

Translating the Bible into Chinese: Robert Morrison's Decision to Render the Divine Appellative as a Test Case

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Abstract

On the bi-centenary anniversary of the establishment of the Old Protestant Cemetery in Macao, in which the first Protestant missionary to China, Robert Morrison, is buried, we take the opportunity to revisit one of the great contributions he made, i.e., translating the Bible into Chinese. We focus on the translation decision that he made concerning the divine appellative. After reviewing the semantics of the Christian divine appellative in their original biblical languages, namely, *אלהים*, *θεός*, and *Deus*, the earlier Christian missionaries' proposals, and the implications of the Catholic official ruling on the matter, we make a comparison between Morrison's version with the Catholic official Chinese version, the Don Scotus Version. The article demonstrates that a reevaluation of the Catholic conventional Chinese rendering of the divine appellative, 天主 *Tianzhu*, is necessary.

第一位來華的基督教傳教士羅伯特馬禮遜一直安葬在澳門基督教墳場。適逢其兩百週年之際，我們藉此機會重新回顧他所做的其中一項偉大貢獻：將《聖經》翻譯成中文。本文關注的是他針對「神聖名稱」所做的翻譯決定。

¹ This paper was developed out of a pre-event talk of the 10th Macau Literary Festival on December 3, 2021, honoring the 200th anniversary of the establishment of the Old Protestant Cemetery in Macao, in which Robert Morrison is buried.

在考察過在古典語文中「神聖名稱」——即אלהים、θεός和*Deus*——的詞性和語義、早期基督宗教傳教士的提議以及天主教官方對此事的裁決的影響之後，我們將馬禮遜譯本與中國天主教官方翻譯本（《思高》本）進行了比較。本文表明，現在有必要重新評價天主教傳統中文對「天主」這一「神聖稱謂」的翻譯。

No bicentenário da criação do Antigo Cemitério Protestante em Macau, onde está sepultado o primeiro missionário protestante na China, Robert Morrison, aproveitamos a oportunidade para revisitar uma das suas grandes contribuições, i.e., a tradução da Bíblia para o chinês. Focámo-nos na decisão de tradução que tomou a respeito do apelativo divino. Depois de revermos a semântica do apelativo divino cristão nas suas línguas bíblicas originais, nomeadamente אלהים, θεός e *Deus*, as propostas dos primeiros missionários cristãos e as implicações da decisão oficial católica sobre o assunto, fazemos uma comparação entre a versão de Morrison com a versão oficial católica chinesa, a versão de Don Scotus. O artigo demonstra que é necessária uma reavaliação da tradução católica convencional chinesa do apelativo divino, 天主 *Tianzhu*.

Keywords: *Bible translation; Robert Morrison; Tianzhu; Shangdi; Deus*

INTRODUCTION

In 1821, Mary Morrison, the wife of Dr. Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary to China, died. Her death marks an end to the long-lasting struggle between the Protestant community in Macau and its Portuguese Catholic colonial government over the permission given to the Protestants to own land for burial purposes.¹ This bi-centennial anniversary offers us an opportunity to reflect on one of Morrison's contributions, namely, his translation of the Bible into Chinese, called 《神天聖書》 (Morrison-Milne Version), which is one of the first Chinese Bibles ever produced by a Protestant mission. An almost simultaneous effort to produce a Chinese Bible was carried out in India under the British and Foreign Bible Society, begun by Hovhannes Ghazaria with only the Gospel of Matthew but completed by Joshua Marshman in 1822. However, given the occasion that gives rise to this paper, we shall discuss solely the Morrison-Milne Version. Moreover, since the author comes from a Catholic background, this paper shall make a preliminary comparison between the MMV and the Catholic version in use, the Don Scotus Version, also called the *Sigao* version (《思高》譯本).

Translators of the Bible into Chinese face many challenges, and they must make a variety of translation decisions for which they have to take responsibility. In this article, attention shall be given to one of them: the translation of the word “God”. One of the perennial issues concerning the translation of the Bible into Chinese, and the one that helped trigger the Rite Controversy, is the *Nomen Dei*. In this article, it does not concern the Proper Name of the God of Israel, YHWH, or the so-called *Tetragrammaton*, but the general noun אלהים in Hebrew,² θεός in Greek, *Deus* in Latin. It is important to note at this juncture that it is not my purpose to reexamine the whole history of the debate on the history of the translation of the divine title into Chinese.³ Rather, with the few pages allotted here in this article, I would like only to demonstrate this as one of the most difficult challenges confronted by a translator of the Bible. What is more, coming from a Chinese Catholic background, I would like to suggest that it is worth revisiting the decision to render the divine appellative as 天主 *Tianzhu*.

¹ See: Lindsay Ride, “The Old Protestant Cemetery in Macao: A Lecture Delivered on May 7, 1962,” *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3 (1963): 9–35 [13–14]; Ou Nian Le, “Old Protestant Cemetery: Treasure House of Macao History,” *Macao Magazine* (July 2017): 63–66 [64].

² There is another Hebrew word that shares a similar semantic content, אל. Nevertheless, since this word has a more salient specialized meaning, the chief god of the pantheon, while אלהים has a more general denotation of supernatural beings, gods and spirits of different levels, in this article we focus solely on the latter.

³ For some recent literature on this issue, see: 戚印平, 〈“Deus”的漢語譯詞以及相關問題的考察〉, 載《東亞近世耶穌會史論集》, 東亞文明研究叢書(臺北: 臺大出版中心, 2004年), 頁75–117; 黃一農, 〈明末清初「帝天說」所引發的論爭〉, 載《兩頭蛇: 明末清初的第一代天主教徒》, 修訂三版, (新竹市: 清大出版社, 2014年), 頁437–462; 紀建勛, 〈明末「天主」考〉, 載《漢語神學的濫觴: 早期全球化時代的上帝之賭》, 漢語基督教文化研究所叢刊52 (香港: 漢語基督教文化研究所, 2020), 57–106。

In this paper, I shall first briefly discuss the semantics of אֱלֹהִים, θεός, and *Deus*. Second, I shall trace the history of the Chinese translation of the Bible until the time of Morrison. Next, the translation of the divine appellative by the early Christian missionaries will be reviewed. Then, we will move to how the early Catholic Chinese missionaries render the appellative in the target language. Afterwards, the paper will look at the Catholic official declaration on the matter and the neglected potential problems and limitations. Finally, we shall look at Morrison's decision on the matter and make a preliminary comparison between his version and the Don Scotus Version, to demonstrate that this matter is at least worth a reevaluation.

I. ELOHIM AND ITS COUNTERPARTS IN THE CLASSICAL LANGUAGES

In order to evaluate the biblical translations for 'God', one must first have the word in the biblical languages, i.e., Hebrew and Greek, clarified. What is more, since the Latina Vulgata had for a long time been the normative version of the Bible used in the West, it is necessary to understand the noun in Latin as well.

The Hebrew word most used in the Hebrew Bible that is translated as 'God' is אֱלֹהִים (transliterated as: *'ēlōhîm*). It is "above all an appellative, and is frequently used as a plural with reference to the gods of different nations."⁴ In other words, grammatically, אֱלֹהִים is a common noun in plural form, and its singular form is אֱלֹהִי (*'ēlōhî*). Literally, אֱלֹהִים means 'gods'. For instance, in Exod 12:12, the God of Israel says to Moses and Aaron:

For that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every [male] first-born in the land of Egypt, both human and beast; and I will mete out punishments to all the gods [אֱלֹהִים] of Egypt, I [YHWH]. (NJPS)⁵

There are many other occurrences of this use of the word אֱלֹהִים in the Hebrew Bible.⁶ At the same time, this noun in the plural form also refers to the singular God of Israel. For example, this is how the first line of the Hebrew Bible reads:

When God [אֱלֹהִים] began to create heaven and earth— (Gen 1:1; NJPS)

In modern Western translations of the Bible, the two uses can easily be distinguished using capitalization. The capitalized 'God' refers to the God of Israel while the non-capitalized 'god(s)' refers to other pagan god(s). In the Hebrew Bible, in most cases, these two different

⁴ Helmer Ringgren, "אֱלֹהִים *'ēlōhîm*," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 1 (1974): 267–284 [276].

⁵ NJPS is the abbreviation for the English translation of the Hebrew Bible published by the Jewish Publication Society in 1985. Here I transliterated the tetragrammaton, YHWH, which NJPS keeps in its original Hebrew יהוה.

⁶ See: Ringgren, "אֱלֹהִים *'ēlōhîm*," 276–277.

uses of the same word אֱלֹהִים can be determined by the context in which the word appears. Insofar as the Hebrew wording is concerned, the word in the two uses looks identical, and readers of the Hebrew Bible are not bothered by the fact that the two uses of the word share the same appearance.

In the biblical traditions, the Greek equivalent of אֱלֹהִים is θεός (*theós*). It refers to “God, the Deity, in general sense, both sg. and pl.”⁷ In other words, similar to אֱלֹהִים, θεός is also a common noun. To translate the two verses quoted above, LXX uses θεός in both cases. In Exod 12:12, the phrase καὶ ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς θεοῖς τῶν Αἰγυπτίων is used to render וּבְכָל-אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרַיִם “and to all the gods of Egypt”; and in Gen 1:1, ὁ θεός is used to render אֱלֹהִים, referring to the biblical God.

The Latin counterpart of אֱלֹהִים is *deus*, which denotes “a god, deity”.⁸ In other words, *deus* is also a common noun. The word *deus* is used to render the two verses quoted above into Latin in the *Latina Vulgata*. In Exod 12:12, the phrase *in cunctis diis Aegypti* is used to translate וּבְכָל-אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרַיִם “and to all the gods of Egypt”; and in Gen 1:1, *Deus* is used to render אֱלֹהִים, referring to the God of Israel. In modern printed editions of the *Vulgata*, capitalization is also used to distinguish the biblical God *Deus* from other pagan gods *di* or *dii*.⁹

In both the original Hebrew Bible and the Greek and Latin translations, the common appellative for the divine is used to refer to both the biblical God and the gods of other nations. In all the three classical versions, such use does not present any problem. The only peculiarity lies with the *Latina Vulgata*, which, while using the same word to refer to both God and the gods, make a difference between by capitalizing the former. This may represent a need seen by the Roman Catholic Church to distinguish the two classes of deities, namely, the one true God and all the other false gods, especially when the same Latin word is used to refer to both. At the same time, the *Latina Vulgata* does not propose or create another word to translate the common divine appellative, even when it refers to the Christian God, for that would then be both grammatically and lexicographically problematic, as it is to render a common noun into a proper noun. Nevertheless, this awareness seems to be completely absent when Christianity entered Chinese soil, and especially in the Chinese translations of Christian texts.

⁷ The Liddell, Scott, Jones *Ancient Greek Lexicon*, s.v. “θεός”, [#lexicon](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=qeo%3Ds&la=greek&can=qeo%3Ds0&prior=w) [accessed August 6, 2024].

⁸ Charlton, T. Lewis, *An Elementary Latin Dictionary* (New York: American Book Company, 1890), s.v. “*deus* ῑ”, <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0060%3Aentry%3Ddeus&highlight=deus> [accessed August 7, 2024].

⁹ This word has two possible forms in the nominative plural.

II. EARLY CHINESE TRANSLATIONS OF *ELOHIM*

In 635 AD, during the Tang Dynasty in Chinese history, Nestorianism entered Chinese soil, known as *Daqin Jingjiao* (大秦景教), or simply *Jingjiao*.¹⁰ In the extant *Jingjiao* documents, the common noun 神 (God) is used, but not as a divine appellative, but only in its theological discourses highlighting its monotheistic belief, 一神, or “[there is] only one God”, for instance, in its *Discourse on the One God* (《一神論》).¹¹ In this treatise, the One God is called *Tianzun* (天尊), which literally means “the Heavenly Supreme”.¹² *Tianzun* is indeed the usual divine appellative used to refer to the One God in *Jingjiao* texts. It is also a title that the Daoist religion uses to refer the three highest deities (三清).¹³ Thus, it has been speculated that the adoption of this title by *Jingjiao* was motivated, at least to a certain degree, by a desire to practice inculturation with the hope that this may make *Jingjiao* more easily acceptable and hence popular amongst the Chinese population.¹⁴

It should be noted that *Jingjiao* also uses the term *alāhā* (rendered into Chinese as 阿羅訶) to refer to God, specifically to the Creator God of the Old Testament. Whenever this term is employed, the context is either the creation of the world, as in the Nestorian Stele,¹⁵ or referring to God the Father, as “the Merciful Father *Alāhā*” (“慈父阿羅訶”) in *Da Qin Hymn of Perfection of the Three Majesties* (《景教三威蒙度讚》).¹⁶ The clearest example showing *Jingjiao*’s use of *Alāhā* to refer to the First Person of the Trinity is in *Let Us Praise* (《尊經》):

妙身皇父阿羅訶、應身皇子彌施訶、證身盧訶寧俱沙，已上三身同歸一體。

The first title, *Alāhā* (阿羅訶), refers to God the Father; the second, *māšīhā* (彌施訶), refers to God the Son, and is a transliteration of מָשִׁיחַ (*māšīaḥ*), i.e., ‘Messiah’, or the Anointed One; the last title, *rūhā dāqūdšā* (盧訶寧俱沙), refers to the Holy Spirit, and is a transliteration of רוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ (*rūaḥ haqqodeš*).

¹⁰ 朱謙之〔著〕，《中國景教》，中華現代學術名著叢書（北京：商務印書館，2014年〔原版：北京：人民出版社，1998年〕），頁2。

¹¹ For the complete text of this *Jingjiao* theological treatise, see: 吳昶興〔編注〕，《大秦景教流行中國碑：大秦景教文獻釋義》，漢語基督教經典文庫集成1（新北市：橄欖出版，2015年），頁75–128。

¹² E.g., see: 吳昶興，《大秦景教文獻釋義》，頁86–87。

¹³ 張興發〔編著〕，《道教神仙信仰》，全國道教學院統編教材（北京：宗教文化出版社，2019年），頁165–178。

¹⁴ 宋蘭友〔著〕，《景教有關「天主」的翻譯》，《神學年刊》第2期（1978年）：頁41–54。

¹⁵ 吳昶興，《大秦景教文獻釋義》，頁10–11。

¹⁶ 吳昶興，《大秦景教文獻釋義》，頁203。

The first title, *Alāhā* (阿羅訶), catches our attention. This Chinese title, 阿羅訶, is also used to render the Sanskrit *Arhat*. It is one of the titles that the Buddha has, meaning “one that should receive offerings from all the living beings.”¹⁷ This Chinese title thus serves two purposes simultaneously. On the one hand, it helped to connect *Jingjiao* with the local Chinese and facilitated the process of inculturation. On the other hand, it is also a transliteration of the Syriac *Alāhā*, which shares the same etymology with the Hebrew *Elohim*.

Compared to biblical texts, *Jingjiao*’s use of *Alāhā* does not correspond to the Hebrew *Elohim*. The contexts in which the latter is found do not have a strong trinitarian connotation, while those of the former do. What is more, statistically speaking, *Tianzun* (天尊) is much more used as a divine appellative in *Jingjiao* documents than *Alāhā*. In other words, since the beginning of the presence of Christianity in China, translators decided that, due to the uniqueness of the biblical God, He should be referred to by a proper noun, rather than a common noun. This position might be motivated by the fact that, unlike many Western languages, there is no capitalization available as a method of distinction, like the *dii* and *Deus* in Latin.

III. CATHOLIC CHINESE TRANSLATIONS OF *ELOHIM*

In 13th century, with the invading Mongol army, Catholicism arrived in China for the first time. With the recommendation letter written by Pope Nicholas IV to Kublia Khan (忽必烈), the Franciscan John of Montecorvino acquired a position in the royal court in Khanbaliq¹⁸ (today: Beijing) of Great Yuan Empire. According to one of his letters, dated January 8, 1305, Montecorvino translated both the New Testament and the Psalms into Tatar (韃靼語).¹⁹ Similar to the Nestorian translation, the fruit of Montecorvino’s is still inaccessible to us. Thus, we do not know how he translated the Greek divine appellative θεός, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew אֱלֹהִים.

The now official and most well-known Catholic rendering of אֱלֹהִים into Chinese, “天主” (*Tianzhu*), literally the “Lord of Heaven,” was coined by the first Jesuit missionaries to China during the late Ming Dynasty. Since their first started writing in Chinese, 天主 has been used to refer to the Christian God.

¹⁷ 吳昶興，〈《大秦景教文獻釋義》〉，頁203，註腳4。

¹⁸ Chinese transliteration: 汗八里. *Khan* is the Mongolian title of political leadership, and *Baliq* is the Mongolian word for ‘town’, or ‘permanent settlement’.

¹⁹ Quoted in: 賈立言著，馮雪冰譯：《漢文聖經譯本小史》，第10頁。 http://bkbible.fhl.net/new/gm.php?fn=b047/m00_010_010_010_010.jpg

Their first Chinese work is the *True Record of the Lord of Heaven* (《新編西竺國天主實錄》), composed by Michele Ruggieri SJ (羅明堅) in 1584.²⁰ As the title of this work indicates, the Chinese divine appellative used to refer to the Christian God is “天主” (*Tianzhu*), “the Lord of Heaven.” In this work, this title is used without any introduction, and no direct explanation is given as to the rationale behind using this divine appellative in Chinese. What is more, in the *Portuguese-Chinese Dictionary* edited by Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci, there is no entry for *Deus* under the heading D.²¹ Thus, one can only speculate the reason for their coinage of the term “天主” (*Tianzhu*), “the Lord of Heaven”. For instance, in chapter one “There Is Truly One God” (真有一位天主章之一), Ruggieri states:

*In the heavenly court, there is truly a Lord of heaven and earth and all things.*²²

天庭之中，真有一位天地萬物之主。

As proposed by Ruggieri, the lordship of God can be construed in three ways. First, just as there is one emperor in the earthly court exercising governance on earthly matter, it stands to reason that, by analogy, there is one Lord in the heavenly court governing the operation of nature and the cosmos.²³ Second, since nothing comes into being by itself, thus there must be an ultimate source of existence that made all things and causes all things to be. That cause and ultimate source of being is the Lord. Third, just as it is natural for one to know that there is a captain when a ship sails well against all odds, one must conclude that there is a Lord of Heaven keeping all things heaven and earth in check. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in his work the term 上帝 (*Shangdi*), meaning the Supreme Emperor, is never used.

Rather, in this work, the Christian God is referred to solely by the term 天主 (*Tianzhu*). Apart from one case in which the common noun 神 (*shen*) to describe how St Augustine was greatly troubled to try to understand the mystery of the Trinity (“顧勞神殫思，求知天主之說，豈

²⁰ See e.g., 肖清和〔著〕，〈明清漢語神學研究的可能路徑——以核心關鍵詞「三位一體」為例〉，《道風：基督教文化評論》第五十期（2019年春）：頁95–129，〔頁105〕。Ruggieri dated his preface in the year “萬曆甲申歲” according to the Ming regnal year, which is 1584.

²¹ P. 82; a facsimile copy of the Dictionary is reprinted in: Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci, *Portugese-Chinese Dictionary*, ed. John W. Witek, SJ (San Francisco, CA: Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History [University of San Francisco], 2001), 221–502.

²² 羅明堅〔著〕，《天主實錄》，收於：《耶穌會羅馬檔案館：明清天主教文獻》（Chinese Christian Texts from the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus），鐘鳴旦（Nicolas Standaert）和杜鼎克（Adrian Dudink）〔編〕，（台北：台北利氏學社，2002年），第一冊：頁1–86，〔頁11〕。My translation.

²³ 羅明堅〔著〕，《天主實錄》，頁11–13.

不大謬？”²⁴ (Chapter Two), most of the time 神 (*shen*) refers to some sort of supernatural beings, especially when it is used as part of a compound noun:

1. 靈神 (*Lingshen*), literally ‘spirits and gods’. It refers to the plurality of gods and spirits that the Chinese population believed in (see: Section Three).
2. 尊神 (*Zunshen*), literally ‘God Supreme’. This term is used only twice, in Section Three, and is used in the twice repeated phrase 天非尊神 (Heaven is not God Supreme). In its context, Ruggieri is refuting the Chinese popular belief that Heaven was the Creator God. It seems, therefore, that at least for Ruggieri, 尊神 (*Zunshen*), or ‘God Supreme’, denotes specifically the Creator God.
3. 邪神 (*Xieshen*), literally ‘evil spirits or false gods’. This compound nouns appears twice (Section Three), referring to those false gods that the Devil pretends to deceive humankind into serving him instead of the true God.
4. 天神 (*Tianshen*), literally ‘heavenly spirit(s)’. This compound noun is used 28 times. It refers to what is commonly known as ‘angel(s)’, or ‘messenger(s) of God’ (see esp., Section Five, “On Angels and Adam”).
5. 聖神 (*Shengshen*). This compound noun is used to refer to the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. It is used five times (see: Section Seven; Section Eleven).
6. 鬼神 (*Gueishen*), literally ‘ghosts and spirits’. It refers to some local or familial ghosts and spirits, like those of the ancestors or local deities, that the Chinese population would revere and venerate (see: Section Seven, art. 2 and Section Thirteen).

In his rendering, Ruggieri appears to use the common noun 神 (*shen*) to denote supernatural beings in general, namely, their gods and spirits, etc., in the Chinese popular belief system, and reserves the proper noun 天主 (*Tianzhu*) to refer to the Christian God. Even the term 尊神 (*Zunshen*), literally ‘God Supreme’, which appears to highlight the divine creative act, is only used to negate the belief that Heaven is divine, but the term is not applied to the biblical God. In other words, since the beginning of the Jesuit Chinese mission, the common noun 神 (*shen*), even a specialized use of it, was not considered as a possible candidate to refer to the

²⁴ 羅明堅〔著〕，《天主實錄》，頁15.

Christian God. He has to be referred to by a proper noun in Chinese, while the reason behind the creation of this Chinese proper noun in 天主 (*Tianzhu*) is not explicitly given. One possible conclusion is that the Christian God is portrayed as the “Lord of heaven and earth and all things”, abbreviated as the “Lord of Heaven”.

The work that is commonly regarded as establishing the use of the Chinese term *Tianzhu* to refer to the Christian God is 《天主實義》 (*The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*), written by Matteo Ricci (利瑪竇) and published in 1603.²⁵

Ricci also uses the divine appellative *Tianzhu* without any introduction, while in one of the early paragraphs one may find a terminological reasoning similar to Ruggieri’s:

子欲先詢所謂始制作天地萬物而時主宰之者。予謂天下莫著明乎是也。人誰不仰目觀天？觀天之際，誰不默自嘆曰：「斯其中必有主之者哉！」夫即天主——吾西國所稱『陡斯』是也。（第一篇、28）

You, Sir, wish first to inquire about the One who is said to have created heaven, earth, and all things and to exercise constant authority over them. I assert, then, that there is nothing under heaven which is more evident than the truth of His existence. Is there anyone who has not raised his eyes and gazed at the sky and who has not silently sighed to himself, while gazing at the sky, and said: “There must surely be Someone in the midst of it who exercises control over it.” Now this Someone is none other than the Lord of Heaven whom our Western nations term *Deus*. (ch. 1, 28)²⁶

一家止有一長，一國止有一君，有二，則國家亂矣；一人止有一身，一身止有一首；有二，則怪異甚矣。吾因是知乾坤之內，雖有鬼神多品，獨有一天主始制作天、地、人、物，而時主宰存安之。（第一篇、50）

[E]ach family has but one head, and each nation has but one sovereign. Should there be two, a nation will find itself in a state of anarchy. A man has only one body; a body has only one head. If it had two heads the man would be a freak. We know, therefore, that although there are many kinds of spiritual beings” in the universe,” there is only one Lord of Heaven who is the first creator of heaven and earth, [hu]mankind and all phenomena and who constantly controls and sustains them. (ch. 1, 50)²⁷

²⁵ Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen SJ, “Translators’ Introduction,” in Matteo Ricci SJ, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T’ien-chu Shih-i)*, trans. Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen SJ, ed. Edward J. Malatesta SJ, Jesuit Primary Sources 6 (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985), 3–56 [10].

²⁶ Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, 70–71.

²⁷ Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, 88–89.

天地之主，或稱謂天地焉。非其以天地為體也，有原主在也。吾恐人誤認此物之原主，而實謂之天主。（第二篇，114）

[T]he Lord of Heaven and earth is sometimes called “Heaven and Earth.” This is not a reference to the heaven and earth which have form, but to the Lord of creation. Afraid lest people be under a misapprehension regarding the true Lord of Heaven, I speak of Him directly as the Lord of Heaven. (ch. 2, 114)²⁸

For Ricci, 天主 (*Tianzhu*) seems to be an abbreviated term for “the One who is said to have created heaven, earth, and all things and to exercise constant authority over them” (始制作天地萬物而時主宰之者). What is of our interests is that Ricci also equates 天主 (*Tianzhu*), a proper noun, with *Deus*, a specialized use of the common noun *deus*. Again, here lies the crux of this translation exercise. In Western languages, the capitalization of the common noun ‘god’, thus ‘God’, is sufficient to make the point that this God is the unique and only divine being while at the same time lexicologically maintaining the use of a common noun. This technique is completely absent in the Chinese language. Thus, it appears that, early on, Ricci decided not to use the common noun 神 (*shen*) to refer to the Christian God, as such use is nowhere to be found in *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*.

To better communicate the absolute monotheism of Christianity to the Chinese people, Ricci attempted an intercultural dialogue with ancient Chinese Classics. When doing so, he found the term 上帝 (*Shangdi*), or ‘Sovereign on High’.²⁹ He believed this is the chief god in the Chinese pantheon, the Most-High in Chinese religious system,³⁰ and thus can be construed as equivalent to the Christian God Most-High:

吾國天主，即華言上帝。（利瑪竇，〈天主實義〉，第二篇，103）³¹

He who is called the Lord of Heaven in my humble country is he who is called Shangdi [Sovereign on High] in Chinese (Matteo Ricci, The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven, II.103).³²

In terms of the use of the common noun 神 (*shen*) by Ricci is similar to that of Ruggieri. What is more, like in the *True Record of the Lord of Heaven*, in *The True Meaning of the Lord*

²⁸ Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, 130–131.

²⁹ Ch. 2, 104–108; see: Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, 122–125.

³⁰ Lancashire and Hu, “Translators’ Introduction,” 33.

³¹ The numbering of the paragraphs follows Meynard, cf. n.43. See also: Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, II.104.

³² Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, rev. Thierry Meynard, S.J., trans. Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, S.J., *Sources for the History of Jesuit Missions 1* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute of Jesuit Sources, Boston College, 2016), 95.

of Heaven one finds a few occasions where 神 (*shen*) is used to refer to the Christian God, or the One God. Ricci's argument against the belief that Heaven is God reads:

蒼蒼有形之天，有九重之析分，烏得為一尊也？上帝索之無形，又何以形之謂乎？……況鬼神未嘗有形，何獨其最尊之神為有形哉？（第二篇，110）

The blue sky which has form is in nine layers ranging from the highest to the lowest. How, then, can it be the same as He who is unique and supremely honored? When we investigate the Sovereign on High we find that He is without form; how, then, can He be called by a name which applies to something with form? ... If all spiritual beings are without form, how can the Lord of Heaven, who is most to be honored and who is without peer, possess form? (ch. 2, 110)³³

It should be noted that Ricci does not use 上帝 (*Shangdi*) directly as a divine appellative. His employment of the term is almost exclusively for his thesis that the divine person whom the Chinese culture had been referring to as 上帝 (*Shangdi*), the chief divine being of their pantheon, was in fact the One God preached by Catholicism.

In summary, the Chinese Catholic translation tradition established by the earliest Jesuit missionaries to China is to use 天主 (*Tianzhu*) to as the divine appellative to refer to the Christian God, even when in the original texts one finds in its place the common noun אֱלֹהִים, θεός, or *Deus*. While they contended that the Christian God 天主 (*Tianzhu*) is the 上帝 (*Shangdi*) mentioned in the ancient Chinese literature, they did not use the latter as a divine appellative. The Chinese common noun 神 (*shen*), when referring to any deities, is almost always reserved to designate pagan ones.

IV. THE ISSUE WITH 天主 (*TIANZHU*)

However, one century later, as a decision made in response to the Chinese Rites Controversy once and for all, Pope Clement XI promulgated the bull *Ex illa die*, on March 19, 1715. One of the issues is which divine appellative in Chinese should be used to refer to the Christian God. On this matter, the bull instructs:

The West calls Deus [God] the creator of Heaven, Earth, and everything in the universe. Since the word Deus does not sound right in the Chinese language, the Westerners in China and Chinese converts to Catholicism have used the term “Heavenly Lord” (Tiānzhǔ) for many years. From now on such terms as “Heaven” [Tiān] and “Shàngdì” should not be used: Deus should be addressed

³³ Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, 126–127.

as the Lord of Heaven, Earth, and everything in the universe. (Ex illa die, no. 1)

One should be reminded that the Latin noun *deus*, is a common noun and not the proper noun of the Christian God. However, the logic of the bull seems to go as follows: since Christianity believes that there is only one God that exists, it follows that the general noun is considered to refer to only one being in the whole world. Thus, it should function just as a proper noun. In other words, “‘God’ should be considered as the name of God.”

At the same time, the argument of the bull for its decision to prohibit the use of *Shangdi* [Sovereign on High] is absent. Nevertheless, the resolutions of the so-called Meeting in Guangzhou, 廣州會議, may offer us a hint. It is a meeting held in Guangzhou, with the participation of all missionaries in China, from December 18, 1667, to January 26, 1668, when all missionaries, including three Dominicans and one Franciscan, were confined in a Jesuit house in Guangzhou during a persecution in China.³⁴ During its discussion on the uniformization of the divine title in Chinese for official use, the missionaries believed that *Shangdi* signifies only a created being, a *materia prima* at best, but not the omnipotent, omniscient, invisible God of the Christian faith.³⁵ This position is best summarized by Jean Valat, S.J., in one of his letters to the then Jesuit Superior General, P. Oliva, S.J.:

*R R.PP. Dominicani et Franciscani, nobiscum in refferendo summi Dei nomine per vocem, Tien-chu, plane hactenus conformes, abhorrent omnino a voce Shanti. Quam partim ex aliquibus textibus dubiam, partim ex interpretibus et communi Sinarum sensu, divinae essentiae, attributis, plane repugnantem et sentient et credunt, prout et voce et scripto nobis pallam fecerunt.*³⁶

All the Dominicans and Franciscans are completely with us in referring to the name of the most-high God by Tien-chu, and they are completely repulsed by Shanti. I doubt partly from certain texts, partly from the interpreters and the common sense of the Chinese, that they feel and believe that the divine essence and attributes are completely inconsistent with the latter term, as they have made clear to us both in speech and in writing.

It appears that those who were against the use of 上帝 (*Shangdi*) to translate *Deus* and its equivalences thought that, according to their understanding of the ancient Chinese classics, 上帝 (*Shangdi*) was only a created being and was thus not divine. This is, however, a misreading of the ancient Chinese classics. As many scholars of ancient Chinese philosophy and history have demonstrated, 上帝 (*Shangdi*), at least since the Zhou dynasty, has become the Most-High

³⁴ 韓承良，〈中國天主教傳教歷史：根據方濟會傳教歷史文件〉（台北市：思高聖經學會，1994），126–127。

³⁵ 韓承良，〈中國天主教傳教歷史〉，128。

³⁶ See: Archivium Romanum Societatis Iesu, Fondo Gesuitico 730, ff. 73-74; cited in: 韓承良，〈中國天主教傳教歷史〉，129。

god (*theos hypsistos*) in the Chinese religious system.³⁷ At the same time, it is also pointed out that the ancient Chinese concept of this Most-High god is rather different from the Christian one.³⁸ Moreover, the matter is further complicated by the fact that ancient Chinese religious thought evolved overtime, and their conception of 上帝 (*Shangdi*) also developed and was gradually merged with their concept of Heaven (*Tian*). Nevertheless, this merge did take a long period of time, and even as late as *Mencius* the merge was still ongoing.³⁹

In fact, the discussion about whether the term *Tianzhu* [Heavenly Lord] or *Shangdi* [Sovereign on High] is the more accurate way to refer to the Christian God continued into the late 18th century. The Chinese Catholic convert Yan Mo (嚴謨), a local Confucian elite, scrutinized the two titles in ancient Chinese literature in his work *Investigation into the Concepts of Lord and Heaven* 《帝天考》 [*Ditiankao*]. After studying around 59 passages from the classics, he concluded that the Christian God was conceptually comparable to *Shangdi* [Sovereign on High] in the Chinese classics. Thus, according to him, the latter was a better title than *Tianzhu* [Heavenly Lord] for the Chinese to refer to the Christian God.⁴⁰

The term that, since the Rites Controversy, has been decreed as the official translation for *Deus* and its equivalence, 天主 (*Tianzhu*), deserves more of our attention. First of all, as have been established earlier in this paper, *Deus*, and its Greek and Hebrew equivalence, is a common noun, while the term 天主 (*Tianzhu*) clearly functions as a proper noun. In other words, the nature of the Chinese term does not conform to that of its original(s).

In contrast to the general impression among learned Catholics, even contemporary ones, that the divine appellative 天主 (*Tianzhu*) was coined by the early Jesuit missionaries,⁴¹ this term has already existed for centuries before Christianity arrived in China. According to the *Records of the Grand Historian* [史記], the first of the *Twenty-Four Histories* [二十四史], aka the Orthodox Histories [正史], the Chinese official dynastic historiography:

³⁷ 李杜，〈《中西哲學思想中的天道與上帝》〉（臺北市：聯聯，1978年），頁14–15；傅佩榮，〈《儒道天論發微》〉（臺北市：聯經，2010年），頁11。

³⁸ 李杜，〈《中西哲學思想中的天道與上帝》〉，頁27–30。

³⁹ 李杜，〈《中西哲學思想中的天道與上帝》〉，頁9–96。

⁴⁰ Thomas H. Reilly, 〈上帝與皇帝之爭——太平天國的宗教與政治〉（英： *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire* ），trans. 李勇、肖軍霞、田芳，世界宗教關係史文叢（上海：人民出版社，2006），27；see also: Nicholas Standaert, S.J., *The Fascinating God: A Challenge to Modern Chinese Theology Presented by a Text on the Name of God Written by a 17th Century Chinese Student of Theology*, *Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Culture* 18 (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1995), 33–47.

⁴¹ See Soong's claim of the absence of this title in Chinese classical literature, see: 宋蘭友 (Veronica Soong)，〈景教有關「天主」的翻譯〉，〈《神學年刊》2（1978）：41–54。

「八神將自古而有之，或曰太公以來作之。」（《史記·封禪書第廿八》）

“The Eight Spirits appear to have existed from ancient times. Some people say that their worship was begun at the time of the Grand Duke, the first lord of the state of Qi at the beginning of the Zhou dynasty” (Shiji 28: Feng and Shan Sacrifices, 22).⁴²

Among these Eight Spirits:

八神：一曰天主，祠天齊。《史記·封禪書第廿八》

Of the Eight Spirits, the first was called the Lord of Heaven [天主: Tianzhu]; sacrifices to him were offered at the Navel of Heaven. (Shiji 28: Feng and Shan Sacrifices, 22)⁴³

In short, the term 天主 (*Tianzhu*) in classical Chinese does not carry the same literal meaning as is supposed in the papal bull, namely, “the Lord of Heaven, Earth, and everything in the universe”.⁴⁴

Indeed, a contemporary of Matteo Ricci, *Zhuhong* (祿宏; 1535–1615), a Buddhist monk with a robust scholarly training, criticized this use of the term 天主 (*Tianzhu*) for exactly the same reason pointed out above, i.e., that this term has been used to refer to some deity in the different pantheons of Chinese religions. One passage in his work, *Jottings under a Bamboo Window* (竹窗隨筆, translit., *Zhuchuang suibi*), published probably a few years after Ricci’s work, is considered a direct rebuttal of the Jesuit’s position. In this passage,⁴⁵ *Zhuhong* pointed out that, according to the witness of the Buddhist Scripture, the term 天主 (*Tianzhu*) refers to, 帝釋天 (Sanskrit: *Śakra devānām indrah*, or abbreviated as *Śakra*), the lord of the Thirty-three *Deva-loka* (忉利天, Sanskrit: *Trayastrimśa*), so-called because the palace on this *Deva-loka*, translated into Chinese as 天 (*Tian*), features 33 rooms for the 33 resident celestial-beings (天人,

⁴² Sima Qian, *Records of The Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II*, rev. ed., trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 13.

⁴³ Sima Qian, *Records of The Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II*, 13. See: 顧長聲, 《傳教士與近代中國》〔簡〕 (上海: 上海人民出版社, 2013年), 頁363.

⁴⁴ See also: 韓兆琦〔注釋〕, 《新譯史記》, 古籍今注新譯叢書 (臺北市: 三民, 2008), III:1447.

⁴⁵ “一老宿言。有異域人為天主之教者。子何不辯。子以為教人敬天。善事也。奚辯焉。老宿曰。彼欲以此移風易俗。而兼之毀佛謗法。賢士良友多信奉者故也。因出其書示予。乃略辯其一二。彼雖崇事天主。而天之說實所未諳。按經以証。彼所稱天主者。忉利天王也。一四天下。三十三天之主也。此一四天下。從一數之而至於千。名小千世界。則有千天主矣。又從一小千數之而復至於千。名中千世界。則有百萬天主矣。又從一中千數之而復至於千。名大千世界。則有萬億天主矣。統此三千大千世界者。大梵天王是也。彼所稱最尊無上之天主。梵天視之。略似周天子視千八百諸侯也。彼所知者。萬億天主中之一耳。餘欲界諸天皆所未知也。又上而色界諸天。又上而無色界諸天。皆所未知也。又言天主者。無形無色無聲。則所謂天者。理而已矣。何以御臣民施政令行賞罰乎。” (Book IV, 85), <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=936678> [accessed September 6, 2024].

Sanskrit: *Deva*).⁴⁶ Thus, for someone who has already taken Buddhism as the point of reference, what Ricci laid down in his work cannot be farther from the truth. It should be noted that the concept of *Deva-loka* does not completely correspond to that of Heaven in Christianity. *Deva-loka* is where the celestial beings (*Deva*) reside. However, *Deva* has not yet achieved the liberation from *Samsāra*, i.e., reincarnation or the karmic cycle.

An early Chinese apologetic work attempted a response to this criticism, among others, against the preaching of the early Jesuit missionaries to China. Attributed to Matteo Ricci, *Bianxue yiku*, or in Chinese 《辯學遺牘》, was published in ca. 1623. Thus, accepting Ricci's authorship, it would be his posthumous work. The response given by this work to *Zhuhong*'s criticism does not reflect the Ricci in other works whose authorship is certain. Its argument goes as follows: Christians teach people to honor 天主 (*Tianzhu* 'Lord of Heaven') as lord, 主; Buddhists teach people to honor the Buddha as lord. Thus, the two religions in fact proclaim the same God, only with different titles, for there is only one Lord of the created world. This Lord is then compared in the text to the Emperor of the Zhou dynasty, carrying the imagery of the Pantocrator. Under the comparison, the 帝釋天 *Śakra*, can be considered as no more than a vassal king or just a duke under the Lord or Emperor of the universe.⁴⁷

The argument is clearly not sound and thus does not answer adequately to the rebuttal. An anonymous comment on this response is right to the point: "The main point of Ricci's refutation of the criticism of *Zhuhong* lies in the argument that the Buddhists regard Buddha as the supreme lord. Therefore he is above the Lord of Heaven, which is simply absurd. This is an unforgivable error."⁴⁸

In summary, in addition to the mismatch of a proper noun with a general noun, the view that 天主 (*Tianzhu*) is only an abbreviation for 天地萬物的主宰 (Lord of Heaven, Earth, and everything in the universe, and thus is free from any pagan religious implication reflects ignorance of some significant Chinese cultural traditions, though they may not be well-known

⁴⁶ “三十三天、謂此山頂四面各有八大天王，帝釋居中，故有此數”（《佛地經論》 [*Buddhabhūmyupadeśa*]); See also: 《阿毘達磨俱舍論》 (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*); see also: Nicolas Standaert, ed., *Handbook of Christianity in China, Volume One: 635–1800*, Handbook of Oriental Studies IV: China 15/1 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 617.

⁴⁷ “教人敬天者是教人敬天主以為主也以為主者以為能生天地萬物生我養我教我賞罰我禍福我因而愛焉信焉望焉終身繇是焉是之謂以為主也主豈有二乎既以為主即幽莫尊於天神明莫尊於國主皆與我共事天主者也非天主也佛惟不認天主欲僭其位而越居其上故深罪之即吾教中豈敢謂事天主可事佛亦可乎彼既奉佛是以佛為主也凡上所云生養諸事愛信望諸情皆歸於佛則佛之外亦不應有二主二之是悖主也安得云敬天善事耶且彼指吾天主為彼教中忉利天王其大梵天王萬億倍大於忉利天王而大梵天王又於佛為弟子列也則忉利天王之於佛烏得擬八百諸侯之於周天子蓋名位至下特小有所統率如所謂與臣臺臺臣僕者耳今有人事周天子以為主又謂其與臺亦可為主乎舍周天子不事而事其與臺威福玉食望之以為歸此乃周天子所必誅即亦事周天子者所必誅反可稱為善事置之不辯耶故我以天主為主汝以佛為主理無二主即無二” (Book I 《天說一》). <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=7882294> [Accessed September 6, 2024]. Before the early 20th century, most Chinese books were printed without punctuations; and they are not supplemented by the source.

⁴⁸ Anon., “Bianxue yidu 辯學遺牘: Bibliographies 書目,” 點睛論壇 Ricci Roundtable. <https://web.archive.org/web/20150823031815/http://ricci.rt.usfca.edu/bibliography/view.aspx?bibliographyID=1818> [Accessed September 7, 2024].

to all Chinese people. The review above of 上帝 (*Shangdi*) and 天主 (*Tianzhu*) seems to indicate that both terms may not be the best candidate to translate *Deus* and its Greek and Hebrew equivalence.

V. ROBERT MORRISON'S TRANSLATION OF GOD

The bible (New Testament) translation from Latin into Chinese by Jean Basset⁴⁹ (c. 1662–1707; 白日昇⁵⁰), which predates the papal bull, uses the Chinese general noun *Shen* 神 (literally “god”) to translate the Latin *Deus*, which is equivalent to the Greek θεός and the Hebrew אֱלֹהִים. For instance, Basset’s translation of Mark 1:1 reads:

神子耶穌基督。福音之始。

Initium evangelii Iesu Christi Filii Dei (Latina Vulgata)

ΑΡΧΗ ΤΟΥ ΕΒΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΥ ΙΗΣΟΥ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ [ΥΙΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ] (NA28⁵¹)

This translation of *Deus* had not been forbidden by the papal bull; yet Basset did not opt for *Tianzhu*, the one promoted by the bull, either, and the rendering *Shen* would soon fall out of use in the Catholic Mission Territories in China.⁵² Until today, the perception that this translation of *Deus* is not appropriate, or that it sounds more Protestant than Catholic and therefore unorthodox (from the [Chinese] Catholic perspective) remains deeply rooted.

In Chinese Protestantism, one of the first missionaries who made a Chinese translation of the Bible is Robert Morrison. Without discrediting Morrison’s original contribution to the production of a new Chinese (Protestant) translation of the Bible, his work was, to a great extent, a revision of the Basset’s work.⁵³ After the publication of his translation of the entire New Testament, Morrison sent a copy of his work and a letter to the British and Foreign Society. He wrote in the letter,

[T]he Gospels, the closing Epistles, and the Book of Revelation, are entirely my own translation. The middle part of the volume is founded on the work of some unknown individual,

⁴⁹ 鍾鳴旦 (Nicholas Standaert, S.J.) [著], 〈聖經在十七世紀的中國〉, 孫尚揚 [譯], 《神學論集》126期 (2000冬) 537–565, [538]頁。

⁵⁰ Or transliterated as: 白日升, or 巴設。

⁵¹ The 28th edition of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graecae* is the most recent critical edition of the New Testament.

⁵² François Barriquand, “Biblical Names of God in Chinese: A Catholic Point of View with Ecumenical Perspectives,” *Hong Kong Journal of Catholic Studies* (2001): 456–560 [487].

⁵³ Ann Cui’an Peng, *The Translation of the Bible into Chinese: The Origin and Unique Authority of the Union Version*, Studies in Chinese Christianity (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publication, 2021), 37. See also: Christopher A. Daily, *Robert Morrison and the Protestant Plan for China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 133; see also: Reilly, 《上帝與皇帝之爭》, 56–57.

whose pious labors were deposited in the British Museum. I took the liberty of altering and supplying what appeared to me to be requisite; and I feel great pleasure in recording the benefit which I first derived from the labors of my unknown predecessor.⁵⁴

In other words, in this letter, Morrison acknowledged that his translation, at least in part, was influenced by Basset. For our purpose, this is particularly important, since it is a Protestant Bible translator who preserved a Catholic translational tradition that had long been fallen from grace, albeit not forbidden by any papal authority.

As we have seen, during the 16th and 17th centuries, the Jesuit missionaries employed several Chinese terms as the divine epithet for the Christian God. Morrison's decision to use *Shen* 神 appears to be not a blind following of Basset. His rejection to use the other options can be inferred from his *Dictionary of the Chinese Language*.⁵⁵

First, 上帝 (*Shangdi*). On this term, Morrison wrote: "though seemingly to express the Christian idea of the deity, [上帝] is however applied to more than one divine personage."⁵⁶ In other words, according to Morrison, the use of 上帝 (*Shangdi*) contradicts monotheism; and thus, his avoidance of this term in his biblical translation.

Second, 天主 (*Tianzhu*). Morrison was clearly aware of this divine appellation in Chinese used in Roman Catholicism: "the Lord of heaven, was introduced by the Roman Catholic Missionaries, and is employed by them to express the Divine Being."⁵⁷ I am not aware of any place where Morrison explained why he did not choose this term, but the desire, whether conscious or not, to differentiate the Protestant Christian translation from the Catholic one may be a possible motivation.

Finally, *Shen* 神. As shown in his explanation of the word in the Dictionary, Morrison was aware that the word was a general noun: "Every evanescent, invisible, inscrutable, spiritual, operating power or cause, is called [*Shen* 神]; a spirit; the human spirit; divinity; god, in the sense of heathen nations; divine; spiritual; the animal spirits."⁵⁸ By this definition alone, it may appear that Morrison does not support the choice of this word as the Chinese counterpart for God. Indeed, in his Dictionary, he catalogued another term *Shenzhu* 神主: "by some Europeans

⁵⁴ BFBS Report (1815), 333.

⁵⁵ Robert Morrison, *Dictionary of the Chinese Language*, 2 vols. (Shanghai: London Mission Press, [repr.] 1865).

⁵⁶ Morrison, *Dictionary*, II:251.

⁵⁷ Morrison, *Dictionary*, II:404.

⁵⁸ Morrison, *Dictionary*, II:283.

[*Shenzhu* 神主 is] used to denote the Lord of spirits; the Supreme God.”⁵⁹ Morrison does use both terms in his Bible translation, while he makes a distinction between the two. He uses the word *Shen* 神 to translate either God or gods and the term *Shenzhu* 神主 for the Tetragrammaton, or YHWH, as in his translation of Exod 20:2 quoted below.

In the remaining pages of this article, a preliminary comparison between Morrison’s Bible translation, completed with the assistance of William Milne, and the first complete Catholic translation of the Bible into Chinese, the Don Scotus Version, is to be made. Our purpose is to illustrate the limitation(s) of using the term 天主 *Tianzhu* as the translation for the common noun אֱלֹהִים in Hebrew, and its Greek and Latin equivalences, and how the forgotten option, at least in the Catholic circle, *Shen* 神, may complement the limitation(s).

From a lexical and grammatical points of view, *Shen* 神 appears to be a more accurate translation of the general noun אֱלֹהִים in Hebrew, θεός in Greek, *Deus* in Latin. 天主 *Tianzhu* “the Master of Heaven” may be a good way to straightforwardly convey a theological truth, but it does produce a negative impact on the impression that the Chinese readers have on particular biblical verses, compared to the original, as Exod 20:2 & 3 shows:⁶⁰

אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים:

לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פָּנַי:

*I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: You shall have no other gods besides Me. (NJPS)*⁶¹

我乃神主、爾神、帶爾出以至比多之地、出被縛之家者。除我外、爾不可有別神也。(MORRISON-MILNE VERSION)

我是上主你的天主，是我領你出了埃及地、奴隸之所。除我之外，你不可有別的神。(DON SCOTUS VERSION)

As the NJPS translation of this verse shows, the religious world in simply twofold: the divine realm and human realm. Morrison’s translation, reflects the same theological vision: 神 *shen* (God or gods) and humankind. The Catholic translation gives the impression that there are not two, but three categories of concepts, in its theological cognitive construction: first, humankind; second, other gods; and third, God whose name is YHWH, or the conventional expression of this four-letter proper name of God as the Lord.

⁵⁹ Morrison, *Dictionary*, II:283.

⁶⁰ Other examples include: Deut 29:17; Judg 2:12; 6:10; 1 Sam 11:4; 1 Chr 5:25; 2 Chr 25:20; 32:17, 19, etc.

⁶¹ NJPS is the abbreviation for the English translation of the Hebrew Bible published by the Jewish Publication Society in 1985.

What is more, the Don Scotus Version weakens God's argument in this verse. A very logical reason behind God's command that the Israelites should have no other gods, or 神 *shen*, beside Him is that they already have a God, 神 *shen*. In other words, the Lord is the only God, 神 *shen*, that they should worship. By rendering God here not with 神 *shen* but with 天主 *Tianzhu*, the motivation of God's command becomes obscure. It may result in readers' confusion as to why the divine command of not having other gods, 神 *shen*, follows the divine self-proclamation that He is 天主 *Tianzhu*.

It is not surprising that this translation may also impact the reception of this, and other related, text, especially on the issue of the development of monotheism in the Hebrew Bible. Since the last decades of the previous century, it has become the consensus of the academic biblical scholarship that biblical monotheism is the culmination of the long historical development from henotheism, or monolatry, namely, the exclusive worship of one God without denying the existence of other gods.⁶² The exclusive biblical monotheism that later promoted by Judaism and Christianity emerged out of the Judahites' religious reflection on their experience of the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE. One of the observations leading to this conclusion comes from the many אֱלֹהִים texts. When this Hebrew word is translated so differently in these texts, such development is no longer detectable by readers, and hence may hinder their reception of such observations.

1 Kgs 11:31b, 33a is perhaps one of the best examples to illustrate this point:

כִּי כֹה אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִנְנִי קָרַע אֶת-הַמַּמְלָכָה מִיַּד שְׁלֹמֹה וְנָתַתִּי לָךְ אֶת עֶשְׂרֵה הַשִּׁבְטִים:

יֵעַן / אֲשֶׁר עָזְבוּנִי וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לַעֲשֻׁתֹת אֱלֹהֵי צִדְוֹן לְכִמּוֹשׁ אֱלֹהֵי מוֹאָב וּלְמִלְכָם אֱלֹהֵי בְנֵי-עַמּוֹן

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I am about to tear the kingdom out of Solomon's hand and will give you ten of the tribes. ... For they have forsaken me and have bowed down to Astarte, goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh, god of Moab, and Milcom, god of the Ammonites. (NABRE)

蓋神主以色列之神如是言云、我卻將裂國出所羅門之手、而以十支賜與汝。……蓋因伊等已棄我、又已拜事洗頓人之女神亞寔大羅得、及摩亞百人之神其摩寔、及亞門子輩之神米勒可麥
(MORRISON-MILNE VERSION)

⁶² See, e.g., Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, vol. I: *From the Beginnings to the End*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994 [German original: Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992]), esp. 53–66; Robert K. Gnuse, *No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 241 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), esp. 177–228; Baruch A. Levine, "Assyrian Ideology and Israelite Monotheism," *British Institute for the Study of Iraq* 67 (2005): 411–427; Mark S. Smith, "Monotheism and the Redefinition of Divinity in Ancient Israel," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Ancient Israel*, ed. Susan Niditch (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 278–296, esp. 287.

因為上主以色列的天主這樣說：看，我必將撒羅滿手中的王國撕裂，將十個支派交給你。……因為他背棄了我，崇拜了漆冬人的女神阿市托勒特、摩阿布人的神革摩士和阿孟人的神米耳公。
(DON SCOTUS VERSION)

The same word אֱלֹהִים, in its masculine plural construct form אֱלֹהֵי, lit., gods/God of, is used for both the God of Israel and the pagan gods individually. In contrast to the Morrison-Milne Version, which uses the same word 神 ‘God/god’ shen for all the occurrences of אֱלֹהִים, the Don Scotus Version, with its use of two different translations, 天主 Tianzhu for the biblical God and 神 shen for all the other pagan gods.

CONCLUSION

Two centuries has passed since Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary to China, arrived Macau and devoted himself to the cause of evangelization. Although the biblical translation produced by Morrison did not enjoy a high acclaim by his contemporaries, its contribution to the Protestant mission in China notwithstanding,⁶³ it does offer Chinese Catholic Bible translators some food for thought, and in this article, the most used general divine appellative serves as a test case.

In the Hebrew Bible, the God of Israel is generally referred to by the common noun אֱלֹהִים (‘*ēlōhīm*). When the Hebrew Bible was first translated into Greek and Latin, this divine appellative of the biblical God is rendered by the common nouns θεός (*theós*) and *Deus* respectively. Both renderings are in the singular and thus corresponding to the entity denoted. However, אֱלֹהִים is in fact a plural form, literally ‘gods’, and it is indeed used also to referred to the gods of other peoples. The Hebrew Bible is not bothered by the fact that the same word, אֱלֹהִים, carrying both meanings. Such usage reflects the cultural context in which they were embedded and fits into their henotheistic worldview, as demonstrated by the examples briefly discussed above.

The earliest Christian missionaries to China, the Nestorians, adopted two strategies in dealing with this issue. On the one hand, they opted for inculturation. They chose *Tianzun* (天尊), the appellative for one of the highest deities in the Daoist religion, as the one for the Christian God. On the other hand, they also transliterated the Syriac common noun *alāhā* (阿羅訶) and used it directly in their Chinese texts. This practice is no longer visible in any later Christian missions, probably because of its inconsistency.

⁶³ Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, The Global Christianity Series (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 49.

The next wave of Christian missionaries to China mainly chose the continue with the inculturation strategy. The 16th centuries Jesuits missionaries first used the term “天主” (*Tianzhu*), “the Lord of Heaven”, to take the place of the common divine appellative in Latin, *Deus*. For them, this Chinese term was just an abbreviation of 天地萬物之主, “the Lord of heaven and earth and all things”. They were most probably unaware of the fact that this term was used, albeit not at all frequently, in ancient Chinese classics in references of the deities in both Taoism and Buddhism; even when this fact was raised to them, they were not able to offer a sufficient response to argue for their position. Nevertheless, at the close of the Rites Controversy, the term “天主” (*Tianzhu*) has since become the standard rendering of the Latin *Deus*, and its Greek and Hebrew equivalents, in the Chinese Catholic tradition.

On the other hand, those who devoted time and effort to work through the biblical text to produce a Bible translation in the 17th and 18th centuries found another solution. Jean Basset, A member of the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris, used 神 ‘God/god’ *shen* to render θεός (*theós*). One century later, Robert Morrison not only got his inspiration to produce a Chinese Bible translation from Basset, many of his translation decisions were also influenced by him. One of them is to render the Hebrew common noun אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*) in Chinese with 神 ‘God/god’ *shen*.

We have demonstrated that 神 ‘God/god’ *shen* is a more advisable translation option than “天主” (*Tianzhu*), “the Lord of Heaven”. First, from a semantic and grammatical point of view, 神 ‘God/god’ *shen* corresponds to אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*), and its Greek and Latin counterparts, is a common noun referring to a supernatural, spiritual being. “天主” (*Tianzhu*), “the Lord of Heaven”, as we have seen, refers to one particular divine being in the Chinese pantheon; what is more, depending on the religious tradition to which one refers, this term does not necessarily designate the chief god of the pantheon. Second, in terms of the facilitation of comprehension, “天主” (*Tianzhu*) appears to be less conducive to understanding than 神 *shen*. Finally, creating a new term 天主 to render the specialized use of the common noun אֱלֹהִים *’ēlōhîm* may hinder readers’ perception to the theological development within the Hebrew Bible, a collection of texts across centuries.

Writing as a Catholic exegete, it strikes me that the translation decision of the first Chinese translation of the New Testament is not inherited by any of its Catholic successors but by a Protestant one. It is understandable that the absence of capitalization in Chinese may call for the need to differentiate between God when referring to the Christian God and god(s) when referring to the deities of other religions. Nevertheless, the original Hebrew and Greek texts,

also unable to make such differentiation, were not bothered by the issue. In light of this, one wonders whether using a separate term to render the specialized use of common noun, should be reconsidered.

There are many challenges that bible translations must face during their vast undertaking. Suffice it to say that ultimately, when confronted by these issues, the Bible translators have no other than themselves to consult and God to whom they pray for wisdom. But in the end, all these are their decisions to make, and by making these decisions, they own these decisions. This is a huge responsibility, and Robert Morrison took this significantly heavy burden on his shoulder. In the end, he disappointed no one. In January 1814, when his translation of the New Testament was printing out, it is recorded that he prayed with the following prophetic line, “The while earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord” (cf. Hab 2:14).⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Morrison, *Memoirs of the Life and Labours of Robert Morrison*, I:376.