

The Bible in China

Maria Ko, FMA

Translated by Peter Barry, MM

This article was taken, with permission of both the author and publisher, from the commemorative volume, "The Catholic Church in China, Today and in the Future," published in 2006 in Taiwan, in honor of the 75th birthday and 50th anniversary of priesthood of Father Jeroom Heyndrickx, CICM.

The Song Dynasty scholar Huang Shangu had this famous saying about reading books: "If your heart is not watered by ancient and modern writings, then your life is lived in the dust. When you look in the mirror you see an ugly face, and your conversation with others has no flavor." From this we see that reading can really form our spirits, raise our qualitative level, expand our wisdom and nourish our lives.

The Chinese people greatly emphasize the reading of books, and really admire "the person who reads." They greatly respect many generational scholarly families. On the plebeian level, you can say, "In books there are golden rooms and pretty faces." Through books, one can achieve a fulfilled life. On a more refined level, we can say, being well-read expands our knowledge, broadens our perspective, allows us to escape boorishness, overcome being closed in, know the vastness of the universe, understand the great expanse of history, experience the mysteries of life, let people walk with the ancients, and helps us to become friends with intellectual societies and outstanding scholars.

The volumes available for the Chinese people to read, like the Four Books and the Five Classics, history books, collections of poems and songs, essays and novels, thousands of years of rich culture gathered into books, are innumerable. If we count the works

of every school and faction, every field of knowledge, science and art, and all the specialized treasures they contain, it is impossible to read them all.

In the religious field, books and classics have an importance, which is irreplaceable. Just consider how Buddhism was transmitted in our country. Tang Dynasty priests, like Xuan Zang and others, expended great energy and suffering to travel to India and bring back the Buddhist classics. Then they continually translated them, and researched and explained them. Their work had a great influence in our country. It allowed Buddhism to sink roots, to grow strong, and to develop and expand broadly and deeply.

We can tentatively ask: in the history of the introduction of the Catholic religion to China, what role did the Christian classic, the Bible, play? On a piece of the earth where classics are the pillar of the culture, and in a country which attaches great importance to words and books, what place does the Bible hold in the Christian community?

1. The “Spreading” and the “Growing” of the Bible in China

The Christian Bible is a book, which can “spread” and “grow.” St. Paul wrote about “the Word of God speeding forth” (2 Thess. 3:1), and St. Luke also spoke about “the Word of God spreading” (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20). Of course, after the Bible was formed, nothing can be added to its content and words. However, its meaning, effectiveness, the broad expansion of its preaching and the depth of its influence have continually grown with the times. From those who witness to it and live it out in their lives, we see that the creditability and truthfulness of the Word continually increases. From the research of Scripture scholars and theologians, we see that the Word can deeply enter into a person. And from the liturgy, pastoral work and the spiritual life, we can see that the Word builds up its own energy. Gregory the Great said this marvelous phrase: “Scripture grows by being read.” From the time it was written, and for the 20 centuries thereafter, the spread and growth of the Bible has been enormous. It has been translated into over 2,000 languages. It has penetrated the whole of Western

culture. It has been manifested in song, dance, music, drama, film, paintings, and sculpture. It has become a “basic symbol” of Western literature and art, and influenced many branches of philosophical thought and outlooks on life.

The Bible has been propagated in China only for about four or five centuries. When compared with China’s five thousand years of history, it is only a short period. But it cannot be denied that after its propagation in China, the Bible has also “spread” and “grown” in China’s vast expanse. In the beginning the development was very slow. But in the several decades after Vatican Council II, the dissemination of the Word has gone from small steps to a fast dash.

a) The early period of evangelization

The Catholic religion gradually made progress in China from the 16th to the 18th centuries. This was just at a conservative period in Church history, after the Council of Trent. Like the rest of the Church, the missionaries were generally of the opinion that the Bible must be read very carefully. To prevent misunderstandings, it was not necessary for ordinary Catholics to directly read the Bible, they thought. To believe in Christianity, the most important book was not the Bible, but the catechism. The missionaries might not even have brought the Bible with them to China. According to the general situation in the West, the missionaries most likely only read the Sacred Scriptures when reading the missal during Mass. They did not directly come in contact with the whole Bible. Therefore, among the Catholics in China, what satisfied people most were the erudite missionaries, large churches, a close-knit community, a high effectiveness, magnanimous works of charity, the unique liturgies, and religious customs. It was not the Scriptures or religious literature. The Catholics were completely unaware that the Bible was the source and foundation of their faith. The majority of the Catholics were more familiar with the prayer book and the catechism than they were with the Bible.

The Bible was translated into Chinese rather late. In the latter half of the 19th century, not long after Protestant Christianity was

propagated in China, there were several versions of the Bible in Chinese. But for Catholics, although Pope Paul V had already in 1615 given permission for the Bible to be translated into Chinese, it was not until the middle of the 20th century that the Studium Biblicum translated and published the Chinese Bible. Then it came into common use.

However, the late translation of the Bible and its lack of direct use does not mean that it did not have an important role to play in the development of the Chinese Catholic Church. Actually the early missionaries, no matter if it was in evangelization, teaching catechism, pastoral instruction or preaching during the liturgy, all made great use of the Bible and explained it. Through oral transmission, although many Christians did not read the Bible directly, they became very familiar with the Bible stories, and understood their meaning. Some missionaries also wrote books containing the deeds of the Bible, especially the things Jesus did during his life. The Christians loved to hear or read these stories. In 1635, the Jesuit missionary Giulio Aleni wrote a book entitled, *A Record of the Words and Deeds of the Incarnate God*, which, in the manner of a biography of Jesus introduced the contents of the Four Gospels. In the following two centuries, “direct explanations” or “brief explanations” of the Bible were continually being published as a means of explaining the Bible in different contexts, whether liturgical, spiritual or pastoral.

b) Development after Vatican Council II

After the Second Vatican Council, the whole Church was renewed. On the one hand, it returned to its foundations, and on the other, it opened itself to the world, in order to bring the Gospel to modern society. The importance of the Bible was greatly enhanced in the consciousness and the life of the Church. Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (DCDR) clearly points out that the Bible is a conversation between God and man, and is the manifestation of the contract of love between God and man. “It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to

make known the mystery of his will...By this revelation, the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends.” (DCDR, para. 2) The God of Christians is the God who creates and loves men and women, and is happy to communicate with them. He makes himself known to men, and this makes them recognize and treasure more deeply their value, meaning and direction.

The Church continually draws nourishment and life from the Bible, and strongly believes: “Such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for their soul and a pure and lasting fount for their spiritual lives.” (DCDR, para. 6) Therefore it is necessary to let Christians directly and more broadly come in contact with the Scriptures.

The revelation contained in the words of the Bible is not abstract. Rather it takes place in history, is real, and can be experienced. In this conversation between God and man, through each incident and each recorded passage, man can become conscious of God’s plan of salvation. This revelation does not remain at the level of a message or of consciousness; rather, it causes man “to share God’s goodness” (DCDR, para. 6), brings heaven and earth into communication, and God and man into loving contact. The ultimate purpose of reading the Scriptures is not just to understand the words, but as St. Gregory the Great said: “To read the Sacred Scriptures is to study how, through the vehicle of the Lord’s words, to know his heart.” The idea of entering the Lord’s heart by reading the Lord’s word has a solid foundation in the tradition of the Church. The early Church Fathers put great emphasis on this concept. The spoken and written word is not absolute; books in the last analysis are only means of communication. They are useful for expressing the meaning of hearts, communicating emotions, evangelizing, or revealing thoughts and feelings. The Bible is no exception. In the limited language of man, it passes on the infinite words of God. Each word and phrase can be said to be transcendent, in the sense that their content is unlimited, hiding a mysterious and unfathomable power,

and a record of God's encounter with man. The Church now more and more emphasizes this point: people cannot just academically study "explanations" and "interpretations" of the Bible; rather, they must try to arrive at "communion" and "connection," and communication with the God, who speaks to them. The reader of the Scriptures should have "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16), "the mind that was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5), and experience that kind of implicit agreement that comes from "a meeting of minds."

Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus gave this promise: "I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all the truth" (Jn. 16:12-13). The whole process of the revelation being at first spoken, then written down and finally becoming a book was done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Paul clearly tells us that all Scripture "was written under the inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16). This word "inspiration," no matter if in Greek or Latin, all contains within it the meaning of "breathing." In the Scriptures there is the breath of the Holy Spirit. It is a force urging man to become good, guiding man towards wholeness (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16), helping man "to obtain the wisdom of salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15). The Bible was written through inspiration, passively absorbing the breath of the Holy Spirit. This breath then spreads everywhere, and actively blowing onto the reader, giving revelation to him. So, Origen was able to say that when reading the Scriptures the Holy Spirit cannot but be present helping the reader, because basically to read the Scriptures is "to listen to the words of the Holy Spirit according to the Holy Spirit's meaning." Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, also said: "If we want to understand and interpret the meaning of the Bible, the Holy Spirit must come down upon us and give us his light and grace." Inspiration was the work of the Holy Spirit when the Bible was formed. It can be said that interpretation is a continuation of that work, although in a different manner. "Since the Bible was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it must be read and received under the guidance of this same Holy Spirit" (DCDR, para. 12).

This special spiritual attitude can not only renew our reasoning, but also renew the presence of God in our hearts. Through this wonderful connected way of reading the Scriptures, the Bible and Chinese culture can be brought closer to one another. This would cause people to experience that kind of excitement, which “expresses admiration by pounding on the table,” a kind of sweetness, which “lingers long in the air,” and an appreciation of “a meeting which happened too late.”

c) Looking to the future

After the enlightening and spirit-filled Vatican Council II concluded in 1965, its doctrines quickly spread throughout the world. On the Chinese side, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan immediately launched into renewal. Because of political problems on the mainland, the spirit of Vatican Council II arrived there over 20 years later. But after the implementation of the open door policy, the mainland Church, while facing many difficulties, still tried to catch up as quickly as possible.

The writer has for the last ten years frequently gone to several seminaries in China to teach the New Testament. At the same time, with the Bible at the center, I have conducted many retreats and spiritual exercises. It is very apparent that the interest of the young priests, seminarians, and Sisters in the Bible is very deep. Their spirit of study is praiseworthy and their desire for learning knows no bounds. Besides wanting to obtain academic knowledge, they are also very concerned about how to make the Bible the basis of their spiritual lives. They are also interested in how to use the Bible in their pastoral work, how to lead the Christians to respectfully read the Bible, love the Bible and live out the doctrines of the Bible in their daily lives.

Twenty years ago, it was not easy to find a Bible to read in China. Now the situation has changed drastically. Now it is easy to possess a Bible and to read it frequently. However, the Bible is not an easy book to read. The Bible is actually a whole library of books. It contains 73 books, written at different times, from different social

backgrounds, with different types of literature, and written in different ways. To enter this world and obtain the knowledge present there, there must be some guidance and some time spent on introductions. One cannot harbor vain hopes of studying by oneself without a teacher. In China, teachers of the Bible and materials to guide people in studying the Bible are still very much lacking. In the last 15 years, several priests and Sisters have gone to Europe or America to study various aspects of philosophy and theology, including the Bible. Several have already returned to China, and are teaching Scripture in the seminaries. They also promote the biblical apostolate. They are very devoted and very idealistic. They are the hope of the Chinese Church for the future. But their numbers are still too few, and their influence still too weak. I wholeheartedly bless and support them. I hope that their numbers increase, that they cooperate and help one another and that they work hard, purposefully and effectively to bring the Scriptures into the lives of the Christians.

Something that makes me happy and thankful is that the fervor for the Bible among ordinary Catholics in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan continues to grow. The various Bible study and sharing groups, as well as Bible retreats, organized by the Catholics have caused their Christian lives to be more active, more deeply rooted and more united with other Christians. Although their free time and materials are limited, groups of Christians in China also hold such activities. These are all traces of the Holy Spirit leading the Church. Also, among the overseas Chinese communities, the Bible is more and more becoming a life force for Christians and the source of their happiness and peace. In recent years, this writer has gone to Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, America and Canada to give conferences on the Bible to Catholic groups. The fervent faith of the Catholics and their love for the Bible is deeply moving. I have learned that many Catholics set aside a period of time each day to read the Bible in their homes, thus allowing the Word of God to be a compass and daily bread for their family life. This is worthy of admiration and imitation.

After the establishment of the United Chinese Catholic

Biblical Association in 1990, Catholic Chinese Bible-lovers from many places can, through periodic meetings and the exchange of books and magazines, increase mutual encouragement and share their Bible knowledge, spirituality and biblical pastoral experience. Also, since the year 2000, the Overseas Catholic Pastoral Commission of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, has held periodic meetings of Chinese Catholics from around the world about evangelization. Although the Bible is not always the main theme, still it is a good opportunity for Catholics from many different places to share their experiences of reading the Bible. The two meetings held up to the present time emphasized the importance of the Bible for the evangelization and spiritual life of the Chinese people.

Another matter we should not overlook is the fact that the Bible has “moved” and “grown” outside the boundaries of the Church. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Bible was no stranger to our country’s literary circles and among our intelligentsia. The influence of the Bible and Christian thought on the May Fourth Movement and on Chinese literature in the first half of the 20th century has already been thoroughly researched. During the second half of the 20th century, under the Communist government, when religions were pressured by atheism, the power of God’s Word still silently spread abroad. It attracted intellectuals seeking spiritual nourishment, and those who came to be known as “cultural Christians.” In the 1980’s, China promoted spiritual civilization, and several universities established research institutes on religion. Their purpose was to study the Christian religion and its scriptures, which had such a deep and long lasting influence on Western culture. They published books introducing the Bible and on methods of explaining the Bible. They also translated ancient and modern hermeneutical works. These works of academic research, although fragmentary and dry, and lacking in the freshening influence of church tradition and theological reflection, thus preventing them from blending harmoniously with faith, are still admirable and worthy of support and encouragement. Exchanges

with these non-Christian scholars can be of great benefit to Catholic scripture scholars. They can learn valuable lessons, especially regarding the topic of how to introduce the Bible into Chinese culture. More and more non-Christian scholars are sincerely and seriously studying the Bible. These are signs of the Bible's "moving" and "growing" in China.

2. Reading the Bible in a Chinese Cultural Atmosphere

After Vatican Council II, Catholics have not only been reading the Bible more directly and completely, but the frequency and quality of the reading has also been enhanced. The Catholics now have a deeper knowledge of the historical background, the languages and the structures of the biblical text. Thus they can better understand the riches stored there. One great step forward is that they understand the close relationship between the Bible and culture. The Bible is the result of a long cultural process. It is the meeting point of the customs and ways of thinking of many different cultures, including the Jewish, Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman cultures. After being formed into a book, the Bible then continued to spread to many other countries' cultures, and experienced unlimited development. Since Vatican II, the theory and practice of inculturation has become prominent. Regarding the entrance of the Bible into different cultures, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, in a document it issued in 1993 entitled "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," clearly pointed out: "The interpretation of an essay always depends on the attention and intention of the reader." Thus the work of inculturation cannot be interrupted. While mentioning the beginnings of evangelization in countries, the document states: "Missionaries, in fact, cannot help [but] bring the Word of God in the form in which it has been inculturated in their own country of origin. New local Churches have to make every effort to convert this foreign form of biblical inculturation into another form more closely corresponding to the culture of their own land."

In many places in Asia, inculturation has caused a new attitude towards the Bible to arise. Asian Christians have begun to

discover the wonders of the Bible from a new vantage point. They have discovered that this book is very close to their own thought processes. They have realized that this book's manner of narration, the technique of using parables, the variety of its words and images, the richness of its vocabulary, the warnings of the prophets, and the admonitions of its wisdom literature, are all used in the same way as in their traditional experience and secular wisdom. This newly discovered feeling of affinity received further affirmation at the Asian Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 1998. The bishops emphasized that Jesus was born in Asia and grew up in Asia, that the Gospel was first preached in Asia, that the Church too was born in Asia, and that it began to develop in Asia. The 73 books of the Bible, except for some that Paul wrote in Europe, first saw the light of day in Asia. The thought structures of the Bible, its literary style, and manner of writing are all basically oriental.

The contradiction is that in the Asia where Jesus was born, up to the present time, Christians number only 3 percent, a definite minority. Why is it like this? The political, social and cultural factors are all very complicated. One cannot make a sweeping generalization. However, most Asian theologians think that one important factor was that when the Catholic religion was first preached in each area of Asia, the missionaries primarily passed on articles of doctrine, and addressed man's reason. This was quite removed from the religious spirit of oriental people, and from their expectations about a revelation from God. So, even up to today the Gospel has not been able to quickly and directly awaken a response in men's hearts. However, with today's new discoveries and familiarity with the Bible, as Pope John Paul II has said, we can hope that Christ's Gospel "will produce abundant fruit in Asia in the third millennium."

The Chinese Church is not different from other Asian Churches. They also hope that by going through a deep absorption and living out of the Word of God, the Church can sink roots in China, grow strong, and that the good news of salvation can bring an abundance of life to the teeming millions of China. In order to

arrive at this objective, it is necessary that the Church increase its efforts at inculturating the Sacred Word. Pastors and students of theology should increase training in Chinese culture, at the same time as they study the Bible and related theological subjects. In this way they will become effective media, helping God to speak to the Chinese people in a Chinese manner.

From the standpoint of academic research concerning a Chinese way of reading the Scriptures, a complete and systematic reflection has not yet appeared. However, some valuable helps and contributions have been published in Taiwan Fugen University's *Theologica Collectanea*. Several informative articles about the Bible have appeared, which illustrate the distinctive characteristics Chinese people have in reading and explaining the Bible. Some writers have also taken certain passages of Scripture, along with their meaning and background, and read them together with similar passages from the Chinese classics. The reaction is very interesting, and leads one to reflect deeply. Especially meaningful are the comparisons made by Fathers Mark Fang and Hu Guozhen between certain literary styles of the Bible and similar styles in the Chinese classics. Bringing the biblical culture and Chinese culture closer together makes the Chinese people feel that both are doubly close.

This writer has made some reflections in this field. They point out that Asian people, especially the Chinese, have a kind of special feeling when explaining the Scriptures. For example, they are in the habit of thinking that "when the word is finished, the meaning knows no boundaries." When viewing watercolor paintings, they like to look at the "blank spaces." Chinese readers are easily drawn into the mood and charm of the words and their symbolism. When reading the Bible, they not only "understand," but they also "become aware of" the words. The Chinese people strongly emphasize the experience of previous generations. As Confucius said: "I was not born with knowledge but, being fond of antiquity, I am quick to seek it" (*The Analects* 7:19). Chinese readers of the Bible meet their ancestors in the faith. As the Book of Sirach (39:1) said: "He explores the wisdom of the men of old." Therefore, when reading the Scriptures, their

ability to make connections is very strong. They are able to use the Bible to explain the Bible, to find consistency, and experience the ancient, but always new, mysteries. It is as Jesus described his disciples in the Gospels. They are like “the householder who brings forth from his storeroom things new and old” (Mt. 13:52). Chinese readers also like to memorize the Sacred Scriptures, taking important passages and “keeping and reflecting on them in their hearts” (Lk. 2:19, 51). At a suitable time, they bring them forth from their storerooms to become “a lamp for their feet and a light for their path” (Ps. 119:105). This is just a small reflection, but it should be enough to satisfy people. God once said to the Israelites: “The Word is very near to you....” (Deut. 30:14). In the same way He relates His Sacred Words to us Chinese. At first glance, they are at a great distance from us. But it is not like that at all; they are very near, very close.

In the area of academic research, a pioneering venture has taken place, which is worth noting. In 2004, the first assembly of Chinese Scripture scholars, from all over the world and from many Christian denominations, was held at the Hong Kong Chinese University. The topic of the assembly was: “Biblical Research, Today and in the Future.” About fifty Scripture scholars gathered together and exchanged rich ideas. The conference was both international and universal. The unique characteristic of the participants was that they were all Scripture scholars, of Chinese extraction, from the Chinese culture, and they all desired to spread knowledge of the Bible in China. After this first assembly, all the participants agreed to set up a liaison network and to hold conferences in different places at regular times in the future.

Such academic research and exchange can help the Bible and Chinese culture to mutually inspire and connect with one another. Besides on the academic level, such exchange is helpful in the areas of pastoral work, spirituality, teaching doctrine, preaching and Bible sharing. Chinese persons, who fervently love the Bible and have a deep knowledge of it, will naturally search for and use methods suitable to the Chinese to spread the good news of salvation to their own fellow countrymen.

3. A Biblical Picture

As everyone knows, the words and style of the Bible do not have theory as the dominant factor. Rather they use parables, pictures and symbols to exhort, preach, encourage and express concern and love. Therefore, I would like to take a passage of the Bible, as a moralistic picture, place it before our readers and hope that everyone is able to obtain some inspiration from it.

Very early in the morning on the day Jesus rose from the dead, a group of women were hurrying along the road. They carefully carried a jar of fragrant ointment, which they had bought in preparation for anointing Jesus' corpse. When Jesus died, the Sabbath day was about to begin. So Jesus' burial was hastily carried out. His body was simply wrapped in a burial cloth and placed in a tomb, which was hewn out of rock and closed up with a large stone. The women were very thoughtful, and loved Jesus very much. They could not allow Jesus' corpse to lie like that in a cold, desolate cave. So after the Sabbath, as dawn was just breaking, they urgently hastened to the tomb, and brought the ointment, which should have been used at the time of Jesus' burial.

On the road, the women's hearts were anxious. They were also sad, confused and fearful. Besides this, they had a big problem to solve: the mouth of the tomb was covered by a huge rock, and they could not roll it back by themselves. Who would help them? As they went along, they became more and more anxious, and began to ask one another: "Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" (Mk. 16:3) They were separated from Jesus by a large rock. How could they overcome this obstacle?

The change in the situation far surpassed their imagination. As they drew near to the tomb, they discovered that the stone had already been rolled back. Their fears were unfounded. The ointment they had prepared was now no longer of any use. At the entrance of the tomb an angel announced to them that Jesus had arisen. Later Jesus himself appeared to them (Mt. 28:9-10).

"Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" This perplexing question can be applied to our study of

the Bible. Sometimes we may feel that between Jesus and us is a great stone. We are separated from him by 20 centuries of history. Thought processes are different. The cultural background and habits of life create all sorts of differences. They make us feel like we can never get near him, nor come in contact with him. We feel that we can only look on this Jesus of Nazareth from a distance. We can worship the God he has revealed, but not approach Him. We can learn about the life of Jesus from reading the Gospels. We can hear his preaching and enter into his thoughts and feelings. However, that thick book, called the Bible, is like a heavy stone. There are many words, chapters and verses, which are difficult to understand. It is hard to grasp certain patterns of thought. We know the words, but not the meaning of the words, in a certain passage. Certain writings are mysterious. We can't get a clear picture of what is being described, nor are we clear about the background. All of this makes us want to draw back from going ahead with Bible study. Who will roll back the stone for us? We decide to seek help in order to overcome this obstacle. We sign up for theology or Bible classes. We put a lot of effort into consulting commentaries, and seeking scholarly guides. This kind of effort is praiseworthy, and most necessary. But we should not forget that what we seek is the risen Jesus, not a corpse in need of anointing. The Jesus of the Scriptures is not just a great person who lived 2,000 years ago. He is still with us. The God of the Bible is not only a God who helped the Israelites in ancient times. He is still in charge of the history of every race of people on the face of the earth. He is the Lord of the universe, who still continually performs marvelous works. We are not only searching for Him when we read the Bible; He is also searching for us. It is not only that we want to listen to Him; He also wants to speak to us, and show His love for us. This is the case, no matter to which culture, language group, race or nation we belong. Do not worry too much about removing the large rock. He will overcome that large rock, and all the difficulties of language, in order to meet us and talk to us.