

THE OTHER TERM QUESTION—
THE TRANSLATION OF βαπτίζω AND
ITS EFFECTS ON THE PROTESTANT
MISSION IN CHINA¹

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In 1843, when most of the missionaries in China at that time met in Hong Kong to decide on the Chinese Bible translation of what was later known as the *Delegates' Version*, committees were formed to address questions which were likely to raise conflict. Two of the committees were assigned to find proper translations for θεός—"God"—and βαπτίζω—"baptism." They were unable to reach a conclusion during the conference, so it was decided that the final decision on the translation of θεός would rest with the general translation committee, and the rendering of βαπτίζω would be left to the preference of each mission.² The later discussions over θεός in the general committee

¹ Paper originally presented at conference on "James Legge: The Heritage of China and the West," 8 to 11 April 1997, The University of Aberdeen.

² See *The Chinese Repository*, vol. 12 (1843), 551ff.

resulted in the well-known "Term Question" and the eventual split of the translation committee. The other open question, the translation of βαπτίζω, though apparently so amicably solved, also had major consequences for the translation of the *Delegates' Version* and the further history of Bible translation in China.

Conflict on this issue was almost as old as the Protestant mission in China. The Presbyterian Robert Morrison came to China in 1807, three years after Joannes Lassar and Joshua Marshman had started to translate the Chinese Bible in the Baptist mission and Bible translation centre in Serampore, India. Morrison's mission society, the London Missionary Society, had originally expressed its interest in cooperating in the Bible translation in Serampore, but very soon afterwards it sent Morrison to China to translate the Bible on his own.³ Though it later asked Morrison to correspond with Marshman on their common but separated work of Bible translation, a request that Morrison rejected as "a very difficult thing...to do,"⁴ Marshman bitterly indicted the London Missionary Society as well as Morrison with trespassing into mission grounds that the Baptists had opened. He pointed to a number of examples—India, Burma, Java, and Malacca—where missionaries of the Church or London Missionary Societies had followed the paths of the earlier established Baptist Missionary Society.⁵

Morrison's and Marshman's translations, though remarkably similar, were received quite differently by the general missionary public. Only Baptist groups preferred Marshman / Lassar's version, whereas nearly all others considered Morrison's somewhat better.⁶ The

³ See pub. letter from Marshman to Baptist Missionary Society of 3 April, 1817.

⁴ Morrison to London Missionary Society of 14 December, 1809. Council for World Mission Archives, School of Oriental and African Studies.

⁵ See pub. letter from Marshman to Baptist Missionary Society of 3 April, 1817.

⁶ See John Wherry, "Historical Summary of the Different Versions of the Scriptures," *Records 1890* (Shanghai: Presbyterian Mission Press, 1890), 50. The only non-Baptist who preferred Marshman to Morrison because of greater faithfulness to the original text appears to have been the Presbyterian W. A. P. Martin (see *Bible Society Record* 11 [1863], 108).

reason behind the Baptist preference for Marshman / Lassar's version was to be found not only in Marshman's denominational ties, but also in his translation of the term βαπτίζω. Morrison had adopted the Catholic term *xi* (洗) to denote "baptism." *Xi* as a term for βαπτίζω had been the Catholic term in use from early times, as in Giulio Aleni's *Tianzhu jiangsheng chuxiang jingjie* (天主降生出像經解) of 1637, and even the Nestorian church had employed *xi*—besides other terms such as *ru tang* (入湯)—"immerse in the water"—in the *Xuting mishi suo jing* (序聽迷詩所經：入多難中洗)—"immerse in the Jordan (*duonan*) to baptize." *Xi* with its main meaning of "to wash" seemed to fit the concept of purification through baptism (Morrison defines *xi* in his dictionary of 1823 as "to wash physically or morally"), though only a remote meaning of *xi* includes the aspect of immersion, which is the basic meaning of the Greek βαπτίζω. Catholic tradition, as well as that of most Protestant groups in the China mission, does not include immersion in the rite of baptism and thus supported the use of *xi*.

The Baptist missionaries at Serampore translated βαπτίζω in all portions of their Bible translations with a term for immersion, reflecting the content of their doctrine. In one of the first parts of Marshman / Lassar's Chinese translation, the Gospel of John (pub. 1813), the relevance of this endeavour is magnified by the fact that three different terms for βαπτίζω are employed: *zhan* (蘸), *cui* (淬), and a combination of the two: *zhancui* (蘸淬) (Jn 1:31). *Zhan* and *cui* both have the meaning "to dip into," which apparently is intended to be the meaning of the newly created *zhancui* also. In the final revision of Marshman / Lassar's translation (pub. 1822), only *zhan* is used. The translation of Marshman / Lassar was not only the first complete Chinese Bible translation ever published, but it was also the first of the Chinese Baptist translations which up to the present day differ in their translation of βαπτίζω from all other Protestant versions.⁷

⁷ There is only a small number of non-Baptist versions besides that of Medhurst / Gützlaff / Bridgman (see below) that use terms that imply immersion: John Chalmers and Martin Schaub

This controversy foreshadowed immense conflicts surrounding the translation of βαπτίζω in Bible translation worldwide. The influential British and Foreign Bible Society had been a major supporter of the Serampore mission, but it finally severed its support in 1836 because of the Baptist interpretation of the Bible translations produced there. This led to the formation of the separate Baptist Bible Translation Society in Great Britain in 1840.⁸ Almost concurrently, in 1837, the American and Foreign Bible Society was founded in the United States as an offspring of the American Bible Society, over a controversy about a Baptist Bengali Bible translation.⁹ (The American and Foreign Bible Society itself experienced another split in 1850, when a sub-group rejected the transliteration of βαπτίζω in the English Bible and formed the American Bible Union, which published its own English New Testament in 1862/63.)¹⁰

In China, Bible translation continued with the work of Walter Henry Medhurst, Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff, and—to a lesser degree—Elijah Bridgman and John Robert Morrison. In the first edition of 1836, they adopted Morrison's translation of βαπτίζω: *xi*—to which they added *li* (禮)—"ceremony"—to form a noun. At this period, not even *xi* met with the favour of the British and Foreign Bible Society, which had decided in 1836 that it would only support Bible translations with a transliterated form of βαπτίζω as done in the English ("baptism") or later in the (Protestant) Japanese Bible

used *zhan* in their New Testament version (pub. 1897), the 1939 New Testament translation by Heinrich Ruck and Zheng Shoulin has *jin* 浸, today's common Baptist term, and the 1986 revision of Xiao Tiedi's New Testament translation bears a number of terms for βαπτίζω, among them *jinxi* 浸洗—"immerse and wash."

⁸ See Neville Cryer, *Bibles Across the World* (London: Mowbrays, 1978), 55.

⁹ See Margaret T. Hills, "ABS Historical Essay 16, Part III, Text and Translations: Principles and Problems, 1831-1860," Unpublished essay (New York: American Bible Society Archives, April 1964), 10-33.

¹⁰ See Margaret T. Hills, ed., *The English Bible in America: A Bibliography of Editions of the Bible & the New Testament Published in America 1777-1957* (New York: American Bible Society, 1961), 260.

(*baputesuma* バプテスマ). Gützlaff, the reviser of many later editions, took the freedom of not being supported by the Bible societies to use *jin* (浸)—"to immerse, soak, moisten"—in later revisions (1840 and 1854) or *jinxi* (浸洗)—"immerse and wash"—in yet another revision of 1847, both terms which certainly would not have met with more favour than *xi*. *Jin* was subsequently adopted by all Baptist translations and editions and has even formed the very name of the Chinese Baptist church.

As a historical footnote: A Taiping explanation of baptism in the *Tiantiao shu* (天條書) (pub. 1852) reads: "...you either take water from a basin and wash (*xi*) your whole body clean or wash yourself by immersing (*jinxi*) in a river, which is better" (或用面盆水周身洗淨，或在江河浸洗更妙).¹¹ The two concepts of either immersing or washing could be based on the different teachings that Hong Xiuquan, the leader of the Taiping, received. The tract written by the early Chinese convert Liang Fa [*Good Words to Admonish the Age* (勸世良言), pub. 1832] and read by Hong taught baptism by sprinkling;¹² but during his time with the Baptist missionary I. J. Roberts in 1847, Hong learned that baptism was done by immersion. However, the Taiping rebels used the version by Medhurst / Gützlaff / Bridgman as the basis for their own editions, and the use of *xi* and *jinxi* may very well suggest a connection between Taiping ideology and the revisions by Gützlaff.

To return to 1843, the stage was already set for conflict over the translation of βαπτίζω when the missionaries met in Hong Kong to plan the *Delegates' Version*.

¹¹ Quoted in Deng Zhicheng, and Xie Xingyao, eds., *Taiping Tianguo Ziliao, Jindai Zhongguo Shiliao Congkan* 36 (Taipei: Wenhai, 1976), 74.

¹² See Jonathan D. Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: Norton, 1996), 63.

The most active Baptist in the translation of the *Delegates' Version* was the American Josiah Goddard. He was a member of the local translation committee in Bangkok, where he translated several books of the New Testament. He finished his part in 1844,¹³ the same year his mission society suggested that he move to Hong Kong to take a more active part in the *Delegates' Version* translation and to find better Chinese teachers.¹⁴ He declined, writing:

I have also for some time been convinced that we shall be obliged to have a version of our own, and I have borne in mind the instructions on this point which I received before leaving America and which have been confirmed at different times by letters from the Board.¹⁵ ...I have not supposed that by participating in revision work we (or any one) became so implicated as to be bound to approve — but that when it is finished it will stand on the basis of its own merits. Perhaps however to prevent misunderstand[ing] it may be well to state that we do not pledge our approval to the work, I have thought best to assist so far as it has fallen to my lot and come within the range of my ability...¹⁶

Other Baptist missionaries, such as Thomas T. Devans, had even more outspoken views on an independent Baptist course in Bible translation,¹⁷ and this course of action was eventually fully adopted by the Baptist board. Shortly afterwards, Goddard stopped

¹³ See letter to General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denominations in the United States of America (GMC) of September 1844, American Baptist Archives Center, American Baptist Historical Society, Valley Forge.

¹⁴ See letter from the GMC to Goddard of 29 June, 1844, American Baptist Archives Center, American Baptist Historical Society, Valley Forge.

¹⁵ In the letter from the GMC of 29 June, 1844, it also said: "It seems highly important to omit nothing in our power to make the revision as judicious as practicable; and on the other side not to turn aside from our appropriate course of action, nor to bind ourselves even by implication, to what we may eventually be unwilling to sanction."

¹⁶ Letter from Goddard to the GMC of 22 November, 1844, American Baptist Archives Center, American Baptist Historical Society, Valley Forge.

¹⁷ See letter from Devans to the GMC of 1 January, 1845, American Baptist Archives Center, American Baptist Historical Society, Valley Forge.

his cooperation with the delegates, a step also taken by William Dean, another American Baptist who had taken an active part in the *Delegates' Version* translation. He officially severed his connection with the delegates because the move of the general committee from Hong Kong to Shanghai had rendered "it unpracticable for us to take a part in this matter. We shall do what we can in a private way."¹⁸

The only Baptist who actually continued to work with the delegates but played a fairly insignificant role was John Lewis Shuck.

Goddard moved to Ningbo in 1848/49 and arranged with Dean to jointly work on a new translation, with Goddard as the main translator and Dean revising and preparing notes.¹⁹ Genesis and Exodus were both published by 1851 and the complete New Testament in 1853. The remaining part of the Old Testament could not be finished by Goddard due to his early death in 1854, but it was eventually published by Dean in 1868. Dean also published a revised version of the New Testament in 1870, but the revision by the American Baptist Edward Clemens Lord of 1872 is better known.

Goddard's diary entries about his translation work illustrate his emphasis on the Hebrew text and his complete reliance on his Chinese teachers.²⁰ As soon as his teachers were absent, Goddard limited himself to preparatory work, not taking up the work of translation himself. Of all that is known about Chinese Bible translation in the 19th century, Goddard was probably the Western translator who relied most strongly on his Chinese assistants.²¹

¹⁸ Letter from Dean to American Baptist Missionary Union (successor of the GMC) of 18 June, 1847. American Baptist Archives Center, American Baptist Historical Society, Valley Forge.

¹⁹ See Letter from Dean to American Baptist Missionary Union of 23 January, 1849, American Baptist Archives Center, American Baptist Historical Society, Valley Forge.

²⁰ Quoted in a letter from Goddard to American Baptist Missionary Union of 6 September, 1850, American Baptist Archives Center, American Baptist Historical Society, Valley Forge.

²¹ See Jost O. Zetzsche, "The Bible in China: The History of the Union Version or The Culmination of Protestant Missionary Bible Translation in China," *Monumenta Serica Monograph Series 45* (Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institute, 1999), 124.

The 1853 version of Goddard and later revision by Lord are praised for their good style and, at the same time, greater fidelity to the original text than the earlier versions, from which they show remarkable independence.

However, many missionaries or historians, among them such influential ones as William Muirhead²² or Marshall Broomhall,²³ referred only vaguely to Goddard as "highly" or "favourably spoken of," thus displaying their own ignorance of the version. Because the Baptist translations by Goddard, Dean, and Lord were not Protestant "mainstream versions," most historians were not familiar with them, and for the same reason these versions were hardly ever employed by later translators.

Though the Baptists had participated in the *Delegates' Version* translation project from its inception, their definition of themselves in relation to Bible translation as a separate entity from the rest of the Protestant community made it impossible for them to finish the project with the others. The terminological problem with the translation of βαπτίζω, though the original cause of the conflict, was therefore not the immediate reason for the separation—the Baptist mission societies had after all been granted the right to publish *Delegates' Version* editions with their own term for βαπτίζω. Nevertheless, Baptist authors tended to point to that as the sole reason for the separation, as in an 1892 history of Baptist missions:

²² See William Muirhead, "Historical Summary of the Different Versions," *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China, Held at Shanghai, 2-20 May, 1890* (Shanghai: Presbyterian Mission Press, 1890), 36.

²³ See Marshall Broomhall, *The Bible in China* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1934), 71.

At one time a plan was formed for securing a "catholic" translation by the united labors of a committee of the missionaries of all denominations in China. This could have been done in the twelfth century, when there was yet no question about the Greek terms for *baptize* and *baptism*, but it could not be done in the nineteenth, when the Pedo-baptists had become so choppingly sectarian as to *cut themselves off from* the universal usage of the Greek and Roman churches during so many centuries.²⁴

The story of the Bible in China continued from there on (at least) in two tracks, with a Baptist and a non-Baptist tradition. This separation could not only be found in Classical (and later Mandarin) Chinese, but also in several dialects with separate Baptist Bible translations, such as Hakka (NT 1903-1917, pub. by China Baptist Publication Society), Shanghai (incomplete New Testament 1867-1888, pub. by American Bible Union), and Swatow (Shantou) (NT 1877-1896, pub. by American Baptist Missionary Union). The only exception was a cooperative enterprise in Ningbo with the participation of Goddard's son J.R. Goddard, and members of the Church Missionary Society (Bible 1901, pub. by BFBS), but even here separate editions were published.

At the general conference in 1890, however, a union version for all Protestant missions in China was decided upon. The general conference, painfully aware of the split in the missionary community caused by the Term Question and the translation of βαπτίζω, decided that the version will be "the common property of the [Bible] societies which have given their patronage to the work, each having the right to publish such editions as it may choose, and with such terms for God, Spirit and baptize, as may be called for." Also, for the New Testament of the so-called High Wenli translation, Goddard's version was to be "employed wherever available."

²⁴ G. W. Hervey, *The Story of Baptist Missions* (n.p.: Barns, 1892), 533f.

These points were again raised when the China Baptist Publication Society requested Baptist editions of the *Union Version*. This society was founded in 1898 by the two large American Baptist Mission societies,

to provide Bibles which gave a correct and faithful translation of the word used in the original Greek for 'baptism' and certain other terms for God and Holy Spirit over which there has been disagreement among the translators.²⁵

Beginning in 1879, there had been individual requests for Baptist editions of existing Bible translations, but these were often rejected by the Bible societies on the grounds that applications should be made by organizations rather than single missionaries. In 1902, the new Baptist society published its own edition of the so-called Easy Wenli New Testament without permission of the Bible societies²⁶ (the only group which ever supported the Easy Wenli translation were the Baptists because of the participation of the Southern Baptist R. H. Graves and his definite influence on that translation). In 1907, however, the China Baptist Publication Society petitioned the involved American, British and Scottish Bible societies for official permission to publish any part of the *Union Version*. It pointed to the decisions made at the general conference as well as to the participation of Graves, who had apparently been told that there was an agreement on a Baptist edition of the *Union Version*.²⁷ Nevertheless, the most effective argument surely must have been the hint at the possibility of making yet another translation or the possibility of a Baptist edition of Griffith John's

²⁵ *A Century of Christian Conquest in China 1836-1936, Records and Addresses of the China Baptist Centenary Celebration, Held at Fung Shan Canton, China, 13-18 October, 1936* (N.p.: n.p., 1936), 81.

²⁶ R. C. Gardner and C. C. Chambers, *Builder of Dreams* (Nashville: Broadman, 1939), 62f.

²⁷ See Zetzsche, *The Bible in China*, 239.

Bible translation by the Scottish Bible Society (Easy Wenli New Testament, pub. 1885),²⁸ both of which would have jeopardized the *Union Version* scheme.

In 1908, all three Bible societies finally agreed on the China Baptist Publication Society's right to publish its own editions of the *Union Version*, under the conditions of a Baptist imprint, the exact conformity of the editions with the exception of the translation of the term for βαπτίζω, and with a limited circulation among Baptists only.²⁹

The version that the Baptist Press, the successor of the China Baptist Publication Society, issued for the Baptist church until 1993 was an edition from 1954, the year it received a set of printing plates of the Mandarin *Union Version* to produce its own edition.³⁰ In November of 1993, a slightly revised edition was published by the Baptist Press,³¹ which is the latest effort in the still separate history of Baptist and mainstream Protestant Bible translation in China.

The Chinese agent of the American Bible Society, John Hykes, asked the American missionaries in China in the beginning of 1905 for their opinion on *xi* or possible alternatives for the translation of βαπτίζω.³² A transliteration was favoured only by few, including the American Presbyterian J. A. Silsby. But even he knew that it

²⁸ See letter from Graves to the secretaries of the Bible societies of 26 July, 1907, American Bible Society Archives, New York.

²⁹ Letter from Hykes (on behalf of the American Bible Society) and Bondfield (on behalf of the British and Scottish Bible Societies) to Chambers of 16 July, 1908, American Bible Society Archives, New York.

³⁰ See *American Bible Society: Annual Report* 140 (1955), 280.

³¹ *Union Version with Modern Punctuation* (Red Letter, Shen and Jin Edition) (《現代標點和合本》〔浸·神·紅字版〕) .

³² The statements of the missionaries were collected in three letters from Hykes to the American Bible Society. The first of the three is lost, the other two are of 24 June, 1905, and 5 July, 1905, American Bible Society Archives, New York.

would offend the "taste of many," and therefore not be accepted. The American Baptists—the English Baptists had by that point agreed to the use of *xi*³³—naturally did not accept *xi*, whereas all other missionaries surveyed supported *xi* because of its cleansing aspect (John Wherry, Presbyterian), or the fact that it had already been coined in its Christian meaning as "baptism" (S. I. J. Schereschewsky, American Episcopal; C. Goodrich, Congregational). None of the missionaries argued that *xi* was the better translation for βαπτίζω, thus once again emphasizing the fact that the discussion surrounding the correct translation for βαπτίζω was doctrinal rather than linguistic.

The "Other Term Question"—as it is called in the title of this paper—differed significantly from the conflict that is usually known as the "Term Question." It was a problem which was neither unique to the mission and Bible translation in China, nor was it a problem of interpretation of Chinese culture and thought. It was a conflict over a theological interpretation that was rooted in the churches of America and Britain and imported into China through the strong denominational ties of the missionaries. However, it had—like the question concerning the translation of "God" and "Spirit"—a profound impact on the history of Bible translation in China and on the unity, or lack thereof, within the missionary community in China.

Beginning with the separation of the Baptists from the *Delegates' Version* committee and continuing until the start of the *Union Version* translation, the Baptist Bible translation tradition was entirely independent from the rest of the Protestant Bible translation activities in China, thus allowing the Baptist translators some liberties that other translators did not have. They were not entangled in conflicts like the Term Question—the Baptists were the most consistent users of *shen*

³³ See letter from Hykes to American Bible Society of 5 July, 1905, American Bible Society Archives, New York.

(神) for "God" and *ling* (靈) for "Spirit," even beyond national lines; they did not have to bother about taking earlier translations into consideration to avoid excluding any group of missionaries (the often-quoted statement that Goddard's version was a revision of the version by Marshman / Lassar was made out of ignorance of Goddard's—and probably Marshman / Lassar's—version); and they did not have to follow guidelines with which they themselves may not have agreed—as in other cases where the Bible societies had such a tremendous and formative impact. The tragedy of the Baptist translators lies in the fact that their translations were only used by a small minority of missionaries and Chinese with no possibility of reaching a greater audience, or even of serving as models for later translators.

ABSTRACT

The Term Question—the question about how to translate God and Spirit into Chinese—is a well-documented controversy that caused considerable divisions between different Protestant mission groups in China. This paper's topic, "Other Term Questions," refers to the Chinese translation of the Greek βαπτίζω (in English commonly translated as "baptism"), which was a question of similar magnitude for many, especially Baptist groups. This controversy has also been reflected in deep disagreements and separate Bible translations that have continued to the present day.

This paper outlines the genesis of the conflict and also analyzes why this question has never been as visible as the discussion about the translation of God and Spirit. The answer lies in the central term: this was not a problem of interpretation of Chinese culture and thought, but rather a conflict over a theological interpretation that was deeply rooted in the churches of America and Britain and imported into China through the strong denominational ties of the missionaries.

撮 要

如何把God和Spirit翻譯為中文這術語問題的爭議，見諸不少文獻中，並造成在華不同更正宗差會相當程度的壁壘分明現象。本文題目「別外術語問題」，指向翻譯βαπτίζω這希臘文為中文（一般英文翻譯是 baptism）的課題。對不少人來說，此乃舉足輕重的問題，尤以浸信會中人為然。有關爭議，亦反映於持續至今的強大分歧以及不同聖經譯本等情況上。

本文勾勒摩擦的緣起，並分析有關問題為何不如翻譯 God 與 Spirit 的討論那末明顯。答案在於核心術語的問題，而問題並不關乎詮釋華人文化與思想，反之，卻繫於入華英美宣教士背後的宗派神學詮釋之間的矛盾。