

## COMMEMORATING THE 100<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE CHINESE UNION VERSION: HISTORY, RECEPTION, AND FUTURE

JOSEPH K. MA\*

**Abstract:** *The Chinese Union Version (CUV) has been the most widely used Chinese translation of the Bible since its publication in 1919 and remains a de facto “Authorized Version” for millions of Chinese Protestants. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Union Version is a fitting occasion to reflect upon its history, reception, and future. These reflections will naturally involve consideration of Bible translation into Chinese and Bible translation more generally, including its limitations. The Union Version will be discussed in relation both to previous Chinese translations and to others published over the past 100 years. The ultimate purpose of this article is to enable clear thinking about the future of the Union Version and future Chinese Bible translations that will inevitably arise.*

**Key words:** *Chinese Union Version, 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Bible translation, history, reception, future*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The year 2019 marks the centennial anniversary of the publication of the most important Chinese translation of the Bible in history. Since its publication in 1919, the Chinese Union Version (和合本) has been by far the dominant translation used by Chinese people. The explosive growth of Christianity in China during the past several decades has only increased the impact of the Union Version, which still functions as a sort of “Authorized Version” for Chinese readers just as the King James Version once did for English readers. Chinese Christians especially have reason to pause and give thanks to the Lord (and to the translators) for this translation which has played such an essential role in our salvation and in the growth of the Chinese church both in China and worldwide. In the recent past, these Bibles were often difficult to acquire in China and were smuggled in, sometimes at great risk.<sup>1</sup> Relatedly, major online retailers in China stopped selling Bibles in April 2018.<sup>2</sup> Today, every time the Union Version is read for personal devotion, preached from a pulpit, or discussed in a smaller group, its impact is extended yet

---

\* Joseph K. Ma holds a Ph.D. in biblical studies and resides in North America. He can be reached at majosephk@gmail.com.

<sup>1</sup> See Brother David with Paul Hattaway, *Project Pearl* (Grand Rapids: Monarch, 2007). This book discusses various efforts to smuggle Bibles into China, focusing on “Project Pearl” in which one million Bibles were brought in at one time by boat on June 18, 1981. Earlier, after asking “believers in 40 different locations . . . every one replied that they wanted the Union Version, in Simplified Chinese script” (p. 150), which is what they would later receive.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/05/world/asia/china-bans-bible-sales.html>.

further. The centennial anniversary of the Union Version is also a fitting occasion to recall key aspects of the history of this translation and to reflect on its reception and on the work of Bible translation generally in anticipation of the next 100 years, if the Lord tarries.

## II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHINESE UNION VERSION

The history of the translation of the Chinese Union Version (和合本) has been treated at length in a book by Zetzsche.<sup>3</sup> What follows is only a brief history.

The Chinese Union Version is neither the first nor the most recent Chinese translation of the Bible. Although the first complete published translation of the Bible into Chinese was technically Marshman and Lassar's in 1822, pride of place is generally given to Morrison and Milne's translation. Published in 1823, it was superior to Marshman and Lassar's, and more widely used.<sup>4</sup> Helped along the way by Chinese assistants (as would also be the case with the Union Version), this version used literary Chinese. Such a translation was specifically aimed at the educated class, a strategy which continued that of the Jesuits from a few centuries before. During the next fifty years, several other translations would be completed, some also in literary Chinese and others in various Chinese dialects.

The first Mandarin (or *guanhua* [官話], later called *guoyu* [國語]) translation of the whole Bible<sup>5</sup> was completed by the Peking Translation Committee in 1874 and is known as the Peking Version. This vernacular translation was the work primarily of five missionaries: Blodget, Burdon, Edkins, Martin (on a more limited basis), and Schereschewsky, along with their Chinese coworkers.<sup>6</sup> The missionaries were good friends and were able to refer to existing translations, such as Marshman's and

<sup>3</sup> Jost Zetzsche, *The Bible in China: The History of the Union Version or the Culmination of Protestant Missionary Bible Translation in China* (Monumenta Serica 45; Nettetal: Steyler, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of these two translations, their relationship to one another, and their relationship to Basset's partial translation of the NT see Zhao Xiaoyang, "An Examination of the Relationship Among the Marshman, Morrison, and Basset Versions of the Bible" (trans. Carissa Fletcher), *Chinese Studies in History* 46.2 (Winter 2012–2013): 6–34. Pp. 17–30 discuss the controversy over Marshman's possible plagiarism of Morrison's NT and his Chinese grammar. See also Zetzsche, *History of the Union Version*, 49–54, as well as William Muirhead's comment on Marshman's controversial Chinese grammar in *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China* (ed. W. J. Lewis et al.; Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission, 1890), 35: "the propriety and utility of his having been so engaged are more than doubtful," whereas "Dr. Morrison and in part Dr. Milne deserve special mention as the pioneers of Protestant missions in China. ... As a first effort of the kind, their translation of the Old and New Testaments cannot be too highly commended." See also the later objections to Marshman's work by his son in Zetzsche, *History of the Union Version*, 48 n. 121. In 1859, he said, "it is now valuable chiefly as a memorial of his missionary zeal and his literary perseverance. ... At this distance of time, and on an impartial review of the circumstances and wants of the Serampore Mission, the appropriation of Mr. Marshman's strength to a distant object of doubtful expediency cannot be regarded without some feelings of regret."

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of the first Mandarin NT (the Nanking Version; 1st ed., 1856) and Burns's Mandarin Psalter, see *ibid.*, 141–45.

<sup>6</sup> Irene Eber, *The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible: S.I.J. Schereschewsky (1831–1906)* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 107; James Dennis, *Centennial Survey of Foreign Missions* (New York: Revell, 1902), 135; Zetzsche, *History of the Union Version*, 145–47.

Morrison's.<sup>7</sup> For the Greek NT, each translator was assigned a portion to translate, which would be circulated to the others for feedback. This feedback would be incorporated by the original translator and a second version circulated again, which would be followed by a meeting for discussion.<sup>8</sup> A short time after beginning the translation of the NT in 1864, the team decided that Schereschewsky should focus on translating the entire OT.<sup>9</sup> As a Lithuanian Jew who converted to Christianity, a former student in a rabbinic school, and a fluent reader of both the Hebrew Bible and Jewish commentaries, he was uniquely gifted for the task. This complete Mandarin translation of the Bible by these five missionaries would later become the basis for the (vernacular) Union Version.

With the proliferation of translations since the 1823 translation of Morrison and Milne, the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China decided at their 1890 meeting in Shanghai to collaboratively produce a "Union Version" of the Chinese Bible. With the support of various Bible societies (British, American, and Scottish), such an effort would have the best chance at producing a high-quality translation that would be the translation of choice for Chinese Protestants for many years to come. This conference also decided that this "version" would actually be three versions: two literary (high *wenli* and easy *wenli*; *wenli* [文理] referring to literary Chinese) and one vernacular (in Mandarin). After some discussion and out of deference to other versions, it was at first only indirectly stated that the Peking Version would be the basis for the vernacular Union Version.<sup>10</sup> In practice, the Peking Version indeed served as the primary basis, as shown by its being included in its own column on the first drafts of the NT translation.<sup>11</sup> For the OT, from the beginning only Schereschewky's translation in the Peking Version was singled out as a basis for the new Mandarin translation of the OT.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, "there was a general feeling that in the Mandarin version to be prepared there is need to have a more careful reference to the original."<sup>13</sup> The first group of transla-

<sup>7</sup> Eber, *Jewish Bishop*, 110.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 109. Zetzsche, *History of the Union Version*, 148, notes that this discussion included consultation with leading commentaries.

<sup>9</sup> Eber, *Jewish Bishop*, 112.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 151, 186 (incl. n. 44). See *Records of the General Conference*, xlii, which recommends "an Executive Committee of ten representative men ... to whom shall be committed the work of securing an improved version of the Old and New Testaments in Mandarin." They were to "select and secure the services of a corps of competent scholars for the work of revision, consisting of not less than seven men, to be known as the Committee on Mandarin Revision." On p. xliii, this "Committee on Revision shall make constant and careful use of the union Mandarin version of the New Testament, prepared in Peking and widely employed in the Mandarin-speaking regions of China, of the recent version prepared by Dr. [Griffith] John, and of the Medhurst version formerly in extensive use in Central China; and in Old Testament revision, of the version of Bishop Schereschewsky."

<sup>11</sup> Zetzsche, *History of the Union Version*, 255, 279.

<sup>12</sup> See n. 10. See also the following comment in Dennis, *Centennial Survey of Foreign Missions*, 135: "The services of Dr. Schereschewsky upon both the original translation [Peking Version] and the revision [Union Version] have been of the greatest value."

<sup>13</sup> D. Z. Sheffield, "Report of the Committee on Mandarin Revision," in *Records of the General Conference*, 515. Eber, *Jewish Bishop*, 186–87, provides examples of the Union Version's more literal translation technique. See also Zetzsche, *History of the Union Version*, 150, 154.

tors were Blodget, Mateer,<sup>14</sup> Owen, Hykes, Bramfitt, Goodrich, and Nevius,<sup>15</sup> and others who participated at various stages along the way included Baller, Woods, Clarke, Lewis, Allan, Sydenstricker, Lowrie, Rees, and Aiken.<sup>16</sup>

The vernacular Union translation was completed twenty-nine years later in 1919. The process was so long that only one of the original translators was still alive when it was finished (Goodrich).<sup>17</sup> The project had bridged the transition from the final years of the Qing dynasty (and the end of millennia of dynastic rule in China) to the era of the republic which began under Sun Yat-sen in 1911. The May Fourth Movement, named after demonstrations on May 4, 1919, promoted among other things literature in the vernacular, which would elevate the vernacular Union Version to prominence over the literary versions. This was ironic because originally the Mandarin version was thought to be less important than the two *wenli* versions.<sup>18</sup> Since then, other translations have been completed (e.g. Lu Zhen Zhong, CNV) and even a revision of the Union Version in 2010 (RCUV), but none has come close to supplanting the original vernacular Union Version.

### III. RECEPTION OF THE UNION VERSION

Perhaps it goes with the territory that a translation of the Bible will also be met with some criticism. This was true of the Union Version even during the early stages of the translation process. For example, Schereschewsky, who believed that the Union translators could not improve upon his translation of the OT and was probably offended by the mere idea of another, criticized the Union Version project for involving too many people and for lacking the necessary expertise.<sup>19</sup> More recently, others have pointed out that some of the language of the Union Version needs revision for greater clarity for today's Chinese readers, or that the translation even occasionally reflects a Christian bias.<sup>20</sup> There has also been an ongoing con-

---

<sup>14</sup> He also chaired the Executive Committee for the Mandarin Union Version. See *Records of the General Conference*, lx.

<sup>15</sup> "Meeting of the Board of Revisers," *The Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal* 23 (1892): 25; Zetzsche, *History of the Union Version*, 217.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 218–19, 293, 308, 314–15.

<sup>17</sup> Eber, *Jewish Bishop*, 186.

<sup>18</sup> Zetzsche, *History of the Union Version*, 220: "it was not considered to be of as lasting or historical impact as the classical translations."

<sup>19</sup> Eber, *Jewish Bishop*, 149, 152, 154–55.

<sup>20</sup> Chen, Yiyi, "The Developing Role of the Hebrew Bible in Modern China," in *The Jewish-Chinese Nexus: A Meeting of Civilizations* (ed. M. Avrum Ehrlich; London: Routledge, 2008), 153, 156, 162. He discusses only one classic example of *'almah* ("virgin") in Isa 7:14 and himself opts for an even more debatable option ("chief queen," which does not fit the usage of *'almah* elsewhere in the OT). On p. 160, Chen explains why he declined the editor's request to "list 10–20 terms" along with his "suggestion of how they should be translated into Chinese, with brief explanations and justifications," although p. 163 n. 11 lists twelve such terms (YHWH, Elohim, Israel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Hebrew, sin, commandment, law, ord[er]nances, Shabbat). Without further explanation (nine additional words listed on p. 57 in the article cited below notwithstanding ["covenant," "sacrifice," "temple," "high place," "*Ruab*," "land," "people," "tribe," "nation"]), it is hard to see how the Union translation of these terms reflects a specifically Christian theological perspective, especially for proper nouns. On p. 160, Chen calls himself "a secular scholar who was trained in the general background of [sic] Ancient Near East and the cultural

troversy over whether the Union Version was translated from English versions, rather than directly from Greek and Hebrew. With mixed motives, Sydenstricker made this accusation regarding the OT in 1908 when it had only been partially translated,<sup>21</sup> and this claim continues to be made today about the Union Version, both in print<sup>22</sup> and anecdotally.

Criticism of a cherished translation can easily make Christians feel uncomfortable. How should we handle criticism of the Union Version? To answer this question, we need to understand (1) the goal and (2) the limitations of every act of translation, including that of the Bible. First, the goal of every translation, whether of a modern movie script or of the Bible, is fidelity to the original and clarity in the target language. For example, the original English script of the movie *Kung Fu Panda* can be compared to the translated Chinese version for accuracy, and the latter version can be evaluated for clarity to Chinese viewers. For the Union Version, it can be compared to the Greek and Hebrew biblical texts for accuracy of translation and evaluated for clarity to Chinese readers. Without getting into detail here, the Union Version on this basis should be considered a very good translation overall.

On the other hand, there is no need to insist that the Union Version is a perfect translation. In other words, it is a very good translation but not a perfect translation. The same applies to the many other very good translations of the Bible into modern languages of the world. Even Christian readers of translations of the Bible

history of ancient Palestine.” His Ph.D. is from Cornell University in Biblical Studies. His dissertation was completed in May 2000 under Gary Rendsburg, a well-known scholar who currently holds the Blanche and Irving Laurie Chair in Jewish History in the Department of Jewish Studies at Rutgers University. In Chen’s “Understanding Israelite Religion: New Challenges for Chinese Bible Translations,” *Religion Compass* 1.1 (2007): 50–60, he relatedly refers to a “Christian agenda” behind the Union Version, which he believes can sometimes be a barrier to understanding “original Israelite religion” (pp. 52–53). On p. 54, he laments that non-Christian biblical scholars have “almost never” been invited to join recent translation projects, which he criticizes as “reworks of the Union Version, with little if any improvement,” having “generally a poorer standard of editorship,” and lacking “team members who are formerly trained in the academic fields of Palestinian archaeology and biblical research” such that frequently “these translations are almost completely ignorant of the latest progress in the study of Israelite religions.” Chen probably sees himself as properly trained for this task and is guided by a belief that the Hebrew Bible is primarily an expression of ancient Israelite religion. He calls the Union Version and its offshoots “New Testament-centric and Christianity-centric” and claims that they do not portray “Israelite religion ... as the original authors intended, but as Christian eyes see it [and cites Isa 7:14].” But Chen overestimates the value of archaeology and other historical research into ancient Israelite religion for Bible translation, which will always be a primarily linguistic task. Neither does citing one controversial example (Isa 7:14) sufficiently prove his point about a “Christian agenda.” Finally, his beliefs about Israelite religion and the Hebrew Bible as law-focused and non-messianic (p. 54) are debatable, as shown both by the diversity of scholarly literature over the ages and by the debates about the meaning of the OT frequently recorded in the NT (i.e. Jesus and the apostles vs. non-believing Jews).

<sup>21</sup> Zetzsche, *History of the Union Version*, 308–11. Schereschewsky had made this same claim about Chinese translations that preceded his. See Eber, *Jewish Bishop*, 154–55.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. George Kam Wah Mak, *Protestant Bible Translation and Mandarin as the National Language of China* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 136–37 n. 218. See also Chen, “New Challenges for Chinese Bible Translations,” 53: “The Union translation took the Revised version of 1885 in English as its source text.” Seemingly reversing course, he then refers to “translators of the Hebrew Bible” and calls the Union version “an excellent piece of work reflecting the highest editorial and scholarly standard,” though not without its problems (see n. 20).

are well aware of occasionally encountering a passage that does not seem to be translated clearly. Those who compare translations or have knowledge of biblical languages will also occasionally encounter a passage that could have been translated with a slightly different meaning. In these situations, perhaps another translator would have produced a clearer or more accurate translation. But even if variations that arise from the decision of a particular translator or translation team are left aside, there are other inherent limitations in the act of translation itself that make a perfect translation, even for an ideal translator, impossible.

Before explaining why a perfect translation of the Bible is impossible, we need to explain the value and necessity of a very good translation, such as the Union Version. In a very good translation, the gospel of Jesus Christ and all major Christian doctrine is faithfully communicated in the target language. Christians have indeed been given “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Pet 1:3), and the faithful work of translators has enabled us to understand the message of Scripture so that we need not ask, “Did God really say?” (Gen 3:1). If this were not true, then evangelism and the health of the church worldwide would be severely compromised because most Christians do not know biblical languages and hence could not be assured of the teachings of Scripture. Instead, Christians should have confidence in very good translations of the Bible, even though there will inevitably be a small percentage of each translation that is open to reasonable, honest debate.

After all, it is the original, canonical text of Scripture in the biblical languages that the Bible teaches is “inspired” (2 Tim 3:16). Such an affirmation does not automatically extend to every aspect of a particular translation, even if it is a very good one. Although we are indebted to faithful Bible translators such as those mentioned above (e.g. Morrison, Schereschewsky, Mateer, Goodrich, Baller), we should not confuse them with biblical authors who were carried along by the Holy Spirit such that everything that they wrote was the very Word of God in all its truth and authority (2 Pet 1:20–21). Although godly translators were probably also helped by the Spirit in their work, the Spirit’s help with translation should not be equated with the Spirit’s help during the writing of Scripture by the apostles and prophets. As Article X of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy states, “We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original.”

Why, then, is a perfect translation of the Bible, even for an ideal translator, impossible? One basic reason why a perfect translation of the Bible is impossible is because of fundamental differences between languages, specifically the biblical languages and modern languages, such as Chinese. For example, a word in biblical Greek or Hebrew sometimes does not have an exact equivalent in Chinese.<sup>23</sup> An obvious example in the history of Chinese Bible translation is the drawn-out controversy over how to translate “God” (Hb. *elohim*; Gk. *theos*). Both Jesuit missionar-

---

<sup>23</sup> For a listing, see Zhao, “Marshman, Morrison, and Basset Versions of the Bible,” 16.

ies and later Protestant missionaries debated for nearly a century each<sup>24</sup> over terms such as *Tianzhu* (天主), *Shen* (神), *Shangdi* (上帝), and others. In addition, sometimes a word in biblical Greek or Hebrew does not appear often enough in the Bible or in related ancient texts to accurately determine its meaning based on its usage. Whether readers of a translation are aware of it or not, this kind of uncertainty in meaning remains even after the word has been translated. In Gen 28:12, the Hebrew word *sullam* appears only once in the OT. From the context, it is something that bridges heaven and earth and that can be traversed by angels. Beyond that, little more can be known with certainty, and translators have accordingly chosen a word such as “ladder” or “stairway” that fits this context.

Languages not only have fundamental differences in the meanings of their words but also in their grammar and syntax. An obvious difference between Chinese and biblical languages is that Chinese is an uninflected language, whereas Hebrew and especially Greek are inflected languages. For example, most Chinese nouns cannot be expressed in terms of a generic plural (besides personal nouns to which 們 can be added), whereas both Hebrew and Greek nouns have generic plural forms. Thus, when translating a plural noun into Chinese, the translator must decide whether to translate the plural sense explicitly, and if so whether to do it with “some [些],” “many [許多],” or “all [萬, 列, 眾],” none of which exactly captures the generic plural sense in the original. Other grammatical and syntactical differences between Chinese and biblical languages include the lack of a definite article in Chinese, different verbal syntax, and different word order. Analogous to the uncertainty concerning the meaning of an individual word mentioned above, sometimes translators also encounter Greek or Hebrew syntactical constructions whose meanings are uncertain.

Although study of biblical languages provides for a more accurate study of Scripture than would be possible otherwise, such study does not remove all uncertainty concerning the meanings of obscure words, unusual syntactical constructions, or difficult passages. Occasionally, the Greek or Hebrew text itself has variant readings represented in known manuscripts that affect translation.<sup>25</sup> In these situations, Bible translators are put into the difficult position of being forced to translate something whose meaning is uncertain. They cannot leave blanks in their translation! The decisions that translators make in these situations will typically depend on their understanding of the passage as a whole. A translator’s overall understanding of a passage will often be correct, but occasional subtle, even subconscious, influences from a particular theological framework and from familiar translations are

<sup>24</sup> Eber, *Jewish Bishop*, 207.

<sup>25</sup> The translation of the Union Version involved deciding how to use the differing Greek textual bases of the King James Version (KJV) and the English Revised Version (ERV), published in 1885. The KJV was based on the Textus Receptus, whereas the ERV translators made use of critical texts such as Westcott and Hort that incorporated more recently discovered manuscripts. Ultimately, a mediating proposal was set forth, “[t]hat the text that underlies the revised English versions of the Old and New Testaments be made the basis, with the privilege of any deviations in accordance with the Authorized Version” (*Records of the General Conference*, xl, xli, xliii; repeated for all three versions). For further discussion, see Mak, *Protestant Bible Translation*, 133–45.

unavoidable. Thankfully, the effect of these influences can be detected in the translation itself and corrected through revision or additional scholarly literature.<sup>26</sup>

The influence of familiar translations of the Bible on translators leads back to the aforementioned controversy over whether the Union Version was translated from an English version or directly from Greek and Hebrew. The English translations that influenced the Union Version translators were the King James Version (KJV) and what is now known as the (English) Revised Version (1885; abbreviated as ERV). There indeed had been a recommendation that “in order to secure harmony in first drafts of translation, great weight be given to the Revised English Version [not to be confused with another modern translation with the same name] of the Bible as an interpretation of the meaning of the original text.”<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, there was also a “Committee on the Greek text” which was responsible for discussing the variations between the Greek texts underlying the KJV and ERV.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, Mak remarks, “It is therefore unfair to claim that the *Union Versions*, at least with regard to the New Testament, were translated entirely from an English Bible.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Goodrich testified that his fellow translator Woods “was our best Greek scholar” who “knew the precise meaning of every Greek word and particle” and that the translation team debated “what the Greek says.”<sup>30</sup> Goodrich also called another fellow-translator Clarke “a good Greek scholar” and was himself on record as concerned with fidelity to Greek and Hebrew.<sup>31</sup> For the OT, insofar as the Union Version wanted to produce a more literal translation than Schereschewsky’s, which itself was thoroughly engaged with the Hebrew text, the Union translation of the OT probably should not be viewed as being entirely translated from an English version either,<sup>32</sup> even if the Union translators’ Hebrew expertise was sometimes questioned. Ultimately, the issue is not that the Union translation was influenced by existing English translations (or that it aligns with Christian doctrine, for that matter), but how faithful it is to the best Greek and Hebrew biblical manuscripts available then and now.<sup>33</sup> With probably only a few ancient exceptions (e.g., the LXX), every translation of the Bible is influenced by existing translations, and it should be expected that the Union translators alternately consulted Greek and Hebrew texts, the KJV and ERV, existing Chinese translations, and perhaps

---

<sup>26</sup> It is unlikely that this effect amounts to the “Christian agenda” for which Chen argues (see n. 20 above).

<sup>27</sup> “Meeting of the Board of Revisers,” 26.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>29</sup> Mak, *Protestant Bible Translation*, 137 n. 218 (continued from previous page).

<sup>30</sup> Zetzsche, *History of the Union Version*, 256–57.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 259, 325.

<sup>32</sup> See Eber, *Jewish Bishop*, 153, and nn. 10, 13 above.

<sup>33</sup> It seems unlikely that the possible retranslation of the Bible in self-conscious accordance with socialism and Chinese nationalism would meet this standard well. The CCC-TSPM statement released on March 27, 2018 refers to developing biblical research talent to “retranslate the Bible” (重译圣经) within the framework of these ideologies (<http://www.ccctspm.org/cppccinfo/10283>). See also p. 6 of Bob Fu’s testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee on October 2, 2018 (<https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/10-02-18%20Fu%20Testimony.pdf>).



even others.<sup>34</sup> It also should be noted that the criticism of the ERV for being too literal<sup>35</sup> actually mitigates the effect of this version on the Union translation.

Therefore, Bible translation will always involve some interpretation and some approximation. With the help of available resources, a translator must determine what is the most likely meaning of a word, phrase, or passage in the biblical language (interpretation; see discussion of *sullam* above) and then translate it as accurately as possible using the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax available in the target language (approximation; see discussion of plural nouns above). Although occasional uncertainties and fundamental differences between languages do not prevent a translation from communicating the gospel and all major Christian doctrines, they do make a perfect translation impossible.

Another basic reason why a perfect Bible translation is impossible (in terms of its longevity) is because the target language changes over time. Some words or phrases fall into disuse and effectively drop out of the vernacular, whereas others are added. Language can develop so much over time that it can be difficult for a modern fluent speaker to understand a text written in their own language but from several centuries ago. Insofar as the criteria for a Bible translation is not only fidelity to the original but also clarity in the target language, the development of spoken languages means that we should expect that even the best Bible translations will eventually become outdated. Such a translation of course cannot be considered a perfect translation.

Since a perfect Bible translation is impossible, even the best translation will always be susceptible to some legitimate criticism. Therefore, Christians should not be surprised by criticisms of translations of the Bible and should not be too quick to reject a very good translation of the Bible just because it is not perfect. Instead, we should first ask whether it communicates the gospel and Christian doctrine clearly and in accordance with its original expression in Greek and Hebrew. If there are occasional places where accuracy or clarity may be improved, revision or additional scholarly publication are options. For this purpose, having some Christians and especially some Christian ministers and scholars who know biblical languages will be of service to the church and the preservation of the gospel.

#### IV. CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE UNION VERSION

What will the next 100 years hold for the Union Version? Only God knows. Ultimately, translations come and go because vernacular languages change and sometimes modern research can clarify the meaning of biblical languages (e.g. by discovery of additional ancient biblical manuscripts). Nevertheless, “the word of our God stands forever” (Isa 40:8). It is not our purpose to say whether the Union

---

<sup>34</sup> Although the ERV did not yet exist, this is essentially what Morrison did (Zetzsche, *History of the Union Version*, 37–39). Marshman’s translation of the NT was likewise influenced by existing English and Armenian translations (Lassar was Armenian) and Griesbach’s critical edition of the NT (*ibid.*, 46–47). Even Schereschewsky consulted translations (*ibid.*, 152).

<sup>35</sup> Brooke Foss Westcott, *Some Lessons of the Revised Version of the New Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; New York: James Pott, 1897), 2, refers to the criticism of “pedantic literality.”

Version should continue to be revised, or whether yet another Chinese translation should be attempted. This is a decision for Chinese readers and especially the Chinese church to make, and most seem quite content to continue using the Union Version for the foreseeable future. Practicality and tradition remain real and legitimate factors. Our more modest goal in this article has been to recall key aspects of the history of the Union Version and to help facilitate objective reflection on the Union Version with an eye to the future.