

An Analysis of Translation Strategies in Joshua Marshman's Bible Translation from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes the translation of the Bible by Joshua Marshman based on the framework of functional equivalence theory. By incorporating certain translation strategies, techniques, and methods, it mainly discusses the degree of equivalence in language, cultural background, and communicative functions of the translation. During the writing process, it is found that while faithfully conveying the essence of the original text, Marshman's translation adjusts the language form and fully considers the cultural background and language habits of the target readers, achieving a high level of functional equivalence.*

Keywords: *Functional equivalence theory; Joshua Marshman; Bible translation; Translation strategies*

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I. Introduction

1.1 An Overview of Functional Equivalence Theory

Functional equivalence theory, put forward by Eugene A. Nida, a distinguished American linguist and translation theorist, has been a cornerstone in translation studies since its inception. Centred on the notion of “functional equivalence”, the theory prioritises functional correspondence between source and target texts over rigid formal fidelity. It challenged the traditional over-emphasis on literal word-for-word matching and opened up new analytical dimensions for translation practice.

At its core, functional equivalence defines translation as the conveyance of a source text's intended function and meaning. For Nida, translation entails far more than linguistic transposition; it is also a process of cultural and informational transfer. Translators need to adopt appropriate strategies by accounting for target-readers' cultural backgrounds, cognitive frameworks and communicative needs, so as to realise functional equivalence across two linguistic systems. Under this theoretical framework, translators are expected not only to render source-language information accurately but also to faithfully reconstruct the original text's intentions, emotional undertones and communicative effects in the target version.

This theory has been widely applied across diverse translation practices, ranging from literary and legal texts to business documents. Regardless of text type, translators ought to work from the source-text foundation while making flexible adjustments according to target-readers' cognitive contexts. In literary translation, particular attention should be paid to recreating the source text's sentiment and artistic conception, enabling target-language audiences to experience comparable aesthetic responses. In legal translation, priority must be given to precision and legal validity, alongside consideration of end-users' practical requirements to guarantee unambiguous transmission of legal information.

1.2 Joshua Marshman and His Chinese Bible Translation

Joshua Marshman was a British Baptist missionary active in the early nineteenth century. Working in Serampore, India, he collaborated to translate and publish the complete Chinese Bible, *The Complete Book of the Old and New Covenants*, in 1822. As the first formally printed full Chinese Bible, this work occupies a landmark position in the history of Chinese-language biblical translation. It represents the collective labour of Marshman and his assistant Lassar and stands as a notable case of cross-cultural exchange.

For example, Marshman translated “the Promised Land” as 福地, a term imbued with symbolic meaning in traditional Chinese culture that evokes an ideal realm of peace and well-being. Through this choice, he sought to build conceptual bridges between Christian canonical ideas and Chinese cultural thought, helping Chinese readers grasp and accept this biblical notion.

Nations possess distinct cultural systems, many of which share few common reference points. If translators adhere rigidly to source-cultural norms and customs, the resulting output may prove unintelligible to

target-language audiences. It is therefore necessary for translators to make appropriate accommodations for local cultural conventions, so that translated texts can be comprehended, accepted and circulated among target communities.

The Complete Book of the Old and New Covenants is written in relatively archaic language, with certain imprecise or newly-coined terms. These shortcomings largely stem from Marshman's limited immersion in Chinese society and his incomplete mastery of Chinese language and culture. Even so, the translation retains its status as a pioneering achievement and provided valuable practical experience for later missionaries and scholars.

Notably, Marshman combined transliteration and free translation for proper nouns of persons and places. This method preserved source-text phonetic features while suiting Chinese readers' reading habits. Though some of his renderings remain controversial, they expanded the scope of exploration for subsequent biblical translation projects. Marshman rendered "Gospel" as 嘉音, "Holy Spirit" as 神魂, and "baptise" as 蘸. All personal and place names were transliterated into Chinese characters modified with the mouth radical.

The publication of The Complete Book of the Old and New Covenants facilitated the dissemination of Christianity within China and offered a model for cross-cultural communication. Later Chinese Bible translations, such as Gützlaff's and Morrison's versions, drew varying degrees of insight from Marshman's work. Building upon his experience, these subsequent translations innovated in translational approaches and stylistic expression, collectively advancing the development of Chinese-language biblical translation.

II. Translation Philosophy

2.1 Artistic Treatment: Linguistic Rhythm and Cultural Imagery

Marshman's translational thinking was rooted in the pursuit of functional equivalence: namely, that a target text should reproduce equivalent communicative functions within the receiving culture. He understood translation as both linguistic transformation and cultural transmission and integration. Accordingly, in his translation practice, he paid close attention to the religious dimensions of the source text and creatively constructed suitable Chinese lexical expressions to achieve effective, harmonious cross-cultural communication.

When translating Psalm 104 in the Old Testament, Marshman produced delicate, poetic renderings of passages depicting natural phenomena and divine creation. The verse "Thou makest the winds thy messengers, and flames of fire thy ministers" was translated as 尔遣风为使者, 火焰为仆役. This rendering captures the original semantic content and, through concise diction and vivid imagery, conveys the majestic power of God over creation and the natural world.

In this instance, Marshman made skillful use of Chinese vocabulary and syntactic patterns. His translation preserves religious solemnity while incorporating the poetic aesthetics characteristic of classical Chinese. Furthermore, Marshman gave careful consideration to textual properties including diction, syntax, grammar and phonetic delivery. Such textual analysis and comparative methodologies had seldom been implemented in prior translation work. They yield useful evaluative criteria for these translated texts, alongside other illuminating historical perspectives.

2.2 Balance between Domestication and Foreignisation

Domestication and foreignisation constitute two fundamental translational strategies, both of which Marshman deployed adaptively in his biblical translation.

A. Application of domestication: Marshman frequently adopted domesticating strategies to restate religious concepts and character archetypes in accessible language. For instance, he translated "Heaven" as 乐土, resonating with traditional Chinese conceptions of an ideal afterlife and enhancing the translation's accessibility and rhetorical appeal.

B. Retention through foreignisation: Meanwhile, Marshman resorted to foreignisation to retain source-text expressive features. "Angel", for example, became 天使, capturing the angel's identity as a divine messenger and sustaining the text's religious solemnity. The foreignising approach respects source-text specificity and broadens Chinese readers' cultural horizons.

2.3 Integration of Literal and Free Translation

Literal translation and free translation represent two core translation approaches, both evident throughout Marshman's biblical work.

A. Precision of literal translation: For religious terminology and proper nouns, Marshman tended toward literal translation to safeguard textual accuracy and canonical authority. "The Word of God", for example, was directly rendered as 上帝之言, faithfully reproducing source-text meaning while conforming to Chinese reading conventions.

B. Readability through free translation: Where linguistic and cultural divergences existed, Marshman employed free translation and reorganised discourse structures, particularly sentence syntax, to improve target-text fluidity.

The sentence “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” was translated as 赦免我们的罪，如同我们免了人的债, conveying the underlying religious message. Expressing Christian concepts absent from pre-existing Chinese cultural frameworks ranks among the most challenging and contested tasks in the history of Chinese Christian translation. It demands a toolkit of techniques: lexical creation, semantic borrowing, conceptual adaptation, free translation, transliteration, and phon-semantic hybrid translation, to build a specialised Chinese discourse for Christianity.

Overall, Marshman's *The Complete Book of the Old and New Covenants* demonstrates considerable sophistication in translational philosophy, strategy and artistic handling. His eclectic methods and careful treatment of linguistic rhythm and cultural imagery helped realise functional equivalence and cultural integration across linguistic boundaries.

III. Translation Methods

A spectrum of translation methods was available to Marshman, including semantic translation, communicative translation and documentary translation. He drew on these approaches in his biblical work, prioritising fidelity to source-text semantics, ensuring effective target-cultural communication, and balancing the text's missionary purpose with its value as a preserved historical-religious document.

3.1 Semantic Translation

Semantic translation occupies a central position in Marshman's translation practice. Its core objective is to capture and reproduce fine-grained lexical and propositional meaning from the source text. Consider the recurring term “grace” in the Bible, which carries layered connotations of divine favour, gracefulness and benevolence. Marshman distinguished its contextual nuances and selected appropriate Chinese equivalents accordingly. When referring to God's redemptive favour, he used 神恩 to emphasise its sacred religious dimension. When describing graceful human conduct, he chose 优雅. This careful selection prevented doctrinal misinterpretation stemming from semantic distortion. When dealing with figurative language such as “the salt of the earth” — a metaphor for society's moral backbone — Marshman investigated the source text's cultural context and logical implications. He translated the phrase as 世之盐 and supplemented it with footnotes elaborating its figurative sense, enabling readers to recognise deeper meanings beneath the literal surface.

3.2 Communicative Translation

Communicative translation prioritises pragmatic communicative effect within the target culture, an objective Marshman pursued rigorously. He refined his phrasing with Chinese patterns of thought in mind. Confronted with lengthy English sentences featuring complex embedded logic, such as “And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”, Marshman produced the rendering 既呼民众与诸弟子近前，乃语之曰：凡欲从我者，当舍己，负其十字架而从吾行焉. He restructured English subordinate clauses into temporal markers and parallel predicates compatible with Chinese syntactic logic, facilitating comprehension and boosting communicative fluency. Additionally, he pursued clarity and conciseness, avoiding overly obscure, archaic or cumbersome phrasing. Faced with English lexical synonymy, he preferred readily intelligible Chinese equivalents so the translated text could fulfil its communicative function within Chinese-language contexts.

3.3 Documentary Translation

Documentary translation requires the target text to retain the canonical quality of the source and preserve its heritage value as religious literature. Marshman maintained a solemn, rigorous stance in lexical selection and syntactic organisation. For ritually-specific religious terms such as “sacrament” and “tabernacle”, he adopted precise Chinese renderings to guard against meaning loss caused by arbitrary lexical choices. Syntactically, he drew heavily on classical Chinese rhetorical devices including antithesis and parallelism to enhance rhythmic quality. For example:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.”

was translated as:

心贫者福矣，盖其国乃天国也；哀恸者福矣，盖将得慰藉也；温柔者福矣，盖将承地土也。

This parallel repetition mirrors the source-text rhetorical structure formally and transmits biblical doctrine conceptually. It provides a relatively reliable Chinese textual foundation for religious-doctrinal research and inheritance, sustaining the cultural standing and historical significance of the Bible as a canonical work within

Chinese-language environments.

IV. Analysis of Translation Techniques

4.1 Amplification and Omission

A. Case analysis of amplification Source text (Genesis): "And the Lord said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation."

Classical-Chinese rendering: 上帝谓挪亚曰：“汝与汝室皆入舟中，以此世吾于汝前见汝为义。”

Analysis: The segment 以此世 constitutes an amplificatory addition that clarifies the temporal scope of “in this generation”. It achieves lexical equivalence (以此世 corresponding to “this generation”) and textual coherence by supplying contextual information absent from the literal syntax.

B. Case analysis of omission Source text (Matthew): “For I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Classical-Chinese rendering: 吾非召义人，乃召罪人悔也。

Analysis: The classical-Chinese version omits the explicit lexical translation of “to call”, yet the verb 召 already encapsulates this semantic component. The adversative relation introduced by “but” is realised through syntactic reordering. Concise and faithful to source-text intent, this instantiates syntactic equivalence (contrast conveyed via sentence rearrangement) and textual equivalence (preservation of logical flow).

4.2 Conversion and Sentence Splitting

A. Case analysis of conversion Source text (Isaiah): “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Classical-Chinese rendering: 吾道高于尔道，吾思高于尔思，犹天高于地也。

Analysis: The English comparative construction is recast as a Chinese coordinate structure with reordered word-order to fit target-language conventions. This realises syntactic equivalence (restructuring of comparative syntax) and textual equivalence (rearrangement without loss of coherence).

B. Case analysis of sentence splitting Source text (Luke): “And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him.”

Classical-Chinese rendering: 彼等登岸，舍其所有，从之。

Analysis: The complex compound source sentence is broken down into short independent phrases for greater succinctness. Aligned with functional-equivalence principles, the translator pursues equivalent communicative function through condensed target-language expression. Sentence-splitting delivers syntactic equivalence (complex clause decomposed into concise phrases) while sustaining textual conciseness and logical continuity.

4.3 Cultural-adaptation Adjustment

Case analysis of cultural-adaptation adjustment Source text (Mark): “And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.”

Classical-Chinese rendering: 取饼祝之，擘而与之，曰：“此吾体，为汝舍之。汝当如此行，以记念我。”

Analysis: Noticeable cultural-stylistic adaptations appear in this passage. For instance, “gave thanks” is rendered as 祝之, matching the stylistic register of classical Chinese. “This do in remembrance of me” becomes 汝当如此行，以记念我. The translation accommodates Chinese cultural backgrounds and observes principles of lexical equivalence (祝之 for “gave thanks”) and syntactic equivalence (recasting the English imperative into a Chinese declarative construction).

Furthermore, “Gospel” is translated alternately as 嘉语 or 嘉音. The character 嘉, like 福, carries associations of positive tidings and good fortune. Marshman's preference for 嘉 may relate to his assistant Lassar, whose native-level Chinese was shaped by Cantonese linguistic habits. 嘉语 and 嘉音 possess euphonious qualities in Cantonese and likely emerged from Marshman's simultaneous process of learning Chinese and producing translation. Notwithstanding deficiencies caused by linguistic divergence, phonetic mismatches and limited preparatory research, Marshman's conceptual understanding and translational treatment of “Gospel” remain fundamentally sound.

In summary, deploying this varied toolkit of translation techniques helps satisfy lexical, syntactic and textual-level requirements set by functional equivalence theory. Such practices enhance target-text readability and foster cross-cultural understanding.

V. Evaluation of Marshman's Translation across Dimensions of Functional Equivalence

Building upon the translation strategies and techniques analysed above, this chapter assesses Marshman's Chinese Bible translation from three interconnected dimensions of functional equivalence: language, culture and communication. Functional equivalence does not demand absolute identity between source and target texts. Instead, it centres on whether target-language readers can obtain comparable comprehension and emotional experience as the original-text audience. Marshman strove to strike a balance between fidelity to biblical content and acceptability for Chinese readers. Nevertheless, constrained by his personal background and the historical context of early-nineteenth-century Sino-Western cultural contact, his translation achieved functional equivalence to varying degrees across these three dimensions, which will be elaborated respectively in the following sections.

5.1 Linguistic Dimension

At the lexical level, Marshman's translation introduces a host of specialised religious terms while subjecting them to sinicisation. For religious loanwords originating from Greek and Hebrew, he selected appropriate Chinese character combinations that preserve source-text meaning while remaining acceptable within Chinese linguistic conventions. Marshman aimed to convey source-text intentions faithfully while aligning with Chinese expressive norms to improve reading fluency for Chinese audiences.

On the syntactic front, Marshman made constant compromises between the hypotactic structures of English and the paratactic features of classical Chinese. Rather than mechanically replicating English subordinate-clause frameworks, he reordered sentence constituents, converted passive constructions into active forms, and adopted concise four-character phrases and short coordinate clauses in line with the rhetorical habits of pre-modern Chinese prose. Such syntactic remodelling discarded rigid formal correspondence but safeguarded the logical relations and propositional meaning of the original text. Even though occasional awkward collocations and archaic coinages persisted due to the scarcity of established Chinese religious terminology in that era, his adjustments effectively reduced reading obstacles for target-language readers and realised functional equivalence at the syntactic level of language.

5.2 Cultural Dimension

Culturally, functional equivalence in Marshman's translation manifests itself in the effective transmission and transformation of Jewish-Christian cultural content embedded within the Bible. Religious rituals, festivals, allusions and other culturally-specific material are mediated through annotations, free translation or semantically-parallel Chinese lexical choices. These measures enable Chinese readers to appreciate the connotative and symbolic dimensions of foreign cultural elements.

For cultural concepts sharply divergent from Chinese traditions, Marshman introduced adaptive modifications and explanatory notes to mitigate misunderstanding and cultural friction. For example, the Western "shepherd" trope is accompanied by brief footnotes unpacking its religious-symbolic significance. These annotations help Chinese readers grasp unfamiliar cultural contexts, bridge interpretive gaps, realise cultural equivalence between source and target text, and promote cross-cultural integration.

5.3 Communicative Dimension

On the communicative level, Marshman took Chinese rhetorical conventions and modes of reasoning into consideration. Clear phrasing, rational sentence organisation and coherent thematic arrangement allowed the translated text to integrate smoothly into local cultural contexts. When rendering religious doctrines, he adopted general-to-specific structures and illustrative examples to render abstract theological ideas more accessible and digestible for readers. His stylistic register approximates both spoken and written Chinese of his era, avoiding communicative obstacles generated by excessively obscure vocabulary. Since scripture is intended for oral recitation and preaching, intelligibility in spoken delivery constitutes a vital consideration for biblical translators. In this respect, Marshman's work achieves communicative-functional equivalence and fulfils the didactic and disseminating roles of religious canonical texts within Chinese-language settings.

Nevertheless, Marshman's denominational religious stance introduced subjective bias into his translation and increased textual difficulty for readers. As a Baptist, he adopted 浸洗礼 for the term "baptizo". By contrast, Morrison, representing Presbyterian and Congregational perspectives, predictably chose the alternative term 洗礼. Thus, the seeds of Protestant denominational disagreement were sown at this early juncture.

VI. Limitations and Historical Influence of Marshman's Translation

6.1 Limitations

Though Marshman produced the first complete Chinese Bible, its reach remained constrained. It was used primarily by early Baptist missionaries and circulated largely among overseas Chinese communities. Despite his efforts toward functional equivalence, historical circumstances and the limited state of contemporary

linguistic-cultural research imposed noticeable limitations. Lexically, several translated terms lack full precision and fail to capture the complete semantic range of their source-language counterparts across contexts. Figurative religious vocabulary is sometimes reduced to a single dominant reading, risking partial misinterpretation of doctrine.

In the sphere of cultural transfer, adaptive adjustments and explanatory notes could not entirely eliminate interpretive barriers for complex Western religious concepts and traditions. Consequently, Chinese readers could not engage with these cultural layers with the same depth as contemporary Western audiences. Compared with modern Chinese Bible translations, Marshman's version features uneven stylistic quality and occasional opacity. Its weaknesses arise partly from over-commitment to literalism, constrained lexical repertoires, incomplete awareness of core syntactic principles, and the near-total absence of established Chinese terminology for biblical and Christian ideas in that early period.

6.2 Historical Influence

Marshman never visited China, yet his groundbreaking Chinese biblical translation earned him recognition as a pioneer of Protestant missionary engagement with China. His translation has attracted positive scholarly assessment: "Considering the conditions under which it was completed, it is an excellent translation, bringing great honour to him and his assistants."

Marshman's translation exerted considerable historical impact. As one landmark achievement in early Chinese biblical translation, it furnished indispensable practical reference for subsequent missionaries and translators. In missionary terms, it met Chinese-speaking audiences' demand for access to biblical texts and advanced the spread of Christianity across Sinophone regions. It also left marks on Chinese language and culture: numerous Western religious concepts and lexical items entered Chinese usage, enriching its vocabulary reservoir and cultural breadth and contributing to broader processes of Chinese linguistic modernisation. Some religious terms were absorbed into everyday Chinese, expanding the expressive capacity of traditional Chinese lexical resources.

VII. Conclusion

An examination of Joshua Marshman's biblical translation through the lens of functional equivalence theory reveals that Marshman deployed a diverse array of translation strategies, methods and techniques. He pursued functional equivalence with the source text along linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions. His translation laid important groundwork for the reception of the Bible within Chinese-language contexts and offers valuable empirical insights for translation theory and practice. Notwithstanding its demonstrable limitations, its practical value and historical significance for its time remain undeniable.

Future biblical-translation research and practice may draw lessons from Marshman's translational experience. Researchers and translators should continue exploring optimised pathways to enable effective cross-cultural transmission of religious classics, foster pluralistic coexistence and prosperity among human civilisations, and advance scholarly progress in translation studies. In this way, translation can serve as a robust, unobstructed bridge facilitating inter-civilisational dialogue.

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