

# CHINA

## Part 2

# LANGUAGE AND BIBLE

BY C. P. HALLIHAN

### BRIDGE TO PART 1

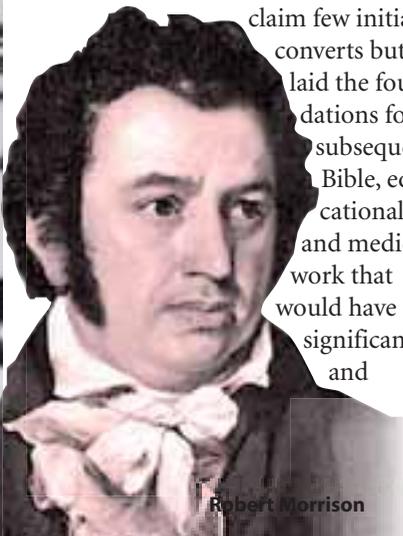
At the start of 'Robert Morrison of China' in QR585, there is this statement: 'During his years in China, Morrison would be able to

claim few initial converts but laid the foundations for subsequent Bible, educational and medical work that would have a significant and

enduring impact on the culture and history of the nation. His impact is honoured today, not only by Christians but by governments as well'. At the close of the article the following appeared: 'In a further part of this article, the Chinese language and the Chinese Bible will be explored further...'. Thus we begin here with the Chinese language.

### CHINESE LANGUAGE

*The Catalogue of Scriptures in the Languages of China and the Republic of China* compiled by H. W. Spillett,<sup>1</sup> lists over forty Chinese languages (six distinct listings for varieties of Mandarin), more than twenty tribal languages, and ten for Amoy, the Republic of China. This profusion should always be borne in mind when we discuss Chinese, or, more



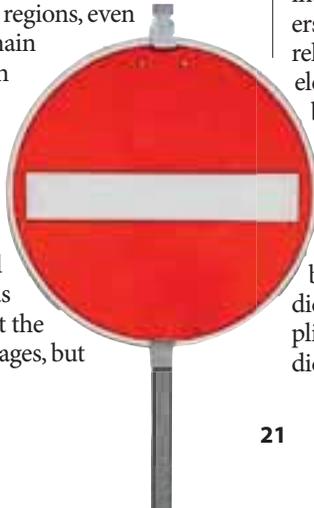
Robert Morrison

pointedly, the Chinese Bible. It also helps to remember that a person, Chinese or foreign, can become a fairly fluent speaker of Mandarin Chinese, but remain barely literate.

### Age

As stated in our last article, China has the world's oldest continuous civilization, a recorded history of about four thousand years. The era of the Shang dynasty approximated to the Biblical time from Abraham to David, and the Chou dynasties from David to the Maccabees. After that came the Han eras, up to the 3rd century AD. The present language of China was originally that used by the Han, and in all its forms is now in use by well over one billion people; decisions as to which forms of Chinese are 'languages' and which are 'dialects' are far from settled. An unexpected consequence of this antiquity is that whilst the spoken language has changed and diversified, the written forms have not, at least not to the same extent. This means that whilst written forms of the language have been mutually understood across the vast distances and differences of China, the pronunciation—spoken communication—of those forms became mutually incomprehensible amongst the regions, even in the historic main forms, Mandarin and Cantonese.

I offer a very clumsy attempt to describe this: the symbol for 'no entry' would be understood as such throughout the European languages, but



the words actually spoken to convey the meaning of this symbol in the closely related languages of French, Italian, and Spanish, would be different.<sup>2</sup> In considering that with more complex symbols even the words used by two English speakers might not be just the same,<sup>3</sup> something of the task of understanding and translating Chinese can be gathered. And I thought Hebrew was challenging!



### Problems (for us)

There is no gainsaying the beauty of Chinese script, particularly in large calligraphic forms,<sup>4</sup> so that it is deceptively easy to become obsessed and excited with simple character reproduction (*and yes, I did*). The arrangement of Chinese characters, *hanzi*, is within a virtual small rectangle, each one the same size; until recent times these were arranged in vertical columns, read from top to bottom, and right to left across columns. The strokes that make up a single character have only a very small percentage that might be called pictographs; the rest are a complex combination of strokes, some indicating an area of meaning, and others indicating sounds. The graphic relationship of these strokes is not fixed: elements can be right, left, above and below each other within the imaginary box.

A difficulty in reading Chinese is that there are no 'word boundaries'—it is not obvious where a word might begin or end.<sup>5</sup> The use of a Chinese dictionary is challenging, even to accomplished academics, with large major dictionaries listing over forty thousand

characters. Educated Chinese today recognize between six and seven thousand characters; newspaper readers need about three thousand characters; and government norms define working literacy at two thousand characters. Most Chinese words are made up of two or more characters, so that, of course, there are many more words than there are characters. The twelve-volume *Hanyu Da Cidian* dictionary uses twenty-three thousand plus leading characters to arrange over three hundred and seventy thousand word meanings. In 1954 the People's Republic of China introduced a Simplified Character System to encourage learning and literacy; and there have been various attempts to use a 'roman' alphabet, none of which have yet really prevailed.

You may well be asking again whether you need to know all this.<sup>6</sup> My aims in trying to share it are simple ones. First is the near miracle of Morrison and others, with so much against them, mastering the language sufficiently to preach, teach and translate. Modern sinologists estimate that an English-speaking student of Chinese will attain in ten years of academic study the level that his contemporaries would attain in two to three years studying a European language. Second is to urge prayer that the Lord will thrust out spiritually equipped labourers into the same field again, and especially Chinese nationals in the realm of Bible translation along sound principles. Thanks be unto almighty God who raised up and enabled such servants of Christ, the Gospel and the Word, for China, whose labours were mighty in their day, and whose fruit remains to this day.

## *A Scripture Connection?*

Two books appeared in the latter part of the 20th century: *Genesis and the Chinese* by K. T. Khang,<sup>7</sup> and *The Discovery of Genesis—How the truths of Genesis were found hidden in the Chinese language* by C. T. Kang and Ethel R. Nelson.<sup>8</sup> The startling thesis of the books is that the significance of some of the parts of Chinese characters suggests a familiarity (at least) with the events recorded in Genesis. Dating of these forms is taken back to within four hundred years of the Babel dispersion in Biblical chronology (Genesis 11). All those Sundered languages and scattered peoples carried with them an awareness, recorded in different ways, of the early events of human history.<sup>9</sup> It seems that in the very construction of their written language the early Chinese embedded refer-  
ences to our origins.

A classic simple example is in the character for 'boat', which has  
**chinese character for 'boat'**  
as composite parts vessel, eight and mouth. (The Genesis suggestions are combined in 1 Peter 3.20 '... when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water'.) Another example is in the character 'to create', made up of mud (dust), life and walking, suggesting Genesis 2.7 'And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a liv-

ing soul.' Fascinating stuff, easy to be taken up with, and yet the Bible believer will recognise that this residual evidence, along with all such fragments in early civilizations, was only to be expected, and whilst it delights us, it is not the ground of our faith or hope or doctrine.

## CHINESE BIBLES

Spillett's *Catalogue*, quoted at the beginning of the article, lists well over thirty English-language mission societies involved with Chinese Bible production from 1810–1975, and numbers 1,091 entries.

### *Marshman*

The first Protestant Bible in Chinese was not produced in China.<sup>10</sup> When Morrison was struggling to accomplish mastery of the language, Joshua Marshman at Serampore, in North India, produced the Chinese version of John Lassar, an Armenian whose work Marshman had

supervised. Issued in parts, by 1822 a whole Bible existed in five volumes. Marshman was not as pressed as Morrison, but he had his own problems in India. Workmen, who normally carved the patterns for a chintz factory, were engaged to carve woodblocks for the Scriptures. They had no knowledge of the 'strange' forms of Chinese—a publisher's nightmare! By 1822, with funding from the British and Foreign Bible Society, metal type was used. In the New Testament the Greek editions of Griesbach<sup>11</sup> were used in the translation. This Serampore Bible was 'immersionist', which perhaps kept it from continuing use among the other Chinese versions. More will be said about this in the paragraph on 'words' below.

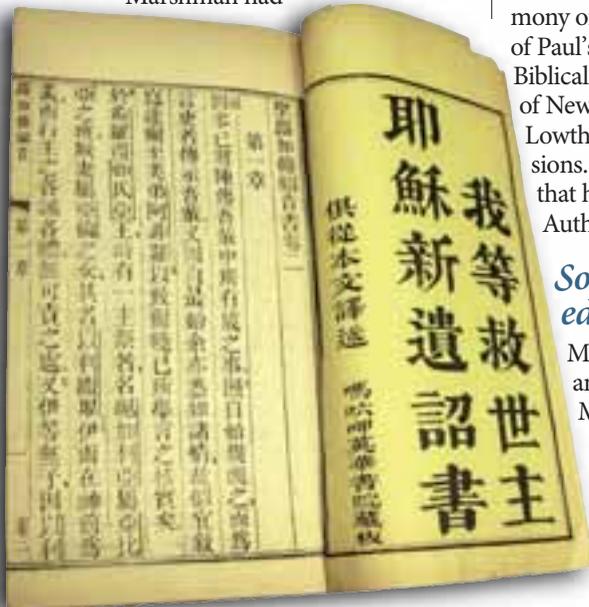
### *Mosely and Morrison*

Detail need not be repeated from Part 1, but we should remember that Mosely's fragments of Chinese which spurred Morrison were Vulgate-based (a harmony of the Gospels, then Acts and most of Paul's letters). Morrison used the Biblical languages and mentions the use of Newcome's Minor Prophets and Lowth's Isaiah, as well as French versions. For the overall sense we are told that he is very close to that of the Authorised Version.

### *Some other 19th-century editions*

Morrison's dictionary, grammar and classical translations, with Marshman's Chinese grammar,

**1817 second edition Morrison New Testament, printed by the Reverend William Milne in Malacca at the Anglo-Chinese College.**



made it now easier to go on to revision procedures, which all workers involved, including the pioneers themselves, recognized to be necessary. There was, of course, a mountain of as-yet-untouched aspects of Bible and literature needs for China. Henry Medhurst, Karl Gützlaff and E. C. Bridgman produced a New Testament in 1835 using these early resources. This was then in general use for a generation. John Morrison, Robert's son, was also involved with this Testament.<sup>12</sup>

As mission work multiplied, the possibilities of cooperation in aspects of the work were explored. In 1843 twelve delegates of British and American mission societies and churches met in Hong Kong<sup>13</sup> and a translation committee was formed. The Gospels were issued in 1850, the New Testament in 1852. In a strange anticipation of the English Revised Version difficulties in the 1880s, differences and divisions appeared between US and UK translators. Medhurst, Milne and Stronach, all of the London Missionary Society, published an Old Testament, the 'London Mission' Version, in 1854 with BFBS. This, combined with the 1852 New Testament, is the Delegates' Bible, which remained in use until the Union Version. The Americans Bridgman and Culbertson, though of different missions, brought out their New Testament in 1859 and

Old Testament in 1862 as publications of the American Bible Society.

### *Later Editions*

These early Protestant versions were made in classical Chinese, the language of professional and public scholars, men who had

*Griffith John*

passed strict government assessment of their literary and stylistic competence. The Chinese name for this classical form of the language is Wenli. There was also another form of the written language, less high-flown and better suited to the communication of ideas; a 'working



**Samuel Schereschewsky at work; photograph dates from 1902**

Wenli', customarily referred to as Easy Wenli in distinction from the classical or High Wenli. There was need then for a Bible version in Easy Wenli, which would serve a much wider readership.

The Welshman Griffith John translated an Easy Wenli New Testament in 1885, working from the Textus Receptus, and with reference to a Peking Mandarin version. John also produced a Mandarin version based on his Easy Wenli work. This was published in 1889 by the National Bible Society of Scotland. Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, sometime missionary bishop of the American Episcopal Church in Shanghai, also worked on the Easy Wenli New Testament, from the Textus Receptus, and his whole Bible was published by the American Bible Society in 1902. An interesting note in passing: the

China Baptist Publication Society published a New Testament in Canton in 1903. Called ‘The Convention Edition,’ it sold at the equivalent of a modern English one penny, because of substantial funding in gold from the Southern Baptist Convention.

Schereschewsky also worked on the Old Testament in Mandarin. Mandarin is understood by 90% of the population, and missionaries determined to translate the Scriptures into various forms of Mandarin. However, in 1890 committees were established to prepare Union Versions to serve the entire church. These were to be in High Wenli and Easy Wenli, with a third in Mandarin. The Easy Wenli Union New Testament appeared in 1903, and Schereschewsky’s Old Testament was combined with it to give a complete Bible in 1919. The High Wenli Union Bible appeared also in 1919, as did the Mandarin Union Bible, widely circulated and still in use as a standard text. There was an edition of 1919 printed in ‘National Phonetic Script’ reflecting not only missionary concern to spread the Word, but ongoing government attempts to address and reduce the linguistic issues in China. Responding to the presence of Chinese Muslims, diglot editions of the Gospels of Matthew and John were published with the Mandarin text and the Van Dyck Arabic text on facing pages; this was also in 1919.

As the 20th century unfolded, Bible editions such as you might expect appeared in Chinese alongside the Union. The Franciscans and Jesuits reappeared strongly on the Bible publishing scene from the mid 1940s. In 1962 another parallel text appeared—Chinese and the English Revised Standard Version; then

came Today’s Chinese Version (based on the English Good News Bible), and the Living Version.

There is a very strong interest among Chinese-speaking Christians in the issues of textual fidelity and integrity of translation principles, as well as in the classic doctrines of the Reformation, which we trust will in due course be displayed in new versions. In addition, Mandarin is now formally called Kuoyu, the national language, and government policy towards this is displacing other colloquial expressions of the language, even though some are spoken by millions of people. It will be interesting to see how this impacts on Bible translation for that nation.

### *A Word about Words*

Given the continual struggle to determine and agree on the meaning of Chinese forms of script and language, it should be no surprise to learn that the proper usage of Divine Titles has been a troublesome issue for over two hundred years. It is a situation where one must say that anyone offering an ‘obvious’ answer has not understood the problem. I offer this summary for your information, but have no competence to discuss the issues.

Marshman and Morrison used ‘Shen’ for the Greek ‘theos’ (God); Medhurst and Gützlaff used ‘Sheng’.

Marshman and Morrison used ‘Sheng Seng’ for Greek ‘pneuma’ (spirit); Medhurst and Gützlaff used ‘Sheng Shen’, and ‘Sheng Lin’ was favoured by some American missionaries.

For ‘baptizo’ the Serampore Baptists used



*Shen*

‘chan’—to immerse; Morrison followed the earlier Roman Catholic translators and used ‘hsi’—to wash, and this prevailed generally.

The Delegates’ version allowed publishers to use their own preference in the Divine Names, so that BFBS used ‘Shang and ‘Shang Shan’; ABS used ‘Shen’ and ‘Sheng Lin’.

At first Schereschewsky used the Roman Catholic style ‘Tien Chu’ for God, and ‘Sheng Shen’ for Spirit, but later he used ‘Shangti’ for God.

### *TBS Interest*

With the growing interest in China and among Chinese speakers in faithful, accurate editions of the Scriptures, the Society has long sought qualified people to help us prepare a good translation from the Greek Textus Receptus and Hebrew Masoretic Text. At long last this project is now underway, although in its very earliest stages. We look forward to the day when this project is complete, and encourage your prayers that the Lord will give our translators wisdom and guidance in this monumental task.

### *Closing Words*

Some may have wished for more about the Chinese churches, but that is too huge an account for these pages. For a modern survey of the church situation in China, Tony Lambert’s *China’s Christian Millions* is an enthusiastic and most informative help.<sup>14</sup> Suffice it here to say that despite an apparent disappearance under Mao, Christianity in China is alive and well! There are so many openly confessing, and

living, the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in just one province, Henan, that officials refer to it as a ‘Jesus Nest.’ This is a mighty demonstration of Sovereign Grace, the majestic fruit of an Almighty Spirit indeed. Furthermore after the waiting years of Morrison’s early ministry, here is fulfilment of prayers and hopes, the realisation, above all, of his Bible translation beginnings and vision. Is anything too hard for God? Jim Elliot, whom I recall as writing that while most men make opportunity of the possible, God’s men grasp the impossible, would surely approve.

---

### *Endnotes*

1. London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1975.

2. French: entrée interdite; Spanish: dirección prohibida; Italian: accesso vietato.

3. For example, a resident of the UK would understand the second sign on page 21. An American visitor might be able to figure out what the pedestrian crossing symbol implies, but the phrase at the bottom—Humped Zebra Crossing—would be a mystery; indeed it would doubtless conjure up a very odd, and totally incorrect, image.



4. Though it is just these beautiful display forms which are the least certain of interpretation, even amongst Chinese speakers.

5. Thi se ndno teis wri tt enwit hout wo rdbo und ari es (*sort of—but you see the idea*).

6. There is so much more! A single word for instance (in English letters ‘ma’) which, spoken in five different tones, means either mother, or torpid, or horse, or scold, or is a simple query indicator. I will not even mention the analytical grammatical forms!

7. Hong Kong: Independent Printing, 1950.

8. St. Louis, MO, USA: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This is the same author as in the previous book.

9. The old chestnut arguments that the literature of the Pentateuch is an eclectic pastiche derived from surrounding cultures could not be more wrong. In the appointments of sovereign providence, Moses, by inspiration, gives us the truth; it is the surrounding nations who gnawed the crusts of half remembered, confused and adulterated fragments of the antebabel common human history.

10. This is not so strange: circumstances directed that the first printed English Testaments and Bibles were not produced in England, but on the Continent.

11. The early 19th-century Griesbach

editions of the Greek New Testament saw the beginning trickle of the critical approach to textual issues which was full blown by the end of the century.

12. Robert had died in John’s arms, you may remember from Part 1.

13. There was also a smaller meeting in Shanghai in 1847.

14. Oxford, England: Monarch Books, 1999, 2006.

---

*Correction to QR585: A correspondent has mentioned the following regarding endnote 10 that appeared in ‘Robert Morrison, Bible Translator of China, 1782–1834’ in the last Quarterly Record (page 27).*

The teaching that Christ has two distinct natures, the human and the divine, is of course normal biblical doctrine. The heresy of the Nestorians was that they taught that in Christ there are two distinct *persons*, the one human (the man Jesus) and the other divine (the eternal Word). While the two natures, the human and the divine, are certainly joined together in the person of Christ, a permanent union having taken place in the incarnation, this is without ‘conversion, composition, or confusion’, to quote the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 8:2).

*We are grateful for this clarification, and apologise for this oversight in our earlier note.*

