

Reassessing the Frontiers

# Searching for the Impact of Bible Translation among the Minorities in China

by Ken Chan

There was a time when the monolingual tribal peoples of Latin America's many rainforests could not communicate with outsiders at all. It was obvious that they needed the gospel in their own languages; to reach them, Bible translation was essential. However, the globalization of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has led to questions about the continuing need for this sort of Bible translation. Whereas rural communities were once isolated, increased ease in communication and transportation have shaped a different world. People are becoming increasingly multilingual. Minorities, in particular, face both internal and external pressures to integrate into the mainstream and speak the national or major trade languages. According to *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, a widely cited and annually updated reference work maintained by SIL International, roughly a third of the world's 7,000 languages are now endangered.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, Bible translation has been an extensive, even at times protracted, process. Translation projects have traditionally included research (linguistic and anthropological); translations (oral and written); literacy (where implementation is viable); and scripture use (both teaching and discipling.) Is all this effort still necessary among minority peoples who are daily becoming more at home in the dominant trade languages? What, then, is the need for Bible translation now?

## *Bible Translation and Closure Theology*

I want to respond initially to this strategic question of Bible translation by exploring *closure theology*, an orientation that suggests that church planting and Bible translation be a high priority among ethnic and linguistic minorities. Ralph Winter's plenary address at the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization alerted the evangelical world to the imbalance of having too many missionaries working with Christians and too few with non-Christians.<sup>2</sup> In particular, he highlighted the need for new efforts to cross geographical, linguistic, sociological, and cultural barriers, the implication being that a massive redeployment of missionaries to the unreached peoples was required.

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Frank Severn was a leading voice who criticized Winter's position. Severn suggested that an extensive redeployment would slow down the momentum of progress made in countries where Christianity had made inroads, but where many villages, and a great number of unsaved, unreached persons lived (of various classifications) who still needed to hear the gospel.<sup>3</sup> The task of evangelization was not finished in a country until all had had a chance to hear.

The problem, as I see it, is that Severn misread Winter. In an early part of his Lausanne address, Winter cited Pakistan as a country with a national church where the job was not done, even though they had a substantial 3% Christian presence. The Muslims, who comprised 97% of the country, still needed the gospel. When Winter went on to say that "normal evangelism will not do the job," he was not neglecting Severn's point. But Winter was saying that the church should devote more resources to the tribes, castes or cultures designated as unreached peoples,<sup>4</sup> which in many cases are considered the minorities. Somebody must go in and ensure that the least-reached have a better chance to hear the gospel and receive the word of God. These large ethnic groupings (some of them numbering in the tens of millions) need cross-cultural missionaries from the global church (not just the western church) to come with the gospel.

Other missionaries have also opposed Winter's prioritization.<sup>5</sup> I am unable to locate a single article in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* which supports Winter's perspective, and I suspect this may have to do with the former editor, Jim Reapsome.<sup>6</sup> To him, it appears futile to speed the coming of Jesus. Jesus will come again like a thief in the night when people least expect it. And even when every people group is reached, there are far more people yet within each people group who still need to be saved, disciplined and sent out.

Bible passages can be adduced to support Reapsome's view. The church cannot predict or speed the second coming of Jesus through worldwide evangelism. Only when the end comes will people know the eschaton has arrived (1 Thess. 5:2). And if the kingdom's growth works like fermentation, it happens invisibly (Matt. 13:33), so there is no point trying to predict or direct its course.

But Winter's view is not heretical,<sup>7</sup> for he would agree with Reapsome's orthodox view that no one can predict the precise timing of the end (Matt. 24:36). What is unique about Closure Theology is the biblical insight that we can actually see clues as Christ's return nears (Matt. 24:3). In particular, the



gospel has to be preached to all peoples before he returns (Matt. 24:14). God is building his church, which consists of all peoples, and this will include peoples living on the remotest islands or deserts (Isa. 42:10–12). Hence, there will be representatives from all of these peoples in heaven (Rev. 7:9; 21:24). God's compassion for all, including the little peoples of the world, is foreshadowed by Yahweh's care for the widows and orphans (Deut. 14:29; 16:14; 26:12; Ps. 146:9; Isa. 10:2; Mal. 3:5; James 1:27). The sheep in the parable of the lost are the peoples of the world, and the hundredth sheep is the people group that has not had any chance whatsoever to hear God's word. This is the context for the great commission (Matt. 28:19–20).

This is what motivated Paul to carry the gospel far and wide (Rom. 15:20). This is what should also motivate the church. It should have the heart of Ps. 57:9–10; 67:1–5 as it fulfills God's mandate to reach the world.

In this view, Bible translation is indispensable to this push to reach and disciple the world. When Paul linked believing to hearing and preaching (Rom. 10:14–15), it was also a call for the church to make sure that the word of God—the very basis of that preaching—be made available in the languages of the world. Winter's agenda to reach the least-reached is important because it is high on God's agenda.<sup>8</sup> And the need for Bible translation is just as important. Secular linguists independently corroborate that "some 4,000 of the world's languages have never been described adequately."<sup>9</sup>

The concern for the least-reached in the world began much earlier with William Carey's "An Enquiry . . ." (1792).<sup>10</sup> Carey was a brilliant English Baptist missionary who went to India and translated the Bible into many Indian languages.<sup>11</sup>

Closure theology back then, even in its embryonic form two centuries ago, was probably the backdrop that gave Bible translators in China the strength to suffer as they served. They believed what they did was an essential chapter in the history of world missions. This was certainly the case with Robert Morrison, who arrived in China in 1807 and became one of the first Protestant translators of the Bible into a Chinese language in that country.

Lesser known Bible translators made just as much of a personal sacrifice. One of their number was Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, originally a Lithuanian Orthodox Jew who studied for the rabbinate in Germany before he became a believer and a missionary translator in China. He finished the Beijing Version of the Chinese Bible in 1899. His translation was well received not only because his knowledge of the

# **T**he growth of cities along with the accompanying multilingualism appears to have made Bible translations less necessary for minority languages.

Hebrew language was impressive but also because he could speak Chinese fluently. After a stroke, practically paralyzed and also suffering from severe Parkinson's, he toiled on until he finished his translation.<sup>12</sup>

Fast forward to today, when volunteers are signing up to carry on that tradition for reaching the least-reached. This closure theology is evidenced in the mission partnership called Table 71,

a loose association of Christian organizations committed to working together in partnership among the remaining unreached people groups in the world.<sup>13</sup>

Major partners include big names in Protestant missions like the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Jesus Film, and TransWorld Radio. Not surprisingly, Bible translation associations like Wycliffe Bible Translators, and Seed Company have also joined this alliance.

Some Bible translation organizations go a step further; they say that Bible translation is needed in every language of the world that does not have it yet. The passion of Wycliffe Associates, for example, is “equipping the local church to translate God’s Word into every language by 2025.”<sup>14</sup> But this momentum in closure theology is encountering resistance today, and a *counter closure theology* has arisen that grounds itself biblically and socio-logically as an alternative perspective.

## **Counter-Closure Theology: Bible Translation is Not Necessary for Church Planting**

The drive for the closure of the church age and the heralding of the return of Christ is commendable because it springs from love. But as Winter was advocating his version of closure theology at Lausanne in 1974, another

plenary speaker at that same venue, Michael Green, was questioning its value in his remarks. Green implicitly countered Winter’s position because he could not discern such a push for “missions to the least-reached” in the early church.<sup>15</sup> Green’s perspective has gained more traction over the past four decades, and his general points still continue to ring true to many people. Specifically, a counter-closure theology seems to have emerged based on (blurred) definitions, common practices influenced by global and urban migration patterns, and the linguistic dynamics we see in the book of Acts.

First, in terms of blurred definitions, it is unclear what exactly constitutes a least-reached people group.<sup>16</sup> This makes it hard to operationalize and execute a frontier missions strategy. A comparison between the coding systems used by the partners of Table 71 reveals discrepancies in how they classify the least-reached groups.<sup>17</sup> On the language front, for example, intelligibility is one way to tell whether two language communities speak the same language. But the definition of intelligibility is itself contested. Another problem is that it is notoriously hard to obtain accurate information in remote places.

Second, globalization and the growth of great urban metropolises, along with the accompanying rise of multilingualism, appear to have made Bible translations less necessary for smaller minority languages. Take China as an example: unpublished interviews show that church leaders in China are not giving a high priority to the least-reached within the country. It is not that they do not care about the minorities, but they tend to believe that this problem will take care of itself as urbanization increases. This thinking

is not ungrounded. Roads, water, electricity, and communications systems are constantly improving, even down to the townships and villages. The quality of education of rural primary schools is going up. Because Mandarin Chinese is the lingua franca of these schools, minority youths are rapidly integrating into the mainstream.<sup>18</sup> It is a fact that many young people in minority communities are learning and acquiring fluency in Mandarin Chinese. For some, Chinese may even supersede their native tongue to become their dominant language. Smart, enterprising young people are furthering their education and climbing the social ladder nationally. They want to get ahead in life and not be despised by others as inferior. Their success in this direction should be applauded.

Some Chinese minorities will go to an extreme fostering this language shift. Parents and grandparents will sometimes only speak the national language (to the extent that they can speak it) with their children and demand the same from their children. Some minorities will lie and deny their ethnic heritage to outsiders out of shame.

Perhaps the subsequent rise of bilingualism makes it expedient to eliminate Bible translation for minority languages. Many church leaders understand this positively as God making it possible for the minorities to hear the gospel without having to wait for long translation projects to finish. They see this as God being creative. Since the presence of language barriers slows down church growth, maybe God is using globalization as a tool to speed up the spread of the gospel before Christ’s second coming.

Evangelism can be done through Chinese dialects. There are older folks and uneducated (women) who are monolingual. But many minority youths are going into cities to look for work. When they find jobs, they may meet Christians and hear the gospel. After becoming Christians, they are

discipled in Chinese. They then can take the gospel back to their relatives in the rural minority areas. This is not merely wishful thinking, for reports of this process are accumulating.

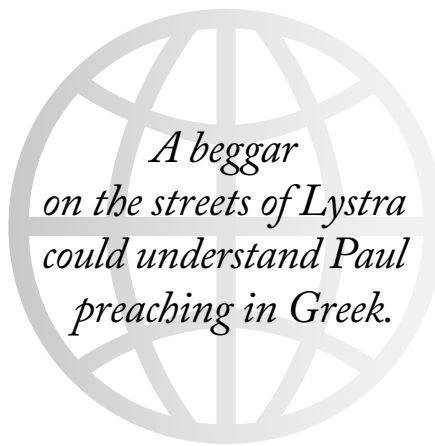
### The First Century Context

I would like to treat at length a third point central to the emergence of a counter-closure theology. There's an assumption that goes something like this: if Bible translation in every language is required for church planting, it would have been the case in the early church. Yet, it seems quite the opposite was true in that first century context. The book of Acts demonstrates that God can reach all peoples through trade languages as the gospel moves naturally through multilingual believers. Is this true? Let's reflect on some of the linguistic dynamics we see in Luke's narrative.

Propagation of the gospel was not a problem when the church was just starting because other Hebrews (or people who could understand Hebrew) were the recipients. Aramaic and liturgical Hebrew were probably the languages Peter and the other apostles used to preach to the other Jews. These occurrences would have included: Peter's first major speech (Acts 2:14–36); the preaching trip of Peter and John in the villages of Samaria (8:14, 25); Philip's talk with the Ethiopian eunuch after he had come to worship in Jerusalem (8:27); and Peter's conversation with Cornelius (Acts 10).

The book of Acts assumes that the gospel could spread not only within the confines of Judaism but also throughout the languages of the Roman empire. Rome had formed a political empire through arms and diplomacy, but the Greek language and culture was ascendant across the Roman empire.<sup>19</sup> Peoples who crossed cultural boundaries were able to talk to each other in koine Greek. The formation of local churches did not have to wait for tribal Bible translation to take place.

As the church spread to Gentiles abroad, Greek was relied on increasingly for evangelism. Either Aramaic, Hebrew or Greek was the medium of communication when Paul talked to the hellenized Jews and Greek God-fearers (Acts 18:4), and to the Jews at Ephesus (19:1–7). Judas (Barsabbas) and Silas from the church at Antioch either spoke Greek to the Gentile believers at Antioch (15:32), or they spoke in Hebrew which was translated into Greek for those who did not know Hebrew. This kind of bilingualism was practiced by cosmopolitan Jews such as Aquila and Priscilla (18:2), who had lived in Rome and Corinth, and by Apollo, a Jewish scholar born in Alexandria (18:24). When Paul and Silas



were praying and singing in prison (16:25), they might have been doing that in any one of three languages (Aramaic, Hebrew, or Greek) so other prisoners could understand them. The prison guard who believed was a local employee of the Roman government. But since he was living in a colony, he probably spread the gospel to his family in Greek (v. 32). The outcome of the Jerusalem council was drawn up in a formal letter (15:23–29). This was probably done in Greek, which explains why the Gentile believers were able to read the letter straight off (v. 31).

Greek was the language medium Paul used with Gentile nonbelievers. This was the case when Paul received the

Macedonian vision (16:9), and when the demon possessed girl at Philippi yelled and Paul chided her for it (16:17–18).<sup>20</sup>

One of the reasons he chose Timothy to be his co-worker was because he could speak Greek. Timothy's mother was a godly Jew (16:2), but his father was Greek. His bilingual background would later help him to pastor his Gentile flock.

Paul was a Roman citizen, and it appears that he may have even spoken Latin. His Latin helped him communicate in more officious settings. In Acts 13:9, he probably talked to the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus Anthupato in Latin.<sup>21</sup> Paul's Latin helped him to get out of tough spots when he was persecuted by the Roman authorities (e.g., 16:37). The book of Acts assumes, in the process of Paul's trial from Jerusalem to Rome, that he faced no language barrier.<sup>22</sup>

Smaller local languages and dialects were not wiped out by Latin. Inscriptions that place Latin and other local languages, such as Oscan (spoken in south-central Italy), side by side still exist. Tomb markers in Anatolia into the second or third century AD show the use of Phrygian alongside Greek. There is also good evidence for the survival of the Galatian tongue.<sup>23</sup>

Again, according to counter-closure theology, Paul did not need to pursue a strategy to target the least-reached. Nor did the existence of these small local languages and dialects hamper the spread of his ministry. Instead, he worked mostly in the larger cities and towns. His strategy was to plant footholds in those places where people from diverse places came together, so that the gospel could then go back out into the smaller places nearby.

Even at a smaller place like Lystra, a beggar on the streets could understand Paul's preaching in Greek (14:9–10).<sup>24</sup> In Acts 14:8–19, though Paul could not understand the Lystra language

that they switched into (v. 11), he could still negotiate a theological dispute with them in Greek. When he healed the lame and the locals thought he was a god, he explained he was not Zeus but only human like them (v. 15). He then got across the idea that Zeus did not do the healing, and the forces of nature they worshipped were not the first principles. Rather, God created everything for the benefit of people (v. 17). These were complicated ideas that he was able to convey.

At Malta, Paul did seem to be lost for words. In his brief stay there (28:1–10), the narrator takes on an omniscient point of view and reports in Greek what the locals said to each other in the local dialect (vv. 4, 6). This episode does not report what Paul said to them. Maybe he did not say anything back to them because he did not know their dialect, and they lived such isolated lives on that island that they could not understand Greek either. It appears that they dropped off the pages of the New Testament, and there is no indication Paul went back to reach them for Christ.

The movement of multilingual believers helped to bring the gospel across cultural boundaries. How else was the great missionary church at Antioch started? People from Cyprus and Cyrene who had believed (11:20) came to Antioch and spoke to the Greek-speaking people there. They in turn commissioned Paul and Barnabas for their famous missionary journeys. One of the early believers from Cyprus, by the name of Mnason, was also instrumental in bringing the gospel to Caesarea (21:16).

This biblical picture of a fluid movement of the gospel across language and cultural boundaries does not begin with the New Testament, but we see it even in the Old Testament. People from various nations could still talk to each other after Babel. This assumes there were people who were multilingual. While it does not mean

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everyone had those abilities, international communication was still taking place. Abraham was a prime example. He traveled extensively, and he could communicate with people who spoke the various languages of that time. He negotiated with Hittites to purchase the burial ground for Sarah (Gen. 23). Examples abound in the many encounters between Israel and the international communities among whom they lived. By the time of Nebuchadnezzar's empire, international communication was well codified (Dan. 3:4; 4:1).

Finally, the case for planting and growing churches without pursuing any intentional closure strategy for the least-reached strengthens even more when one considers Acts 2:4–11. There, we see a reversal of the tower of Babel. God's power was at work to enable God-fearing Jews who had come to Jerusalem from diverse places, from "every nation under heaven," to hear in their own mother tongue the disciples—Galileans all—praising God in multiple languages. This was a fulfillment of the prophesy in Joel where God's Spirit was promised to be poured out unto all mankind, irrespective of race, gender, age, and social class (Joel 2:28–32).

We can conclude that the church in Acts was propagated through the major trade languages of the time, and by oral translations (into mother tongue languages) through the empowerment and superintendence of the Holy Spirit. Why can't we expect that to happen now?

### *Spiritual Impact in the History of Bible Translation in China*

While church members may not be explicitly conscious of counter-closure theology when they think along these lines, it is precisely these assumptions that may account for the trend that

devalues and questions the necessity of a Bible translation in every language. Churches and individuals that have traditionally been supportive are now wondering whether an expensive, multi-year translation project can benefit a language community when the gospel can spread in a globalized world without such a translation program. The concern for cost efficiency is causing supporters to channel resources to other kinds of missions that have the potential to create more immediate impact.

While counter-closure theology appears to show that God was able to grow the early church without a concerted effort in Bible translation, this overlooks the very real impact of the Septuagint LXX (Greek) Old Testament which had been translated from the Hebrew 300 years earlier. With Greek being the language of education everywhere (except perhaps in Israel), it can be concluded that most of the disciples in the early church did have intelligible scriptures available to them. Nevertheless, it does not follow that doing further Bible translation is not somehow helpful. If we widen our perspective, the history of Bible translation in China shows just how integral a part of church growth it was.

### **Scripture Use Was Key to Discipleship in China**

One reason that the Chinese church began to grow, and kept on growing, was because local translators who worked on Bible translation were themselves disciplined through the process. They were experiencing the effect of scripture use as they were translating and in so doing, many of them acquired the spiritual capacity to lead the church.

Chinese translators fell in love with the Bible early on. Two Christians from Guangdong, Feng Ya Sheng (冯亚生)



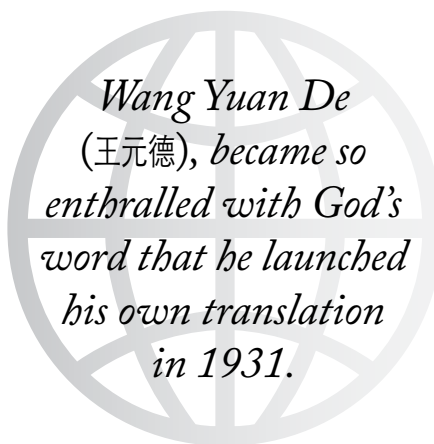
and Feng Ya Xue (冯亚学), went to Germany and became sinologists at Halle.<sup>25</sup> They could have studied and published on any topic; yet the project they chose was to translate Mark and Luke into a German-Chinese diglot (bilingual book) in 1826.

The vibrancy of the Christian faith engendered in the lives of local translators was palpable in some cases. One of those who worked on the Chinese Union Version was Wang Yuan De (王元德), who later became a professor at what is now Shandong University (齐鲁大学). He became so enthralled with God's word that he launched his own translation in 1931. He was able to finish it quickly because he would get lost in the Word to the point of forgetting to eat or sleep. It was reported that he would read out his drafts 50–60 times to make sure they sounded fluent.

Protestant Bible translation majored on deepening the Bible knowledge of the local translators. They were not low-level helpers, employed to brush up on the Chinese defects of the foreign translators.<sup>26</sup> Rather, those who were linguistically gifted were encouraged to learn koine Greek and biblical Hebrew. As they delved into the original texts, they were forced to confront Christian truths deeply. The local counterpart of Medhurst, Wang Tao (王韬, 1828–97)<sup>27</sup> for example, had the liberty to propose any emendation to the translation committee. This was possible because his grasp of the Bible was good enough to warrant that kind of trust. His proficiency in turn was driven by his love of the Bible.

Some of these translators became key figures of the Protestant church in China, not the least of whom was Ho Tsun-Sheen (何进善). His story showed that it was Bible translation, in particular, that had the most impact on his spiritual development. Early on, he had a negative reaction to foreigners. Though he was fortunate enough to receive the best western education

possible for a Chinese at the time—at the Chinese-Anglo College in Malacca—the wife of his English teacher discriminated against him. Her bad Christian witness could have turned Ho away from his newfound faith.<sup>28</sup> This danger was more acute because he was struggling to choose between being a Confucian scholar or a Christian.<sup>29</sup> But his work with James Legge and Medhurst on Bible translation galvanized his resolve to follow Christ as a disciple. As he confronted the issue of whether he should marry the non-Christian girl his father had arranged for him, he conceded in order to honor his father, but he refused to worship idols during his wedding ceremony in honor of Christ.<sup>30</sup> His maturing faith



that stemmed from Bible translating and reading eventually led his wife to become a Christian, also. She was baptized at the Union Chapel in Hong Kong where he had become pastor.

The link between an available, understandable translation of the Bible, the reading of the Bible (scripture use), and discipleship shone brightly for minorities in China. For them, it was not a job-creation program. They believed in God for God's sake. Far from receiving handouts from the missionaries, the Lisu, though poor, would give lard, rice and fuel to the traveling evangelists to advance the cause of Christ.<sup>31</sup> Bible reading led to serious faith. They saw how God

was displeased when they sacrificed to idols, and they stopped. The spiritual change went deeper yet. The China Inland Mission reported that the Lisu

were constantly led to pray for the Han Chinese in Yunnan and in other provinces who were faced with starvation because of famine or flood, even though they have themselves suffered so much at their hands in the past.<sup>32</sup>

### The Promotion of Literacy Led to Scripture Use

A second reason that churches in China grew was literacy. The minorities lived marginal lives and were not literate in either Chinese or their own tongues. But that changed for the Miao when Samuel Pollard sought to bring about wholistic transformation. He helped to bring about what is now called a people movement.

The number of Methodist members recorded in Southwest China had risen from three when Pollard arrived (all of them missionaries' wives) to 5,458 when he died, with 12,000 more under instruction.<sup>33</sup>

That last phrase “under instruction” is telling, because the immense growth was only possible when there was replication. Believers could not rely solely on oral instruction for edification, nor could they mature into church leaders that way. They had to have the Bible in print and be able to read it for personal growth. And the Bible had to be in place for the community to grow together through corporate worship and small group discussions. So, it was no surprise that Pollard viewed the promotion of literacy, together with Bible translation, as vital components for organizing this people movement into a network of local churches. This was made easy because the Miao wanted to learn how to read, and they asked Pollard to teach them.<sup>34</sup> Even women, who had low status in that society, took to literacy readily and scored well on literacy tests.<sup>35</sup> Literacy and church growth marched forward in lockstep.

As schools (17 of them by 1915) were opening, the Miao were baptized in droves. Morals began to change for the better. The trysting places of young people, which existed in every village, were burned down.

This pattern was repeated among the Lisu. J. O. Fraser firmly believed that planting a vibrant local church required literacy. He even taught older people how to read the Fraser script.<sup>36</sup> A Lisu scholar estimated that about 60,000–70,000 could read the Fraser script in an area that had a lot of Lisu churches.<sup>37</sup> Further south, Ola Hanson planted the church among the Kachin (known as the Jingpo in China). They were illiterate, and Hanson felt that was an impediment to church growth. One of the first things he did was to publish a book in Kachin, using a romanized alphabet.<sup>38</sup> Again, the church grew as literacy grew.<sup>39</sup>

But it was among the Han where scripture use made the biggest impact. There is absolutely no doubt that China has had a long, and distinguished, literary history. But the church played a crucial role in furthering the penetration of literacy into society and the church communities. From the beginning of Protestant church history, Liang Fa (梁发), who was the first ordained Protestant Chinese pastor, felt more work had to be done in promoting literacy. Education was available, but it was not prevalent because it was expensive. Usually, only those who had money or family connections were able to place their children in one of the learning centers (书院). Up until 1907, there were only 923 *quanxueso* (a type of learning center), 1,621 lecture halls, and 262 education associations in all of China.<sup>40</sup> Seeing that the status quo prevented the masses from knowing God through the Bible, he opened the first Protestant school for boys in China. Not all the students came from Christian homes or became Christians, but the Protestant effort in making literacy open to all made it possible for more people to know God and the Bible.

Liang Fa's idea for mass literacy inspired Li Duanfen (1833–1907) and Zheng Guanying (1842–1923) to propose a national school system for all children.<sup>41</sup> This massive literacy effort by the church coincided with the period when local churches sprang up all over China. By 1919, “only 106 (about 6 per cent) of China's 1,704 *xian* (counties) were without some form of missionary presence.”<sup>42</sup> God grew his church through heroic missionaries. But if literacy had not become available for the rural churches, it is doubtful the church in China could have grown the way it did.

### *Discipling through Bible Translation*

As we reach the end of our biblical and historical discussion, two opposite pictures come into mind as we consider the need for Bible translation now.

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The first picture tells us that doing Bible translation is not a necessity. The theology of Acts shows that God can grow his church his way. All the language and cultural groups that he wants to be represented in heaven will somehow find a way to know the gospel and be admitted to the kingdom. God may use Bible translation to bring that about, but some trends indicate this might not be necessary. The *Ethnologue* shows about half of the language communities in China are on the path of making the switch from monolingualism to bi- (or) multilingualism.<sup>43</sup> The size and vitality of many least-reached languages now is shrinking and these least-reached languages have less vitality today than the Chinese language had 150 years ago.

But this article wishes to draw another picture of Bible translation. The reason Bible translation is needed is not

primarily because of a closure theology, but for two other reasons.

First, a strategy that relies solely on oral translation is not conducive to discipleship. The assumption that Chinese minority Christians who are bilingual can translate the gospel message spontaneously into their native tongues underestimates the difficulty. It is hard to find equivalent words or concepts that can capture the original even after intentional study. In practice, oral translators often resort to inserting a phonetic transliteration of a phrase from the trade language (e.g., Mandarin Chinese) to convey the key terms which are new. The target audience typically has no idea what point is being made and offers a blank stare in response. Or the oral translator will paraphrase the meaning of a passage in a highly generalized way, such that the critical nuances are lost.

Wayne Dye's seminal research in scripture use listed the availability of scripture in an appropriate language as a key factor for impacting an emerging church.<sup>44</sup> While people can hear enough about Christ to make a decision to follow him, they need to have the Bible to understand Christ in sufficient depth to become disciples.

Even when people understand the Bible in a second language, the truth often loses its impact because hearers perceive God as distant and Christian faith as of little relevance to their daily lives. Good Christian living is about interpersonal relations, about emotion, about the deep springs of human life. Teaching that is all in the LWC [Language of Wider Communication such as a trade language], suggests that Christian living is only for one's public persona, and internal spiritual growth is seriously hindered.<sup>45</sup>

In the history of Bible translation in China, many of the principal local

translators could have lived their whole Christian life reading only the English Bible. But it was not so for the other Christians in China, those who had less English. It was not reasonable for them to rely on oral translation only in their Christian growth. Because of Bible translation and literacy, they were disciples as they translated. This made it possible for them to become Christian teachers and leaders. This in turn made it possible for them to train the subsequent generation of teachers and leaders. This was true for the minorities and the Han Chinese churches alike.

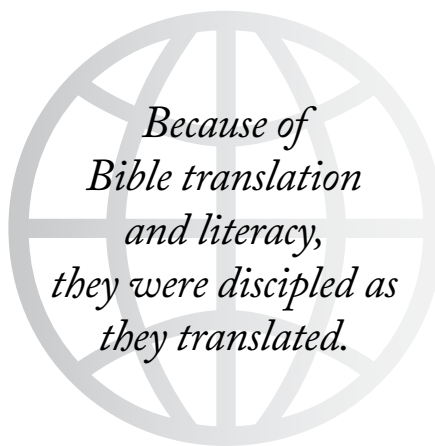
People prefer to worship God in their native language. Language in the religious domain and in poetics is more effective in one's heart language. Discipleship is a process that requires the breaking down of existing traditions and the reconstructing of a new worldview. This reflects back on the issue of Bible translation for the least-reached people groups: it is still best for them to have the Bible in their heart languages because most of them don't know the trade language well enough to understand the finer points of what God is saying to them.

The great commission, the command to go and *make disciples*, is not done until the church is fully prepared as the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2). This requires Christians of all languages to reach a certain level of maturity in faith and practice. Bible translation and literacy are essential to the growing of God's church. Conversion needs to take root and not remain one inch deep.

The oft-made criticism of Bible translation is that it is not cost efficient, but that's not true in light of history. Had Robert Morrison and the subsequent translators not poured their lives into these massive projects that only bore fruit slowly, one can imagine a greatly diminished church in China now, two centuries later.

Secondly, more areas need Bible translation than one thinks. It's incorrect

to say that urbanization in China will clear out its villages.<sup>46</sup> Yes, the large cities in China are growing larger; but, there is now a trend where third or fourth tier cities are depopulating because they offer few benefits and impose a higher cost of living compared to villages. Unskilled villagers who had gone there to look for seasonal work now make more money back in townships as micro business owners. There is a huge increase in ecotourism. Cake shops, once a cosmopolitan marker, are popping up in townships. As rural land is being privatized in the second decade of the twenty-first century, more commercial opportunities will open up for the minorities of China in their ancestral lands.



Many of the minority autonomous provinces, prefectures, cities, counties, townships, and villages in China were independent geopolitical entities a century ago. They have retained their language and culture to such a degree that visitors would think they are in a neighboring country. It's obvious these places need Bible translation.

Many languages make good candidates for Bible translation projects. So why has not more been done? The stretches of Bible-less territories in the west and the northwest await brave souls who are technically equipped and called to go. More has not been done up to now because of severe restrictions and persecutions. It is highly unlikely that

counter-closure theology, as I have outlined it, is the reason why people do not do Bible translation. Rather, other reasons inhibit the long and hard process of Bible translation. People are not willing to sacrifice the time and suffer the costs. Laziness sets in and inertia grinds. Minorities who come from the fringe of society typically have low self-esteem and lack the confidence it takes to do a complex literary project. The "King James Version syndrome" is also prevalent, where the minorities think that God originally spoke the exact words encoded in the Chinese Union Version, and it only is sacrosanct.

*Bible translation is an act of discipling the church.* As a standalone, this statement sounds trite. But history shows the cost of not heeding this advice—many Bibles translated at great financial and human cost are sitting in warehouses gathering dust. Once a church planting movement reaches a certain stage, a church planter for a minority language community will realize that some form of Bible translation needs to be done. Without it, church growth slows. It is one thing to evangelize a people or plant a small local church. It is another thing for the emerging church to take root, survive, and become a house of praise for his fame and renown (Isa. 26:8). That is the time when the church planter will reach out and ask Bible translation agencies to come in and help. This is the best time to start a translation project. The evangelist needs to make the request.<sup>47</sup> When there is that felt need, translated portions will be used. The feedback gathered from the use of such scripture portions is fed back to the translators. This improves the translation quality and increases spiritual impact.

In this view of Bible translation, closure is harder to define because the last mission frontier is discovered only as church planters find concrete needs for Bible translation. Translation will take place piece-meal, and how far it progresses



will depend on the number of people in a least-reached community, their demographic structure, and their level of interest in having their vernacular scripture.

A lot hinges on the church planter. And the question is: Are there enough of them? The answer circles back to Winter's original observation: No, there are far too few of them working among the remaining least-reached peoples. Unless the global church intentionally sends missionaries to evangelize and disciple these peoples, we must surrender to a counter-closure theology. God could do it non-linearly, mysteriously, and without Bible translation. But the student of history can see that God has called the church to work alongside him in this endeavor.

The technical expertise built up in the past century by translation

**A** lot hinges on the church planter. And the key question is: Are there enough of them? The answer circles back to Winter.

organizations is a "select arrow" in the Lord's quiver (Isa. 49:2). The Forum of Bible Agencies International, "an alliance of more than 25 leading international Bible Agencies and other mission organizations," is "working together to maximize the worldwide access and impact of God's Word."<sup>48</sup> Here Bible translation is not the end goal, but a means to disciple minority language communities. In particular, the connection between discipleship and Bible translation is highlighted in the mission statements of the Wycliffe Global Alliance (the umbrella organization of the Wycliffe family of organizations),<sup>49</sup> Seed Company,<sup>50</sup> and Pioneer Bible Translators.<sup>51</sup>

This leads us to a final question: will leaders who shape missions in China lead the spiritual transformation of the least-reached through Bible translation?<sup>52</sup> **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 20th ed., www.ethnologue.com, accessed November 22, 2016. Languages become endangered for a variety of reasons. Language shift, endangerment, and death are taken as facts by linguists. For an example, see David Bradley and Maya Bradley, eds., *Language Endangerment and Language Maintenance* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Winter, "The Highest Priority: Cross-cultural Evangelism" in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 213–41.

<sup>3</sup> He argues "mission should focus on reaching every sociolinguistic group of people where the church does not exist" (Frank Severn, "Some Thoughts on the Meaning of 'All the Nations'," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 33:4 (1997): 419.

<sup>4</sup> Winter, "The Highest Priority," 213–14.

<sup>5</sup> For a review of opposing views, see Michael A. Rynkiewicz, "Corporate Metaphors and Strategic Thinking: 'The 10/40 Window' in the American Evangelical Worldview,"

*Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. 35, no. 2 (2007): 217–41.

<sup>6</sup> See his most clear apologetic against Winter's closure theology in, "Why I don't Believe in Closure," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1996): 262–63.

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm Hunter traced the major points of Winter's views in "The Omega Connection," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 20:1, 2003: 20–24. But Hunter did not focus on the theological aspect of the discussion.

<sup>8</sup> McGavran was another leading missiologist who was instrumental in this "frontier mission movement." See Alan Johnson's review of the history of this movement's development in "The Frontier Mission Movement's Understanding of the Modern Mission Era," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 18:2, 2001: 82.

<sup>9</sup> See Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, *The Extinction of the World's Languages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 28.

<sup>10</sup> "An Enquiry Into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion

of the Heathens" (1792). For online access, see: <https://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/enquiry/anenquiry.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/missionaries/william-carey.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Jost Oliver Zetzsche, *The Bible in China: The History of the Union Version* (originally Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institute, 1999; trans. Daniel Choi; Hong Kong: International Bible Society, 2002), 138–39.

<sup>13</sup> See [www.table71.org](http://www.table71.org) (Accessed on November 8, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> See [www.wycliffeassociates.org](http://www.wycliffeassociates.org) (Accessed on November 8, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> "There does not seem to have been anything very remarkable in the strategy and tactics of the early Christian mission." See his "Methods and Strategy in the Evangelism of the Early Church" in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 165.

<sup>16</sup> R. W. Lewis has addressed this issue of definitions in her article in this issue of the *IJFM*, "Losing Sight of the Frontier Mission Task: What's Gone Wrong with the Demographics?" *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 35:1, 2018: 5–19.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Johnson also points out that "it has been hard to reach consensus on the precise indicators" ("Critical Analysis of the Missiology of the Frontier Mission Movement," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 18:3 [2001]: 122). Todd M. Johnson also avers: "artificially airtight twentieth-century taxonomies of race and language have been rightly deconstructed by the academy" ("Globalization, Christian Identity, and Frontier Missions," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 27:4 [2010]: 167).

<sup>18</sup> The autonomous province of Tibet and the northwest are exceptions. These language groups have retained their mother tongues due to special historical and social factors.

<sup>19</sup> This was no doubt aided by the spread of Greek culture through the Alexandrian library. Even Philo, the Jewish historian, wrote in Greek rather than in Hebrew.

<sup>20</sup> The Jews, who were trying to discredit Paul before the noble women and the aristocrats of Pisidian Antioch (13:50) and at Iconium (14:2), probably also spoke in Greek.

<sup>21</sup> Sergius's position as a government leader and the form of his name recorded here, Sergius Paulus Anthupato, (a Latinism), both suggest this conversation might have been in Latin.

<sup>22</sup> The mix of language use of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic is detailed in Bernard Spolsky, *The Languages of the Jews: A Sociolinguistic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), esp. 30–32. The spoken language seems to have changed from Hebrew to Aramaic by the time of Jesus. Epigraphic evidence “such as marriage and divorce papers were in Aramaic” (p. 43). Hebrew was still the language of religious teaching and liturgy. Greek was increasingly adopted by the Jews. Even at Qumran, which paid the utmost attention to ritual purity, “twenty-seven texts are in Greek,” beside the 750 Hebrew texts and 150 Aramaic (p. 48). Latin was not forced on the non-Latins. But Latin inscriptions were put up as a sign of imperial rule: 190 of these have been discovered in Caesarea, and 530 “from the rest of Israel” (p. 59).

<sup>23</sup> See James Clackson, “Language maintenance and language shift in the Mediterranean world during the Roman Empire,” in Alex Mullen and Patrick James, eds., *Multilingualism in the Graeco-Roman Worlds*, pp. 36–57 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 41–46. “Inscriptional evidence for all ‘local languages’ (other than Greek in the south) disappears from the Italian peninsula by the end of the first century AD” (p. 42). But as smaller languages died off close to the heart of the Roman empire, the rate of language survival increased with distance from it. Coptic in Egypt and Palmyra, in what is now Syria, were examples of that principle (p. 48).

<sup>24</sup> Lystra (of Pisidia) was not close to Tarsus (of Cecilia) by ancient standard. It was unlikely that Paul would have known the local language spoken there.

<sup>25</sup> Jost Oliver Zetzsche, *The Bible in China: The History of the Union Version* (originally Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institute, 1999; trans. Daniel Choi; Hong Kong: International Bible Society, 2002), 125–127.

<sup>26</sup> There were locals who were not as gifted and who did perform this function. And it was short-sighted for people like Thomas Hall Hudson (1800–76) to see the locals’ roles as nothing more than making the foreigner’s translation sound more fluent (see Zetzsche, 112–14).

<sup>27</sup> Walter Henry Medhurst was a British Congregationalist missionary to China and one of the earliest translators of the Bible. In 1840, together with three other missionary colleagues (Charles Gutzlaff, E. C. Bridgman, and John R. Morrison), Medhurst began translating

what became the famous Delegates’ Version, the first Chinese Bible in a standard classical Chinese, and acceptable as Chinese literature. Wang Tao was his co-translator who worked with him on the Delegates Version. For more information on them see: Hanan, Patrick, “The Bible as Chinese Literature: Medhurst, Wang Tao and the Delegates’ Version” in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 63:1 (2003). <http://www.oalib.com/paper/1508932#.WmZEL6inE2w>.

<sup>28</sup> See Lauren Pfister, “A Transmitter but not a Creator: Ho Tsun-Sheen (1817–1871), the First Modern Chinese Protestant Theologian,” eds. Irene Eber, Sze-kar Wan, and Knut Walf, *Bible in Modern China*, 139–44.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 134, quoting SOAS Library, “Sketch of the Life of Ho Tsun-Sheen,” CWM/South China/Personal/Legge/Box 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 147–50.

<sup>31</sup> *China’s Millions*, London ed., Apr 1932: 77; July 1932: 131. It was the policy of the China Inland Mission for local Christians “to secure their own preaching chapel” and “to support their own preachers” (*China’s Millions*, Australian ed., May 1, 1932: 73).

<sup>32</sup> Tien Ju Kang, *Peaks of Faith: Protestant Mission in Revolutionary China* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 53, quoting *China’s Million*, North American ed., 1907: 106.

<sup>33</sup> John Pritchard, *Methodists and their Missionary Societies: 1900–1996* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 70.

<sup>34</sup> Pritchard, 68–69.

<sup>35</sup> *China’s Millions*, Aug 1933, 122.

<sup>36</sup> Isobel Miller Kuhn, *By Searching* (London: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1966), 55.

<sup>37</sup> Tien, 47. The subscription of *Nuji-angbao*, a newspaper printed in this script, had a circulation of 2,500.

<sup>38</sup> Up to recently, *Tuanjiejiao*, a newspaper published in Jingpo, was “published only in the missionary script.” See Tien, 47 n. 24.

<sup>39</sup> Hanson wrote: “several hundred boys and girls have been educated in mission and Government schools.” Ola Hanson, *The Kachins: Their Customs and Traditions* (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1913), 97.

<sup>40</sup> See Paul J. Bailey, *Reform the People: Changing Attitudes towards Popular Education in Early Twentieth-Century China* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 101.

<sup>41</sup> See Bailey, 20–21.

<sup>42</sup> See Robert A. Bickers, *Britain in China: Community Culture and Colonialism, 1900–1949* (New York: Manchester

University Press, 1999), 69, quoting Albert Feuerwerker, *The Foreign Establishment in China in the Early Twentieth Century* (Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies 29; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1976).

<sup>43</sup> This is counting languages that score 6b or above on the EGID scale. For a definition of this, see [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com) (accessed November 9, 2016).

<sup>44</sup> T. Wayne Dye, “Scripture in an Accessible Form: The Most Common Avenue to Increased Scripture Engagement,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 26:3 (2009): 123–28.

<sup>45</sup> T. Wayne Dye, “Eight Conditions of Scripture Engagement: Social and Cultural Factors Necessary for Vernacular Bible Translation to Achieve Maximum Effect,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 26:2 (2009): 90.

<sup>46</sup> It is common in China for people to say that nobody is left in the villages except for a few elderlies and children who are not old enough to enter school. In reality, many adults live in the villages of the least-reached language communities. They cannot be spotted easily because they are working in the fields (that are widely scattered) in the daytime.

<sup>47</sup> Offering money to start a translation project is not a good strategy. It is often seen as a job creation program by the minorities. Little impact comes out of it.

<sup>48</sup> See [www.ifoba.org](http://www.ifoba.org) (accessed on November 8, 2016).

<sup>49</sup> “We believe Bible translation is an essential component of the Church’s responsibility as they participate in God’s mission to redeem and restore His creation. Access to and use of Scripture in a language and format that can be easily understood is essential to the spiritual formation and growth of individuals and of local bodies of believers.” See [www.wycliffe.net](http://www.wycliffe.net), “More about the Alliance: Important Facts” (accessed November 9, 2016). Wycliffe USA’s ([www.wycliffe.org](http://www.wycliffe.org)) own vision statement, which does not preclude discipleship, is less clear on this issue.

<sup>50</sup> See [www.theseedcompany.org](http://www.theseedcompany.org) (accessed November 8, 2016). Its vision statement is: “God’s Word transforming lives in every language in this generation.”

<sup>51</sup> See [www.pioneerbible.org](http://www.pioneerbible.org) (accessed November 8, 2016).

<sup>52</sup> This article was written in celebration of the 30th anniversary of Wycliffe Bible Translators (Hong Kong) in 2017.