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THE POLITICS OF BIBLE PRODUCTION IN LATE QING CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Protestant missionaries in early 19th-century China emphasized the need for a Chinese Bible translation. This emphasis was in keeping with the Protestant mission ethos, designed to reach the Chinese countryside at a time when missionaries were forbidden entry into the interior. This paper tracks the course of Protestant translation efforts from 1804 – 1850, examining the impact of politics on those efforts. By tracing the arguments, controversies, and discussions surrounding the issues of Bible production, it attempts to demonstrate effect of internal politics between missionaries on broader Bible production, including printing. The thesis will also examine those arguments more broadly, in the context of late Qing China's conflict with the West. This thesis relies primarily on secondary sources, drawing from two prior PhD dissertations, while also looking at primary source material, in particular selected works of W.H Medhurst and the twenty volumes of the *Chinese Repository*. The paper demonstrates that external political constraints and internal political bickering both shaped Protestant Chinese Bible production efforts, forcing missionaries to relocate, funding to shift, and printing techniques to change to suit the social and political constraints of the missional world of late Qing China.

PROLOGUE

Mission Efforts in China and Southeast Asia, 1790-1820s

Christianity arrived in China with the Nestorians, who proselytized for several centuries, according to evidence dating from the 600s CE. They left behind few traces of their existence, mostly various steles and other artifacts. Their disappearance paused the efforts towards Chinese Christianity. A thousand years later, in the 1600s the Jesuits under Mateo Ricci succeeded in reaching the highest levels of the Chinese Imperial government for a brief heyday. By the time the first Protestant missionaries reached China in the 1800s, few traces of Chinese Christianity were visible. The Protestant missionaries of the London Missionary Society and similarly minded organizations, with whom this thesis primarily deals, encountered a China vastly changed and changing. Whereas the Jesuits' influence reached the Imperial court, the Protestant missionaries were offered no such opportunity. Instead, because of their association with the Western powers, they were confined to particular areas and were placed under severe limitations regarding what they could say and do. Travel was severely restricted, and preaching and evangelization were forbidden.

Protestant Christianity, unlike Catholicism, placed a heavy emphasis on preaching and teaching the Scriptures on an individual level. That emphasis ran squarely against the Qing government's regulations, and forced the Protestant missionaries to find ways to achieve their mission and avoid the government's limitations. Early on in the history of the China mission, the Protestant missionaries focused on the distribution of Christian literature, particularly Bibles, as a vital tool of reaching the Chinese masses. A tract or copy of the Bible was the silent evangelist, conveyed from person to person, a precious possession with a lifesaving gift, reaching all walks of life in all parts of China. This vision of the Bible as the silent preacher fit in with the broader

Protestant theology of the Word of God, and the centrality of the Word to the life of the believer. Therefore, if the Bible was central to a believer's life, then it followed that the Bible needed to be in that person's own language.

Where Protestant missionaries went, Bible translation efforts followed. Here, the Protestant missionaries contrasted starkly with their Catholic counterparts. Catholic missionaries had been working in China for over 200 years before the Protestants arrived in China yet failed to complete a Catholic translation. In contrast, the Protestant missionaries produced two versions of the Bible in the first 20 years. This quick success of the Protestant translation enterprise nevertheless contained a surprising amount of infighting, bickering, and competing visions for the Chinese Bible. In short, the efforts among the LMS missionaries to translate the Bible into Chinese would be hampered by both internal and external politics. This thesis charts the history of the early attempts by Protestant missionaries to translate the Bible into Chinese, and the affect of external and internal politics on those attempts. It will survey the arguments and political maneuvering that characterized the different aspects of Bible production. Lastly, it will examine how one man's effort in particular, Walter Henry Medhurst, heavily influenced Bible production in late Qing China.

Political Positioning: Mosely's Preparations and Morrison's Arrival

Efforts to translate the Bible into Chinese began before the first LMS missionaries reached China. In England, William Moseley attempted to organize a translation attempt as early as 1798. The attempted translation was based on the recognition, in line with the Protestant theology of Bible translation, that there was an "evangelical religious calling to put the Bible into the hands of all of earth's inhabitants."¹ His endeavor ultimately came to naught when the three

¹ Christopher Daily, *Robert Morrison and the Protestant Plan for China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2013), 87.

societies in London who had initially agreed to fund the project backed out. Moseley's efforts were not in vain, for he discovered in the British Museum an existing translation of part of the New Testament in Chinese.² Initially, Mosely proposed to print the manuscript as found, but certain characteristics of the manuscript precluded this possibility. First, the manuscript appeared to be a Catholic interpretation, translated from the Latin Vulgate rather than the original Biblical languages of Greek and Hebrew. Additionally, printing costs were prohibitively expensive.³ Nevertheless, the manuscript proved that a complete Chinese translation was possible, and it led Moseley, in 1804, to presented a letter to the LMS Board of Directors arguing for the importance and feasibility of working on a Chinese Bible translation.

Mosely's efforts highlighted a key fact: Bible production was as much a political process as it was a linguistic one. Translation work was typically done by missionaries, trained and sent by mission boards like the London Missionary Society. Native converts frequently assisted the missionaries with the translating, while mission boards funded the printing process. Funding also came, in some cases primarily, from the numerous Bible societies. One example was the British and Foreign Bible Society, which supplied money for the publication of works both in Britain and around the world. Thus, any missionary who intended to translate and publish a new version, like Mosely's suggestion of a Chinese translation, needed both the support of his sending mission board and the fiscal support of one or more Bible societies.

In Mosely's case, his proposal was apparently well-received; as Daily notes, "the (LMS) directors immediately and unanimously voted to establish a mission to China."⁴ The actual planning of the mission would take several more years, and several missionaries would join the

² Daily, 88-90.

³ *The Chinese Repository*, Vol.4 No.6, Oct.1835, 251.

⁴ Daily, 90.

effort and depart again before the mission officially embarked.⁵ It was not until September 6, 1807, that the first LMS missionary, Robert Morrison, reached China.

Robert Morrison, in the parlance of the day, received the call of God to ministry in 1797. Born January 5, 1782 in Northumberland, Morrison grew up in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where he was still living in 1797.⁶ Morrison's call to ministry led him, by 1804, to the LMS, to whom he volunteered his service as a foreign missionary.⁷ Morrison spent a little over a year at the LMS's new training center, Gosport Academy, and by 1805 had moved to London to study Chinese.⁸ In 1807, Morrison departed for China, arriving in September. While Mosely's experience illustrated the effect of the politics of mission boards and missionaries on planning a new translation, Robert Morrison quickly learned that political realities of the destination country also played a key role.

The ruling Qing dynasty of China had been in power since the mid-1600s. By the end of the 18th century, the empire came under increasing pressure from expanding Western empires, notably France and England. In China, that pressure manifested itself most clearly in the complicated and intricate trading relations between the competing powers. The growing tension led to increasing restrictions on foreign nationals in China, and ensured that the opportunities granted to previous generations of missionaries, like the Jesuits, would not be afforded to the Protestants.⁹ After 1760, the Qing government forbade Westerners from residing in China, with one exception: the trading port of Canton. Here, employees of the British East India Company

⁵ Note Daily's account of William Brown, who joined the LMS and was trained as a missionary, but quit before ever leaving England. Daily, 95.

⁶ Ibid., 7-10.

⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁸ Ibid., 91-93.

⁹ Leona O'Sullivan, "The London Missionary Society: A Written Record of Missionaries and Printing Presses in the Straits Settlements, 1815-1847," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 57 no. 2 (1984), 61-62.

were permitted to stay, but only from October to March, during the trading season.¹⁰

Furthermore it was illegal for any Chinese to teach the language to the Europeans. While an analysis of China-European relations during the late Qing is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that trade disputes, growing opium trade, and competition between rival Western powers for the Chinese trade heavily influenced Bible production efforts.

Morrison encountered the complexities of Chinese politics immediately. The trade situation, and the requisite presence of other Europeans for his mission work, meant that Morrison's choice of residence was limited to either Canton or Macau. Macau, however, posed an additional difficulty; it was a Portuguese colony, not British. Not only was it the property of a political rival, but also a religious one; Macau was "the stepping stone into China for the Catholic missionaries."¹¹ The Catholics were not willing to help a lone Protestant missionary establish a rival mission in their own backyard. Macau was clearly not an ideal location, and a meeting with Sir George Staunton, an Englishman with the East India Company, confirmed this to Morrison.¹² The only option was Canton, but here the laws of the East India Company were added to the restrictions imposed by the Qing government. The Company outlawed any British non-employees from residing in Canton, partly to preserve its own interests and partly to avoid upsetting the local authorities. Despite the obstacles, it was clear that Canton was where Morrison needed to be.

Politics, plus a little subterfuge, provided the answer to Morrison's problem. He simply posed as an American, and avoided the British East India Company's restrictions. Under that

¹⁰ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 151, <http://www.questia.com/read/98946555/the-search-for-modern-china>.

¹¹ Ching Su, "The Printing Presses of the London Missionary Society Among the Chinese" (PhD diss., University of London, 1996), 42. The Catholic missionaries were also prohibited from entering China, but had done so, quietly, since the Jesuits' time.

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

pretext he came to be known as an American missionary.¹³ After over a year living in Canton as an American, in 1809 Morrison received an offer to become a Chinese translator for the British East India Company. Once again politics played a role on both sides. The Company desired a translator who would represent their own views in negotiations, rather than relying on native translators in the employ of the Cohong merchant monopoly, who often modified what the foreigners said to meet the Chinese officials' expectations. On his part, in Canton, Morrison found himself in financial difficulties, his level of support from England insufficient for his needs. The job offer would alleviate his financial straits, and after consideration, Morrison accepted.¹⁴ Now financially stable, officially British once more and with a full year of language study completed, he was finally in a position to begin his translation work.

As the Bible translation work proceeded, Morrison found himself embroiled in a controversy from an unlikely source, a fellow missionary. This conflict was the first one in a series of conflicts involving Chinese Bible translations, and served as a foreshadowing of future debates.

India, Marshman, and the Race to the Chinese Bible

The first translation discord in Chinese missions seemed at first to be a very minor one, a race to be the first to publish a completed Chinese Bible. The controversy was more complicated than it appeared, taking place largely outside of China, featuring men who would become key figures in the China mission, and containing in embryonic form the debates over translation philosophy and origin that would blossom into divisive issues a half-century later.

In the Protestant mission movement, India came before China. It was in India, under William Carey and others, that the first wave of Protestant missionaries quickly turned their

¹³ Ching., 43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

efforts towards translating the Bible into vernacular languages. At Serampore the pursuit was led by Joshua Marshman, an English Baptist missionary who arrived in India in 1799, to translate the Bible into Chinese.¹⁵ Marshman was one part of a trio of missionary translators, the “Serampore Trio,” consisting of Carey, Marshman, and William Ward, all prolific in their translation efforts throughout the coming years.¹⁶ Marshman was in charge of the Chinese translation, despite never setting foot in China.¹⁷ He began translating around 1805, closely assisted by Joannes Lassar, an Armenian born and raised in Macau.¹⁸ Lassar provided the rough translation into Chinese from English, while Marshman compared the Chinese against the Biblical languages.¹⁹ Lassar’s work was highly praised, as a report in 1808 to the LMS indicated. Writing from Calcutta, a Rev. Brown stated “Mr. Lassar is a thorough Chinese, and will do the great work of translating the Scriptures into that language.”²⁰ Marshman also had the help of an unnamed Chinese assistant, and the work progressed steadily. The team worked on both the NT and OT simultaneously, although progress was quicker on the NT.²¹

While Marshman and Lassar worked in Serampore, Robert Morrison arrived in China, acclimatized, and began working on his own version. The conflict between the two teams began in earnest around 1809. It was then that Morrison, aware that Marshman was also working on a Chinese Bible translation, sent him a copy of the old Chinese Bible manuscript discovered by Mosely.²² The manuscript would play a key role in the translation race.

¹⁵ Zhao Xiaoyang, “An Examination of the Relationship Among the Marshman, Morrison, and Basset Versions of the Bible,” *Chinese Studies in History*, vol. 46, no. 2 (Winter 2012-13), 11-12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12. Zhao notes that the press at Serampore would eventually produce publications in nearly forty different languages.

¹⁷ *Chinese Repository*, vol.4 no.2, 252.

¹⁸ Wylie, *Memorials of the Protestant Missionaries to the Chinese* (Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1867), 2.

¹⁹ *Chinese Repository*, vol.4 no.2, 253-254.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

²¹ *Chinese Repository*, vol.4 no.2, 252-253; Zhao, “An Examination,” 15.

²² Zhao, “An Examination,” 16.

The manuscript had an unusual history. It had been discovered by an Englishman working for the East India Company in Canton in 1738. From Canton it was taken to London, where it remained virtually unknown until its rediscovery by Moseley. Interest in the manuscript was part of the impetus behind Morrison's commission to China, and prior to his departure he copied the manuscript to take with him.²³ The authorship of the document was unknown; possibilities included an ancient Nestorian origin, or a more recent Roman Catholic missionary. The latter was thought more likely, but it was not until 1945 that Rev. Bernward Willeke demonstrated it to be the correct idea. He established the manuscript as being a translation by Jean Basset, a Roman Catholic missionary working in the early 1700s.²⁴ The translation was a partial one, including only "a harmony of the Four Gospels, the Book of Acts, the Pauline Epistles, and the first chapter of Hebrews."²⁵ Although partial, the Basset version proved invaluable to both Morrison and Marshman's efforts, forming the foundation for both men's version of the New Testament.²⁶

Marshman began his translation long before Morrison, and lacked a copy of Basset. The trouble between the two missionaries began shortly after Marshman received a copy of the Basset manuscript from Morrison. Marshman's early versions of the Gospel of Matthew, done with no existing Chinese translation to draw upon, forced Marshman to "completely fabricate the names, place names, and theological terms."²⁷ After receiving the copy of Basset from Morrison, Marshman quickly finished his NT translation, and produced further revisions of the

²³ *Chinese Repository*, vol.4 no.6 (Oct. 1835), 252.

²⁴ Bernward Willeke, "The Chinese Bible Manuscript in the British Museum," *Roman Catholic Quarterly*, vol. 7 no. 1., 450-453.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 453.

²⁶ See Zhao, "An Examination," and Thor Strandenaes, "Principles of Chinese Bible Translation" (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 1987), 22-46.

²⁷ Zhao, "An Examination," 16.

NT books previously completed.²⁸ The new revisions were markedly improved, and Marshman rapidly overtook Morrison with the speed of his translation. Marshman reported a complete translation of the NT as early as 1811, although it was not printed at that time.²⁹ By 1812, he was working on a third revision of the gospel of John. In the meantime, Morrison finished his New Testament in 1813.³⁰ Both continued to work on the OT, publishing pieces of the NT as they went. Each was eager to be the first to complete a Chinese Bible, a deed that would certainly win high praise among the societies and mission boards in England.³¹

The improvement in Marshman's version, and similarity to Morrison's works, soon led to accusations of plagiarism.³² Some missionaries, among them William Milne, who worked closely with Morrison, assumed that the close similarity between the two versions culminated from more than the fact that both men, after 1809, worked from the Basset manuscript. Sometime between 1813 and 1816, Marshman received a copy of Morrison's New Testament, printed in 1813.³³ In the eyes of Morrison's supporters, Marshman abused the generous gift of the Basset version, and had gone a step further in plagiarizing Morrison's NT after 1813. This accounted for the frequent revisions, each of which moved closer to Morrison's version in style and term choices.³⁴ Marshman added insult to injury by admitting that he frequently consulted the Morrison version when revising his own work.³⁵ Other scholars explore in further detail the relationship between the Marshman, Morrison, and Basset versions; a final ruling on who plagiarized whom, or what even counts as plagiarism in translation, is beyond the scope of this thesis. Both men relied on Basset for the basis of the NT, while translating the OT on their own;

²⁸ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 4 no. 6 (Oct. 1835), 253. Also note Strandenaes Chapter 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 253

³⁰ Zhao, "An Examination," 16-17; *Chinese Repository*, vol. 4 no. 2, 257.

³¹ Strandenaes, 45.

³² Zhao, "An Examination," 17-18.

³³ Zhao, "An Examination," 19-23.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 23

³⁵ *Ibid.*

When Marshman finished his version, the achievement was even more impressive considering it was one of only three Chinese works the Serampore press ever produced.³⁶ The conflict between the two men went deeper than has been outlined here, but in the end Marshman won the unofficial race.³⁷ He published his completed Bible in 1822, and sent a copy to the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1823. In both accomplishments, he was ahead of Morrison by a year.

The arguments between Marshman and Morrison were public ones, chronicled in frequent letters to and from England. Both sides felt the need to defend themselves from accusation because of the need for continuing support from the Bible societies. Morrison and Marshman were careful to keep the mission boards in England informed of their progress. Constant reports were necessary, because while missionaries could translate largely independently of the societies, printing a completed translation required funds and support. Nevertheless, the incident highlighted the jockeying for position that went on even between missionaries.

The conflict between Morrison and Marshman ended with the completion of the translations, but it highlights how even the translation of the Bible, an undertaking of profound religious significance, was subject to heated personal disagreements. Morrison's difficulties in establishing himself in China also emphasized the political difficulties inherent to the world of the strait settlements and Chinese treaty ports of the early 1800s. These factors, political infighting at home and abroad, the social-political context of China, and even interpersonal conflict, continued to shape Bible production efforts in the years to come.

³⁶ Zhao, "An Examination," 17.

³⁷ Zhao Xiaoyang's "An Examination of the Relationship Among the Marshman, Morrison, and Basset Versions of the Bible" is an excellent condensed look at the parallels between the versions. Thor Strandenaes also covers some of the same area, in a bit more technical detail.

CHAPTER ONE: MEDHURST, MORRISON, AND THE CALL FOR A NEW TRANSLATION

New Faces – Milne, Medhurst, and the Expansion of the Chinese Mission

As Morrison continued his translation of the Bible in the 1810s, support from England and the LMS slowly grew. On an individual basis, Morrison's early exchanges with the London Missionary Society demonstrated his advancing knowledge of Chinese, and prompted the LMS to send crucial support in the form of William Milne. As the translation proceeded, Morrison provided samples of the work to illustrate his progress. In 1810, Morrison sent a copy of Acts, printed secretly and at great expense in China, to the BFBS. The book won their continued support, in the form of £500.³⁸ In September of the same year, they granted a second sum of £500. The funds helped Morrison through the remainder of the NT.³⁹ The delivery of the completed NT in 1814 impelled the BFBS to send Morrison an additional £1000.⁴⁰ In total, the *Chinese Repository* of 1835 calculated that £6600 had gone to Morrison from the Bible societies.⁴¹ Worldwide, by 1815, there were 80 missionaries under the LMS system, and the budget had grown from £6,800 in 1811 to nearly £20,000 by 1815.⁴²

The mission in China mirrored those trends. After 1813, the China mission was ready for its own press, and with Milne to assist him, Morrison began to explore his options. Here again he was stymied by the political constraints of the Chinese government. Morrison, still employed as an official translator at Canton, was well-positioned to read the political currents, and observed that the atmosphere of the Qing Dynasty towards Christians had taken a significant turn for the worse. His position at Canton as an employee of the Company enjoyed a level of

³⁸ Medhurst, *China: Its State and Prospects*, 259.

³⁹ Ching, 257.

⁴⁰ Ching, 258.

⁴¹ Ching, 261.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 59.

security, but the addition of a printing press there would add too much scrutiny.⁴³ Thus, shortly after his arrival in China, Milne left again, on a tour of southeast Asia in search of a suitable location for an expanded mission. When he returned, he and Morrison “came to the decision that Milne should go to Malacca to establish a multi-functioning station there.”⁴⁴ Here it was the external politics of the treaty ports, rather than any internal bickering, that forced the separation.

Milne left for Malacca in the fall of 1815. Both men requested a printing press from the LMS, but received no response. In twist of fate, Morrison and Milne, impatient with a lack of communication and direction from the LMS in England, decided to purchase a small press from India. With a six-month lag in communications, they had no way of knowing that the LMS had finally decided to send a press to the Chinese mission. The Society then went one step further, and along with the press sent a trained printer to assist with the work. Morrison wrote to the LMS explaining his purchase of a separate press, but by that point the LMS printer and press were bound for Malacca to rendezvous with Milne.⁴⁵

The LMS mission stations in southeast Asia were often collectively referred to as the Ultra-Ganges mission, and the works produced at those stations included numerous materials in languages other than Chinese, although this thesis focuses on the Chinese language production. The arrival of a second printing press was important for the expansion of the Ultra-Ganges mission, but the printer who accompanied it had a much greater influence both on the Malacca station and the broader course of Chinese missions. The printer was Walter Henry Medhurst, commissioned by the LMS primarily for his training as a printer, although some time after his arrival he was ordained as a missionary. He also proved to be a skilled linguist and translator, and it was primarily in those roles that he influenced Chinese Bible production.

⁴³ Ching, 61.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 60-61

⁴⁵ Daily, 154-157.

Walter Henry Medhurst was born on April 29, 1796, and by 14 was apprenticed to a printer in Gloucester. In his late teens, Medhurst, who was attending an independent congregation, answered an advertisement for a printer for the London Missionary Society. He trained for a short time at Hackney College prior to his departure, and left England for China in 1816.⁴⁶ Unlike his predecessors, Morrison and Milne, Medhurst was a printer first, and a missionary second. His missions training was less extensive than Morrison's, as he did not attend the Gosport academy. Instead, he demonstrated an innate linguistic talent; the director of the LMS praised his "taste for languages."⁴⁷ At the printing press, Medhurst evidenced his training in a burst of productivity. From 1810-1856, the LMS printing presses in China and southeast Asia produced 525 works in Chinese; Medhurst, who did not arrive until 1817, was the author of 229 of those works.⁴⁸ Despite his obvious linguistic talents, Medhurst proved to be a controversial figure, particularly with the patriarch of the China mission, Robert Morrison.

Shifting Power in the China Mission, 1817-1830

Morrison continued to work in Canton, providing the translations for Milne to print at Malacca, but after Medhurst's arrival, tensions began to emerge between the elder two missionaries and the new arrival.⁴⁹ Reasons for the conflict varied, including Medhurst's lack of a Gosport education, his youth, or simply his personality.⁵⁰ Regardless, complaints began to trickle back to the LMS from the missionaries at Malacca. The new missionaries, including Medhurst, primarily objected to William Milne's leadership of the station. Medhurst and the other missionaries at Malacca sent a letter to the LMS criticizing Milne. Given the close

⁴⁶ Wylie, 24.

⁴⁷ Daily, 166.

⁴⁸ Ching. Numbers drawn from the Appendix, "A List of Chinese Works Printed by the LMS Missionaries, 1810-1873."

⁴⁹ Ching, 197.

⁵⁰ Daily's book explores the importance of Morrison and Milne's formal training, and he postulates that the arguments that arose were "perhaps . . . a sign of the separation and tension that existed between the Gosport- and non-Gosport-educated missionaries." 166.

relationship between Milne and Robert Morrison, the latter viewed an attack on Milne as a criticism of himself. After that incident, Morrison viewed Medhurst with a measure of distrust.⁵¹ The bickering continued from 1818-1821, but after more missionaries arrived in 1821, and Milne unexpectedly died in 1822, the various conflicts subsided.⁵² By 1823, Medhurst and another missionary, Slater, had left the Malacca station to establish a press at Batavia on Java.⁵³ This left an opening at Malacca, in many ways the headquarters of the China mission, which Medhurst would have been the perfect candidate to fill. But his previous attacks on Milne had left a bad impression on Morrison, who viewed them as indirect attacks on himself.⁵⁴ The lingering distrust between the two men compelled Medhurst to remain in Batavia.

With the establishment of the press at Batavia in 1823, three locations now produced printed material in Chinese. In addition, some material still came directly from Morrison in Macau, via local printers. The majority came from either the Malacca press or the Batavia station. Between 1815 and 1830, the Malacca press produced 73 works in Chinese. Of these, roughly 30 were by Milne and 16 by Morrison, including the 1823 version of the Bible translated by Morrison. In Batavia, Medhurst produced nearly 40 works, mostly tracts and handbills.⁵⁵

Morrison began to take a reduced role in the China mission around 1830, and died in 1834. As the frontrunner for Protestant missions in China, Morrison from the beginning had seen his attempts at Bible production, from translation to printing, be shaped by internal and external political forces. He had been forced to locate a press outside of China proper, and been engaged in a race for the first Chinese translation. His close ties to Milne and their control of the Malacca press led to further political conflict, between missionaries like Medhurst already on the

⁵¹ Ibid., 166, 172-177.

⁵² Ibid., 172-175.

⁵³ Ibid., 178.

⁵⁴ Daily, 172.

⁵⁵ Ching, "Appendix: A List of Chinese Works Printed by the LMS Missionaries, 1810-1873," 396-404.

field and with the directors of the LMS in England. After his death, Morrison would be treated, as one author puts it, to “a hagiographical discourse,” because of his definitive version of the Chinese Bible.⁵⁶

Efforts to retranslate the Bible continued to generate controversy throughout the 1830s and 40s. If anything, the new debates that emerged were fiercer and more vehemently argued than the conflicts of the first two decades of the China mission. The first efforts in the new field, like Morrison’s translation of the Bible, continued to be praised; but as time passed others started to examine them more critically. With the critical reevaluation of Morrison’s version of the Chinese Bible in the coming decades, two separate but related issues would emerge to influence Bible translation moving forward.

Conflicting Theories of Translation

Differing underlying Bible translation theories was one cause of the heated controversy that emerged between Medhurst and Robert Morrison. Despite their common goal of a Chinese Bible, he and Morrison never worked together on any Bible translation efforts. While mere personal friction played a role in their dissonance, Medhurst, writing after Morrison’s death, referred to a conversation between Morrison and himself in which Morrison admitted that “my idea of translation being so diverse from his, it would be very difficult to form a version” by working together.⁵⁷

Modern theories of Bible translation have been shaped by Eugene Nida’s book *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Nida and co-author Charles Taber argued that whereas old theories of translation relied primarily on “the form of the message,” new theories shifted the

⁵⁶ Daily, 193.

⁵⁷ Letter from Medhurst, Batavia, April 1835. SOAS archives, London.

focus to the “response of the receptor.”⁵⁸ Broadly speaking, the old and new theories of translation are known as formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. The first approach emphasizes faithfulness to the original text: trying to recreate in a second language as closely as possible all the nuances of the original. Nida refers to these as the “stylistic specialties,” including word patterns and rhythms. The second approach focuses on translating the meaning of a word in a particular context, hence, the “dynamic” aspect, since meanings and contexts change. While Medhurst and Morrison may not have framed their differences in those terms, it is apparent that they realized such differences existed.

Morrison translated the Bible on the principle of formal equivalence and faithfulness to the original texts. Although he worked partially from other translations like Basset’s, Morrison stated that he translated from the original languages of Greek and Hebrew, while conforming the language to that of the Authorized Version of the English Bible.⁵⁹ Morrison tried to find correspondents in Chinese that were as close as possible to the original Greek, for the New Testament, and Hebrew for the Old Testament.

As an example, Strandenaes, in his excellent analysis of Morrison from a technical perspective, notes that four tendencies emerge from a comparison of Morrison with Basset. Basset’s version consisted mostly of portions of the New Testament, but Morrison used many of those passages with minimal changes. When Morrison did update Basset’s wording, he tended to do so, as Strandenaes states,

1. To attain a closer formal correspondence with the Greek text,
2. To render the Greek text more accurately into Chinese,
3. To provide the Chinese text with more of the grammatical information from the Greek text.

⁵⁸ Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 1, <http://www.questia.com/read/117606834/the-theory-and-practice-of-translation>.

⁵⁹ Strandenaes, 24-25.

4. To render meaning more intelligibly.⁶⁰

Morrison sought for and rendered a version that followed the original texts as closely as possible. However, Medhurst and others argued that accuracy to a Greek manuscript did not necessarily equal a readable or intelligible Chinese Bible. Chinese sentence structure differs from English or Greek sentence structure. Morrison generally tried to match the original structure, which led to some passages being unintelligible or sounding foreign.⁶¹ Ultimately, as Medhurst pointed out, Morrison's translation wasn't always good Chinese.

Bible translations frequently undergo revisions; after initial completion, it seemed that Morrison's version would follow that trend. Yet due to Morrison's religious and secular work duties, and the loss of his friend and contributor Milne in 1822, he had little time or inclination to revise his translation. Faced with the reality that a revision was not forthcoming, Medhurst and others began arguing for an entirely new translation of the scriptures.

The Push for a New Translation, and Morrison's Legacy (mid-1820s to 1843)

While the 1820s progressed, questions continued to be raised about the quality of Morrison's translation. Alexander Wylie, writing several decades later, expressed the opinion that "under the circumstances, we cannot too highly value the efforts of Morrison and Milne, while every Chinese scholar must be conscious of the deficiencies of their version."⁶² Wylie had the benefit of hindsight, but even in 1826, contemporary missionaries including David Collie and Samuel Kidd were proposing a new translation.⁶³

⁶⁰ Strandenaes, 34.

⁶¹ Strandenaes, 37-38.

⁶² Patrick Hanan, "The Bible as Chinese Literature," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 63, no. 1 (June 2003), 200.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 200.

Morrison's disagreements with Medhurst and their opposing views of what constituted a good translation had precluded the possibility they could ever work together. Morrison turned Medhurst down when he presented him sometime in the 1820s with "the first five chapters of Matthew, with but a few alterations, which I thought would remedy & improve the style."⁶⁴ After Morrison's death, Medhurst took the bold step of beginning a new translation on his own, without support from the Bible societies. He did so in a relatively tactful way; rather than declare openly that he was retranslating Morrison, in 1834 Medhurst began work on a Harmony of the Gospels. After he completed a portion of the new translation, about 20 pages, Medhurst wrote to the British and Foreign Bible Society informing them of his attempt, and sent a copy of his progress to Morrison.⁶⁵ He carefully expressed his desire to keep any final version faithful to the "sense of the Scriptures," but would endeavor to make the Harmony much more readable in Chinese.⁶⁶ Morrison was not impressed. The previous doubts he had expressed about working with Medhurst on any new translation were borne out; Medhurst, he wrote, was trying to turn the Scriptures into "quite a parlor-book!"⁶⁷

Despite opposition, support for a new translation soon grew beyond individual requests, when the *Chinese Repository* published an article calling for a new translation in January 1835. The note contained a history of the Chinese Bible translations to that point, and after duly praising Marshman and Morrison's efforts, concluded "We are sure that it was the earnest desire of the translators, Morrison, Milne, and Marshman, that their successors should enter into their

⁶⁴ Ibid., 202.

⁶⁵ Hanan, 202-203.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 203.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 203.

labours.” The end goal remained a Chinese Bible that “shall, in point of style, equal, if not surpass, the best native works extant.”⁶⁸

Medhurst’s attempted new version fit into his own theories of translation, and tried to answer the criticism of Morrison’s work. Those criticisms followed several lines. First, Medhurst and others often focused on the literary quality of the Morrison translation. No one doubted the accuracy of Morrison’s translation as scripture; at issue was the quality as a simple book. They questioned the readability of the Bible in Chinese, and how well it measured to the Chinese expectations of a great work of literature. Medhurst in particular was not sparing in his analysis of Morrison’s work. Writing to the LMS from the station at Batavia in April 1835, after Morrison’s death, Medhurst recounted the Chinese reaction to the work.

I have been accustomed to hear the Chinese express considerable dissatisfaction with our present version of the Scriptures in their language: all describe the style as stiff & mean ... giving it a foreign, in their eyes a barbarous appearance: many have thrown it aside after the perusal of one or two pages: and few, I fear, have given it a second reading. The numbers of volumes of the holy scriptures being made in quantity & bulk than our other publications, has given the Chinese an infavourable opinion of the whole, & though complete strangers easily receive any book that is offered them, I have been grieved to observe that among those who have been accustomed to receive our books there is ... in some instances to a positive refusal to look on them.⁶⁹

Medhurst desired a readable Chinese translation. In his words, “The first thing that strikes a Chinese student, on looking into the present version of the Scriptures, is its too great difficulty and over scrupulous fidelity.”⁷⁰ This was a frequent charge; it was that Morrison’s version was “unidiomatic,” and did not use words and phrases that made sense to a native speaker. There was room, in Medhurst’s mind, for a certain amount of paraphrase when translating the Bible, conceding that paraphrase allowed for a more idiomatic, readable

⁶⁸ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 4 no.2, 261.

⁶⁹ Letter from Medhurst to LMS, April 1835. SOAS archives London.

⁷⁰ Letter from W.H. Medhurst to the LMS, April 1 1835, Batavia. SOAS archives, London.

translation to a Chinese person. Morrison's version, by adhering strictly to every nuance of the original Greek and Hebrew, failed to pass muster as a work of literature suitable for a native speaker. Liang Afa, quoted in Medhurst's *China, Its State and Prospects* (1840), argued for the unsuitability of the Morrison version and the need for a new one:

The style adopted in the present version is far from being idiomatic, the translators having sometimes used too many characters, and employed inverted and unusual phrases, by which the sense is obscured. . . I am a Chinese, and know the style most suited to the Chinese mind; let us endeavor, therefore, to render the version more idiomatic.⁷¹

The second argument was related to the first, but in a more scholarly manner. Morrison's translation was dated; his New Testament had been completed by 1815, the entire Bible by 1823. By the time Morrison died in 1834, no new translation work, and no revisions, had been done for nearly 20 years, despite a great expansion of the China mission and of the missionaries' knowledge of Chinese. "All first efforts are necessarily defective," Medhurst wrote in 1840, "and it will not appear strange if this should be found capable of improvement."⁷² Morrison had completed his Chinese dictionary while doing his translation; any new translation would have the benefit of his completed dictionary from the start, as well as years, in Medhurst's case, of language study.

A third argument was more subtle, but was related to Morrison's use of the Basset version as the basis for much of the New Testament. While the Protestant missionaries were unsure of the exact origins of the Basset version, they were relatively certain that it was in fact a Roman Catholic production. In their minds, this was problematic.⁷³ Roman Catholic versions were frequently done not from the original Greek and Hebrew, but from the Latin Vulgate, a fact

⁷¹ Medhurst, *China, Its State and Prospects*, 558.

⁷² Medhurst, *China: Its State and Prospects*, 558.

⁷³ Note one of the objections originally given to the printing of the Basset manuscript, where it was simply noted that the translation appeared "to have been made from the Vulgate, under the direction of the Jesuits." *Chinese Repository*, Vol. 4, 251.

which conflicted with Protestant theories of translation. While Morrison did not consistently echo the Catholic terminology embedded in the Basset manuscript, he did so on a number of instances, including his use of the word *shin* (*shen*) for God.⁷⁴ Morrison also used the word *Tianzhu* for God, which was used by Chinese Roman Catholics even in Morrison's day.⁷⁵

An open confrontation between Morrison and Medhurst was averted by the elder missionary's death in 1834 which actually freed Medhurst to speed up his efforts. By 1835, Medhurst had prepared a second edition of the Harmony of the Gospels and was nearing completion on the Gospels themselves. At this point in the effort, Medhurst's skill as a translator was evident, but even more important to his success was his ability to raise support for his project. He proposed to work on the new translation with Robert Morrison's son, John Robert Morrison. The younger Morrison was born in Macau, educated in England, and returned to China with his father in 1826. There, he enrolled at the LMS Chinese-Anglo college in Malacca, founded by his father.⁷⁶ John Robert Morrison had followed his father's footsteps; his support for a new translation provided an invaluable boost to Medhurst's effort. Medhurst also began working closely with Elijah Bridgman of the American Bible Society, who reported back to the U.S. that they were "endeavoring to render it . . . more conformable to the Chinese idiom."⁷⁷ Bridgman further clarified that they were also "adhering as strictly as possible in every case to the Greek text."⁷⁸ Nevertheless, this new translation sought to be much more readable compared to the original attempt.

⁷⁴ Strandenaes, 36.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 38-40.

⁷⁶ Wylie, 10.

⁷⁷ Hanan, 203.

⁷⁸ Hana, 203.

Medhurst relocated to Guangzhou, and began work with John Morrison and Karl Gutzlaff, a Prussian missionary.⁷⁹ They continued translation efforts through 1835, and by 1836 Medhurst departed for England to present the case for a new translation. As Hanan notes, the application Medhurst submitted to the LMS included “an assessment of Morrison’s version of Matthew, a comparison of the old and new versions of the first chapters of Luke and Colossians, and specimens of free and literal translation of the first section of the Confucian Four Books.”⁸⁰ The presentation was meant to achieve several purposes. First, it was meant to demonstrate the need for a new translation; second, to indicate the widespread support for a new translation, and third to show the necessity for a more dynamic, paraphrased version.⁸¹ Medhurst supported his argument with references from native Chinese speakers, including Liang Afa and Zhu Delang. He also had the support of Western missionaries, among them Gutzlaff and Robert Morrison’s own son John.⁸²

Medhurst needed all the support he could get while presenting his case to the societies in England. As he was aware, not all were in favor of a new translation. In particular, two missionaries stationed at Malacca, John Evans and Samuel Dyer, took issue with Medhurst’s departures from the Greek. Medhurst issued a rebuttal to some of their criticism, but the two men sent a letter to London which reached the LMS before Medhurst. The damage was done before Medhurst arrived, and when the British and Foreign Bible Society considered his proposal on November 25, 1836, they reacted exactly opposite of how he wanted. They found Medhurst’s version as “tending to substitute human paraphrase for the simple statements of the Word of

⁷⁹ Wylie, 54. Karl Gutzlaff had a remarkably checkered reception among the other missionaries. His command of the language was sufficient to assist Medhurst with a translation of the Bible, which he eventually finished. But while that work may have been praiseworthy, others of Gutzlaff’s projects were less well received. His provocatively-titled *China Opened* was subjected to a rather blistering review in the *Chinese Repository* of 1839. See *Chinese Repository*, vol. 8 no. 2, 84-98.

⁸⁰ Hanan, 207.

⁸¹ Hanan, 207-208.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 201-205.

God;” rather than fund a new translation, the editorial committee recommended a revision of Morrison’s translation. Medhurst’s Chinese assistant Zhu Delang, one of the references Medhurst had quoted to support a new translation, was present with him in England; rather than give his opinion extra weight as a native speaker, the BFBS proposed repatriating him to China immediately, apparently out of sheer spite.⁸³

The response must have puzzled and wounded Medhurst; his case had been well argued, and at any rate the work was well underway. Indeed, Gutzlaff would later press on and finish the version he and Medhurst started.⁸⁴ In the meantime, Medhurst was left to figure out where he went wrong. While Medhurst had prepared his case very well technically, he had forgotten a key fact; Robert Morrison had been the major figure in the China mission for decades. The Morrison version of the Bible, his crowning achievement, “held canonical status.”⁸⁵ Many of the men on the committee knew Morrison, had followed his efforts, and were not about to listen to any attempts to change what they viewed as his legacy. Medhurst also hurt his cause by pushing for a retranslation so soon after Morrison’s death; just over two years had elapsed by the committee meeting in 1836. Medhurst tried to give credit to Morrison for the initial translation. “This work will immortalize the names of Morrison, Milne, and Marshman, who, being dead, yet speak,” Medhurst wrote, while calling the translation “one of the greatest achievements of the Protestant mission to China.”⁸⁶ Nevertheless, to the BFBS and the LMS, Medhurst’s call for a new translation and his pre-emptive efforts in Guangzhou must have seemed incredibly impertinent.

While the politics of the matter ended Medhurst’s proposal, the push for a new version continued. The BFBS committee had proposed going back to the plan of a revision of Morrison,

⁸³ Hanan, 209.

⁸⁴ Zhao Xiaoyang, “In the name of God: translation and transformation of Chinese culture, foreign religion, and the reproduction of *Tianzhu* and *Shangdi*,” *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, vol. 4 no 2 (December 2010), 168.

⁸⁵ Hanan, 209.

⁸⁶ Medhurst, *China: State and Prospects*, 555.

but that plan was never feasible.⁸⁷ Part of the problem was that only Medhurst, and the translators working with him, had the linguistic ability to do it; given the rejection his proposal had received, it was unlikely Medhurst would be willing to undertake a mere revision of Morrison. So the need for a new translation remained, but it was another seven years before a real effort at a new translation emerged.

⁸⁷ Hanan, "The Bible as Chinese Literature," 213.

CHAPTER TWO: POLITICS AND THE WORD OF GOD: THE DELEGATES' BIBLE

The landscape of Protestant missions in China shifted radically after the Opium War (1839-1842) dramatically changed the landscape of Chinese missions. As a result of the British victory in the conflict, five treaty ports were opened: Amoy, Ningpo, Canton, Fuchow, and Shanghai, while the island of Hong Kong became a British colony. Foreigners could freely travel, trade, and reside permanently in the treaty ports, and openly study Chinese. Religion was not specifically mentioned in the treaty, but the new conditions were the opening into China the Protestant missionaries had sought after.⁸⁸

Immediately, one consequence of the new political reality became obvious; the LMS presses, previously confined to off-shore locations, could now be relocated from Malacca, Batavia and Penang to mainland China itself.⁸⁹ The question then became where the three LMS presses should go. Canton seemed to be the first choice, with a long history of missionary work dating from Morrison's arrival, but it was eliminated due to intense anti-British sentiment. Focus shifted to the other five possibilities – Amoy, Ningpo, Fuchien, Shanghai and Hong Kong.

The original plan to move the LMS presses into mainland China involved shuffling both the missionaries and the presses from the old stations to the new treaty ports. James Legge and another missionary, Hobson, intended to set up in Hong Kong with the press from the Penang station. Samuel Dyer and John Stronach intended to take the Malacca press, briefly relocated to Singapore, to Fuchou. Alexander Stronach, elder brother to John, intended to go to Amoy, without a printing press.⁹⁰

That plan left Ningpo and Shanghai with only one remaining press, from Batavia.

⁸⁸ Ching, 284.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 285.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

If all went according to plan, there would be four stations – Hong Kong, Amoy, Fuchou, and either Shanghai or Ningpo – and a printing press at each one, except Amoy. Naturally, all did not go according to plan. Samuel Dyer died, Medhurst and W. C. Milne, son of William Milne, were diverted by a typhoon to Manila, and Milne then abandoned his survey trip to Ningpo and Shanghai. The Penang press had produced a number of works in Malay; when the time came for it to be removed to Hong Kong, missionaries to the Malay blocked the removal. With the Hong Kong station now short a printing press, Legge diverted the Malacca press to Hong Kong instead of Fuchou.⁹¹

After Medhurst left Manila, he met with another LMS missionary, Dr. William Lockhart, and visited first Ningpo and then Shanghai. They arrived in Shanghai shortly before Christmas 1843 and surveyed the city, quickly coming to the conclusion that Shanghai was the better alternative. Shanghai boasted a larger population, many of whom were Fuchien and spoke a dialect Medhurst had studied. Ultimately, the presses, books, and type from Batavia were shipped to Shanghai, by way of Singapore, Hong Kong, and Chusan.⁹² Medhurst took over the direction of the press at Shanghai; he would be based there for the majority of his remaining years in China. After the dust settled from the various moves, the LMS by 1843 listed three stations in China: Amoy, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. Only the latter two, under James Legge and W.H. Medhurst, contained printing presses. They were the only two LMS presses in China until their closure some decades later.⁹³

As missionaries and presses of the LMS shuffled positions in light of the new politics of the post-Opium War era, they met in August of 1843 to discuss a new attempt to translate the Bible into Chinese. Medhurst's longtime advocacy for a new translation had finally paid off; the

⁹¹ Ching, 285.

⁹² Ibid., 288-290.

⁹³ Ibid., 286.

new attempt would receive official support from the Bible societies in England.⁹⁴ This time, the effort would be made by more missionaries than Medhurst and his assistants.

The new version of the Bible produced under the plan would be known as the Delegates' Version.⁹⁵ It would be a team effort, translated piecemeal by committees in the various treaty ports, and included missionaries from different mission boards and denominations. The plan divided the revision of the New Testament into five parts, and assigned each part to local committees. The five committees, located in Shanghai, Amoy, Canton, Hong Kong, and Bangkok, were composed of all of the Protestant missionaries working in those areas. After the NT was nearly completed the local committees would send delegates to a central committee to finish the translation.⁹⁶ Medhurst was set in charge of the entire effort, which was surely some vindication after his attempt at a translation was cut short in the 1830s.

When the committee convened in Shanghai to finish the revision, it consisted of five delegates. From the LMS came W.H. Medhurst and James Stronach; William J. Boone was from the American Episcopalian Church; the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions sent E. C. Bridgman. Originally, Walter M. Lowrie from the American Presbyterian Church was intended to join, but the worthy gentleman was lost in an attack by pirates while traveling back to Ningpo. He was replaced by W. C. Milne, also of the LMS. This switch gave the British three representatives on the delegates committee to the Americans' two, a fact that would become important later on.⁹⁷

Even before the committee met, difficulties emerged, at first in numerous delays. The plan had been established in 1843, but when Medhurst called for a meeting three years later, the

⁹⁴ Hanan, 213.

⁹⁵ Ching, 300-301; Irene Eber, "The Interminable Term Question," in *Bible in Modern China*, ed. Irene Eber (Nettetal: Steyler Verl., 1999), 137-138.

⁹⁶ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 12 no. 10, October 1843, 551-553.

⁹⁷ Ching, 302.

editors of the *Chinese Repository* drily noted, “we know that more than one of the five local committees have as yet received from some of the others no part of the proposed revision.”⁹⁸ The committees apparently picked up the pace, because the delegates finally met in 1847. As it turned out, the delays were the least of the difficulties, because shortly after the Delegates’ Committee convened the plan fell apart, and the Committee became quickly mired in a major controversy that dwarfed any of the previous conflicts. The Term Controversy, as it came to be known, would have a lasting impact on Bible translation efforts in China and was a theological question as well as a linguistic one, highlighting differences in linguistic analysis and opposing views of Chinese culture itself. The controversy emerged rapidly after the delegates convened in Shanghai, when the representatives discovered that they could not agree on a very basic translation: the proper name of God. How did one translate the name of God into a language that lacked, or appeared to lack, a clear term for a supreme deity? The issue drastically slowed work on the new revision. To keep progress moving forward, the delegates agreed to leave the translations of “God” and “Holy Spirit” blank. They were able to complete most of the Gospel of Mark in this manner, but the compromise was intended to be a stop-gap measure. The delegates could hardly print a finished version while missing words.⁹⁹

The question was simple, but it revealed complex ways of thinking about the Chinese language, the role of religion in Chinese society, and the old disagreements on how best to translate Scripture. Speaking of the Term Controversy, one historian summed up the importance of the debate succinctly: names “represent both history and a body of beliefs.”¹⁰⁰ When the missionaries argued over which terms to use in translation, they were arguing both over their own beliefs, and over Chinese history itself.

⁹⁸ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 15 no. 2 (February 1846), 110.

⁹⁹ Ching, 303.

¹⁰⁰ Zhao Xiaoyang, “In the name of God,” 164.

The terms in question were the various names for “god” in Chinese. Historically, Christianity arrived in China with the Nestorians; a stele dating from CE 635 indicates that these early missionaries used the word *Aluohe* for God. This was possibly a simple transliteration from Syrian.¹⁰¹ Transliterations are generally poor choices to convey a wealth of meaning, and the Nestorians’ term vanished with them. The next wave of Christian missions in China, under the Jesuits, used a more lasting name. Mateo Ricci, the most famous of the Jesuit missionaries, settled on the term *Shangdi* for “Deus” or God. Ricci linked the use of the term *Shangdi* to his belief that Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and the Catholic faith were all fundamentally compatible. China had once known of a true, universal God, and had simply lost that knowledge. Thus, the proper term for God needed to be one that had roots in Chinese antiquity. The word that Ricci settled on, *shangdi*, stood for a supreme deity. “Ricci argued that the Christian “Deus” and the supreme deity of Chinese antiquity, *Shangdi*, were one and the same.”¹⁰² The use of *shangdi* then became linked with a belief in the legitimacy of Chinese antiquity and the idea that many of the ancient religions of China had roots, however distant, in Christianity itself.

This idea was controversial, even in Ricci’s time. *Shangdi*’s use in the Confucian classics, particularly, tainted it in the mind of some Jesuits. As part of the broader Rites Controversy, in 1704, the issue resulted in the Pope himself banning the use of *shangdi* altogether. While the Protestant missionaries were not inclined to blindly follow their Catholic brethren, they inherited much of the distrust of the term. When Morrison began his translation, he worked partly from Basset’s version, a Roman Catholic translation done after the prohibition

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 164.

¹⁰² Ibid., “In the name of God,” 165.

of the term *shangdi*. Basset used the more neutral term *Tianzhu*, “Lord of Heaven,” and a third term, *shen*, meaning a powerful spirit or used in some cases as an adjective for “divine.”¹⁰³

Even during Morrison’s time, there was disagreement. *Shen* became the term of choice for Morrison, partly because it seemed analogous in English to the use of the word “god.” There are many gods, but one God; the meaning is determined by the use. The term also was devoid of close association with another philosophy or religion, thus avoiding the issue that had soured the Jesuits on *shangdi*. Morrison took the lead of Basset in this instance, and Marshman, working at the same time, followed him. His co-translator William Milne at first preferred the term *shen* to translate God, but later changed his mind. He came to favor the older term *shangdi*, for it seemed to be used more specially of “the highest and most elevated of all deities.”¹⁰⁴

The Term Controversy proper began in 1847, or perhaps in the initial meetings in 1843, where the initial planners failed to specify which terms to use, but the debate between missionaries over the proper terms had been ongoing since at least the 1830s.¹⁰⁵ Exchanges in the *Chinese Repository*, a publication in Canton begun by the American Bridgman as a way to keep fellow missionaries informed of the latest news, show the intensification of the debate. The earliest mention of a need for a new translation came in 1835. This was followed in 1838 by the reprint of a lengthy article from 1821, from a different publication. The author discussed at length the difference between *shen*, *tianzhu* and *shangdi*, but generally spoke in favour of the use

¹⁰³ Eber, “Term Question,” 138. As a note: many different spellings were used for the different terms in the English publications. For the sake of consistency, aside from direct quotations from primary sources, I have used the modern renderings. Thus, *T’ien* is *Tian*; *Shangti* or *Shang Ti* is *shangdi*; *tien chu*, *teen chu*, etc. are *Tianzhu*, and *shin* is *shen*.

¹⁰⁴ Zhao, “Names of God,” 167-168.

¹⁰⁵ Hanan, 213.

of *shangdi*. “*Shin*,” he argued, “is . . . daily and universally used, but rarely in the high sense of deity.”¹⁰⁶

During the Opium War, articles about terminology and Bible translation disappeared from the journal, reappearing in 1843 with a report of the meetings in Hong Kong that led to the formation of the translation committees.¹⁰⁷ Not surprisingly, as work on the new translation progressed in the committees, the debate grew more public. An anonymous letter to the editor appeared in 1845, arguing that *shen* was the correct word; *shangdi* was disqualified, in the author’s mind, because it could not “be applied indiscriminately to celestial and terrestrial, to true and false gods.”¹⁰⁸ This criticism of *shangdi* was answered in the next issue with a series of questions from a *shangdi* defender.¹⁰⁹ In 1846, Medhurst wrote in the *Repository* to propose a meeting of the delegates, and highlighted some of the terms that needed discussion. This meeting, the editors noted, was premature. The April edition of the same year included another statement of the need for a new translation, coupled with a condensed argument for the use of *shen*.¹¹⁰ Another argument for *shen* appeared in June.¹¹¹ In September, a letter was published promoting *shangdi*, warning about the evangelistic risks of the continued use of *shen*. *Shen*, the correspondent wrote, led the Chinese to “point to their own gods.”¹¹² This was an argument calculated to weigh heavily among missionaries, but the editors of the *Repository* quickly turned the attack on its head. Quoting another missionary, the *Repository* rejoined that the use of

¹⁰⁶ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 7 no. 6, 315. Note the extremely early date of 1821; debates over the proper name of God had been ongoing for over two decades by the time the Term Controversy proper started.

¹⁰⁷ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 12 no. 10, October 1843, 551.

¹⁰⁸ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 14 no. 2, February 1845, 101.

¹⁰⁹ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 14 no. 3, March 1845, 145-148.

¹¹⁰ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 15 no. 4, April 1846, 161-165.

¹¹¹ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 15 no. 6, June 1846, 311-317.

¹¹² *Chinese Repository*, vol. 15 no. 9, September 1846, 464.

shangdi required “more time to convince them [native Chinese speakers] that we do not mean their *shangdi* than it would to teach them a new term.”¹¹³

In the *Repository* of 1846, a “correspondent at Ningpo” laid out the argument for the use of *shen*. The author began by stating flatly that “the idea [of God] does not exist in China, and whatever word may be selected must be converted to a Christian use.”¹¹⁴ This was a plain rejection of the idea that Chinese religion had roots in an ancient monotheistic religion. China clearly possessed a notion of gods, but any word chosen required the Western sense of God added to it. Ultimately, the word *shen* fit the bill. The editorial went on to delve into the use of *shen*, examining certain classic texts including excerpts from Mencius.¹¹⁵ Above all, the author plainly rejected the use of the term *shangdi*. *Shen*, as a general term for Chinese divinity, could be used in a Christian way in the Bible; but *Shangdi*, as a more specific name for an ancient Chinese deity, would never suit.¹¹⁶

The back-and-forth in the *Repository* were two sides arguing their case before a jury. In this case, the jury was both the mission boards and Bible societies in Britain and America, and more importantly the other missionaries on the translation committees. Medhurst became the champion of *shangti*, and several of the other English missionaries joined him. On the other side were the editors of the *Chinese Repository*, notably Bridgman, and the American missionaries. The *Repository* in particular became a forum in which each side argued the merits of *shen* or *shangdi*. As the local committees finished their work and the time came for a meeting of delegates to complete the revision, the campaigns for support became increasingly sharp.

¹¹³ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 15 no. 9, September 1846, 466.

¹¹⁴ *Chinese Repository*, v.15 no.12 December 1846, 73.

¹¹⁵ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 15 no. 12, December 1846, 578-579.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 596-597.

The delegates were scheduled to meet in Shanghai in June 1847. In March, the *Repository* published another letter promoting *Shangdi*, but accompanied it with a rebuttal from the editors. In June, the delegates met in Shanghai. After all the arguments in the preceding years, the meetings exposed the intensity of the Term Controversy. As the *Repository* explained in its report the next year, the delegates were embroiled in days of oral arguments. Boone, Lowrie, and Bridgman supported translating the Greek word *theos* with *shen*; Medhurst and Stronach argued in favor of *shangdi*. By the conclusion of the meeting, no solution had been reached. Instead, “it was unanimously resolved to enter on a more formal investigation of the subject . . . to writing.”¹¹⁷ It seemed that years of editorial arguments and days of oral arguments led to only several more years of written ones.

Many more arguments would be made in the *Repository*, and entire books written arguing for one viewpoint or another. Medhurst himself wrote four books on the subject; *A Dissertation on the Theology of the Chinese* (1847), *An Inquiry into the Proper Mode of Rendering the Word God* (1848), *On the True Meaning of the Word Shin* (1849), and *An Inquiry into the Proper Mode of Rendering the Word Ruach* (1850). All dealt directly with the Term Controversy in various forms. In addition, much of the material in those books was also published in the *Repository*. The other side was not silent. Every issue of the *Repository* in 1848, except one, contained an argument written by either Medhurst for *Shangdi* or William Boone for *shen*.¹¹⁸ Four more articles on the controversy appeared in 1849, and eight in 1850.¹¹⁹

By 1850, the Term Controversy was drawing to a close. It had not been resolved; by this point, both camps were firmly dug in, and no amount of research on the Chinese uses of the terms would sway either one. In August 1850 the Delegates Committee gathered in Shanghai

¹¹⁷ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 17 no. 1, 53-54.

¹¹⁸ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 17.

¹¹⁹ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 18 and 19.

again, at Medhurst's home, and published a series of resolutions that proposed a compromise. The Delegates could not agree on the proper term for God, so they agreed to leave it untranslated. However, they also realized that such a version, with untranslated Greek words in the midst of Chinese, would be virtually useless. The committee landed on a compromise, by handing responsibility for the final decision of the term question to the various Bible societies, knowing that different societies would choose different words. This was, in many ways, an admission of defeat, and the exact wording of the resolution seemed to admit it:

The Committee of Delegates resolve . . . to offer the version as it now stands, to the Bible Societies of Europe and America . . . throwing upon said parties all the responsibility . . . the Committee of Delegates feeling themselves released from any further responsibility with respect to the rendering of the words (Theos) and (pneuma) by their inability to come to any decision in regards to it in their body.¹²⁰

Despite the stalemate, the compromise accomplished a number of goals. It allowed the Committee to proceed with the translation of the Old Testament, and it ensured rapid distribution of the completed NT to the numerous missionaries and mission boards in China and abroad.¹²¹ Bible production would continue, after a political compromise.

Medhurst's failed to persuade the committee to adopt *Shangdi*, but the Delegates' Bible was nonetheless a victory for his philosophy of translation. The years of arguing for a better, freer translation and his own growing influence in the China mission resulted in the Committee's adoption of many of Medhurst's ideas. The Delegates' Version took "more freedom in providing what is not explicitly stated in the Greek texts."¹²² Also, while the Term Controversy did result in words being left untranslated, there was more consistency in the translation. Morrison had used multiple terms for God, including *shen* and *Tianzhu*, and was not always

¹²⁰ *Chinese Repository*, vol. 19 no. 10, October 1850, 546.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 547-548.

¹²² Strandenaes, 60.

consistent; the Delegates' Version left the choice of words to the mission boards, but by doing so ensured an consistent application of whatever word was chosen.¹²³

The Term Controversy flared up again later in the century, but the debates from 1830-1850, and the broader story of the Delegates' Version, demonstrate the necessity of political of missional support for Bible translation. However, Bible translation is only one part of the larger Bible production process, and the printing of the Chinese translation brought its own political constraints, concurrent with the translation process.

¹²³ Strandenaes, 63.

CHAPTER THREE: THE POLITICS OF THE PRESS

China posed an unusual printing problem. In other parts of the world, the Western empires and missionaries who accompanied them introduced the moveable-type printing press. In China, early moveable-type presses existed from the 11th century AD, beating Gutenberg in Europe by about four hundred years.¹²⁴ In China, the missionaries were forced to deal with problems of adaptation rather than introduction. They had to develop methods of printing that fit with the publications, most importantly Bibles, and they had to deal with the complexity of Chinese characters. Like the translation process, the printing process was also subject to political tensions, which had an important affect on Bible production.

Robert Morrison encountered the difficulty of printing in China immediately on his arrival. While in the midst of struggling with the language and working on his first translations, in 1810, Morrison arranged for a copy of the Acts of the Apostles to be printed. Printing in Canton was risky, because it ran afoul of the legislations on foreigners and the Chinese language. Morrison eventually found a printer in Macau, but the price proved to be much higher than anticipated.¹²⁵ Nor did the situation improve; in 1812, it was declared that the printing of any Christian material, by Chinese or foreigners, was a capital offense.¹²⁶ Convincing native printers to work for the missionaries was possible, but prohibitively expensive and risky; instead, Morrison pursued translating a less contentious Chinese dictionary. The problem was funding; as Morrison's living expense were over double the estimated amount, it was unlikely that he or the LMS could afford to hire out the printing of a dictionary.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ K. T. Wu, "The Development of Typography in China during the Nineteenth Century," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, vol. 22 no. 3 (July 1952), 288.

¹²⁵ Daily, 134-136.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 292.

¹²⁷ Ching, 46; Medhurst, *China: Its State and Prospects*, 262.

In search of an alternative, Morrison approached the East India Company directly, to see if he could obtain funding from them. This was a bit of a risk; when Morrison first broached the possibility in 1808, he was not an employee of the company, simply a newly-arrived missionary. After the Company hired Morrison as a translator, he continued to argue his case, and by 1812 he submitted a formal proposal for a three-part dictionary including Chinese to English alphabetically, Chinese to English by radicals, and English to Chinese. His proposal was forwarded to London, where somewhat surprisingly it was granted. In 1814, the Company dispatched a printer and a printing press.¹²⁸

Politics again interfered with Morrison's plans. The East India Company, careful not to offend the Qing government and risk their trading privileges, imposed additional rules on the Company press; it had to be stationed at Macao, and it could not print anything religious. Morrison instead submitted his *A Grammar of the Chinese Language* to the East India Company and it was sent by the Company to Calcutta in 1812 to be printed. The end result was that the dictionary was actually sent to the Serampore Mission Press for publishing, which inadvertently escalated Morrison's rivalry with Joshua Marshman in India.¹²⁹

By 1815, Morrison's Chinese dictionary was still incomplete, but in the meantime Joshua Marshman had released his own version, *Elements of Chinese Grammar*. That summer saw the two missionaries in heated conflict, Morrison openly accusing Marshman of plagiarizing his dictionary, while Marshman defended himself furiously. The feud lasted for nearly two years, only alleviated in 1817 when the East India Company's press finally opened in Macao.¹³⁰ The rivalry persisted until Marshman published his Chinese Bible in 1822.

¹²⁸ Ching, 148.

¹²⁹ Zhao, "An Examination," 28.

¹³⁰ Zhao, "An Examination," 29.

Marshman's 1822 Bible demonstrated the advances in Chinese typography. It was not only the first complete Chinese version, but it was also the first Chinese translation printed with a moveable-type press. Morrison's Bible was printed using block printing, the predominant method in China at the time. Block printing was cheaper, easier to learn and operate, and less technically complex, but it came with several notable flaws. It was not particularly fast, and the blocks, typically wood, could only be used for one work. When that work was complete, all of those blocks needed to be stored, and the wooden ones were prone to cracking after extended storage.¹³¹ Moreover, if a single block was damaged or missing, the entire set would be unusable.¹³² Typography, however, offered the benefits of being more durable and more easily customizable, and a well-cut font of type rendered the Chinese characters beautifully.¹³³ The development of Chinese typography and the growing influence of the mission presses in China has been chronicled elsewhere, but it is worth noting that after the conclusion of the Opium War typography fully supplanted block printing as the method of choice in the mission presses. A closer look at one particular press serves to highlight the politics involved in the printing aspect of Bible production.

After the Opium War, the LMS sought new locations for their presses. Previously, politics had prevented those presses from being located in mainland China. The new treaties resulted in a much more open China, at least in the treaty ports. After surveying both Ningpo and Shanghai, Medhurst settled on Shanghai as the ideal location. Shanghai was a political center, being one of four circuit seats in Chiangsu province, and had a long history of Catholic Christianity.¹³⁴ Also, Medhurst himself had important political connections there; his own son,

¹³¹ Wu, 292.

¹³² Medhurst, *China, Its State and Prospects*, 572.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 573.

¹³⁴ Ching, 278-288

W.H. Medhurst Jr., was employed as the official translator to the British consul at Shanghai. During his son's absence for medical reasons, Medhurst filled the role of official interpreter for six months, allowing him constant contact with the leading men of the city, both Chinese and British.¹³⁵

Medhurst reassembled the Batavia press, and made the important decision to actively promote the press in the Chinese market as well as among the other missionaries.¹³⁶ He also decided, crucially, to focus from the beginning on typography. Medhurst had been a proponent of typography over block printing for years, but now was able to establish the Shanghai press as a Western-style press.¹³⁷ He invested early in building the supply of Chinese type, printed commercial as well as religious works, and by 1846 was ready to move to a large compound dedicated to the press and the mission in general.¹³⁸

Despite advances in printing and a more successful situation, the Shanghai press was still subject to political controversy. In 1844, Gutzlaff, who had previously worked with Medhurst on a translation of the Bible, announced his plan to form a society to reach the interior of China with Christian literature. By 1847, the BFBS decided to support him with £100.¹³⁹ Gutzlaff reported great success in his endeavors, and the Society sent him over £700 in the next three years. This support alarmed the LMS, who feared losing the BFBS' financial support for the Delegates Version then in progress.¹⁴⁰ Being then in charge of both the Shanghai press and Delegates' Committee, Medhurst was called on to reassure the LMS that Gutzlaff's reports were exaggerated. He further reminded the LMS that the very same version of the Bible being

¹³⁵ Ching, 290.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Medhurst, *China, Its State and Prospects*, 573-574. Medhurst noted, in 1840, that a moveable-type press in China would require a "European printer acquainted with the Chinese language." He was the ideal candidate.

¹³⁸ Ching, 299-300.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 306.

¹⁴⁰ Ching, 306.

distributed by Gutzlaff was essentially the one the two missionaries had translated together a decade before. That version had been resoundingly rejected by the BFBS in 1835, and was now being distributed by their own funding.¹⁴¹

Medhurst's work at Shanghai and his influence among the other missionaries established the Shanghai press as a major influence in Chinese printing for several decades. The Delegates' Version was completed and a large cylinder press installed in Shanghai to handle the printing of it.¹⁴² Much of that success was attributable to Medhurst's political savvy; after nearly thirty years in the China mission, he understood the importance of politics.

¹⁴¹ Ching, 306.

¹⁴² Ibid., 302.

CONCLUSION

Robert Morrison, Joshua Marshman, W. H. Medhurst, E. C. Bridgman, William Milne, and the numerous other Protestant missionaries to China of the early 19th century all possessed similar goals. Each wanted to spread the gospel to the Chinese masses, each endeavored to master a difficult language towards that goal, and each desired to translate or help translate the word of God into Chinese.

Those plans, however holy, encountered the realities of human nature. In particular, the missionaries were forced, early and often in the course of the China mission, to adapt their plans to the political world of the late Qing empire. The policies of Chinese government forced Morrison and others to relocate multiple times, while the restrictions on printing pushed the missionaries to learn different printing methods. The Qing policies also increased the need for a Chinese translation, as a way to penetrate the interior of China with the gospel in spite of the rules. Added to these external political constraints was the constant internal political bickering, between individual missionaries and mission boards, which also shaped the course of Bible production.

As in any political conflict, certain individuals came to dominate these discussions. Morrison lost the Bible translation race to Marshman, but nevertheless emerged as the patriarch of the China mission for the first two decades. His preferences heavily influenced the course of the mission, from the allocation of funds, as in the case of the mission school at Malacca, to the appointment of key positions, or the blocking thereof, in Medhurst's case. For his own part, W.H. Medhurst, with the benefits of a long career and advanced language and printing skills, came to lead the Bible translation effort after Morrison's death. His insistence on a set method of translation, and his emphatic arguments, engendered resistance. The Term Controversy,

which dominated the theological arguments of the 1840s, witnessed the emergence of Bridgman, Boone and others as opponents to Medhurst's translation choices.

The rivalry between Morrison and Marshman, accentuated by the restrictions on printing in China, was only the opening note in the chorus of controversies that would leave their mark on the history of Chinese translations. Debates over language use, translation sources, methods of printing, and key terms dominated most of the first four decades of Bible translation efforts.

In conclusion, Bible translation in late Qing China was more than a technical act, relying as well on the assistance and influence of individuals around the world. As one commentator notes, "translating the Bible was seldom just a two-man enterprise," and this thesis has attempted to demonstrate the vital role that political forces, both individual and national, played on that enterprise.¹⁴³ Those forces did not prevent the missionaries from pushing forward. "China is open to the distribution of books," Medhurst stated in 1840, "the myriads . . . are ready to receive the word of life, and the lever that shall move this moral world is metal-type printing."¹⁴⁴ The "lever" of printing and Bible production was itself shaped by the political constraints of the missional context of late Qing China.

¹⁴³ Hanan, 198.

¹⁴⁴ Medhurst, *China, Its State and Prospects*, 575.

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