

*Serving More Than Two Masters: Contextualization of Christianity  
in Contemporary China and the Changes of Christianity in Translated Texts*

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**Abstract**

The publication volume of translation works of Christian literature from English to Chinese soar recently with the contextualization of Christianity in contemporary China. Four Chinese translation versions of C.S.Lewis' Screwtape Letters, published in the Mainland of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan respectively, as well as the identities of their translators are examined. The research data includes both translation texts and translators' notes. It is interesting to note that in the translated texts, Christianity has been indeed changing in the target culture. It is suggested in the paper that by adopting the contextualization model which developed by missionaries into the analysis of translation texts, the religion changes that often going unnoticed by target texts readers could be revealed under the cover of "dynamic equivalence" which often being highlighted in translation studies. The tension between the commandment of serving one master in Christianity and the well-acknowledged perception that translators also serve target culture is illustrated by using the tool of detailed textual analysis. The paper concludes that the concepts of Christianity has been blended into the context of various familiar religions for Chinese readers.

Keywords: Contextualization, Translation, Contextual Theology, Christian Literature

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## **Introduction**

There is a well-known dichotomy in Translation Studies famously described by Friedrich Schleiermacher: “Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, as moves the author towards him”. The tension that translators face, in order to leave “somebody” in peace, are often between two texts, and with a recent social turn in Translation Studies, between two contexts. House explains the relationship between texts and contexts in translation with the term “re-contextualization”, which means “taking a text out of its original situational-cultural context and placing it within a new set of relationships in Third Space in the receiving culture”. This “Third Space” suggests that “a translation will always be ‘different’, marginal, located in-between” (ibid) and belongs neither to the source culture nor the target culture. However, when we look at the translation of Christian literature from the field of contextual theology, it is totally a different story, as the purpose of producing such translation text is definitely not to let the translation stay marginal, but in the hope to transform the target culture. As Hiebert’s model “critical contextualization” (Hiebert, 2009) suggested, instead of letting the translation hover in Third Space, the Gospel Core is planted inside the target culture.

By looking at the translation of Christian literature with such interdisciplinary lens, this paper attempts to adopt critical contextualization model on translation texts to perform textual analysis. When comparing different translation versions, the aim is to draw attention to the presence (or absence) of Gospel Core and the potential power (or inability) of translation texts to cultural transformation. Hopefully, such observation would provide a fresh viewpoint for translators of Christian literature.

## **Translation and publication of Christian literature in Contemporary China**

Before we review the contextualization model as see its application in translation analysis, we will have a brief overview of the translation of Christian literature publication in contemporary China.

In contemporary China, the publication of Christian literature from translation had been flourishing, comparing to the original work in Chinese language by theologians. Pan sketched the landscape as: “today, most of the publications are translated work, which is another wave of borrowing from the West” (translation). These publications were not only accessible in churches or seminaries, but also it is observed that “books by John Piper and Philip Yancey are available in secular bookstores because they are considered intellectual, not religious” as “the government sometimes deems works worthy for their social rather than spiritual value, allowing publishers to avoid a more rigorous review process (ibid). However, the publishing trend greatly fluctuated in the recent years. From a more recent post in the website Bitterwinter, Sun observes that “starting from April 2018, the Chinese government banned the sale of Bibles and other religious materials that are not sanctioned by the regime and started closing down stores that sell them” . As the future of the publication of translated work, or even the future of Christianity in China is still under the shadow, the interpretation on already published translation texts becomes important as they serves as a channel for many to get to know faith or strengthen their faith. As Li Haihua, the chief editor of

one of Chinese translation of Narnia, commented on the relationship between the revival of a church and reading in a seminar discussing C.S.Lewis’ fantasy literature and faith, “the revival of a church starts with reading...what you give the next generation to read has a lot of impacts on their whole lives” (translation). Therefore, this research is considered timely for not only scholars to perform translation criticism, but also for readers to have a new perspective on what they read.

C.S. Lewis was regarded as “almost certainly the most influential religious author of the twentieth century, in English or any other language”. During the past decades, Lewis’s various works were able to circulate and enjoyed popularity in Chinese speaking world, both for his fantasy works and apologetic works. This research chose one of the most popular works by C.S.Lewis “The Screwtape Letters”. It was first introduced by The Council on Christian Literature for Overseas Chinese in Hong Kong, and later published by Mainland and Taiwan publishers as well. The details of the publication are as follows:

Title	Translator	Publisher	Publish Year
地獄來鴻 (di yu lai hong)	Lu Jizeng 魯繼曾	Hong Kong: The Council on Christian Literature for Overseas Chinese 基督教輔僑出版社	1958
大榔頭寫給蠹木的煽情書 (dalangtou xiegei dumu de shanqingshu)	Tseng Chen-chen 曾珍珍	Taipei: Taosheng Publisher 道聲出版社	2001
魔鬼家書 (mogui jiashu)	Kuang Zhiqiong, Li Anqin 況志瓊、 李安琴	Shanghai: East China Normal University Press 華東師範大學出版社	2010
小心魔鬼很聰明 (xiaoxin mogui hen congming)	Tseng Chen-chen 曾珍珍	Taipei: Campus Evangelical Fellowship Press 校園出版社	2014 (revised version of 2001)
地獄來鴻：來自魔鬼的書信 (diyu laihong: laizi mogui de shuxin)	Gao Zimei 高子梅	Taichung: Howdo Books 好讀出版社	2015

The translation analysis will focus on the translation published in Hong Kong in 1958 (hereinafter referred to as “HK”), two translation versions in Taiwan respectively in 2014 and 2015 (hereinafter referred to as “TW 2014” and “TW 2015”, as well as the translation version in the Mainland of China in 2010 (hereinafter referred to as “ML”). Other than HK, the three translation versions used are quite recent.

## Literature Review

In this section, we will first establish our hypothesis in this research, that everyone can be involved in doing contextual theology. Then Hiebert's contextualization model will be presented as a framework where we use to analyze translation texts.

For the translation of Christian literature means to bring cultural transformation as previously argued in Introduction part, the translators are not merely the consumers of translation product. Instead, they are "non-participants" of contextual theology who can also "in several significant but limited ways contribute to the contextualization of theology in a context that is not his or her own". Translators are involved in the construction of contextual theology by using the tool of translation to place the message in the target culture. This construction process with the participation of has been discussed from the perspective of interpreters for church interpreting task, especially on church interpreting. "Church interpreters' task is seen to carry religious significance in that their service is intended to help the listeners to encounter God." But for written translation works, there has been little literature on the discussion of constructing contextual theology from translators' perspective.

Before we discuss how to construct contextual theology, the first question is which contexts translators are involved. Hiebert's model (Hiebert, 2009) illustrates the relationship between source culture and target culture. The square shape and the circle shape at the bottom of this figure represent missionaries' culture and target culture, in our case, source context and target context. The pentagon shape is termed as "metacultural grid" (ibid) is the which is "a grid that enables us to understand, translate, compare, and evaluate different cultures" and "enables us to live in different worlds while keeping our core identity secure" (ibid). The diamond shape with a big "G" in the middle represent the message of Gospel, which not only should remain unchanged in the source context and target context, but also not be shaped by the square or circle culture. The downward arrow pointing from the pentagon to the circle shape also has a significant implication for us. It affirms that the Gospel message can also speak to the target culture directly without via source culture.

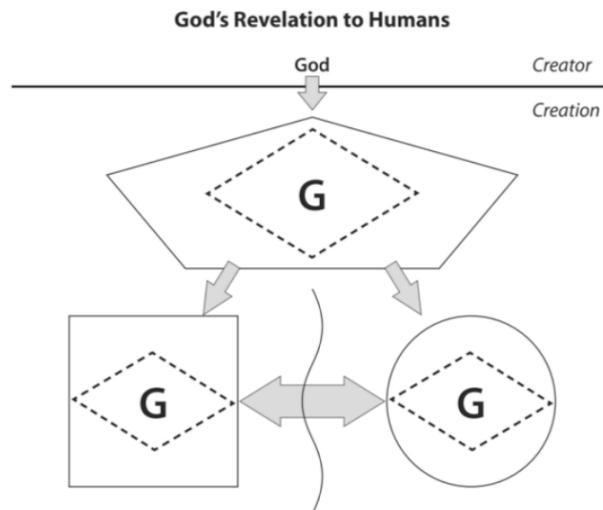


Figure 1: Critical contextualization model (Hiebert, 2009)

Compared with “non-contextualization” and “uncritical contextualization” that Hiebert outlined, his “critical contextualization” model is a breakthrough of how missionaries view Gospel and view their own culture. Since “the Scriptures themselves were given to humans in particular historical and sociocultural contexts” (ibid), the “metacultural grid” and human cultures can be regarded in two levels. Therefore, missionaries’ culture is just one type of culture among other human cultures. The missionaries are no longer transplanting their own culture to the respondents’ culture as if the missionaries are in a superior position. From this perspective, the source context is no longer the standard for the target context to follow. The message in source context is not the goal for missionaries to communicate to the target context, but the Gospel core.

### Translation texts analysis

In this section, translation texts of “The Screwtape Letters” will be analysed under the framework of Hiebert’s critical contextualization. When choosing the examples below, we first identified all of the religious terms in the translation texts, especially the terms from other religions as they stand out in Christian literature. Then we looked for the corresponding terms in the source text. The example here is the translation of borrowed terms from other religions for faith-related abstract concepts.

The example is taken from the first strategy that Screwtape offered to Wormwood in Letter 3 of ST to “keep his mind off the most elementary duties by directing it to the most advanced and spiritual ones” . In this chapter, the newly converted Christian needs to deal with the relationship between his mum and himself. Screwtape suggested that by only focusing his own conversion, the man could ignore his mum’s needs and still think himself as the converted. The conversion of “the patient” appears to be obvious in the beginning of Letter 2 – “your patient has become a Christian”. The implication of the concept of “conversion” is obvious – which refers to the commitment of faith to Christianity. However, in the translation texts, the term “conversion” has different translations.

[ST] He thinks his conversion is something inside him and his attention is therefore chiefly turned at present to the states of his own mind—or rather to that very expurgated version of them which is all you should allow him to see.

[HK] 使他認為皈依(*guiyi*)宗教乃內心的事，而集中注意力於自身目前的心理狀況——最好說是後者經過刪改的版本，因為你絕不可示以原本。

[TW 2014] 這傢夥認為自己的悔改(*huigai*)是發生在“內裡”的事件，所以他的注意力當前都集中在自己的心思狀態上，或者更應說在他那些已被潔淨(*jiejing*)的心思上。

[ML] 他認為對信仰的皈依(*guiyi*)是內心的事情，因此目前把自己的注意力轉移到了自己的心思意念上——更確切地說，轉移到了那些經過完全淨化(*jinghua*)的心思意念上。

[TW 2015] 因為他自以為改信(*gaixin*)基督教是源於他「內心」的轉變，所以此刻注意力全擺在自己的心境狀態上——或者說已經淨化(*jinghua*)的心緒上。

First, we will consider the collocation of the translation terms for “conversion”. The Buddhist term “*guiyi*” is applied as a correspondence of “conversion” in HK and ML versions. *Guiyi* means “*tisarana*” commitment to Buddhism, which means the commitment to buddha, dhamma and sangha. The search result in Chinese corpus can give us a clue of how “*guiyi*” is often used in the Mainland China and in Taiwan. From [www.cncorpus.org](http://www.cncorpus.org), among 13 examples of “*guiyi*”, two refer to Christianity, three refer to Buddhism and two refer to Islam, while the other cases refer to religion in general or arts. In Sinica Corpus, among 19 examples of “*guiyi*”, two refer to Christianity, ten refer to Buddhism and one refer to Islam, while the other cases refer to religion in general. In TW2015, the translation for “conversion” – “*gaixin*” (change of faith) is quite neutral, but the following object “Christianity” clearly defines the implied meaning. In TW version, “*huigai*” (repent) is used. While “*guiyi*” has a mixed usage among different religions, the term “*huigai*” is used either for Christianity context or for non-religious context – when it is used to relate to crimes. The term “*huigai*” also appears in the Chinese Union Version of the Bible in the Gospel of John. Therefore, it could help TT readers who are aware of the Biblical terms to associate this term with Christianity.

Different translation terms lead to different extends of highlighting the teaching in Christianity that conversion to Christianity means change from inside-out. The term “*huigai*” in Chinese has two characters: “*hui*” (repent) and “*gai*” (change). So the term itself contains both repent from inner self and change the outward behaviour. In TW2014, the first part of the sentence “*huigai shi fasheng zai neili de shijian*” (literature translation: repentance is what happens inside) already sounds problematic, as “*gai*” (to change) is already in the word “*huigai*”. With the translation of “*huigai*”, on the one hand, the specific teaching of Christianity (which differentiate from other religions) that faith should be from inside-out is successfully highlighted; on the other hand, the term itself stands out (instead of being generalized as “*guiyi*”) and triggers connotations with various teachings of Jesus. It is believed that Christian readers who are familiar with the Chinese Bible could easily relate the term “*huigai*” with the meaning in the Bible.

The case is also true for the term “expurgated”. In ML and TW2015 version, “*jinghua*” (to purify) also has strong favour of Buddhism. The common collocation of this verb is to purify the heart (*jinghua xinling*) or to purify the world (*jinghua shijie*). The translation of TW2014, “*jiejing*” (to clean), is a synonym of “*jinghua*”. But the major difference is, the term “*jiejing*” appears in the Chinese Bible instead of “*jinghua*” when it comes to the meaning “to purify” or “to clean”.

Taking the above example of translating faith-related abstract terms, we attempt to explain the difference of choosing translation strategies in the critical contextualization model. When translators choose to use terms from the target context which may sound familiar to TT readers (in the example above, the translation of “*guiyi*” and “*jinghua*”), they tend to dig in the target context to find substitutes in order to solve the problem of human culture differences. In this case, the translators

focus on the difference between the source context and the target context. The message is passed from the source context to the target context.

However, when translators keep the consistency of translating the abstract terms in source context into the existed terms in the Bible in the target context (in the example above, the translation of “*huigai*” and “*jiejing*”), the Gospel core is kept in the target context without mixing other religions or elements that is not a part of the Gospel. The two downward arrows in the critical contextualization explain this strategy well – the Gospel core existed in both source context and target context, and more importantly, it remains unchanged in both contexts. It shows the power of the Gospel to speak directly to every culture contexts. It does not only speak to the source culture, nor does it speak to target culture through source culture. When dealing with faith-related abstract concepts in the source context, the Gospel core in the target context is the repertoire for searching for corresponding terms, instead of the whole target context.

When we consider doing contextual theology, the translation strategy of finding an equivalence within the target context but outside the Gospel core could be problematic. The obvious drawback is the distortion of meaning and therefore, the loss of associations and connotations. In the long run, by using terms directly from the Gospel core, theology vocabulary could be broadened and target context will bear a larger repertoire for perceiving God.

## **Conclusion**

This paper serves as a preliminary analysis of translation texts from both translation studies and contextual theology. The adoption of contextualization models in analysing translation could yield several implication for translators:

- (1) With the presence of “metacultural grid”, the relationship between source context and target context needs to be reconsidered.
- (2) To translate faith-related terms, the resources for finding a substitution with the critical contextualization model should be within Gospel core.
- (3) For the purpose of constructing contextual theology, translators need to consider carefully for usage of terms related to other religions. The Gospel has the power to transform culture context.

The quest for translators of choosing which masters to serve continues. It is hoped that the translation analysis offered could shed some lights for a framework for the translators of Christian literature.

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