

## **THE STORY OF THE BIG FLOWERY MIAO BIBLE**

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### **The Miao people in China**

Miao is one of the fifty-five official minority groups in China. Miao is an umbrella term which comprises a linguistically and culturally related group of people. The Miao gained official status as an ethnic group in China in 1949. The Miao people settled primarily in the provinces of Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guangxi. Some members of the Miao sub-groups, most notably the Hmong, have migrated out of China into Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand). Following the communist takeover of Laos in 1975, a large group of Hmong refugees resettled in several Western nations, mostly in the United States, France, and Australia. According to the 2000 census, the number of Miao in China was estimated to be about nine million.

About 4000 years ago, the ancestors of the Miao tribes settled primarily around the Yellow River basin. Due to situations of war and social conflicts, the Miao tribes had a series of large-scale migrations, which eventually led to their dispersion towards the mountainous regions in the southwestern provinces of China. This long history of scattering and the resultant isolation contributed to the complex language situation among them. According to some linguists, there are three primary Miao dialects, seventy secondary dialects, and eighteen vernaculars. The three major Miao dialects are the Western Hunan dialect, the Eastern Guizhou dialect, and the Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan dialect (Han 2000, 4-6).

The Big Flowery Miao language is known as the Northeastern Yunnan secondary dialect, a sub-dialect of the Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan dialect. The population of the Big Flowery Miao is approximately 600,000, about 60 percent of whom have embraced Christianity.

The Big Flowery Miao live in the cold, rugged, and wet mountainous regions of southwestern China, and some villages can only be reached by several days' journey on foot. Traditionally, they have been the most oppressed and despised group among the Miao. Their neighbours and other ethnic groups looked down on them. About 100 years ago, the Nosu Yi bullied the Miao by seizing their land, imposing taxes on them, and making them slaves. The Nosu Yi masters

would use the back of a Miao slave as a stool to mount their horses. Miao slaves were housed with the animals. They were deeply entrenched in slavery, poverty, and animism, and they lived in despair.

### **The first Big Flowery Miao New Testament**

In the midst of their desperate struggle for survival, some missionaries came, befriended them, and pointed out rays of hope to them.

In 1896, missionaries of the China Inland Mission (CIM) in Guizhou made specific efforts to reach out to the minority groups there. Samuel Clarke reached out to the Black Miao at Panghai. James R. Adam befriended the Big Flowery Miao, and this sparked an impressive people movement to Christ in Guizhou and Yunnan. Adam opened a chapel and a boys' school for the Big Flowery Miao in 1899. Soon, scores of the Big Flowery Miao accepted Christ (Covell 1995, 83-88). News spread, and the Big Flowery Miao in Yunnan travelled for days on foot to Guizhou to listen to Adam. Out of consideration for the Miao in Yunnan, in 1904 Adam introduced a few Big Flowery Miao from Yunnan to Samuel Pollard, who worked in Yunnan at that time (Covell 1995, 89-90).

Samuel Pollard was born on April 20, 1864, in Cornwall, England. He went to China in 1887 and eventually settled in Zhaotong and befriended the local people there. One summer evening, a handful of Miao appeared at his gates. They wanted to learn to read and to know the God of the Christians. He taught them, and soon more and more Miao people came to him. Pollard and his coworkers ministered to them in Zhaotong in Yunnan province as well as in Shimenken in Guizhou province. In less than two decades, he and his coworkers saw thousands of Big Flowery Miao become Christians.

Scholars have been trying to find explanations for the mass movement of the Big Flowery Miao in China to Christianity. As a people, they had suffered oppression and lived in despair for a long time, and their own culture could not offer them any hope. Perhaps that made them more open to new ideas propagated by the missionaries, and more willing to embrace changes. Their new-found faith also gave them a new sense of identity as sons and daughters of God (Covell 1995, 271-72).

The missionaries used Mandarin to relate to the Miao, but the Miao found it very difficult to master the language. It was essential that the Bible, catechism, and hymnals should be available in the Miao language so that the people could learn and grow. At that time, Miao was a spoken language, without a written script. Pollard and his coworkers, including Chinese and Miao intellectuals Yang Yage, Zhang Yuehan, and Stephen Li, eventually came up with the Pollard script. Chinese sources state that the script was modelled on the design found on Miao costumes (Han 2000, 124-25). Western sources tend to argue that Pollard and his colleagues were influenced by the syllabics used by missionaries working among the Indians of North America (Covell 1995, 100). In any case, this script gained acceptance among the Miao and is commonly known as Pollard script, or the old Miao script.

With this script, Bible translation work among the Big Flowery Miao began. Pollard did most of the first draft of the Miao New Testament by himself. Portions of the New Testament were published for the first time in 1907. During the last years of his life, he hurried to finish the translation of the New Testament. In 1915, not long after he translated the book of Revelation, he died of typhoid while tending villagers who had the same disease. William H. Hudspeth and Arthur Nicholls revised his draft and published the Big Flowery Miao New Testament in 1917. The text was typeset in Japan, and 85,000 copies of this edition were distributed (Covell 1995, 100).

A large percentage of the Miao did not know Mandarin, and even for those who did, their command of the language was not sufficient to have a good grasp of the Chinese Bible or sermons preached in Mandarin. The publication of the Big Flowery Miao New Testament fulfilled a partial need among the Miao believers, but the need for a complete Bible in their own language persisted.

### **The Miao Old Testament and a new translation of the New Testament**

In the 1980s, the leaders of the Big Flowery Miao churches in Yunnan met and decided to work on their own translation of the Old Testament. In June 1990, the matter was discussed by the leaders of the Yunnan Christian Council (CC) and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). In January 1991, the Miao OT translation team was formed in Kunming. Each member of the team was assigned to translate a number of books.

In 1992, Dr. I-Jin Loh and Dr. Graham Ogden conducted a translation seminar in Kunming, and leaders from several minority groups, including the Big Flowery Miao, attended the sessions. After the seminar, the Miao leaders went back and continued translating the Old Testament.

In May 2001, Kua Wee Seng, Ruth Li, and Yu Suee Yan visited several minority groups in Yunnan. During that trip, we found that the Big Flowery Miao had translated the Old Testament into their own language and reviewed it seven times. Their draft was based on the first edition of Today's Chinese Version (TCV). We also met the leaders of the Yunnan CC and officials from the Yunnan Administration for Religious Affairs (ARA). Relationships were established. Further visits were made, and soon we were able to provide the translation team with the necessary financial support, as well as technical help in the form of translation workshop training and checking.

### **Challenges in translating the Bible into Miao**

The Miao translators are very dedicated in their work. They left behind their families in their respective villages, stayed together in the translation centre in Wuding, and laboured for years. It has been a blessing to work with these dedicated Miao Christians. At the same time, there are challenges, some of which are listed below:

### *1. The training of the translators*

Most of the translators have lower secondary school education. Some have only completed primary school. Their command of Mandarin is not very good, and sometimes they misunderstand the Chinese texts without realising their mistakes. In addition, due to their lack of training, they tended to produce a literal translation of the TCV, which did not sound natural in their own language.

To overcome this problem, a great deal of training was needed and this training was mostly done as part of the translation checking.

### *2. Model text for translation*

The model text chosen—the first edition of the TCV—was outdated. When we started working with the group, we discussed the advantages and disadvantages of using the TCV or the Chinese Union Version (CUV) as the model text. Miao readers who know Mandarin are somewhat familiar with the CUV but the TCV is totally new to them. Unfortunately, most readers, including the translators, found it much more difficult to understand the CUV than the TCV. In the end, the team decided to adopt the latest version of the TCV as the model text. The CUV text is referred to extensively for comparison. When the Revised Chinese Union Version (RCUV) New Testament was published in 2006, it served as another important resource.

To facilitate the acceptance of the Miao Bible by the users, while the OT translation was in progress, we embarked on a free distribution of the latest version of the TCV to the Miao churches. Key leaders in the Miao churches were given free copies of the TCV. The intention was to help these leaders become familiar with the content of the TCV, which would, hopefully, facilitate their acceptance of the Miao Bible when it was published.

### *3. The Big Flowery Miao script*

A new Miao script based on the Hanyu Pinyin writing system was created by the authorities in 1956, endorsed in 1958, and propagated in the 1980s. Unfortunately, this script is not widely used. The Miao believers are only familiar with the old Miao script, which is used in the Miao New Testament. This script issue is a sensitive one and could potentially have derailed the project. The Miao leaders debated whether to follow the new script, the old script in its entirety, or to do some minor modification to the old script. For the translation team, this issue was settled when the leaders of the Miao church in Yunnan held their consultation in Kunming and agreed on a slightly modified old Miao script. The Miao hymnals printed in Yunnan used this slightly modified script. There are some minor differences in the written scripts used by the Big Flowery Miao in Yunnan and in Guizhou, including the number of tones and the relative positions of the vowels. Due to the difficulties of holding consultations across various provinces, the leaders of the Miao churches in Yunnan did what they could within the constraints they were facing. The translation team adopted this slightly modified written script for the Miao Bible.

#### *4. Miao text and computer technology*

The Miao characters cannot be found in the character inventories of Microsoft Word. This is further complicated by the different positions of the vowels to indicate different tones. Fortunately, some missionaries helped design fonts and a keyboard file in Keyman so that the Miao text could be keyed into the computer in a Word document. This was a temporary solution which made it possible for the team to have electronic copy of the text. It also allowed the team to make changes and corrections without having to rewrite the entire text with pen and paper. The team also introduced word breaks. Earlier texts were written without word breaks, and this caused problems in typesetting. Word breaks were introduced in trial editions and were well accepted. Based on this positive feedback, the team included word breaks in the Miao Bible.

Unfortunately, since the Miao script is not in Unicode, the team could not benefit from the very helpful checks that are available in Paratext. Consistency checking and spotting typographical errors had to be done by reading the texts over and over again. However, several agencies have been trying over the last few years to get the Pollard script included in Unicode, and significant progress has been made. It is hoped that, in the not too distant future, translation projects using the Pollard script will be able to function within the Paratext environment.

#### *5. Field testing*

The Big Flowery Miao settled in different mountainous regions in Yunnan, and this geographical separation and linguistic variation posed a challenge. In order to have a more objective assessment of the quality of the translation and its acceptability, the team produced trial editions of some books of the Old Testament, and conducted extensive field testing in various places in Yunnan and in parts of Guizhou. The response was generally very positive. Helpful recommendations for changes from the readers were incorporated, and this enabled the team to come up with a better quality translation. However, differences between the Big Flowery Miao dialects in Yunnan and Guizhou were also noted.

Despite the limitations and various challenges, the team persevered and came up with an acceptable OT translation in 2006. The New Testament published in 1917, a formal equivalence translation, was outdated and was not easy to understand. A new translation of the New Testament modelled on the functional equivalence principle was needed. This NT translation started in 2006, and the whole Bible was completed in 2008.

#### **The dedication and launching of the Miao Bible**

The dedication and launching service of the Miao Bible was held at a Miao church in Da Ching on September 5, 2009. Leaders from the China Christian Council (CCC), the Yunnan and Guizhou CC and TSPM, representatives from UBS, and about 1,500 Miao believers dressed in their traditional costumes attended the launching ceremony. It was an historic occasion as we celebrated the first complete Bible translated by locals and published in China since 1949.

Pollard and his coworkers started translating the Gospels in 1906 and the Big Flowery Miao had waited for over 100 years to have the complete Bible in their hands. Within a matter of days, all 10,000 copies of the Miao Bible had been distributed.

After the dedication of the Miao Bible, some Miao churches organised weekly Bible reading classes and read through the New Testament. Several individuals read through the entire Miao Bible. The response has been very encouraging. Users felt a sense of intimacy in reading the Bible in their mother tongue, and they found it much easier to understand. Some churches also organised literacy classes to help illiterate members to read.

After a year of extensive usage of the Miao Bible, twenty-six typographical and typesetting errors had been spotted. Weaknesses in the translation, though very few, were also noted. These have been corrected.

There is also a need to explain the translation principles adopted in the Miao Bible, including the rendering of some important terms, to the Miao church leaders and users. Some of the readers who know Mandarin have noted some differences in translation between the Miao Bible and the CUV, and they automatically assume that errors have occurred in the Miao Bible.

In order to help users better appreciate the Miao Bible, the translation team organised a Bible seminar that took place September 13-17, 2010, and was attended by forty-one Miao church leaders from different parts of Yunnan. During the seminar, a UBS consultant explained the translation principles adopted in the Miao Bible, the rendering of some important key terms (e.g., the tetragrammaton), the transliteration of some proper names in the Old Testament, and special features of the Miao Bible. The question and answer sessions also helped clarify doubts and uncertainties in the mind of some participants. After the seminar, most of the participants mentioned that it had been a very enriching learning experience and they felt that the Miao Bible would play a crucial role in the renewal of the Miao churches. They were also ready to explain what they had learned to their church members.

### **Concluding reflections**

The publication of the Miao Bible marked an important milestone for Miao believers. It concluded a lengthy period of Bible translation into that language, beginning with Samuel Pollard and his coworkers. At the same time, it was the starting point of another journey. The Miao believers need to read and digest this book, and point out mistakes and areas for refinement so that the next reprint will be better than the first edition. Since there are no commentaries or other biblical resources available in the Miao language, they may need a Study Bible in the future. The completion of the Miao Bible also gave me an opportunity to reflect and evaluate my involvement with this group as well as with other translation teams in China. As I look back over the past decade of involvement in China, I am amazed at what God is doing in the churches, especially among the minority groups. I am thankful for the Chinese government officials and the

Chinese church leadership. Their strong support and help made it possible for the Miao Bible to be translated, printed, and distributed. I admire the dedication of the Miao translators, who spent many years away from home, working on the Miao translation. It was certainly a great privilege to be able to work with these people. At the same time, I would also like to offer a few concluding reflections which may be relevant for our ongoing work in China.

### *1. Establish cordial relationships*

We need to build up good relationships at all levels in order for translation work to have a chance of success. In China, this means building relationships with the translators, the church leaders of the target language group, leaders of the local and provincial Christian Councils and the TSPM, and officials from the Yunnan ARA. We need to maintain various levels of relationships at the provincial and local levels so that we can get the project off the ground and receive the necessary approvals from the various levels of authorities. In China, being connected is crucial if we want to get things done, and face-to-face interaction is essential. Having a meal together from time to time helps to establish and maintain relationships. It is a good way to keep in touch and get to know each other better. In addition, we also need to establish cordial relationships with the leaders of CCC and TSPM and officials of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA). Relationships at the national level are important, since printing the New Testament or the whole Bible requires approval at that level. In this regard, it is helpful to have visits from CCC, TSPM, SARA, the provincial CC and TSPM, and ARA to national Bible Societies, and reciprocal visits by Bible Societies to China. Keeping these channels of relationship open is vital so that we can continue to serve the churches in China. In this regard, UBS's China Partnership has done a tremendous job in establishing and developing relationships with various levels of authorities in China. We need to make a conscious effort to build up multilevel and multifaceted relationships with all the relevant people in the system. A good relationship pays hefty dividends in the long term.

### *2. It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white so long as it catches mice*

This is a famous saying of Deng Xiaoping, which he used in 1979 in the context of pushing for economic development in China. He argued that people should be free from ideological burdens so that they can pursue their own living. In that early stage of economic development when internal funding was limited, Deng wanted the people to be creative and pragmatic in their business ventures, making money legally within proper limits. The focus was on pragmatism that achieved the goal within the proper boundaries.

Such pragmatism is relevant to our work in China as well. We need to adopt a pragmatic and flexible approach that can bring about the results we hope for. Of course this does not mean anything goes. Things need to be done within an acceptable moral and ethical framework.

We need to be pragmatic and find ways that are workable within a particular culture. For instance, in China we are always given a team to work with. We do not choose the translators. They have been chosen for us. Sometimes the leader of a translation team does not even know how to read or write in their own language! This is something we need to live with and find creative ways to move the project forward.

In order to get a translation project approved, it is important to show that the project contributes positively to the language community. During this time of rapid social and economic development, the Chinese government is especially concerned about social stability. Since 2005, Chairman Hu Jintao has repeatedly emphasised the importance of creating a harmonious society. It will be very helpful if we can show to the relevant authorities that an accurately translated Bible, besides meeting the spiritual needs of the believers, also encourages them to seek their personal as well as communal *shalom*. In addition, the proliferation of religious sects also makes it urgent for Christians to have a Bible that is properly translated in their own language, which they can read and understand. If officials can see the positive contribution that Christians and their Bibles make towards society, they may be much more willing to grant approvals for Bible translation projects.

### *3. Crossing the river by feeling the stones*

This saying is also commonly attributed to Deng Xiaoping. The meaning is that in the context of reform and economic development, one has to move on carefully by experimentation, trying to figure things out one step at a time. The goal is to get safely to the other side of the river.

This saying is applicable to translation work in China as well. When we visited Yunnan in May 2001, we did not know what was in store for us. We found several minority groups had translated the New Testament or Old Testament on their own, but the drafts were very rough and needed extensive reworking.

We met with the leaders of the local and provincial CC and TSPM and with officials from Yunnan ARA. They were aware of the Bible translation work among several minority groups, but the status of these projects was not clear. The issue of the old script (church language) versus the new script was sensitive and complicated. Technical issues like keying the text into the computer also posed a challenge.

Working with a Bible translation team in Yunnan was a new situation for us as well as for the leaders in the Yunnan CC, TSPM, and ARA. There was no protocol to follow and no marked path, but there was a willingness to experiment and try things out, partly due to the relationships established. As a result, translation officers from the Asia Pacific Area came in and worked step by step with the teams and the officials, crossing the river one stone at a time. There were some uncertainties and turbulence along the way. Leadership changes caused the work to be suspended for about two years. The translators were left to struggle on their own. When work resumed, we pressed on. We published trial editions of

portions in the Old Testament and New Testament. While the translation work was progressing, no one knew whether we could eventually publish the whole Bible. This had not been done since 1949. Yes, Amity Printing Company does print Bibles, but these are reprints of existing versions. Printing a new version translated by the local people in China is a different ball game. Permissions and approvals needed to be obtained from various levels of authorities. We were in the process of crossing the river, but no one knew whether there were dangerous undercurrents along the way, or how deep the water was on the other side. We moved on one step at a time, not knowing how slippery the next stone would be.

On the fifth of September 2009, we found ourselves on the other side of the river. About 1,500 people gathered at a Miao church in Da Ching to celebrate the dedication and the launching of the Big Flowery Miao Bible. The Big Flowery Miao believers had waited for a long time, and at last they had the Miao Bible in their own hands. Their dream has become reality.

Meanwhile, for the other translation projects, there are many rivers yet to be crossed.

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