

Digitization of Bibles in Greater China (1661–1960)

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Abstract

Bible translations in (or for) Greater China may be classified into three categories: Chinese, Han dialects, and indigenous languages. All these language groups witness translation activities by Protestant missionaries. However, in its earliest history, Bible translation was pioneered by missionaries of Eastern Christianity in the seventh century or even earlier, whereas from the Catholic side, clear historical narrative has recorded Bible translation work in the thirteenth century by John of Montecorvino (1247–1328) into a Tatar language. Sadly, this work was not preserved. The earliest extant Bible translation in this vast area was published in 1661 in the Siriya language of Taiwan. This article reports on two major digitization projects: digitization of old Chinese Bibles (1707–1960), including 51 translations in total, and digitization of Bibles in Han dialects/fangyan and indigenous languages (1661–1960)—about 50 languages (including dialects) and 60 translations. These two projects represent the largest and most systematic full-text digitization of the Bible heritage of the area ever undertaken.

Keywords

Bible translation, Bibles in China, digitization, history of Bible translation

According to the UBS *Global Scripture Access Report – 2019 Annual Progress* (United Bible Societies 2020), of the 7,350 languages (including sign languages) used in the world, there are about 3,400 languages that have a translation of the full Bible or parts of it. It seems only logical to assume that languages with the most translations of the Christian Bible are also the

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most widely used international languages, namely English and Spanish.¹ It may surprise many people, though, that Chinese (classical and modern) ranks among those languages with the most translations, with around forty-five full Bibles or New Testaments, and another thirty-five translations of Bible selections. The overwhelming number of Mandarin Chinese speakers in Mainland China often makes us forget that Chinese is only one of the many languages spoken in the country;² Bible translation activities in indigenous languages and Han dialects existed side by side with those in the Chinese language, with some even predating many Chinese translations.

Bible translations in or for the Greater China area (including Mainland China and Taiwan) may be classified into three categories, Chinese, Han dialects, and indigenous languages, and were undertaken by (Russian) Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants. Protestants certainly were the most enthusiastic in their Bible translation endeavours. However, in its earliest history, Bible translation was pioneered by missionaries of Eastern Christianity in the seventh century (as revealed in the eighth-century Nestorian Stele) or even earlier, whereas from the Catholic side, the clear historical narrative has recorded Bible translation work by John of Montecorvino (1247–1328) into a Tatar language, which would either have been an indigenous language spoken in Inner Mongolia or Mongolian itself. Sadly, none of this translation work was preserved. The earliest extant Bible translation in the region was published in 1661 in the Siriya (or Sinkang) language of Taiwan (see below).

Apart from a handful of Chinese Mandarin translations, little is known of the Bible heritage in China. The lack of access to these Bibles accounts for the overall ignorance among the general public. In 2007, when Chinese Protestant churches all over the world celebrated the bicentennial of Christianity in China, i.e., the arrival of Robert Morrison (1782–1834), Morrison’s 1823 translation was published only as a photographic facsimile edition. Indeed, digitization of Bibles in Chinese or Bibles in China has lagged behind that of other languages, until now. This article reports on two major full-text digitization projects of Bibles in (or for) China: (1)

¹ According to one count available on the internet, English has about 100 translations (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_Bible_translations) and Spanish about 50 translations (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_translations_into_Spanish) of full Bibles.

² The number of languages spoken in China is always a subject of much discussion. *Ethnologue* lists 302 languages (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2021), whereas according to the official publication of the Chinese government, *The Languages of China*, the number of languages spoken in China is 129 (Sun, Hu, and Huang 2007). One point of difference is the classification of Han dialects as distinct languages (as in *Ethnologue*) or being subsumed under “Chinese” proper. For a brief discussion on language diversity (especially of the Han “fangyan” or dialects) in Mainland China, see Wong 2015.

Digitization of Bibles in Han dialects/fangyan and indigenous languages in Greater China (1661 to the 1960s) and (2) Digitization of Old Chinese Bibles (1707 to the 1960s). Both projects are under the auspices of the Digital Bible Library (United Bible Societies), with funding from various sources including Every Tribe Every Nation (ETEN), the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), and the Hong Kong Bible Society (HKBS). These two projects together represent the largest and most systematic full-text digitization effort ever made for the Bible heritage in the Greater China area.³

Digitization of Bibles in Han dialects/fangyan and indigenous languages in China (1661–1960s)

This digitization project, which began in 2018 and will finish by 2022, aims at providing full-text digitization of all major Bible translations in the indigenous languages and the Han dialects (or, “fangyan” in Chinese, meaning “topolect”) published prior to the 1960s in Greater China, comprising about sixty Bible translations in fifty languages (including dialects). Of the indigenous languages, the following translations are included (twenty-nine translations in total; * indicates projects digitized by BFBS):

- North and Northwest: Mongolian (1827/1840); Manchurian (1869); Tibetan (1948); Turkestan (1917/1919). See Figure 1.
- Southwest (Yunnan and Guizhou):
 - Miao (also known as Hmong outside of China): Big Flowery (1878); Black (1934); Small Flowery (1908); Sichuan (1922); White (1922/1938)
 - Yi: Black (1948); Gan/Dry (1910/1912/1936); East Lisu (1951)
 - Others: Buyi (Bouyei/Chung Chia; 1904)*; Kado (1939); Keh-Deo (1937); Kopu (1913); Lahu (1949/1962); West Lisu (1938/1939/1950); Naxi (1922)*; Dai (1931); Tai Lü (1921); Tai Ya (1922); Wa (1938); Zaiwa (Atsi; 1938[Fraser]/1951 [Roman])*
- Taiwan: Sinkang (1661); Amis (1957/1958); Bunun (1951/1955/1959); Paiwan (1959); Sediq (1956/1957/1960); Taroko (1956/1957/1960). See Figure 2.

The orthographies of the translations included in this digitization vary. Many indigenous translations (such as those in the north) have their own native orthographies that have been used for centuries, but a few were

³ The actual undertaking of the digitization process, including the procedures and challenges involved, has been reported in Wong 2017.



Figure 1. Title pages of selected Bibles in the indigenous languages of North and Northwest China and Southwest China

developed more recently by Western missionaries (such as the Pollard script for Miao, Yi, and East Lisu). Certain phonetic systems, such as those using Latin script (e.g., Wa, Zaiwa) and zhuyin, are also used. Zhuyin (meaning, “notating sound” or “phonetic notation”) or Mandarin Phonetic Symbols, commonly known as “Bopomofo”⁴ (ㄅ ㄆ ㄇ ㄉ), was the most widely used Chinese transliteration system before the introduction of the modern “Hanyu pinyin” (meaning, “Chinese pronunciation”) system in Mainland China (1958), and is still in use (with some variation) in Taiwan. In the early history of aboriginal Bible translations in Taiwan, translators were forced to use zhuyin symbols. As a reaction against this enforcement, nowadays translators of the aboriginal languages prefer to use Latin script instead. The BFBS Bible Archive, now housed at the Cambridge University Library, is the major repository for most of the Bibles in this collection. The project also owes much to the organization Faith-Hope-Love in Taiwan, which provided high-quality images for almost all aboriginal language translations in Taiwan prior to 1960. Local libraries from China, such as Guangdong Provincial Zhongshan Library, also benefited the project.

Apart from a few translations published during the mid to late nineteenth century, most of the indigenous language translations were published in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Many translations are still recognized by the local speakers and have had immense influence on the religious

⁴ Zhuyin symbols consist of thirty-seven characters with four tone marks. The first four characters of this system are ㄅ (bo), ㄆ (po), ㄇ (mo), ㄉ (fo), hence the name “Bopomofo.”



Figure 2. Title pages of selected Bibles in the aboriginal languages of Taiwan

language (such as in local hymns) of the community. A number of these languages (such as Big Flowery Miao, East Lisu, Yi, and Wa) have published more up-to-date translations in recent decades. Unfortunately, the digitized texts of these languages were not available when their retranslation work was in progress.

This digitization project includes the oldest extant translation of the Gospel of Matthew and Gospel of John in Greater China, into an extinct language known as Sinkang (or, “Sinckan” as spelled in the translation) of the Siriya people in Taiwan (known as Formosa at that time) by the Dutch missionary, the Rev. Daniel Gravius (1616–1681). Gravius came to Taiwan in 1647 and resided in Soulang, now the Tainan area. In 1651, he left for Batavia (now Jakarta) and stayed there for three years before returning to the Netherlands. It was commonly believed that during his short stay in the Tainan area he started working on the translation, but the translation was published in the Netherlands in 1661. It was a diglot edition of the Sinkang language and the first official Dutch translation, the *Statenbijbel* (1637). The images shown here (Figures 3 and 4) are provided by the Royal Danish Library in Denmark from the original publication. In the preface of the translation, Gravius expressed his intention that this translation should help the Siriya people to understand the Bible and the Christian faith. Ironically, in that same year, the Chinese general Zheng Chenggong of the Ming Dynasty fled to Formosa because of his failure to repel the invasion of the Manchus; in Formosa, he attacked and destroyed the Dutch settlement.

History seems to suggest that China has never been favourable to foreign missionary work. When the first Protestant missionary, Robert Morrison,

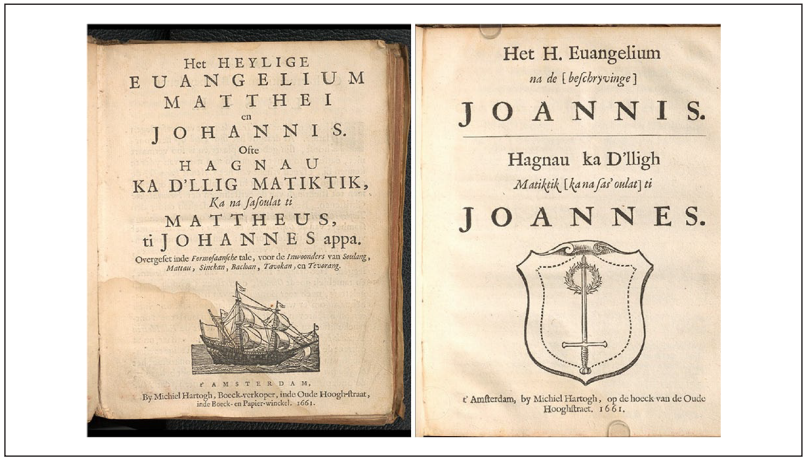


Figure 3. Title page of Gravius's translation, and the title page of the Gospel of John

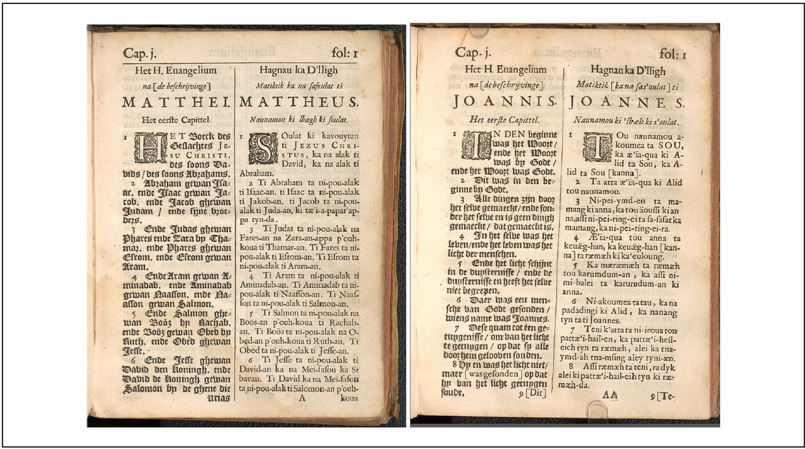


Figure 4. The first pages of Gravius's Gospels of Matthew and John

came to China in 1807, his activities were confined to Guangzhou (or Canton) and Macao. By the time he finished the translation of the Bible, he had to publish it in Malacca (1823), which was under British rule. Likewise, the first Chinese Bible, predating Morrison's translation by one year (1822), was published not on Chinese soil but in India, by Johannes Lassar and Joshua Marshman. For many years, the “closed country” policy confined

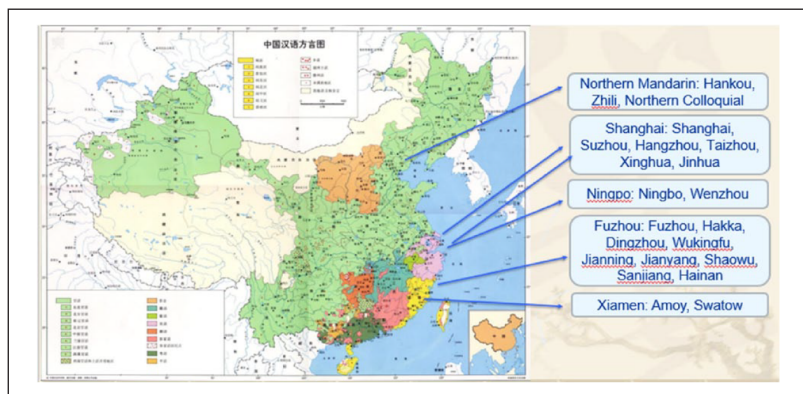


Figure 5. Centres of the early Bible translation work in Han dialects

Westerners to “Macao and the 13 Factories of Canton” (13 Factories is a district in Guangzhou where trading was most active). After the First Opium War (1842), the Qing Government was forced to open five major ports: Canton, Fuzhou, Xiamen, Ningbo, and Shanghai, which are also areas where many dialects are spoken.

Basically, all the early Bible translation work in Han dialects was in these areas (Figure 5), twenty-four translations in total:

- Northern Mandarin: Hankou (also spelled as Hankow, 1921), Zhili (Chihli, 1917), Jiaodong (Kiaotung, 1918/1920); Northern Colloquial (1925)
- Canton: Guangdong or Canton (1907/1934)
- Fuzhou: Fuzhou (Foochow, 1891/1906), Hakka (Kejia, 1923/1924), Dingzhou (Tingchow, 1919), Wukingfu (1918), Jianning (Kienning, 1896), Jianyang (Kienyang, 1898), Shaowu (1905), Sanjiang (Sankiang, 1904/1904), Hainan (1891)
- Xiamen: Amoy (1898), Swatow (1905/1922)
- Ningpo: Ningbo (Ningpo; 1868/1906), Wenzhou (Wenchow, 1902)
- Shanghai: Shanghai (1853/1908), Suzhou (Soochow, 1892), Hangzhou (Hangchow, 1877/1879), Taizhou (Taichow, 1914), Xinghua (Hinghua, dialect of Pu-Xian, 1912), Jinhua (Kinhwa, 1866)

Several dialects had their translations published both in Latin and in Chinese scripts (see Figure 6). The Han Chinese characters, being ideograms, may be pronounced according to the dialect pronunciation of the speakers. Other phonetic scripts were also used, such as zhuyin and another



Figure 6. Title pages of selected Bibles in Han dialect Bibles

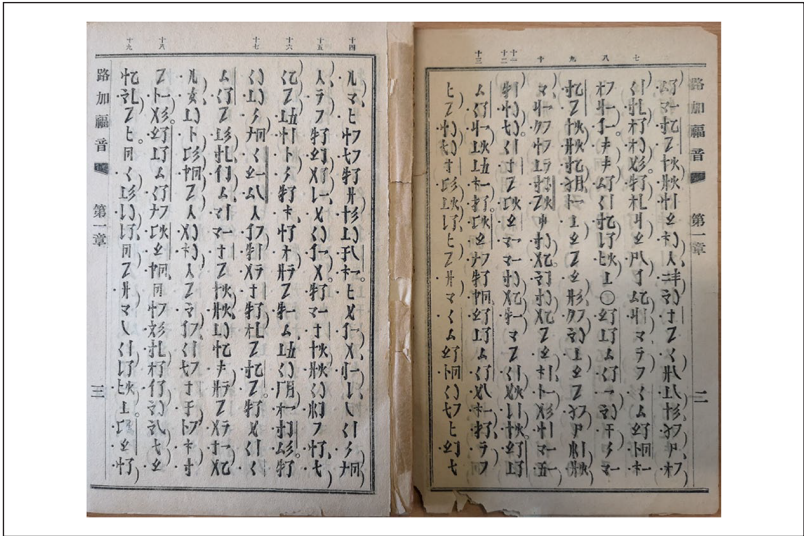


Figure 7. Luke 1 in Zhili (1925) in Wangzhou Mandarin transcription

phonetic system called the Wangzhou transcription system for Mandarin Chinese (see Figure 7). It remains an open question whether the texts (e.g., Zhili, Jiaodong, and Northern Colloquial) written in Wangzhou transcription can be digitized successfully, because the characters are not Unicode compliant.

Bible translation work in the Han dialects is the most neglected area in the study of the history of Bible translations in China. Because these language forms are often subsumed under Chinese proper, many people (even scholars) would consider that these dialects had no written record, even though some dialects have a translation of the full Bible. One unique feature of this category of Bible translations in China was the involvement of female translators in a number of dialects, such as Sankiang, Jianning, Dingzhou, Hainan, and Cantonese. As in many parts of the world, early missionary work in China was predominantly done by males. Many women missionaries, however capable they were in the Chinese language, were excluded from being involved in Bible translation work in Chinese. The restrictiveness of this situation, however, not only allowed them to be gospel ambassadors to the dialect areas but at the same time gave them an opportunity to translate God's word into the heart languages of the local people. At a time when literacy (defined as knowledge of Chinese proper) was extremely low in the country, dialect Bibles were the only means through which the local people might read God's word in their mother tongue. As a result of the national literacy campaign begun in the late 1950s, and the growing popularity of the Chinese Union Version (1919), dialect Bibles fell into disuse and were forgotten in Mainland China,⁵ but in Taiwan, the Bible Society is still very vigorous in providing the Bible in dialect forms, such as Hakka (2012) and Taiwanese (2021).

Digitization of old Chinese Bibles

This digitization project, which began in 2016 and was completed in 2020, aimed at providing full-text digitization of all Bible translations in Chinese (Classical and modern) published prior to the 1960s in Greater China, and includes fifty-one translations (see Figure 8). Those included are (Protestant unless otherwise indicated):

- Jean Basset and Johann Su, Wenli NT (incomplete, 1707, Catholic; 白日昇—徐約翰文理譯本)
- L. Poirot, Peking Vernacular Version with study notes (1813, Catholic; 賀清泰官話研讀本)
- Johannes Lassar and Joshua Marshman, Wenli Version (1822; 馬殊曼文理譯本)
- William Milne and Robert Morrison, Wenli Version (1823; 馬禮遜文理譯本)

⁵ See discussion on the challenges of Bible translation among the non-Mandarin fangyan in Wong 2015.

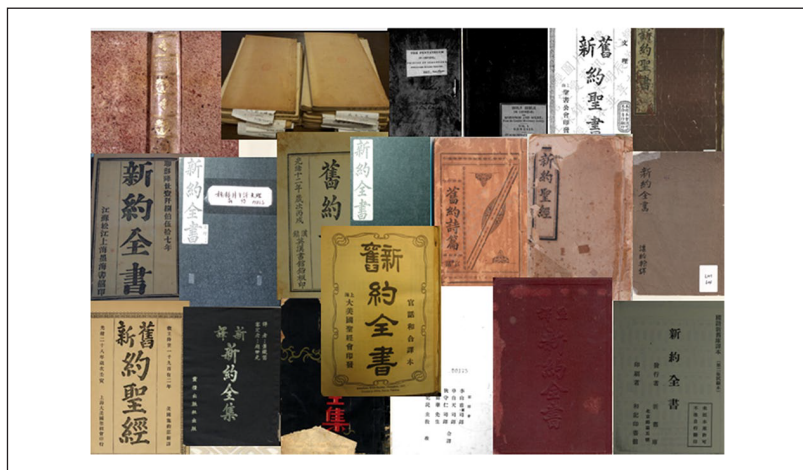


Figure 8. Title pages of selected Bibles in Chinese

- Committee of Four, Wenli Version (1837; 四人小組文理譯本)
- Karl F. A. Gutzlaff, Wenli Version (1839; 郭實臘文理譯本)
- Goddard-Lord, Wenli NT (1853; 高德－羅爾梯文理譯本)
- Taiping Dynasty Wenli Version (incomplete, 1853; 太平天國文理譯本)
- Nanking Mandarin NT (1857; 南京官話譯本)
- Elijah C. Bridgman and Michael S. Culbertson, Wenli NT (1859; 裨治文－克陸存文理譯本)
- Gury Karpov, Wenli NT (1864, Russian Orthodox; 固里·卡爾波夫文理譯本)
- Thomas Hall Hudson, Wenli NT (1867; 胡德邁文理譯本)
- William Dean, Wenli NT (1870; 蕡為仁文理譯本)
- Peking Mandarin Version (1872; 北京官話譯本)
- Wang Duomo, Mandarin Gospels & Act (1875, Catholic; 王多默官話譯本)
- Flavian Gorodetsky, Wenli Psalters (1879, Russian Orthodox; 弗拉維昂·高連茨基文理譯本)
- Griffith John, Wenli NT & Psalms (1886; 楊格非淺文理譯本)
- Li Wenyu, Wenli Acts & Gospels (1887, Catholic; 李問漁文理研讀本)
- Peking Guanhua NT (1888; 北京官話羅馬字譯本)
- John S. Burdon and Henry Blodget, Wenli NT (1889; 包爾騰－柏漢理文理譯本)
- Xu Bin, Wenli Gospels with study notes (1889, Catholic; 許彬文理研讀本)

- Griffith John, Mandarin NT & Psalms (1892; 楊格非官話譯本)
- John Chalmers and Martin Schaub, Wenli NT (1897; 湛約翰—韶瑪亭文理譯本)
- Samuel I. J. Schereschewsky, Easy Wenli Version (1902; 施約瑟淺文理譯本)
- Ivan Figurovsky, Wenli NT & Psalters (1910, Russian Orthodox; 英諾肯提乙文理譯本)
- Chinese Union Easy Wenli NT (1912; 和合淺文理譯本)
- Chinese Union Wenli Version (1919; 和合深文理譯本)
- Chinese Union Mandarin Version (1919; 和合官話譯本)
- Joseph Hsiao, NT with study notes (1922, Catholic; 蕭靜山官話研讀本)
- Pierre L. Bousquet, Wenli Epistles & Revelation with study notes (1923, Catholic; 卜士傑文理研讀本)
- Marie-Louis Félix Aubazac, Wenli Epistles of Paul and others with study notes (1927, Catholic; 何雷思文理研讀本)
- Wenli Delegates' Version (1927; 委辦文理譯本)
- Anglican Deuterocanonical (1933; 次經官話全書)
- Wang Yuan Teh, Newly Punctuated NT (1933; 王宣忱官話譯本)
- Zhu Baohui, NT with study notes (1936; 朱寶惠官話研讀本)
- Ma Xiangbo, Wenli Gospels (1937, Catholic; 馬相伯文理譯本)
- Hsiao Shun-hua, Mandarin Gospels-Acts & other epistles with study notes (1939, Catholic; 蕭舜華官話研讀本)
- Heinrich Ruck and Zheng Shoulin, Bible Treasury NT (1941; 鄭壽麟—陸亨理官話譯本)
- Joseph Dejean, Wenli Gospels with study notes (1946, Catholic; 德如瑟文理研讀本)
- Wu Ching-hsiung Wenli Psalms & NT with study notes (1946, Catholic; 吳經熊文理研讀本)
- Litvanyi and others, NT with study notes (1949, Catholic; 李山甫等人官話研讀本)
- Jesuit Zikawei Monastery, Gospels with study notes (1953, Catholic; 新譯福音初稿官話研讀本)
- Theodore Hsiao, NT (1967; 蕭鐵笛官話譯本)

Short selections

- Xu Dishan, Song of Songs (1921; 許地山雅歌新譯)
- Lee Rongfang, Lamentation (1931; 李榮芳哀詞)
- John L. Nevius, Mark & Acts (1866–1868; 倪維思《馬可福音》《使徒行傳》)
- F. W. Baller, Psalms (1908; 鮑康寧《詩篇精意》)
- Chen Mengjia, Song of Songs (1932; 陳夢家《歌中之歌》)



Figure 9. Gospel of Matthew by Wang Duomo (1875)

- Calvin Lee, A New Translation of the Epistle of James (1928; 李啟榮《新譯雅各書》)
- Yan Fu, Mark (1–4) (馬可福音一到四章; 嚴復《馬可福音》)
- William C. Burns, Psalms (1870; 賓為霖《舊約詩篇官話》)

In addition to what has been reported earlier on this project (Wong 2017), what follows serves as an update to the work. The project has made a special effort to include all the translations (including selections) of both the Russian Orthodox Church (three in total) and the Roman Catholic Church (fourteen in total). In addition to the collection from the BFBS Bible archive, the project has benefited immensely from the collection at the Holy Spirit Seminary College of Theology and Philosophy in Hong Kong. The notable Zikawei library in Shanghai has made available two unpublished translations by local Jesuit priests which are rarely mentioned in any scholarly discussion: Wang Duomo (1875; Figure 9) and Xu Bin (1884; Figure 10). This project also includes a number of literary translations of single books, including Lamentations (Li Rongfeng, 1931), Song of Songs (Xu Dishan, 1921, and Chen Mongjia, 1932), and selected Psalms (F. W. Baller, 1908). The project has included all the known Bible translations in Chinese, with the only exception being the New Testament translated by Absalom Sydenstricker (1929). A search for the publication or its image is still in progress. By the time this article is published, all these Bibles (including the nineteen texts funded by HKBS) should be available via YouVersion and UBS applications.⁶

⁶ In addition to these channels, Faith-Hope-Love has also acquired licensing permission from UBS to host the entire collection at their website for the public: <https://bible.fhl.net/>



Figure 10. Gospel of Matthew by Xu Bin (1884)

Today, the politically charged expression “Sinicization of Christianity”⁷ often causes unease. Leaving aside its profoundly political implication (such as the re-education and remoulding campaign under the umbrella of Chinese socialism), Sinicization refers to indigenization in China, to which Western missionaries contributed in previous centuries. Given the centrality of the Bible in the Christian faith, Bible translation in China is the most important realization of Sinicization for Christianity. Perhaps this is the reason, in the effort to re-Sinicize Christianity in the modern political context, that retranslation of the Bible is also on the political agenda.

In addition to the preservation of the Bible heritage in China, these two digitization projects are witness to the inculturation efforts and negotiations between Western Christianity and the different ethnic and language groups in China. Lying dormant and hidden in these Bibles for more than three and a half centuries is “a great deal of cultural heritage and Godly wisdom, and for the first time ever, people will be able to gain unprecedented access to them.”⁸ In the service of the scholarship of Bible translation, researchers can now readily engage in the study of the relationships among different translations, such as how Morrison-Milne (1823) made use of the first Catholic translation (incomplete) by Basset-Su (1707), or to what extent the Peking Mandarin Version (1872) exerted influence on the Chinese Union

new/ob.html.

⁷ In a major speech in 2016, President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China called for the “Sinicization of religion.” He noted that, given the rise of religion among the Chinese people, the Chinese Communist Party must “guide the adaptation of religions to socialist society.”

⁸ Kenny Wang, advisor to the digitization project, quoted in Wong 2017, 19.

Version (1919). Equally important is the new availability of these early translations as translation resources (for reference or even as a base) for new translation projects in their respective languages. Indeed, if the digital form of the East Lisu New Testament published in 1951 had been available, the translation work of more than a decade on the East Lisu Bible (2009) would have been considerably shortened. The same can be said of the Hakka (2012) and Taiwanese (2021) Bibles. Even more, for any translation project in Mandarin Chinese (especially those which are currently ongoing), to ignore these invaluable resources would be to disregard God's blessing to the Chinese-speaking churches through this rich heritage.

By the time the digitization of Bibles in Han fangyan/dialects and indigenous languages is completed, the Chinese-speaking world will be celebrating the bicentennial of the first published Bible in Chinese (albeit not on Chinese soil) by Johannes Lassar and Joshua Marshman (1822). Let it be remembered that the Bible heritage in China is older than 200 years—considerably older than the first published Bible in Han Chinese!

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Abbreviations

- BFBS British and Foreign Bible Society
 ETEN Every Tribe Every Nation
 HKBS Hong Kong Bible Society