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***Sola Scriptura*, the Chinese Union Version Bible and their Impacts on
Conservative Christian Leaders: The Case of Watchman Nee and Wang
Mingdao**

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Abstract

The majority of Chinese Christians can be considered to be theologically conservative. One distinctive feature of conservative theology is Biblicism, according to which, the Scripture occupies a central role. The Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* legitimises their conservative stance and directs a stern application of this principle. As Biblicists, they are discontented with the ‘unbiblical’ practices and ministries of missionaries. On the other hand, the missionaries have put forward the Union Version translation project on the basis of the principle of *sola scriptura*. In this paper, I will investigate how Watchman Nee (1903-1972) and Wang Mingdao (1900-1991) were discursively influenced by the missionary’s Union Version Bible translation project through their different understandings of *sola scriptura*. Though Nee and Wang accused the missionaries of having betrayed the Reformation principle, they were nonetheless still under its influence through the Chinese Union Version Bible. Also, their teaching on biblical reading is similar with the medieval monastic practice of *lectio divina*. In this sense, the Chinese Union Version Bible brings out

an interesting integration of Chinese conservative Christian faith, missionary enterprise, *sola scriptura*, and monastic style of spiritual practice in the Chinese Church.

Keywords: 1. *Sola Scriptura*; 2. Chinese Union Version Bible; 3. Watchman Nee; 4. Wang Mingdao; 5. *Lectio Divina*

Short title: *Sola Scriptura*

1. Introduction

Y. Y. Chong speculated that the missionaries in China were enthusiastic in promoting the Union Version translation project, because they were influenced by the Holiness Revival Movement.¹ However, one may notice that the Holiness Revival Movement was a movement for pious and moral Christian life, rather than a translation movement.² It cannot be the major source of influence on the translation project. Jost Zetzsche pointed out that there are complex dynamics and controversies among missionaries and bible societies in discussing the project. He suggested that the Union Version project could be launched because of the 'missionaries' sense of the urgent need to create one Bible for China'.³ On this 'urgent need', I concur with George K. W. Mak's observation that the Bible translation

¹ Yau Yuk Chong, *A Study of the Phenomenon of Authoritativeness in the Chinese Translations of the Protestant Bible* (Hong Kong, 1998), p. 130, <http://hub.hku.hk/bib/B3123835X>.

² Melvin Easterday Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Metuchen, 1996), pp. 3-4.

³ Jost Zetzsche, 'The Work of Lifetimes: Why the Union Version Took Nearly Three Decades to Complete', in *Bible in Modern China: The Literary and Intellectual Impact*, ed. Irene Eber, Sze-Kar Wan, and Knut Walf (Sankt Augustin, 1999), p. 80.

projects of the Protestant missionaries in China followed the Reformation principle of establishing the absolute authority of the Bible and to promote individual reading of it.⁴ In the Epitome of the Formula of Concord (1577), the reformers described that the authority of the Holy Scripture was the formal principle of the reformation:

In this way the distinction between the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments and all other writings is preserved, and Holy Scripture alone remains the only judge, rule, and guiding principle (*sola sacra scriptura iudex, norma et regula*), according to which, as the only touchstone, all teachings should and must be recognised and judged, whether they are good and evil, correct or incorrect (Formula of Concord, EP Rule and Norm, 7).

This is the essential principle of *sola scriptura*. The Bible is the supreme standard of doctrine and nothing about Christian faith can be asserted if it is not in agreement with or goes beyond the Holy Scripture. The principle was common to all Protestants.⁵ Because of *sola scriptura*, the missionaries were required to provide good-quality Bible versions in local languages, enabling missionaries in the field to access God's teaching directly. Under this principle, the missionaries in China enthusiastically supported the Union Version translation project.

⁴ George Kam Wah Mak, Protestant Bible Translation and Mandarin as the National Language of China (Leiden, 2017), p. 62.

⁵ Roland H. Bainton, 'The Bible in the Reformation', in The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge, 1963), p.4.

However, one may doubt that in what extent that the missionaries' understanding of the Reformation principle influenced the conservative independent/non-denominational Chinese churches, which constituted the majority of the Chinese Church in the twentieth century. In the previous studies of the Union Version, researchers usually focused on the discussion within the missionary circle. Though Y. Y. Chong published her research on the Chinese reception of the Union Version in 1998, but her research has some mistakes. She argued that Chinese Christians had little theological discussion on biblical translation in the Republican period due to unstable social circumstances and this resulted in much of the the historical materials being lost or inaccessible. In support of this assertion, she cited two short articles by Wang Mingdao and claimed that they are the only materials that she could retrieve.⁶ However, she was apparently not aware at the time that most of the works of Wang and Nee were still in circulation, and there are ample materials on their views of the Union Version.

Moreover, previous discussion on Chinese Christians' role in biblical translation usually focused on their contribution to the translation process.⁷ Lauren Pfister noted that Ho Tsun-Sheen, the renowned Chinese translator assisting James Legge, attempted to integrate 'a Christian worldview with a Ruist cultural framework, which Legge also shared with him'.⁸

⁶ Chong, *A Study of the Phenomenon of Authoritativeness in the Chinese Translations of the Protestant Bible*, p. 60.

⁷ For examples, Lauren Pfister's 'A Transmitter but not a Creator: Ho Tsun-Sheen (1817-1871), the First Modern Chinese Protestant Theologian', and Francis K. H. So's 'Wu Ching-Hsiung's Chinese Translation of Images of the Most High in the Psalms'. They have been published in Irene Eber, Sze-Kar Wan, and Knut Walf, ed., *Bible in Modern China: The Literary and Intellectual Impact* (Sankt Augustin, 1999), p. 165-198, 321-350.

⁸ Pfister, 'A Transmitter but not a Creator: Ho Tsun-Sheen (1817-1871), the First Modern Chinese Protestant Theologian', p. 194.

The relationship and interaction between missionaries and Chinese Christians in biblical translation is a valuable topic of discussion. But, the critical reception and responses of Chinese Christian readers are less attended by researchers. In this paper, I will investigate how the conservative independent/non-denominational Chinese Christian leaders were discursively influenced by the missionaries' Union Version Bible translation project through a different understanding of *sola scriptura*.

Although the missionary movement in China was an heir of the Reformation spirit and the Union Version translation project explicitly claimed to follow the principle of *sola scriptura*, the conservative independent leaders like Wang Mingdao (1900-1991) and Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903-1972) rejected the authority of missionaries and western denominations as 'flawed', 'inheritance of human' and 'corrupt'.⁹ However, one distinctive feature of Chinese conservative theology is Biblicism. The Scripture occupied a central role in the conservative faith. The Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* legitimises the conservative stance and puts the application of the principle into a stern direction. For the Bible is the most important authority for conservative Christians, Watchman Nee and Wang Mingdao, who were important leaders of the conservative circle in the early twentieth century, complained the 'inaccuracy' and 'inauthenticity' of the translation of the Union Version. They pointed out the errors of translation in the Union Version and offered their own translation. However, at the same time, they have admitted that Chinese Union Version was an outstanding and up to date translation of the Scripture. We can also note

⁹ Mingdao Wang, *The Fifty Years (Wu Shi Nian Lai)* (Hong Kong, 1971), pp. 64, 70; Tuosheng Ni, *Further Talks on the Church Life (Jiao Hui de Lu)* (Taipei, 1979), pp. 141–42; Tuosheng Ni, *The Normal Christian Church Life (Gong Zuo de Zai Si)*, *Ni Tuo Sheng Wen Ji* 30 (Taipei, 2004), p. 151.

that the revisions of translation suggested by Wang and Nee are limited in scope, usually offering only an alternative translation of single word or term. Even the later Recovery Version (completed in 2005), which was a 'new' translation produced by Nee's founded 'Little Folk' community, does not drastically depart from the Union Version.

Because the Bible occupies a central role in the religious practice of conservative Christians, the teaching and ministry of Nee and Wang unavoidable heavily relied on the Union Version. They taught that Christians should read and understand the Bible thoroughly. However, biblical commentary is unnecessary or even harmful for spiritual cultivation. The Bible is 'self-sufficient'. Thus, the criticisms of translated versions did not develop into a kind of historical criticism as it has the biblical translation history of the West. Nee and Wang urged Christians to read the Bible, and eventually to read the Union Version. Memorising texts and verbalising them are important for mastering the Bible content. The Union Version, which is written in eloquent modern Chinese, became an integrated part of the Chinese Christian spiritual life rather than a mere convenient translation. The teaching of spiritual practice—memorising and verbalising the biblical texts—of Nee and Wang is peculiarly similar to the medieval monastic principle of *lectio divina*. Their teaching promoted a very different interpretation of *sola scriptura* in regarding the Union Version with that of the missionaries. Nee, Wang and the missionaries unintentionally integrated the Reformation principle, medieval spiritual practice and Chinese culture into an organic whole through the Union Version. This integration clearly shows the significant impact of the Union Version on the Chinese church.

2. The Chinese Union Version, its translation principle and *sola scriptura*

The creation of the Chinese Union Version was a long-term project. As early as the General Conference of missionaries of 1877, missionaries in China discussed on the project. *Sola scriptura* can be noticed as an important motivating factor and translation principle for the missionaries. S. L. Baldwin of American Methodist Episcopal Mission stated that the missionaries needed to produce a union version of the whole Bible, which ‘should be faithful to the originals, yet thoroughly idiomatic, simple and perspicuous in style, and as free as possible from unusual Chinese characters’. He predicted that this version would prevent confusion in teaching Christian truths and cause the truths ‘to become imbedded in the language, and find a home in the popular mind and conscience’.¹⁰ It is important to note that in 1877, Chauncey Goodrich of American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, as a long-term supporter for Mandarin translation of the union version, also appealed the case with the principle of *sola scriptura*. He empathetically advocated that,

In the Protestant Church of the 19th century, there can scarcely arise a controversy as to the fitness of giving the Bible to the *people*. The Protestant Church was *born* out of such controversies, and makes her boast that the word of God is free. There is none so poor or so low that she will not offer him the Gospel pearl. Need it be written how much the masses in China need the Bible in the Vernacular to unlock its sealed treasures.... God meant the light of the Bible, like the light of the sun, to shine down into the bottom of the valleys, as well as to illuminate the tops of the mountains. I think there is almost universal conviction among Protestant

¹⁰ S. L. Baldwin, ‘Christian Literature—What Has Been Done and What Is Needed’, in Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China, Held at Shanghai, May 10-24, 1877, ed. M. T. Yates, R. Nelson, and E. R. Barrett (Shanghai, 1878), p. 210.

Missionaries, even in China, that the people must have the Bible in their vernacular. It need scarcely be added, in this paper, that in China we must also have a Bible in the universal language of China.¹¹

Unfortunately, the discussion in 1877 conference was unable to reach a consensus and ended up diverging into two translation projects.¹²

In the General Conference of missionaries of 1890, the Union Version project again became an important discussion topic. One can clearly see that the *sola scriptura* and a unified translation of the Bible pervaded missionaries' discourses about the project. John Wherry of American Presbyterian Mission (North) clearly stated that the Protestant Church considers the Bible, not the papal office, 'as its creed, and believes that an intelligent, personal acceptance of this creed is essential to the spiritual welfare of everyman'.¹³ Wherry noted that the Peking version of Mandarin Bible (with the Old Testament translated by Schereschewsky) was a successful translation. He asserted that it was the result of, 1. 'its inherent excellence as a new and independent rendering of the Bible into Chinese', 2. 'it is in the familiar speech of the people to whom it was this version given', and 3. 'It was ... to the unlearned of North China what the Bibles of Wycliffe and Luther were to the English and

¹¹ C. Goodrich, Importance of a Vernacular Christian Literature, with Special Reference to the Mandarin', in Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China, Held at Shanghai, May 10-24, 1877, ed. M. T. Yates, R. Nelson, and E. R. Barrett (Shanghai, 1878), p. 215.

¹² Zetzsche, 'The Work of Lifetimes: Why the Union Version Took Nearly Three Decades to Complete', p. 79.

¹³ John Wherry, 'Historical-Summary of the Different Versions of the Scriptures', in Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 7-20, 1890, ed. W. J. Lewis, W. T. A. Barber, and J. R. Hykes (Shanghai, 1890), p. 48.

Germans'.¹⁴ All the above reasons showed that Wherry evaluated the success of the Peking version according to the criteria of *sola scriptura*.

William Muirhead of the London Missionary Society pointed out that the Protestant missions had a common practice 'to translate as soon as possible at least a portion of Holy Writ into the current tongue.' Because 'the faithful transfer of the Sacred Writings into the language of this people' may help Chinese 'become acquainted with their [the Bible's] precious truths, and raised to the enjoyment of their [the Bible's] inestimable blessings for time and eternity, for earth and heaven.'¹⁵ A unified Bible translation is to show the 'standard of truth' of Christian revelation.¹⁶ After the conference, Calvin Mateer argued that the Mandarin Bible can more effectively *speak to* the Chinese than the *Wen-li* Bible. A Mandarin Bible can be 'intelligible to the common people' when it 'is *read to them*' in the public worship. According to Mateer, 'The fundamental distinction between *Wen-li* and Mandarin is that the former is addressed to the *eye*, the latter to the *ear*.'¹⁷ The structure of the sentences of the Mandarin Bible 'should conform to the model of the spoken language'.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁵ W. Muirhead, 'Historical Summary of the Different Versions. With Their Terminology, and the Feasibility of Securing a Single Standard Version in Wen-Li, with a Corresponding Version in Mandarin Colloquial', in Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 7-20, 1890, ed. W. J. Lewis, W. T. A. Barber, and J. R. Hykes (Shanghai, 1890), p. 33.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁷ C. W. Mateer, 'The Style of the Mandarin Bible', *The Chinese Recorder*, XXXI, no. 7 (1900), p. 331.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 333.

In the discussion on adding notes, headings, introduction and preface to the Bible, the missionaries' concern was whether the additional information would jeopardize the principle of *sola scriptura*. Finally, they decided to allow only minimal marginal notes in the Union Version.¹⁹

The principle of *sola scriptura* reflected that the Union Version project was one of the typical biblical production projects in the nineteenth century. Faithfulness was the guiding principle for upholding *sola scriptura* in the translation projects of that time.²⁰ For example, the Revised Version project in the nineteenth century listed 'faithfulness' of the translation and revision as the essential first principle.²¹ Also, Protestant efforts to produce the Bible by that time assumed that 'merely reading the text would change people's lives and in turn bring about salvation on a national and international level'.²² The principle of *sola scriptura* supported using vernaculars for bible translation projects.²³

3. Wang and Nee on Reformation, Missionary Enterprise and the Union Version Bible

¹⁹ W. J. Lewis, W. T. A. Barber, and J. R. Hykes (eds.), 'Report of the Committee on the Need of Brief Introductions and Notes to the Scriptures and on Bible Distribution', in Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 7-20, 1890 (Shanghai, 1890), xiiv.

²⁰ Paul Ellingworth, 'From Martin Luther to the English Revised Version', in A History of Bible Translation, ed. Philip A. Noss (Roma, 2007), p. 134.

²¹ Harry M. Orlinsky and Robert G. Bratcher, A History of Bible Translation and the North American Contribution (Atlanta, 1991), p.42.

²² Leslie Howson and Scott McLaren, 'Producing the Text: Production and Distribution of Popular Editions of the Bible', in The New Cambridge History of the Bible, vol. 4, From 1750 to the Present, ed. John Riches (Cambridge, 2013), p. 61.

²³ Anthony Pym, 'On the Historical Epistemologies of Bible Translating', in A History of Bible Translation, ed. Philip A. Noss (Roma, 2007), p.207.

Wong and Nee appreciated the spiritual achievement of the Reformation, and their positive evaluations were chiefly related to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. Watchman Nee commended that Martin Luther brought the Lord's recovery to the church.²⁴ This recovery had two parts: justification by faith, and a Bible open to all.²⁵ However, he objected that Luther only explicated the truth of faith and did not give a clear teaching on justification.²⁶ In other words, Luther's main contribution to the Lord's recovery is on the doctrine of the Holy Scripture. For Nee, the proper view to the biblical authority is to believe that it is God's living words. He stated that,

The Bible is an astonishing book. This book has its characteristics, that is, it is spoken by the words of human beings, but it is really God's words. It is written by human hands, but it is really written by God's hand... The Bible is a book written by human humans and spoken by human mouths. However, God has blown his breath into it. Therefore, it is a living book. It is living word spoken by the living God. This is the meaning of inspiration in the Bible.²⁷

According to Nee, because the Bible was directly inspired by God and the Spirit is inerrant, the Bible too must be inerrant: 'The Holy Spirit inspires the Bible. The Spirit does not only give words to human beings, but also prepares the person who is writing the Bible to be a

²⁴ Tuosheng Ni, Messages Given During the Resumption of Watchman Nee's Ministry (Ni Tuosheng Hui Fu Zhi Shi Guo Cheng Zhong Xin Xi Ji Lu), Ni Tuo Sheng Wen Ji 57 (Taipei, 2004), p. 52.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 82.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 55.

²⁷ Tuosheng Ni, The Ministry of God's Word (Shen Hua Yu de Zhi Shi) (Hong Kong, 1996), pp. 106-7.

vessel. Because the vessel has the spirit of this kind, so it is called to write that type of words. Therefore, the Spirit behind the words of the Scripture is complete and strong. The Spirit cannot be wrong. The Spirit is inerrant.²⁸

For Wang Mingdao, the Reformation was a movement of bible reading and translation. He rejoiced that the Reformation made the Bible available to the public.²⁹ He appreciated Martin Luther for his courage of standing for the biblical truth against the oppression of Roman Catholic Church.³⁰ Wang Mingdao's view on the Bible was similar to Watchman Nee's. He emphasized that every single word in the Bible is inspired by God, and thus, the Bible is inerrant.³¹ For him, Theological Liberalism denied the authority of the Bible, and Liberals were indeed 'unbelievers'.³² He asserted that the only authority for his ministry is the Bible. He stated that,

Whatever the Bible says, I will accept. Whatever the Bible does not say, I will not take them even a little bit. My faith and my message are fully back to the Bible. No matter how many people subtract some truths from the Bible, and no matter how

²⁸ Tuosheng Ni, *How to Study the Bible; The Breaking of the Outer Man and the Release of the Spirit* (Du Jing Zhi Lu. Ren de Po Sui Yu Ling de Chu Lai), Ni Tuo Sheng Wen Ji 54 (Taipei 2004), p. 66.

²⁹ Mingdao Wang, *Why Do I Believe the Bible Is Inspired by God?* (Wo Wei Shen Me Xin Sheng Jing Shi Shen Suo Mo Shi De?) (Beiping, 1933), p. 130.

³⁰ Mingdao Wang, 'The Preface of the Spiritual Food Quarterly and a Prayer of Martin Luther (Ling Shi Ji Kan de Fa Kan Yu He Lu De Ma Ding Yi Pian Dao Wen)', *Ling Shi C* (Winter 1951), pp. 80-82.

³¹ Mingdao Wang, 'We, Because of Faith (Wo Men Shi Wei Le Xin Yang)', in *The Fifty Years (Wu Shi Nian Lai)* (Hong Kong, 1971), p. 26.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

many people add some traditions other than the Bible, I always believe in everything in the Bible, no less and no more.³³

For Nee and Wang, the Reformation exalts biblical authority and they explicitly taught that only the Bible could be the authority for Christian life. If the main influence of *sola scriptura* for the missionaries' Union Version project manifested in vernacular—Mandarin—translation, for Wang and Nee this was properly strict obedience to the Bible. However, when they applied this principle regarding the Union Version, it produced a paradox. Although missionaries considered themselves as faithful students of the *sola scriptura*, Wang and Nee criticised the missionary enterprise and denominational churches for betraying the Reformation. Nee believed that his ministry was a ministry of Lord's recovery. He admitted that, from missionaries, the Chinese had been taught a lot of religious knowledge, but they did not proclaim the message of salvation, justification, and regeneration. He believed that this was the fault of denominationalism.³⁴ He described the denominations that the western missionaries brought into China as unbiblical. In his opinion, denominationalism cannot be a result of biblical teaching.³⁵

Wang also voiced severe criticism of the missionary enterprise and the denominational churches. He claimed that more than half of Christians in China were not true Christians, but only *Jiao You* (religious friends); they did not repent from sin and live out a faithful life. He

³³ Wang, *The Fifty Years* (Wu Shi Nian Lai), p. 125.

³⁴ Tuosheng Ni, *The Present Testimony*, vol. 4 (Fu Xing Bao, Juan 4), Ni Tuo Sheng Wen Ji 11 (Taipei, 2004), p. 164.

³⁵ Tuosheng Ni, *Christian Post*, vol. 5 (Ji Du Tu Bao, Juan 5), Ni Tuo Sheng Wen Ji 7 (Taipei, 2004), p. 367.

lamented that the Chinese Church was disloyal to the biblical teaching and also objected that western missionaries dominated control of missionary work and chose incompetent and unfaithful Chinese to be their co-workers.³⁶ He therefore saw it as the task of his ministry to point out their sins and proclaim the biblical truth.³⁷

While Nee and Wang heavily criticized the missionary enterprise in China and they had some complaints about the translation of some verses; their reverence for the biblical authority nonetheless led them a positive reception of the Union Version Bible project, believing that the missionaries had done a good job with it.³⁸ Nee described the Mandarin Union Version Bible as ‘the best bible translation in China, and one of the best in the world’, because it had been translated from the best available Greek manuscripts of that time.³⁹ Wang Mingdao recognised that the Mandarin Union Version was ‘really a very good’ translation.⁴⁰ Through the Union Version Bible, we can understand how missionaries and two Chinese Christian leaders approached the *sola scriptura* differently while coming to the same destination.

4. The Union Version and Chinese Spiritual Cultivation: From *Sola Scriptura* to *Lectio*

Divina

³⁶ Wang, *The Fifty Years (Wu Shi Nian Lai)*, pp. 80-81.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-78.

³⁸ Tuosheng Ni, *Christian Post*, vol. 2 (Ji Du Tu Bao, Juan 2), Ni Tuo Sheng Wen Ji 4 (Taipei, 2004), p. 126; Mingdao Wang, *Gleanings Gathered from ‘Spiritual Food Quarterly’ (Ling Shi Shi Yi)* (Hong Kong, 1987), pp. 6-22.

³⁹ Ni, *How to Study the Bible; The Breaking of the Outer Man and the Release of the Spirit (Du Jing Zhi Lu. Ren de Po Sui Yu Ling de Chu Lai)*, p. 104.

⁴⁰ Mingdao Wang, ‘The Two Words That Chinese Bible Translation Has Incorrectly Used (Han Wen Sheng Jing Yi Ben Zhong Liang Ge Yong Cuo Le de Zi)’, in *Chinese Bible Translation (Sheng Jing Han Wen Yi Ben Lun Wen Ji)*, ed. R. P. Kramers (Hong Kong, 1965), p. 71.

As conservative leaders, Nee and Wang regarded Bible reading as an obligation of all Christians.⁴¹ We can find that both followed the reformers' exegetical principles derived from the principle of *sola scriptura* in their teaching of Bible reading: 1. The Bible is the sole authority for Christian life, 2. The sixty-six books of the Bible are a unified whole, 3. Scripture as interpreter itself (*Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*) is the best exegetical method.⁴² However, Chinese conservative leaders did not develop these principles into the historical-critical practices that the reformers and their successors did.⁴³ The reason for this is that for Chinese conservative leaders biblical reading is mainly a spiritual practice and should not be an intellectual endeavor.

Nee and Wang did not think that reading the Bible, even according to the above principles, would automatically transform a Christian's spiritual life. They argued that Christians couldn't benefit from the Bible unless they prepare themselves to be a person ready for receiving God's teaching. Wang suggested that Christians should empty themselves. He stated,

However, we should be cautious at this point. We should not mix those unbiblical teachings, which we hear from everyday life, with the biblical teachings. Because they are not biblical stuff, they can effectively block us to receive the biblical truth. It

⁴¹ Ni, *How to Study the Bible; The Breaking of the Outer Man and the Release of the Spirit* (Du Jing Zhi Lu. Ren de Po Sui Yu Ling de Chu Lai), p. 1; Wang, *What's in the Bible?* (Sheng Jing Zhong You Shen Me?), p. 21.

⁴² Vítor Westhelle, 'Luther on the Authority of Scripture', *Lutheran Quarterly*, XIX (2005), pp. 373-91.

⁴³ Gert Kwakkel, 'The Reformation and Historical-Critical Research in Biblical Interpretation', in *The Reformation: Its Roots and Its Legacy*, ed. Pierre Berthoud and Pieter J. Lalleman (Eugene, 2017), pp. 74-87.

will be the best if I re-evaluate everything that I know with the biblical standard. We can keep it if it has biblical basis. We can forgo it if it has not. The things that I know a little bit, no matter it has been learnt in the past few years or several ten years, no matter it has been heard from a pastor or a doctor, they cannot be the standard. The person that is going to read the Bible should use the Bible as the sole standard, and then he or she can talk about bible reading.⁴⁴

For Nee therefore, Christians should not only have the right method to read the Bible, they should also become the right persons for Bible reading.⁴⁵ He wrote that,

A person that is closed from God, even he researches a lot, pray a lot, he is still a person that cannot read the Bible ... God's light is the same. But, humans are not the same. Someone is open to God. Thus, he can read the Bible. Someone is closed from God. Thus, he cannot read the Bible.⁴⁶

Therefore, reading bible is not an art of hermeneutics, but an act of spiritual cultivation. Nee taught that if we want to have a fruitful Bible-reading experience, we need to enter three modes that the Holy Spirit requires: the thought of the Holy Spirit, the reality in the Bible of the Holy Spirit, and the spirit of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ He believed that reading Bible is an engagement with the Holy Spirit and that people can only grasp the mystery of the Bible if

⁴⁴ Wang, What's in the Bible? (Sheng Jing Zhong You Shen Me?), pp. 13-14.

⁴⁵ Ni, How to Study the Bible; The Breaking of the Outer Man and the Release of the Spirit (Du Jing Zhi Lu. Ren de Po Sui Yu Ling de Chu Lai), 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

they are connected with the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ More importantly, for Nee the people that are connected with the Holy Spirit and open to God should memorise the Bible. We do not connect with the Holy Spirit through exegesis but by memorising. Nee argues that,

Paul told Ephesians, 'to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive".' (Acts 20:35). To remember Lord's words, you need to memorize them. You cannot remember if you do not memorize them ... If our hearts before God are open, and if our attitude is gentle, it is very easy to memorise the Bible. If we always remember the Lord's words, it is very easy to memorise the Bible. If we memorize the Bible whenever we have time, we can plentifully stock Christ's words in our hearts. If our inner person does not have the words of the Bible, it will be very difficult for the Holy Spirit to speak to us. Every time God gives us revelation, usually it uses the words of the Bible. If we do not memorize solidly the words of the Bible, revelation will not come out easily.⁴⁹

After we have memorised the words of the Bible, we need to meditate the Biblical teaching. Interestingly, one way to help us to have effective meditation is to remember the biblical teaching.⁵⁰ Thus, we come back to the point of memorising the Bible.

Wang Mingdao did not have the mystical sensibility that Nee had in the teaching of Bible reading. He believed that the vast number of Bibles in circulation was sufficient proof that

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 81.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 86-87.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 92-93.

the Bible is inspired and preserved by God.⁵¹ Pragmatically, he asserted that the best reading method for the Bible is simply to read it.⁵² This should be approached in a disciplined or habitual manner: Christians should have a daily Bible reading in the morning, they should pray for themselves to ask the Holy Spirit to come and guide them, they should closely read one whole chapter of the Bible several times, and then they should divide that chapter into paragraphs, find out the themes and memorise them. After becoming familiar with the flow of the chapter, readers should identify the core teachings or truths of that chapter. Finally, the readers should choose several key verses of the chapter to memorise firmly and thoroughly.⁵³ Wang was a stern moralist teacher and emphasized that the Bible is ‘the sword of the Holy Spirit’ that Christians can use it to fight off the temptation of the devil. He lamented that Christians often failed in their moral life because they did not memorise God’s words and discover the appropriate biblical teachings to resist the Devil’s attacks when they are in spiritual struggle.⁵⁴ Accordingly, he picked out the verses from the Union Version Bible and listed them according to categories so that it would be easier for readers to find and memorise the passages that they could use to fight off spiritual temptations.⁵⁵

Thus, one can be aware that though the Chinese Christian leaders considered the Bible as the sole authority of their life, they do not turn the principle of *sola scriptura* into a

⁵¹ Wang, *Why Do I Believe the Bible Is Inspired by God?* (Wo Wei Shen Me Xin Sheng Jing Shi Shen Suo Mo Shi De?), p. 132.

⁵² Mingdao Wang, *What’s in the Bible?* (Sheng Jing Zhong You Shen Me?) (Hong Kong, 1995), p. 12.

⁵³ Wang, *What’s in the Bible?* (Sheng Jing Zhong You Shen Me?), p. 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Ni, *How to Study the Bible; The Breaking of the Outer Man and the Release of the Spirit* (Du Jing Zhi Lu. Ren de Po Sui Yu Ling de Chu Lai), pp. 22-39.

humanistic hermeneutical idea. In Western Christianity, the *sola scriptura* led to the rise of historical critical method, which scholars used to fight against the established religious authority. In Chinese Christianity, the conservative leaders were also very critical to the established religious authority, which was in this case the western missionary enterprise. However, their adherence with *sola scriptura* did not lead them to develop critical biblical hermeneutics, but spiritual practice. For them, reading the Bible is not a self-contained activity; instead, it is a necessary component of a broader spiritual cultivation project. Both Nee and Wang stressed the importance of memorising, meditating, and praying in the course of the bible reading. The practice allowed the Chinese Union Version to become a necessary part of their life. Though both accused the missionaries of betraying the principles of the Reformation, they were nonetheless still under the influence of missionaries through the Chinese Union Version Bible.

The integration of biblical translations and biblical reading as strategy of spiritual cultivation was not limited to China, but appears as a consequence of missionaries engaging with indigenous cultures. Lamin Sanneh observed that biblical translations in African local languages were used as written oracle for spiritual combat. African Christians also referred to the translated Bible, criticising unfaithful practice to the Scriptures of the missionaries.⁵⁶ In China, we find that Chinese conservative Christian leaders transformed the Union Version as the core of spiritual and moral teaching—and also used it to repudiate the missionary establishment.

⁵⁶ Lamin Sanneh, 'Translations of the Bible and the Culture Impulse', in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 4 (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 104-105, 107.

Finally, one should note that the teachings of Nee and Wang were very similar to the three-step practice in the medieval monastic *lectio divina*: monks need to go through reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), and prayer (*oratio*) in their spiritual practice. The *lectio* is an active reading and the words of the Bible are pronounced verbally. The *meditatio* is a memorising practice, which aims to immerse one's body and soul into the sacred text. The *oratio* is the response to the light of the Scripture.⁵⁷ In a deeper sense, it is a practice of 'letting our Divine Friend speak to us through his inspired and inspiring Word'.⁵⁸ The objective and steps of the practice are very similar to the teaching of Wang and Nee. Certainly, Nee and Wang did not draw their teaching from the monastic or Roman Catholic tradition. I suggest that their high respect of biblical authority as life transforming power led them teach a humble, self-empty, and meditating way of reading bible. Evan Howard found that the teaching of bible reading of the Protestant spiritual revival movements in the West from the sixteenth to nineteenth century were a lay recovery of the monastic culture of *lectio divina*.⁵⁹ However, on the other hand, the spirit of *sola scriptura* in the translation projects of the nineteenth century turned the biblical scholarship into historical-critical and textual critical enquires. Though the conservative readers of these translations were benefited by the fruit of the scholarship, they were critical to the achievement and practised *sola scriptura* in a different way. It is possible that Wang and Nee unintentionally went back to the monastic practice as the western revival movements did. In this way, the adoption of the Chinese Union Version Bible reveals an interesting integration of Chinese conservative

⁵⁷ M. Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* (New York, 1998), p. 151; Laura Sterponi, 'Reading and Meditation in the Middle Ages: Lectio Divina and Books of Hours', *Text & Talk*, XXVIII, no. 5 (2008), pp. 671, 673.

⁵⁸ Pennington, *Lectio Divina*, xi.

⁵⁹ Evan Howard, 'Lectio Divina in the Evangelical Tradition', *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, V, no. 1 (2012), pp. 56-77.

Christian faith, missionary enterprise, *sola scriptura* and monastic style of spiritual practice in the Chinese Church.

In short, the Reformation's principle of *sola scriptura* indeed deeply influenced Chinese Christian leaders of the early twentieth century. Also, they viewed the principle as a ground for their opposition to missionaries and western denominations. However, in their teaching of biblical reading, *sola scriptura* did not lead to biblical criticism. The main application was on reading the Bible as a spiritual practice. Because of the spiritual practice, the Mandarin Union Version, though it is a work of the missionaries, received an unparalleled reverence. For memorising and prayer are vital parts of Bible reading in the teaching of Wang and Nee, their practice of *sola scriptura* through Mandarin Union Version Bible converges with the medieval monastic tradition.