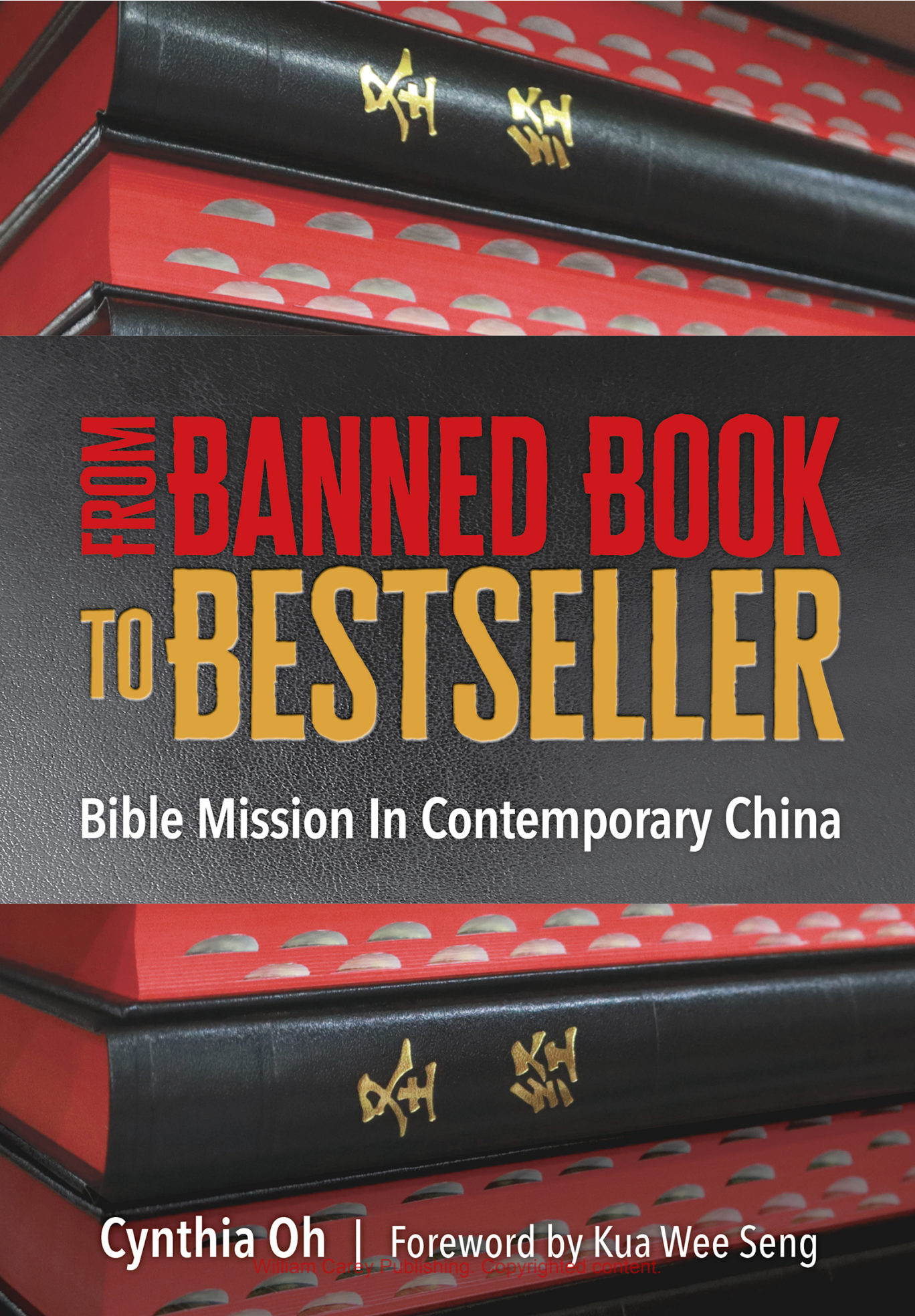


FROM BANNED BOOK TO BESTSELLER

Bible Mission In Contemporary China

Cynthia Oh | Foreword by Kua Wee Seng

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From Banned Book to Bestseller: The Bible Mission in Contemporary China

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Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA | www.frontierventures.org

Cover and Interior Designer: Mike Riester

ISBNs: 978-1-64508-582-9 (paperback)
978-1-64508-630-7 (color hardback)
978-1-64508-584-3 (epub)

Printed Worldwide

28 27 26 25 24 1 2 3 4 5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024941548

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1
Blazing the Trails

The Bible in China–The Seventh Century to the 1950s

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. —John 1:1

He decided to carry the true Sutras (of the True Way) with him, and observing the course of the winds, he made his way (to China) through difficulties and perils.

—An extract from the inscription on the Nestorian Stone Tablet

The Nestorians, Franciscans, and Jesuits

Who first brought Bibles into China, and how was the Word of God received? The Scripture was likely first carried into China in AD 635 by a group of Christians known as the Nestorians. This fascinating story is told through a historical artifact—a 2.8-meter-tall limestone tablet—standing today in the Beilin Museum in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province. Discovered in 1625, it takes us back to the seventh century when men arrived from the Church of the East during the reign of Emperor Tang Taizong.

It is worth reproducing a key excerpt inscribed in both Chinese and Syriac recording the Nestorian's missionary zeal, Bible translation work, and their exceptional reception by the emperor:

> And behold there was a highly virtuous man named A-lo-pen in the Kingdom of Ta-Chin. Auguring from the azure sky, he decided to carry the true Sutras (of the True Way) with him, and observing the course of the winds, he made his way (to China) through difficulties and perils. Thus, in the Ninth year of the period named Cheng-Kuan (A.D. 635), he arrived at Chang An. The Emperor dispatched his Minister Duke Fang Huan Ling, with a guard of honor, to the western suburb to meet the visitor and conduct him to the palace. The Sutras (Scripture) were translated at the Imperial Library. (His Majesty) investigated The Way in his own Forbidden apartment, and being convinced of its correctness and truth, he gave special orders for its propagation.[1]

It seems that the Nestorians were allowed to translate the Scripture and share the Christian faith in China during the Tang Dynasty. However, their work ended abruptly when the imperial edict of 845 snuffed out religious activities, affecting not only the Nestorian Christians but other religious groups as well.

1 Sweeny, "The Nestorian Stele Content."

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In 986, a Christian monk from Najran (in modern-day Saudi Arabia) who had been sent to China by the Nestorian Patriarch in 982 was reported to have said, "Christianity is extinct in China; the native Christians have perished in one way or an-other; the church which they had has been destroyed and there is only one Christian left in the land."[2] While his observation may not be applied to the whole of China, one can sense the dismal state of the Nestorian Church at the time.

The skies seemed overcast at the close of the tenth century for Christianity and the Bible in China. The next attempt to bring the Word of God to China was made by John of Montecorvino, the first Roman Catholic missionary from the Order of Friars Minor, also known as the Franciscans. He reached Beijing in 1294, almost three centuries after Nestorian Christianity was last heard of after the fall of the Tang Dynasty.

John of Montecorvino translated the New Testament and Psalms into the Mongolian language, which was then the lingua franca of the Yuan Dynasty—a task seldom undertaken by the Catholics, who believed that the Bible should be kept in Latin. He inspired another Franciscan monk, Gabriele Allegra, who later in the twentieth century successfully translated the Chinese Catholic Bible, the Studium Biblicum Version, which is the de facto authorized Chinese Catholic Bible used today.

Under John of Montecorvino's leadership, the gospel spread to Fujian Province, a three-month's journey from Beijing. From his letters, it was reported that he baptized six thousand Mongols in Beijing. He was even appointed by the Vatican to be the archbishop of Beijing and primate of all the East in 1307. However, his ministry did not survive the fall of the Mongols in 1368.[3]

More than two centuries later, in 1582, the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci reached China. The light was rekindled. He and the early Jesuits saw the need for a basic Chinese Christian vocabulary. Hence, they translated Bible stories and Gospel readings for liturgical use. Subsequently, Jean Basset (1662–1707), a French priest, translated part of the New Testament into Chinese but died before he could complete it.

The eighteenth century closed with a complete Chinese Bible still not in sight and the future of Christianity in China uncertain.

Protestant Missionaries and Bible Societies (1800s to Mid-1900s)

In 1804, a group of Christians in England led by William Wilberforce captured the same vision of carrying the Scripture to different peoples and lands. They formed the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS). Interestingly, the manuscript by Jean Basset, which the BFBS had considered publishing in the same year the society was founded, was preserved in the British Museum.[4]

Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary to China, carried a copy of Basset's manuscript with him when he set sail from Britain in 1807. Because the East India Company had prohibited missionaries from entering China, Morrison, a British citizen, sought to sail via America. After arriving in New York, he had to obtain all the necessary documents and

2 "History of Early Christianity in China."

3 Moffett, "John of Montecorvino."

4 Cann, "UBS Bible Work in China: From Inception to 1959."

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letters to ensure his safety and residence in the American quarters of Canton. On board the vessel, an American merchant asked if Morrison "really expected to make an impression on the idolatry of the Great Chinese Empire." Morrison replied, "No, sir, I expect God will."[5] It was this trust in God that saw Morrison through the coming challenges. As Broomhall put it, "His lot was maintained by a Higher Power than the world's most powerful monopoly."[6]

By the 1800s, the Bible had been translated into seventy-one languages of the world but not into Mandarin. But with Robert Morrison, this was about to change. Upon arriving in China, Morrison, who had started to learn Mandarin back in London, immediately embarked on Bible translation, using Basset's manuscript as a reference. In 1811, Morrison received the first grant from BFBS for his translation work. This marked the beginning of BFBS's support of the Bible mission in China, which continues to this day.

Under the hostile environment of the Qing Dynasty, challenges and opposition abounded in the Bible translation work. In secrecy, Morrison learned the Chinese language as locals were forbidden by the Qing government to teach the language to foreigners. This meant spending long hours without going out, cabin fever, and ill health during his initial years. These lines stand out from his letters home, "I feel the confinement a good deal," "I am under the continual dread of the oppressor," "The natives who assist me are hunted from place to place and sometimes seized." Later, printing blocks created for the printing of the New Testament were seized by the Chinese authorities and destroyed. Men who helped Morrison create the wooden blocks were also arrested. One can imagine the devastation Morrison felt.

In 1810, when the first Scripture portion was printed, it had to be camouflaged with a false cover page. As Scripture became more available throughout China, "the government decreed the death penalty for any European preparing or disseminating Christian literature and exile to northern Manchuria for any Chinese deluded by them."[7]

In 1813, Morrison was grateful to be joined by the second Protestant missionary to China, William Milnes, who assisted him in the Bible translation work. To understand the extent of the difficulty of language learning, one only need to turn to these famous lines by Milnes, "To acquire the Chinese language is a work for men with bodies of brass, lungs of steel, heads of oak, hearts of apostles, memories of angels, and lives of Methuselah."[8] Amid these challenges, Morrison and Milnes, together with their Chinese assistants, persisted in the long and formidable task of giving the Word of God to the Chinese in their language.



A copy of the first Chinese Bible, translated by Robert Morrison and published in 1823 by BFBS in several volumes. Photo supplied by Cambridge University Library.

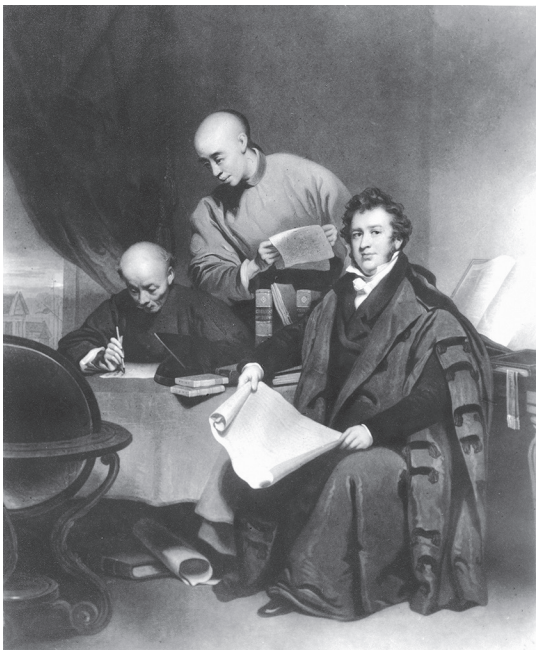
5 Hallihan, "Robert Morrison, Bible Translator of China, 1782–1834."

6 Broomhall, *Bible in China*, 55.

7 Nida, *The Book of a Thousand Tongues*, 71.

8 Doyle, "William Milnes."

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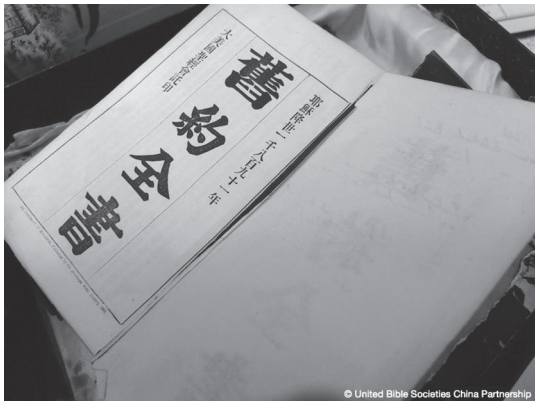


A painting depicting Robert Morrison and his assistants working on the translation of the Bible into Chinese. Photo supplied by Cambridge University Library.

The Chinese Bible was finally completed in 1819 but was not published until 1823, sixteen years after Morrison arrived in China and started work on it. However, by this time he was the lone missionary to witness the first copy of the Chinese Bible rolling off the printing press in Malacca, a location chosen earlier by Milnes because the Chinese empire was still a closed land. Morrison had lost both his wife, Mary, who died of cholera in 1821, and his ministry partner, Milnes, who died of lung disease in 1822.[9] Milnes himself had lost his wife, Rachel, in 1819.[10] In the midst of these tragic losses, Morrison saw the fruition of a dream—the message of hope and salvation finally being made available for the first time in China.

Deeply aware of the limitations of his pioneering translation, Morrison himself began a revision process. Other and later Chinese Bible translations were also done with the support of BFBS and the American Bible Society (ABS), which started to support Bible missions in China in 1833. This support included the translation, publication, and distribution of various versions of the Chinese Bible translated by Joshua Marshman, Walter Medhurst, Karl Gützlaff, and the Board of Delegates (formed by a group of Protestant missionaries).[11]

Amazingly, by the late 1800s, there were about twenty-seven versions of the Chinese Bible done by missionaries sent by mission societies from different countries and church denominations. And this began to present a problem. Protestant missionaries in China saw that without a unified version of the Chinese Bible, without a common name for "God" and "Jesus," they were running the danger of "speaking of different deities" in the ears of the Chinese! However, due to translation and theological differences, discussion of a unified version had been fraught with difficulties.



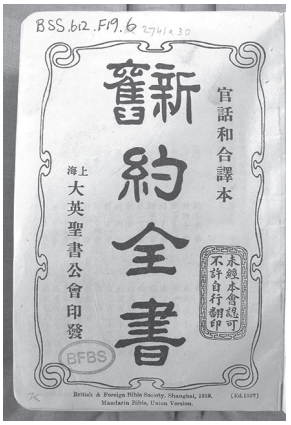
1891 Chinese Old Testament by ABS.

9 Doyle, "William Milne."

10 Hallihan, "Robert Morrison, Bible Translator."

11 Cann, "UBS Bible Work."

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1919 CUV printed by BFBS.

A breakthrough came at the 1890 General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China held in Shanghai—a formal proposal for a unified version was approved as consensus was reached to translate the Mandarin Union Version of the Chinese Bible, later known as the Chinese Union Version (CUV). BFBS, ABS, and the National Bible Society of Scotland, which began contributing to the Bible missions in China in 1863, gladly came together to support the Bible translation.

The unified version saw the light of day three decades later in 1919, a translation project that survived the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), the collapse of the Qing Dynasty (1912) and World War I (1914–1918). Today, more than a century later, the CUV continues to be the de facto authorized version used by the Chinese Protestant Christians with its printing and distribution in China supported by the Bible Societies. More will be said about the CUV in chapter 17.


CUV Bible translators with their respective Chinese language assistants. L-R: Frederick W. Baller, Liu Dacheng, C. Goodrich, Zhang Xixin, Calvin Wilson Mateer, Wang Yuande, Spencer Lewis, and Li Chunfan.

Bibles in Local Dialects and Ethnic Minority Languages

Besides Mandarin, the Bible was also translated into Chinese dialects and ethnic minority languages by some missionaries and their local assistants. During this period, China still had millions of people who were not familiar with the Chinese language and needed the Scripture in their own dialects. Furthermore, contrary to popular assumptions, dialects were spoken by all classes of the community, not just the uneducated.

By the first three decades of 1900, several Scripture publications appeared for the first time with the support of the Bible Societies. This included some first portions of the Bible in twenty-six dialects. Between 1850 and 1933, the Bible Societies published full Bibles in Xiamen, Guangdong, Fuzhou, Shantou, Shanghai (1908), Soochow (1908), Taichow (1914), Ningpo (1901), Hinghua (1912), and Hakka (1916) dialects.[12] New Testaments were published in Jianming and Wenzhou dialects.

12 American Bible Society, "American Bible Society (ABS) in China 1931–1966, Pre-1930"; and Cann, "UBS Bible Work."

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