BOOK REVIEWS


It is well-known that Martin Luther’s translation of Hebrew and Greek texts into German Bible contributed greatly to the standardization of vernacular language and the improvement of the literary style of written German. Similarly William Tyndale’s translation of Hebrew and Greek texts into English Bible about the same time influenced the King James Version translation seventy years later, and also had huge impacts on English culture and literature. Mak follows the lead of mission historian Broomhall in The Bible in China and tries to correlate the translation of Chinese Mandarin Bibles with the development of Mandarin into the national official language of China, and to highlight these Bibles’ contributions to the later Chinese literature.

Chinese written language was unified in the second century BCE, and in the 19th century the medium was in wényán, with many different spoken dialects. Late Qing intellectuals saw the wealth and power of Western countries and realized the importance of having a unified national spoken language with corresponding writing style. Western missionaries in China also saw the need to translate the Bible for wider circulation and reading, so they produced several Mandarin Bibles from 1856 to 1919, including Nanking Version New Testament (NT) (1856/57), the Peking Version NT (1872), Schereschewsky’s Old Testament (OT) (1874), Griffith John’s NT (1889), Schereschewsky’s revised OT together with the Peking Version NT (1908). Finally in the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries in Shanghai in 1890, they decided to work together to produce a Chinese Union Version (CUV) Bible for the Chinese churches of all denominations. They agreed to produce a Mandarin version, as well as a wényán, and a light wényán version. When the entire Mandarin Bible was published in 1919, it happened to coincide with the Chinese May Fourth Movement. Politically it was a protest of discrimination against Chinese national rights in the post-first World War political arena. Culturally it promoted changes in the Chinese culture and system in order to speed up the adaptations of Western science and democracy. Particularly the leaders of the Movement, many being Western-educated professors of Peking University, promoted the use of Mandarin as the standard language for writing and speaking for the whole China.

In Chapter 1, “The Emergence of the Mandarin Protestant Bible,” Mak chronicles the three Bible societies, the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), the American Bible Society, and the National Bible Society of Scotland, working toward a Bible translation which could adapt the three major Mandarin dialects to become a common (tōngxīng) Mandarin.

In Chapter 2, Mak details the institutional patronage of three Bible societies, especially BFBS, with their support of translations, printing, and distributions of the Bibles throughout the whole China. Through their support, 155,600,833 copies of the Mandarin Bibles (in whole or part) were distributed in 1877-1936, and it was one of the most widely circulated Mandarin books in China. Mak points out that BFBS also exerted its control of the translation by
limiting the Greek texts chosen for translation, and following the example of
King James English Bible by using the “without note or comment” principle,
consistent with their belief of self-sufficiency of the Scripture and an individ-
ual’s right and ability to interpret the Bible. Mak claims that because CUV
Mandarin Bible is without note or comment, it is free of theological bias, so it
has been accepted by Chinese Christians for almost 100 years.

Chapter 3, “The Use of the Mandarin Bible and the Promotion of Manda-
rin as guoyu (national language) in Republican China,” is the main thesis
of the book. Mak argues that the use of Mandarin Bible played a role in pro-
moting Mandarin as the national language of China and in eliminating illi-
teracy. Its use encouraged the idea of belonging to the Chinese nation and
aligned the church to the national aspiration, and showed that Chinese
Christians are still Chinese. Because the Mandarin Bible was widely dis-
tributed, it was used within and outside the church, even in language textbooks
as examples of good literature. By this it played a part in helping to spread
and standardize the use of Mandarin in formal educational setting.

Similar to Luther’s German Bible and the King James English Bible, Mak
finds some evidences that Mandarin Bibles also influenced Chinese language
in lexicon and grammar. In Chapter 4, he identifies five neologisms, repre-
senting new ideas. In Chapter 5, Mak examines the use of four grammatical
features in the Mandarin Bibles which was adopted into later literature. Mak
does not cite a paper by Strandenaes about the impact of the Mandarin Bi-
bles in dictionaries published in PRC.

The author states that the missionaries’ efforts to translate the Bible into
a common Mandarin paved the development of Mandarin into a national
language (59). This claim seems too strong because in other places, Mak says
it played a role. Also in 1920 Beiyang government ordered all elementary
schools to teach Mandarin as the national language. It was only one year
after CUV was published, and before the Mandarin Bibles were widely dis-
tributed. At that time Christians only accounted for less than one percent of
Chinese population; it is very difficult to see that the Mandarin Bibles would
play a major role in elevating Mandarin into the national language. It seems
that missionaries understood the cultural current at the time and made the
correct decision in producing a union version of the Mandarin Bible. This
decision was made based on their concern for the gospel and church, not for
the national unity purpose, which was peripheral, as Lian demonstrated in his
book Redeemed by Fire that the Chinese Christian leaders at that time were
God-centered and anti-nationalism, albeit anti-Western.

This book has an extensive bibliography (38 pages), an index of Biblical
verses, and a general index. Overall, this is a well-researched monograph
exploring the impacts of Mandarin Bibles published from 1856 to 1919. Due
to the small size of the Christian community and short history of Christian
presence in China, the overall impacts are not as great as the author claims to
be.

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