A Study on Chinese Translations of "God": Exemplified by "tianzhu"(天主), "shangdi" (上帝) and "shen" (神)

Yixin Duan[1],Wenjing Su[2], Wanjing Zhang[1], Lingfan Ye[3], Yimin Yuan[1*]

[1] School of Foreign Languages, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu 611731, Sichuan Province, People's Republic of China

[2] International Cooperation Office, Leshan Vocational and Technical College, Leshan 614000, Sichuan Province, People's Republic of China

[3]School of Automation Engineering, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu 611731, Sichuan Province, People's Republic of China

Corresponding author: yuanyimin@uestc.edu.cn

Abstract. The Chinese civilization has been bursting with vitality and vigor in the process of dialogue with other cultures, especially with the Western classic *Bible*. The "best" translation of the supreme master of Christianity is one of the core issues in the process of translating the *Bible* into Chinese. In this paper, we first review the process of translation of the classic *Bible* in China, and sort out the different Chinese translations of "God" in the "Chinese Rites Controversy" in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The study identifies that the three most common translations are "tian zhu" (天主), "shang di" (上帝) and "shen" (神). Focusing on these various translations, this paper analyzes the connotations of aforementioned Chinese characters in the original texts from the perspective of linguistics and culture, and further discusses their impact on language, translation theory and culture.

Keywords: Chinese translations of "God", Chinese translation of the *Bible*, "tianzhu" (天主), "shangdi" (上帝), "shen" (神)

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1 Introduction

As one of the world's three major religions, Christianity has not only greatly influenced the spiritual world of the West, but also engaged in dialogue and intermingling with Chinese civilization in the far East. The continuous re-translations of the *Bible* in the world and the "Chinese Rites Controversy" that emerged during its introduction into China show that the *Bible* translation is worth analyzing in detail as a classic example of cross-cultural communication.

In this paper, we first briefly review the history of *Bible* translation, with special focus on the "Chinese Rites Controversy" in the process of Chinese translation. Then, we sort out three main Chinese translations of "God"— "tian zhu" (天主), "shang di" (上帝) and "shen" (神), analyzing the linguistic, cultural, and social factors behind the different translations, and then discussing their impact on translation, language, and culture.

2 Brief Survey on Translation Process of *Bible*

This section will firstly briefly review the history of *Bible* translation in the world, and investigate its translation process within China.

2.1 Translation Process of *Bible* in the World

Harry M. Orlinsky and Robert G. Bratcher divide worldwide *Bible* translation into four periods: the Jewish period (200 B.C. to the 4th century A.D.), the Catholic period (4th century A.D. to 1500), the Protestant period (1500 to 1960), and the period of increased cooperation among Christian communities (1960 to the present). [1]11-15

Early in the 3rd century, the first translation of the Bible appeared, the *Septuagint*, which was translated by a group of Jews who interpreted the *Old Testament* from Hebrew into Greek. In the first century A.D., there were many sects within the Jewish people living in Palestine under the Roman Empire, and the Christianity was only one of those sects during that time.[2] In the 4th century A.D., the monarch of the Roman endorsed it as the state religion in order to consolidate the sovereignty. During this time, St. Jerome (340-420) revised this classic into Latin, citing Cicero's (BC106-BC43) translation strategy. Based on practice, Jerome proposed two main translation strategies, namely the "word-for-word" and "meaning-for-meaning". [3]25-27

The Renaissance that emerged in the 14th century objectively contributed to the development of national languages in European countries, so that "the right" to interpret the *Bible* was no longer confined to the Church. The Reformation inaugurated in the 15th and 16th centuries under the leadership of Martin Luther (1483-1546), further lead to translations of the *Bible* into many national languages, conveying the thoughts and culture of Christianity.[4]61

From above brief review of history of the translation of the *Bible*, it could be noticed that the impacts of the transmission of this classic have already gone beyond religious dimension, which are also important in that it helps develop languages, literature, translation and so on.

2.2 Translation Process of *Bible* in China

Compared to the history of Bible translation in Europe, the introduction of this classic to China is relatively new. In China, Dr. Li Shiyuan divided the history of *Bible* Chinese translation into four periods, which are later accepted by Zhuang Rouyu and Ren Dongsheng.

The first period can be called "Early *Bible* Introduction", from around the Tang Dynasty to 1807. In 635, the *Bible* entered China from Persia. During the Tang dynasty, Christianity (then known as "Nestorianis", which was called "jing jiao" in China) propagated doctrines mainly through translations and compositions, and these activities were mainly carried out by its missionaries.[4]108-110 [5]25-45 The translation method in that time mainly adopted transliteration, such as translating the Hebrew word "Elohim" as "e luo he"(阿罗诃), and utilized readily available Buddhist and Taoist concepts, such as "zhen zhu" (真主) and "tian zun" (天尊). Later, in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, a batch of missionaries to China utilized a combination of "transliteration" and "liberal translation" to further introduce Christianity. For example, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) realized that the spread of foreign religions in China had to be based on the recognition of Confucianism, so he chose to adopt the Chinese words "tian zhu" (天主) and "shang di" (上帝) that already existed in classics to transmit the religious thoughts of Christianity.

The second period can be seen as the "Mature Period of Bible Translation", about from 1807 to 1850. In the second stage, there were several High Wenli Versions (《深文理圣经》) written by missionaries alone or in groups.[6]16 From then on, the controversy over the translation of "God" continued into the 19th century, resulting in three

translations of the supreme Lord of Christianity in Chinese:“tian zhu” (天主), “shang di” (上帝), and “shen” (神).[7]116-122

The third stage is “Popularization of Bible Translation”, from 1850-1919. The translation of the *Bible* followed the textual reform movement carried out in China. Therefore, and saw the emergence of Easy Wenli Version (《浅文理圣经》) which was more popular compared to the High Wenli Version. In 1919, the publication of Union Version Chinese Bible (also called Mandarin Union Version) was a sign of the transition from plurality to unity in the Chinese translation of the *Bible*, and it was the first universally used version in China.[6]16-17

The fourth stage is dominated by Chinese, from 1919 to now. Local Chinese Christian believers shouldered the work of translating the Scriptures included both independent translations undertaken by individuals, such as the LYU JHEN JHONG Bible (《吕振中译本》), as well as collaborative translations undertaken by Chinese groups, such as the Today’s Chinese Version (TCV, 《现代中文译本》).[6]17

One of the most representative issues in the process of translating the *Bible* into Chinese is how to translate the concept “God”, the highest object of faith, around which there has been a “Term Question” for three to four hundred years. This is not only a translation issue, but also involves many aspects of philosophy, literature, religion, comparative literature, and so on, which are involved in the cultural exchanges between the different groups.

3 Debates on Chinese Translations of “God”

Translation is the process involving both re-presentation of meaning of the original texts and re-construction of cultural elements contained in the works. And for better transmission of this classic, the readers’ reactions should also be taken into consideration by *Bible* translators. Focusing on the Supreme “God”, both missionaries and Chinese readers have discussed various translations of it, reflecting their different comprehension of this concept.

The first period of controversy over the translation of “God” among missionaries occurred in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Catholic priests Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607) proposed that “Deus” (“God” in English) should be translated into “tian zhu” (天主), while Matteo Ricci at that time insisted that this concept should be translated into “shang di” (上帝). Later, Niccolo Longobardi (1559-1654) and other missionaries disagreed with both translations. This debate continued until the late 17th

and early 18th centuries, when the Pope issued a papal bull fixing the use of the translation "tian zhu" (天主).[8]18-20

This "Term Question" was further expanded among later Protestant missionaries. In the early 19th century, Robert Morrison (1782-1834), a Protestant missionary to China, published translations that adopted "shen" (神) as the translation of the word "God", but his writings also used various translations such as "zhen zhu" (真主), "zhu" (主), "shang tian" (上天), etc. to refer to "God". It reflected that even the translators themselves had misgivings about the "best" translations for the Supreme Lord. Later, Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff (1803-1851) advocated the translation of "shang di" (上帝), which was later adopted by the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom.

The issue reached a climax at the mid-19th century Bible translation conferences, where there was a heated debate between the "shen" (神) and "shang di" (上帝). For the supporters for "shen" (神), most famous representatives were Elijah Coleman Bridgman (1801-1861), James Legge (1815-1897), and Walter Macon Lowrie (1819-1847); while Henry Medhurst (1796-1857) was a prominent advocate for "shang di" (上帝). Besides, the attitude of the British Bible Society and American Bible Society were completely opposite: the former advocated "shang di" (上帝) and the latter supported "shen" (神).

Until the end of the 19th century, at the missionary conference [Note: this refers to the Protestant missionary conference, so the translation of "tian zhu" (天主) is not mentioned for the time being], the argument over the name of "God" was settled with the subjectivity of the translators — they decided to issue both "shang di" (上帝) and "shen" (神) versions.[9]20-23,29

At the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, scholars such as Xu Guangqi (徐光启) accepted the Catholic view of divine providence as a pursuit of social order, morality and ethics, so he used the terms "tian zhu" (天主) and "shang di" (上帝) at the same time in his writings, and Yan Mo (严谟) wrote works to defend the translation of "shang di" (上帝). However, anti-clerical figures such as Zhong Shisheng (钟始声) realized the essential difference between the Confucian terms "tian" (天) and "shang di" (上帝) and the Catholic Supreme "God", and thus criticized Matteo Ricci's use of Confucianism as a method to propagate their religious concept.

In the 19th century, Liang Fa (梁发), a preacher born in the lower class, most widely used the term "shen tian shang di" (神天上帝) to refer to the word "God"; later Hong

Xiuquan (洪秀全) was influenced by Liang and accepted Christian thought, and the term "(huang) shang di" (上帝/皇上帝) was commonly used in his works.

These different perspectives on translations of "God" showed the difficulties of conveying this religious concept. At the same time, it could be viewed as an interesting dialogue and mutual integration between different cultures.

4 Analysis of Three Translations of "God"

In order to understand the reasons of various translations of "God", we should focus on its corresponding Chinese translations firstly — the implications of characters "tian" (天), "di" (帝) and "shen" (神). At the same time, the translators' background and goals of translation should also be taken into consideration.

4.1 "Tian" (天) and "Tian Zhu" (天主)

The concept of "tian" (天) lies at the core of the entire Chinese belief system and has profound philosophical implications, not only "metaphysical" but also moral. During the Yin and Shang dynasties, the concept of "tian" (天) was associated with the "supreme ruler of the universe". The term "tian zhu" (天主) can be traced back to the Records of the Grand Historian (《史记》), as seen in "八神：一曰天主，祠天齐。天齐渊水，居临菑南郊山下者" (from " Religious Sacrificial Ceremonies") (《封禅书》). Here, the concept "tian zhu" (天主) may be understood as the object of primitive worship of the Qi people.

Michele Ruggieri used the translation of the name "tian zhu" (天主), reflecting his tendency of domestication. In *The True Record of the Lord of Heaven* (《天主实录》),[9]313 he shows his basic strategy of relying on the scholarly community to spread his message: he paid attention to the reactions of Chinese officials and scholars, and used philosophical arguments based on rationality to propagate his teachings.[10]37 It can be seen that when the missionaries translated the *Bible* and introduced the concept of "God" to China, the main target readers were the Chinese intellectuals. Based on this translation purpose, it is understandable that the missionaries of the late Ming Dynasty chose the translation of "tian zhu"(天主), which was chosen in order to gain the favor of the officials and literati by this elegant and richly connoted term.

4.2 "Shang Di" (上帝)

The word "di" (帝) has a long history and has deepened in connotation during the development of the Chinese nation. In the *Books of Chow* (《尚书》), it records "God was consequently roused to anger, and did not give him the Great Plan with its nine divisions" (帝乃震怒，不畀洪范九畴) (from "Hong Fan") (《洪范》), which embodies Chinese ancestors' understanding of the power of nature that represents the sublime, mysterious power. In *Zhuangzi* (《庄子》), it says "The Ruler of the Southern Ocean was Shu, the Ruler of the Northern Ocean was Hu, and the Ruler of the Centre was Chaos" (南海之帝为倏，北海之帝为忽，中央之帝为混沌) (from "Ying Di Wang") (《应帝王》), marking the "di" (帝) from the proper noun to the class name.

In the period of Qin dynasty, ancient people inherited former natural feature of "di" (帝) in Shang dynasty and moral connotations of "di" (帝) in Xi Zhou, further expanding the implications of "di" (帝).[11] Additionally, the character "di" (帝) is also closely related to "tian" (天). The words "tian zi" (天子), "huang di" (皇帝) and "di" (帝) not only reflect the supreme status, but also the rationality of the origin of the emperor's identity and status.

In the "Book of Genesis" (《创世纪》), the story of the creation of humans shows that Gods is the only true Lord, the creative and sovereign power of the universe, who spreads the gospel to save the lost sheep. This shows that the concept of "God" in Christianity has a certain degree of similarity with "di" (帝) — both of them have a high status and represent mysterious power.

Therefore, when the "shang di" (上帝) was chosen to serve as the corresponding concept for "God", and thus was endowed with religious color, it is still acceptable to the Chinese people on a psychological level because of its connotation. Moreover, the word "di" (帝) has religious, philosophical, and secular connotations, so itself is elusive. This may also be the reason why Matteo Ricci tried to use "shang di" (上帝) as a synonym for "God" in *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (《天主实义》).[9]313

4.3 "Shen" (神)

The *Shuowen Jiezi* (《说文解字》) states, "Tian Shen, the one who draws out all things. It comes from "shi" and "shen" (天神，引出万物者也。从示、申). The "shi" (示) means "the heaven hangs down the image, to see good and bad luck" (天垂象，见吉凶) and "the divine events are also shown" (神事也); while the "shen" (申) indicates

“shen” (申，神也).From this, we can see that “shen” (神) is not only associated with the gods of nature and ancestral spirits, but also with the traditional five elements of “yin and yang” (阴阳) which could be applied to observe the outer world.

Since ancient times, the Chinese have been polytheists at the religious level. At the same time, they are also imbued with the traditional thought of “unity of heaven and man” (天人合一). Therefore, the concept of “shen” (神) embodies rich connotations, such as “abundance”, “diversity”, “integration” and “unity”.

In this case, who supported the translation “shen” (神) believed that the word “God” in the original Hebrew text of the *Bible* originally indicated a class name rather than a supreme proper name,[7]119 and they were in favor of a “class name” that could be on behalf of all “gods” — they more concerned about the generic attribute of translation word,[12]30-31 emphasizing pluralism and coexistence.

5 Impacts of These Three Translations of “God”

Various translations of “God” not only triggered disputes over the conveying of Supreme Lord, but also contributed to re-translations of the *Bible*. The constant discussions have various impacts, from concepts, language, translation theory, translation practice to literature.

5.1 Enrichment of the Concept “Shang Di” (上帝)

The word “shang di” (上帝) originates from ancient Chinese texts, and ancient sages did use the words “tian” (天) and “shang di” (上帝) to refer to the ruler of heaven and earth. However. when this word was used as the counterpart of“God”, it was to a certain extent rendered in a foreign religious color.

The connotation of “shang di” (上帝) in the pre-Qin texts is very broad. According to Mr. Guo Qiyong’s conception in *The Spirit of Chinese Confucianism*[13], “shang di” (上帝) implies the idea of “harmony with real creatures” and “inclusiveness”. In addition, “shang di” (上帝) in the traditional Chinese context embodies the idea that “heaven and earth are born together in me, and all things are one with me” (天地与我并生，万物与我为一) (from “Zhuangzi: The Theory of Things”), emphasizing the intrinsic relationship between “di” (帝) or “tian” (天) and “man”. Under the concept of the “unity of heaven and man” (天人合一), the “generation power” of “di” (帝) can ultimately be manifested in all things.

But the "God" in *Genesis* is the supreme Creator, who, despite his human-like appearance and emotions, is essentially a transcendent being. He has the power to create all things, but ultimately manifests himself as an external "creation" power.

When the concept of "God" entered China with the spread of Christianity, it introduced a kind of Western traditional "dichotomy" or "dialectical" thought into this land. The most obvious manifestation of this is the opposition between man and nature, which is a great shock to the traditional Chinese concept of "the unity of heaven and man". At the same time, for the general public, with the introduction of Christianity, the concept of "shang di" (上帝) also took on a mysterious religious meaning in their minds.

5.2 Contribution to Translation Theory

Western missionaries to China during the Ming and Qing dynasties continued their practice of "faithfulness" in translating religious texts.[3]28-32 With missionary work as their primary goal, they "only sought to preserve the original meaning of the Biblical text" in their translations.

Represented by P. L. Depoirot (1735-1814), Robert Morrison (1782-1834), S. I. L. Sehereschewsky (1831-1906), and Griffith John (1831-1912), among others, emphasizing the interpretation of original texts, they also paid attention to the translator's subjectivity and the reader's reaction. Especially, Griffith John proposed "pursuing faithfulness to the original work with flexible translation", which was the prelude to the development of modern Chinese translation theory.[14]135-138

The idea of conducting translation research from linguistics was also introduced to China. At the end of the Qing Dynasty, Ma Jianzhong, on the basis of linguistics, put forward the idea of "Shan Yi" (善译) in "Proposed Establishment of a Translation Academy" (《拟设翻译书院议》), suggesting that translators should examine "the source of words" (文字孳生之源), "the pitch of words" (音声之高下), "the style of texts" (尽其文体之变态),[15]214 describing the elements involved in the study of translation — the phonology, etymology, syntax, and style — and reflecting a fusion of the traditional Chinese theory of translation and the Western translation theory.

At the same time, the missionaries paid attention to the target readers in the process of missionary work. For example, the school that adopted the translation of "tian zhu" (天主) paid attention to the readers who were Chinese officials and scholars; the school that adopted the word "shang di" (上帝) considered the emotional needs of the readers

at the psychological level; and the school that adopted the word “shen” (神) sensed the multi-god worship in ancient Chinese religions. All these illustrate the influence of the translation purpose and the target readers on the translation strategy, and reveal that we need to consider the translation process from various aspects.

5.3 Introduction of Foreign Culture

When translators translated the *Bible*, they used exegesis and other methods to introduce foreign words and concepts into the cultural environment of the translation language.

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the translation of Christian classics in China expanded from the translation of religious classics to the all-round translation of Western philosophy, science, religion and other books. At the same time, many Chinese classics were also transmitted into Western world,[16]1-6 conveying information about culture, customs, history, art and so on, contributing to mutual learning between different cultures.

In addition, the idea of “dichotomy” and “dialectic” was introduced to China, which objectively contributed to the change of Chinese thought. Under the observation of the “other”, the “self” re-examined itself, and further scrutinized and excavated its own culture with objective and dialectical thinking. For example, in the debates over various translations, the missionaries and the scholarly class went back to the canonical texts and reinterpreted the concepts of “tian zhu” (天主), “shang di” (上帝), and “shen” (神), comparing them with the Christian concept of the Supreme Lord, so as to further excavate the profound connotation of these concepts.

6 Conclusion

Examining the development trend of Chinese translation of the *Bible*, it can be found that from the level of translation operation, the participation of local Chinese translators is increasing, and the angle of text analysis is more objective and scientific. In addition, the literary and philosophical connotations of the *Bible* itself have been transmitted, and there has been continuous exchange and interaction with different cultures.

The widespread dissemination of the *Bible* in China can not be separated from the characteristic of Chinese culture, which is “inclusive”, which makes Chinese people have a higher degree of acceptance of heterogeneous cultures. Thus, to re-examine the

influence of the Chinese translation of the *Bible* from the perspective of multiple translations is a way of thinking to promote the mutual appreciation of cultures and civilizations.

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