

# A Brief Survey of the History of Chinese Translations of the Hebrew Bible<sup>1</sup>

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Since the publication of two articles about myself,<sup>2</sup> scholars and laymen alike, who now know a little about me, have been asking me about the need for another Chinese translation of the Hebrew Bible. While in my mind the answer to this question has always been a positive one, the time frame in which I would embark on such an effort has been indefinitely postponed due to my personal situation. Nevertheless, in order to justify my answer to such a question, a brief survey of the history of Chinese translations of the Hebrew Bible is inevitable.

Although there are a couple of excellent books written on this topic,<sup>3</sup> such a task would be much more difficult and unimaginable without the Internet and the plethora of articles written on this topic and disseminated among Christian sponsored online forums. Most if not all of these articles are written in Chinese (either in simplified or traditional characters), and some of these are written in meticulously detail about one or another version of the translation.<sup>4</sup> These Internet sources are quoted in detail in their respective places in this article.<sup>5</sup> The only relatively comprehensive survey written in English addressing this topic is slightly outdated since it was finished in 1975.<sup>6</sup> The intention of this paper is to write an updated brief survey in the English language, so that a more systematic answer can be provided to interested readers and

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<sup>1</sup> I owe much to Professor Youde Fu, who invited me to the *International Symposium of Inter-Religious Dialogue: Confucianism, Judaism and Christianity* held in Jinan, China. The symposium provided not only a platform to discuss the issues with scholars in this field, but also the opportunity to get published in a peer-reviewed English language journal so that more scholars in the English-speaking world can have access to the content of this article. I think the theme of the symposium matches this survey, since any serious effort at translating the Hebrew Bible to Chinese is destined to be an “inter-cultural dialogue,” if not an “inter-religious” one.

<sup>2</sup> “Students Goal is Chinese Translation of Hebrew Bible,” *Cornell Chronicle*, Nov. 21, 1996, Ithaca, NY; “An Unlikely Expert Bringing the Hebrew Bible to the Chinese,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct. 31, 1997, Washington, D.C.

<sup>3</sup> 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 (赵维本, 《译经溯源——现代五大中文圣经翻译史》, 香港: 中国神学研究院, 1993, the book contains by far the most comprehensive information, although its emphasis is the translation of the New Testament; Huirong Chen, *A Brief History of the Chinese Translation of the Bible*, Hong Kong: New Chinese Bible Translation Society, 1986 (陈惠荣, 《中文圣经翻译小史》, 香港: 中文圣经新译会, 1986)。

<sup>4</sup> So far, the author has managed to find one such online article written in English, the URL as of February of 2005 was [http://www.amityfoundation.org/ANS/Articles/ans98/ans98.1/98\\_1\\_3.htm](http://www.amityfoundation.org/ANS/Articles/ans98/ans98.1/98_1_3.htm). The article is an English summary of an article written in Chinese: 刘重明, “圣经有那些中文译本,” 《天风》, 1997年第12期, pp. 40-41.

(Chongming Liu, “Different Versions of Chinese Translations of the Bible,” *Tian Feng*, December 1997). However, as with many online resources, the fluidity of the location is always problematic – although the above website is still available, the exact article cannot be located as of May 2005. Sample websites written in Chinese are:

<http://www.biblesociety-tw.org/bmag/bmag13/bcome13.htm>; <http://www.biblesociety-tw.org/cb.htm>;

<http://www.ctestimony.org/0203/hysj.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Particularly, the following Internet articles should be noted (reachable from within China as of May 2005).

<http://www.ctestimony.org/0203/zwsj.htm>, a survey by an anonymous author written in Chinese.

<sup>6</sup> Hubert W. Spillett, *A catalogue of Scriptures in the languages of China and the Republic of China*, London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1975. I was not able to obtain a copy of this book in a timely fashion during the preparation of this paper, since it is owned by only eighteen US and European libraries based on an OCLC search on Feb. 14, 2005.

so that hopefully more international attentions can be drawn to this matter.

This survey is intended to be a comprehensive account of the significant efforts translating the Hebrew Bible into Chinese either directly from Hebrew or from other Western languages. Although inevitably many of the translations also include the Greek New Testament, this is not discussed here. Translation efforts that include only books from the New Testament are not surveyed in this article either.

(1)

The earliest record about a Chinese translation of the Hebrew Bible is found on a stone stele dating back to 781 CE. The stele was excavated in the city of Xi'an in 1625. The stele was erected by Nestorian Christians, who started to live and develop in China's capital *Changan* (today's Xi'an) in 635 C.E.. 1,756 Chinese characters were found on the stele, together with 70 Syriac words. The Chinese name of the stele is formally translated as "the Memorial of the Propagation in China of the Luminous Religion from Daqin" (大秦景教流行中國碑, Daqin being the Chinese term for the Roman Empire). Among the characters on the stele, we find Chinese expressions such as "real canon" and "translating the Bible."<sup>7</sup> So far, however, no preserved Bible translations of this period as mentioned in the stele are to be found. Based on the information found in a Nestorian Church canon *Zunjing* (尊经) discovered at *Dunhuang* (敦煌) in 1907-08, translated books from the Hebrew Bible were Genesis, Exodus, the book of Psalms, the book of Zechariah, and the book of Hosea, among others.

(2)

The second earliest recorded translation of the Hebrew Bible in China, to be dated to late thirteenth century to early fourteenth century, was by Father John of Montecorvino. The information was gained from his own letters written in Latin, and the target language of translation is Mongolian, the language of the ruling people of China at that time, not exactly Chinese. No actual copies of this translation were found.

(3)

The famous Jesuit Matteo Ricci also attempted translating the Hebrew Bible in the late sixteenth century. However, the only record preserved down to today is his rendering of the ten commandments in Chinese. There is no evidence that he undertook the effort of translating the whole Hebrew Bible; many clues point in the

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<sup>7</sup> A picture of the stele is to be found in the official website of the National Museum of China (<http://www.nmch.gov.cn/gb/collections/show2.jsp?id=5146>). Since the stele was erected to celebrate the accomplishments of the Assyrian Church of the East in China, which is also referred to as the Nestorian Church, the stele is also called the "Nestorian Stele" or "Nestorian Stone." An electronic version of the Chinese original text can be found at the official website of the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA) ([http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/cbeta/result/app/T54/2144\\_001.htm](http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/cbeta/result/app/T54/2144_001.htm)), The stele text in English can be found in Charles F. Horne, ed., *The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East*, (New York: Parke, Austin, & Lipscomb, 1917), Vol. XII, *Medieval China*, pp. 381-392. An Internet copy of the English translation together with the original introduction from Horne's book can be found in "the Internet East Asian History Sourcebook" hosted at Fordham University (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/eastasia/781nestorian.html>).

direction that only sections very useful for his missionary activities were translated to Chinese.

(4)

During late eighteenth century, Jesuit Louis de Poirot translated almost all the books of the Hebrew Bible to Chinese. However, the translation was based on the Vulgate. It never got published. The manuscript is preserved in the *Beitang* (北堂) Library in Beijing.<sup>8</sup>

(5)

In 1807, Robert Morrison cooperated with W. C. Milne, both from London, finished translating several books of the Hebrew Bible into Chinese; in 1819, Morrison finished the rest of the Hebrew Bible by himself. The translation was published in 1823 at Malacca in Malaysia.

(6)

The English Baptist missionary and orientalist Joshua Marshman (1768-1837) translated the book of Genesis into Chinese, together with several New Testament books. These were published in 1822.

(7)

In 1840, a group of four people (Walter Henry Medhurst, Charles Gutzlaff, E. C. Bridgman, and John R. Morrison) cooperated to translate the Bible. The translation of the Hebrew part was done mostly by Gutzlaff from the Netherlands Missionary Society, with the exception that the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua were done by the group collectively. This translation is very famous due to its adoption by the revolutionary peasant leader Hong Xiuquan of the *Taipingtianguo* movement as the doctrines of the organization. Hong renamed the book slightly and added notations in many places to fit the needs of the movement.<sup>9</sup>

(8)

In 1854, a new translation of the Hebrew Bible, prepared by Walter Henry Medhurst with the help of the Sinologist James Legge, was published. The translation was initiated by a missionary commission yet turned out to be a translation by a few people, due to separation into different sections because of theological differences. The translation was considered excellent Chinese writing, and it used plenty of Chinese philosophical terms, sacrificing accuracy based on the original Hebrew texts.

(9)

In 1862, the American Protestant missionary E. C. Bridgman (1801-1861) published a translation of the Hebrew Bible, characterized by the accuracy of the translation and its loyalty to the original Hebrew texts.

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<sup>8</sup> 杨森富,《中国基督教史》,第四版,台北:商务印书馆,1984,p.366。

<sup>9</sup> 《旧遗诏圣书》。

(10)

J. T. Goddard published his re-edited and re-translated Hebrew Bible in Chinese in 1868. It is considered an excellent combination and compromise in style between Bridgman's and Medhurst's translations: it is both elegant from the perspective of Chinese readers and accurate with respect to the original texts.

(11)

The Jewish Episcopal Bishop S. I. J. Schereschewsky (1831-1906) published a northern vernacular Chinese translation of the Hebrew Bible in 1875, and later a second edition in 1902.

(12) The second edition was written with only two fingers due to his illness and is thus known as the "two finger edition." Schereschewsky's translation was the most popular translation for over 20 years, before the Union Version was published.<sup>10</sup>

(13)<sup>11</sup>

Griffith John (1831-1912) of the Scotland Bible Society at *Hankou* (汉口) started to publish Chinese translations of several books from the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, and Proverbs), beginning in 1889. Later, in 1905, he published a collection of his Chinese translation of the Hebrew Bible through the Song of Songs.

(14)

The most famous Chinese translation of the Hebrew Bible is the Chinese Union version (Ho-ho version, 和合本). It was so named as a reflection of the fact that translators from all the major denominations of the time came together and worked in co-operation with each other in order to produce the finished work. This translation was commissioned by the Shanghai Missionary Society in 1890 and completed in 1919 by a sixteen-member committee of foreign missionaries, with the aid of several Chinese believers to check the accuracy of the language used.

Translators of the Hebrew Bible part were selected Bible experts who were also missionaries. They were C. W. Mateer from the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A., G. Owen and S. Lewis from the American Methodist Episcopal Church,<sup>12</sup> C. Goodrich from the American Congregationalist, and F. W. Baller from the China Inland Mission. The translation effort for the Hebrew part of the Bible lasted almost thirteen years,

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed commentary on this translator's background and style based on his translation of Genesis, see Irene Eber, "Translating the Ancestors: S. J. Schereschewsky's 1875 Chinese Version of Genesis," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. LVI, Oct. 2, 1993. More recently and more comprehensively, Irene Eber, *The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible, S.I.J. Schereschewsky (1831-1906)*, *Studies in Christian Mission* vol 22, E. J. Brill, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> The author has encountered the mention of a《四史圣经译注》by 德雅 published in 1892, but is not able to obtain more information about this translation. It is not certain whether it contains any books from the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>12</sup> This information is from 汤清,《中国基督教百年史》,香港:道声出版社,1987,p.427,p.433. However, the information from the website <http://www.holyseed.org/bst/v2.2/big5/copyrgt.txt> indicates that G. Owen and S. Lewis were from British Church in London. It is likely the website is correct, since it is quoted from a copyright note of Chinese Bible software (<http://www.almega.com.hk/bibletools/main1.asp>).

with the books of Job and Psalms finished first and the complete Hebrew Bible finished in 1919.

The Union translation took the Revised Version of 1885 in English as its source text, which itself was based on the King James Bible. The translators strove to achieve four criteria: (1) use everyday spoken language instead of classical or vernacular Chinese; (2) use simple language so that laymen could understand while listening in the church; (3) be faithful to the original Hebrew, yet still take Chinese elegance into consideration; (4) translate puns and wordplays literally, instead of giving out literary translations of the hidden meanings:

Sometimes, a word in the original text may have no exact correspondence in Chinese. In such instances, the Chinese translation is expanded slightly in order to capture and explain the meaning of the original word. Small dots are placed under any additional words to indicate that they are not part of the original text but are merely used to provide a context and explanation to make the Chinese translation of the original word clear.<sup>13</sup>

The Union translation was a great success since its publication and has been the best selling Chinese Bible ever since. It has been considered not only a popular book for believers and non-believers alike, but also an outstanding scholarly work.

(15)<sup>14</sup>

An Italian Franciscan Friar, Gabriele Allegra, who died in 1976, began a Chinese Bible translation in 1935 and later founded the *Studium Biblicum* (Sigao Bible Society) to accomplish his work. This translation was done directly from the original Hebrew, and the process was well documented.<sup>15</sup> The Chinese translation of the Hebrew Bible was published in 1954 in Hong Kong. In 1968, a revised version of the Chinese translation was published in combination with the recently finished New Testament translation. In 1992, this version was once again published, but for the first time in Mainland China.

The translation emphasizes accuracy over elegance. It made every effort to convey the original meanings of the scripture, and the translators had received the most advanced biblical scholarship training of the time. Another outstanding feature of this translation is the introduction added in front of every book and the detailed summary and endnotes added after each book. It attempts not only to reflect the latest scholarship of biblical studies of the time in its notes and introductions, but also adds

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.amityfoundation.org/ANS/Articles/ans98/ans98.1/98\\_1\\_3.htm](http://www.amityfoundation.org/ANS/Articles/ans98/ans98.1/98_1_3.htm).

<sup>14</sup> The author has encountered the mention of a 《国语新旧译本》 co-translated by 郑寿麟 and 陆亨理 (Shoulin Zheng and Henry Ruck) published in 1926; 《圣咏译义》 by 吴经熊 published in 1946; and 《简易圣经读本》 by 狄守仁 published in 1955. However, the author is not able to obtain more information about these three translations from available research resources. It is not certain whether the last two versions contain any books from the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>15</sup> There is a large amount of information on the process online or offline. In particular, see the autobiography by Gabriele Allegra himself: 雷永明, 《雷永明神父回忆录》, 韩承良译, 香港: 思高出版社, 1987.

explanatory notes and quotation from traditional Chinese sources in order to elucidate the Hebrew texts. Every introduction by itself is a valuable scholarly article about the book. Due to the large amount of information added to the translation of the original texts, single volumes of each book with full notations targeting advanced readers were published, in addition to the one volume edition with abridged notations. The appendices of the single volume copies are also very useful.

This Chinese Bible has become the standard text for Chinese Catholics worldwide, including those within China.

(16)

Another translation done by one person, by the name of Lü Zhenzhong, was published in 1970. He began his translation as a scholar at Yanjing University in 1940 and completed the full translation 30 years later. Working only from original Hebrew texts, this translation uses the so-called “direct translation” method, with exact one-to-one correspondences to the original Hebrew, reflecting the original meaning and content of each word and even keeping to the original grammar and structures. In this way, some problems that are faced in the Union Version are avoided in the Lü translation.

(17)

The center of Christianity’s development moved from the mainland to Taiwan after the communist party gained control over Mainland China in 1949. Therefore, Taiwan’s effort in translating the Bible into Chinese reflects the best level of translation in China. Under the guidelines of the United Bible Societies,<sup>16</sup> translation started at Taiwan in 1971. It took the Today’s English Version as its blueprint and was accordingly named Today’s Chinese Version (TCV). TCV was published by the United Bible Societies in 1979. “During translation, reference was made to around 70 of the best translations of the Bible since the 1950’s, ensuring that this version of the Bible contains all the advances in Biblical scholarship and translation of recent times.”<sup>17</sup> The version used the principle of so-called “dynamic equivalence” during the translation. It endeavored to convey to the Chinese readers what the Hebrew author originally intended to express to the original Hebrew readers or listeners. In order to achieve this, free translations were used more extensively. The translators had in mind average people who had junior middle school education as the majority of the readers. “It avoids using any theological jargon, and the translation does not have an exact word-to-word correspondence with the original texts. Nevertheless, the basic meaning is the same, but in a much more natural and easier-to-follow style.”<sup>18</sup>

Illustrations were inserted into the TCV. Footnotes were added into each page. A second edition of the TCV came out in 1984, and was reprinted twenty times. A

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<sup>16</sup> “Guiding Principles for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible,” *The Bible Societies and the Roman Catholic Church*, London: United Bible Societies, June, 1968.

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.amityfoundation.org/ANS/Articles/ans98/ans98.1/98\\_1\\_3.htm](http://www.amityfoundation.org/ANS/Articles/ans98/ans98.1/98_1_3.htm).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

revised version appeared in 1995, making reference to original Hebrew and Greek texts during the revision.

(18)

In 1976, with the sponsorship of the Lockman Foundation from California, U.S.A., an initiative to produce a so-called “New Chinese Translation” was announced. The Hebrew Bible part of the “New Chinese Translation” started in the same year. The effort lasted over ten years and did not turn out to be very successful due to the quality of the translation or lack of propaganda or both.<sup>19</sup>

(19)

In 1987, the *Commission for Chinese Bible Translation Cooperation* was established in order to translate the Bible from Hebrew directly to Chinese. The translation is to be named the “New Union Bible Translation.” The Hebrew text to be used is *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. So far, this effort has produced no result. One of the main reasons for the slow progress are the internal conflicts between Catholic and other Christian translators on the commission regarding the religious terms to be used in the new translation.

### **Conclusion:**

We have summarized information on nearly twenty Chinese translations of the Hebrew Bible into Chinese.<sup>20</sup> So, is another Chinese translation of the Hebrew Bible necessary? Maybe. However, this time the translation should not be sponsored by or affiliated with any religious group. Chinese readers, who are mostly not Christians, deserves a Chinese translation of the Bible just from the literary perspective of the Bible, probably with archaeological, geographical, historical, as well as theological footnotes for those interested. However, this is not an easy task. Most of the biblical scholars are religious people themselves, and it is hard to find a secular scholar willing to engage in such a task that calls for tremendous “religious devotion”. Furthermore, funding would definitely be a problem, if not a determining issue. For the laymen who want to read the Bible in Chinese just as a literary work, they will have to live with the current translations for now and probably for a long time to come.

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<sup>19</sup> It was published as 《圣经新译本》（向导版），天道书楼出版社，1992。

<sup>20</sup> See appendix 1.

Appendix 1:

Chart on the History of the Chinese Translation of the Hebrew Bible<sup>21</sup>

#	Date (all dates C.E.)	Translation	In Chinese
1	781	Nestorian Stele mentioned about a translation activities, never found	景教碑中提及“翻经”活动
2	Late 13 <sup>th</sup> century to early 14 <sup>th</sup> century	John of Montecorvino, Psalms, (Mongolian Translation), never found	《若望孟高维诺译本》：诗篇（蒙古文）
3	Late 16 <sup>th</sup> century	Matteo Ricci, leaflets containing a Chinese translation of the Ten Commandments	利玛窦译“祖传天主十诫”
4	Late 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Louis de Poirot, almost all of the Hebrew Bible books	贺清泰《古新圣经》，未印刷发行
5	1823	Robert Morrison, full translation of the Hebrew Bible included, first published in Malacca in Malaysia.	马礼逊《神天圣书》
6	1822	Joshua Marshman,	《马殊曼译本》
7	1840	Walter Henry Medhurst, Charles Gutzlaff, E. C. Bridgman, John R. Morrison	麦都思、郭实腊、裨治文、马儒汉《旧遗诏书》
8	1854	Walter Henry Medhurst and sinologist James Legge, etc	《委办译本》
9	1862	E. C. Bridgman	《裨治文译本》
10	1868	J. T. Goddard etc.	高德、罗尔梯、迪因修译《旧约全书》
11	1875	S. I. J. Schereschewsky	施约瑟《北京官话旧约全书》
	1892	Ya De	德雅《四史圣经译注》
12	1902	S. I. J. Schereschewsky	施约瑟《二指版》
13	1905	Griffith John	杨格非《旧约浅文理译本》（至雅歌）

<sup>21</sup> Chinese translations that contains only the New Testament are not included. Translations containing at least one book from the Hebrew Bible are included in this chart.

14	1919	C. W. Mateer, G. Owen, S. Lewis, C. Goodrich and F. W. Baller: Chinese Union Version	《文理和合本》《国语和合译本》
	1926	Shoulin Zheng and Henry Ruck	郑寿麟、陆亨理合译《国语新旧库译本》 <sup>22</sup>
	1946	Jingxiong Wu	吴经熊《圣咏译义》
	1955	Shouren Di	狄守仁《简易圣经读本》
15	1954	Gabriele Allegra; finished the translation of Hebrew Bible part	雷永明《思高圣经译本》之旧约部分完成
16	1970	Lü Zhenzhong	《吕振中译本》
17	1979	United Bible Societies (Taiwan), Today Chinese Version (TCV)	《当代圣经》(《现代中文译本》)
18	1993	Sponsored by Lockman Foundation of the U.S., based in HongKong	《圣经新译本》
19	1987--??	Chinese Bible Translation Cooperation Commission	《合一本》

<sup>22</sup> 贾保罗 (R. P. Kramers), “最近之中文圣经译本”, 载《圣经汉译论文集》, 贾保罗编, 香港: 辅侨出版社, 1965, pp. 29-37。