinese Translations of the Protestant Bible*.

These academic publications demonstrate an increasing recognition of the significance of Bible translation in China. Each study has its own specialization and emphasis concerning Bible translation in China; taken together, they provide a rich resource and much relevant material for my present research and analysis. I acknowledge a general dependence on all the previously mentioned works.

This volume explores the uniqueness and contemporary challenges of the UV in the context of the history of Chinese Bible translation, a topic that is attracting more and more attention. I have several advantages in conducting this research. Like the majority of readers of the UV, I grew up in mainland China. When the UV went through a severe, historic ordeal along with its readers, I was there to witness the UV comforting those who were suffering under persecution. I once participated in Chinese Bible revision with a group under the auspices of the United Bible Societies. I was Director of the Commission on Bible Publication at the China Christian Council and Chief editor of the UV concise annotated version, published in 1998. These experiences have provided me with first-hand knowledge of the context for research and analysis.

The UV resulted from decisions made by the Protestant Missionary Conference held in Shanghai in 1890. At the conference, it was decided that “One Bible, Three Versions” should be the goal of the union version project. The UV, originally known as “The *Guanhua*/Mandarin Union Version,” was one of the three versions. The other two were “The *Wenli* Union Version” and “The Easy *Wenli* Union Version.”<sup>1</sup> Why did only the Mandarin Union Version become the standard Bible commonly used by Chinese Christians? The catalogue compiled by H. W. Spillett (1975) was based on Darlow/Mould’s, —the most exhaustive list of Chinese versions and editions published thus far, showing that there is no lack of versions

1 “Mandarin” refers to standard Chinese. It is a term used first by Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century as the equivalent of the Chinese term *Guanhua* (language of the officials). *Guanhua* was replaced with *Guoyu* (national language), which is still used in HK and Taiwan, and with *Putonghua* (common language) in the mainland. The term *Wenli* (principles of literature or writing) was coined by the 19th century missionaries to describe a high form of classical Chinese and Easy *Wenli* (or Low *Wenli*) for a lower form of classical Chinese. These terms were used only within missionary circles. Sinologists outside Christian circles commonly use *Wenyanwen* for classical Chinese and *Baihuawen* for the colloquial form.

for Chinese Christians to choose from.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, since the UV appeared in 1919, it has been accepted as the standard translation by Chinese Protestants worldwide, for all their different cultural experiences, levels of education, and denominational backgrounds. This is still true to this day, despite many criticisms.

The UV has dominated the religious life of Chinese Protestants by serving multiple functions. As the Word of God, it helps Chinese Christians in times of need. It is used not only for Sunday services and personal devotions, but also in various group meetings, such as women's prayer meetings, youth groups, senior gatherings, and Bible studies. More and more people, men and women, young and old, are seeking to know the value of life through the Bible. It is a common and highly treasured gift at ordinations, baptisms, and weddings. Zhou Lianhua, biblical scholar and translator, once commented on the UV's multiple functions:

For sixty years, the UV has led many people to believe in Jesus, has comforted many who were broken-hearted or in sorrow, and has guided numerous lost sheep as well. This Bible has been read from the pulpit in church, used as a teaching material in classrooms, read carefully in studies and used also as devotional reading in the living room, the dining room and the bedroom. It has accompanied soldiers to war; it has been placed by the side of a bed to comfort the sick and also it has been put into many coffins of those who rest in the Lord. . . This is a best-selling book and also is the only book that is read by someone every single day.<sup>3</sup>

The UV has been pored over by a high proportion of Chinese Bible readers over a long period of time. It has enjoyed the longest period of acceptance in the Chinese churches. When the UV came into being, Protestant Bible translation had taken place for over a hundred years, with various versions in circulation. The emergence of the UV ended the practice of using multiple versions as it rapidly became and continues to be the most widely used Protestant Chinese Bible. Twelve years ago, my survey of Chinese Bible readers showed that the UV was favored by the majority. Now, although many new versions have become available, it is still the UV that enjoys the highest number of sales.

2. Darlow/Moule is short for *Historical Catalogue of the Printed Editions of Holy Scripture in the Library of the British and Foreign Bible Society I-II, 181-255*, edited by Darlow, T. H., and H. F. Moule, published by BFBS in 1903.

3. Zhou, "Jieshao Xiandai Zhongwen Yiben," 17.