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Listening to the Other: Kuang's *Babel*, Postcolonialism, and Bible Translation

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Abstract: Despite its influence in the broader academy, postcolonial thought has had minimal impact on the study of Bible translation. This article examines postcolonialism, drawing out common themes from the contested descriptions of the discipline, and briefly reviews some of the ways postcolonial thought has contributed to Missiology, Biblical Studies, and Translation Studies. It then explores the general lack of interaction between postcolonial criticism and studies of Bible translation and suggests ways that attending to postcolonial critiques could benefit the field. The article concludes with a case study using the history of Thai translations of the Bible to illustrate some of the benefits that could be brought to studies of Bible translation by an increased sensitivity to postcolonial thought.

1 Introduction

One of my favourite recent novels was *Babel, or The Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (Kuang 2022). An overstuffed mixture of dark academia, magical realism, and historical fiction, the novel follows Robin, a boy brought to England from China in the early 1800s. He enters the University of Oxford's Royal Institute of Translation (known as Babel), which uses the magic of translation to fuel the British Empire. Robin and three friends grow close, learn of the destructive nature of imperialism, and eventually decide to act against it. In describing her powerfully told fable about how "translation... served as a tool of empire", Kuang explains that

> when we think about the technologies of empire and colonialism, we usually think of guns and ships. But in what ways has the understanding of knowledge—or the knowledge of languages of

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> people that are in colonized territories—enhanced or exacerbated the brutalities of colonial rule? (Egan 2023:24).

The questions that *Babel* poses are central to the academic field of postcolonialism. Gandhi (2019:177) explains that "ever since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* [in 1978], postcolonialism has had a major impact across disciplines. ... It has also placed imperialism at the heart of modern power—as a technology of harmfulness that calls forth corresponding objections." Despite this claim, postcolonial thought has had minimal impact on the study of Bible translation. This article introduces postcolonialism by exploring some common themes from postcolonial thinkers. It briefly reviews the contribution of postcolonialism to other disciplines and suggests some ways it could sharpen our study of Bible translation. To help ground the discussion, we conclude with a case study examining how postcolonial critique could benefit the study of the history of Thai translations of the Bible.

2 Postcolonialism as a discipline

Postcolonialism emerged in the late twentieth century with key contributions from the "Holy Trinity of colonial-discourse analysis": Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak (Robert Young in Childs and Williams 2014:viii; Sugirtharajah 2001:247–248). Yet, after fifty years, there are few things that writers about postcolonialism agree about. Indeed, even the name of the field remains contested, with various writers preferring *decolonialism*, *anti-colonialism*, or *counter-colonialism* to describe their goals (Hiraide 2021). Even those who have chosen to use the term *postcolonialism* cannot agree on how it should be spelled, with extensive discussion in the literature about "the vexed issue of using or not using the hapless hyphen" (Sugirtharajah 2001:245).[1]

One thing about which postcolonial scholars do agree is that the word is difficult to define, and this "excessive conceptual fuzziness" has been one of the main criticisms of postcolonialism (Buts 2023:270). Some postcolonial scholars embrace the ambiguity and caution against creating too specific a definition, noting that postcolonialism is more of a practice, process, or perspective (Kinyua 2017:61; Sugirtharajah 2012:11, 177).[2] Others attempt to clarify the meaning of

[1] Most authors have opted for the non-hyphenated form. However, some believe that a hyphen changes the meaning of the term: "While the term 'post-colonial' refers to a time period beyond colonialism, 'postcolonial' refers to a discourse that challenges hegemonic modes of knowledge that lend themselves to the colonial enterprise" (Nadella 2021, np).

[2] Young (2003:7) claims that there is such variety in the "practices and ideas" referred to by the term that "there is no single entity called 'postcolonial theory'".

the term, with much of the writing about postcolonial theory consisting of attempts to properly describe and delineate the field.

Wong (2020) helpfully differentiates three ways that the term is employed in scholarly literature: (a) a historical indicator[3]; (b) a word indicating "resistance to the legacy of colonialism" (464); or (c) a way of describing the decolonization of the mind, targeting "the internalised values and thought structures within and among the newly independent national subjects" (465). The second use that Wong mentions is the most common, seeing postcolonialism as a response of protest against the lasting effects of colonization on "individuals, communities, and cultures" (Sugirtharajah 2012:13). Crowell agrees, noting that

> while there is no agreement on a precise definition of postcolonialism, the unifying element for all postcolonial studies is its penetrating critique of colonial expansion and domination, and the lasting effects on the people and institutions subjected to its rule. (2009:219)

One of the main ways that postcolonialism critiques and resists colonialism is through its sensitivity towards power relations, encompassing "explorations, interrogations, and resignifications of unequal relationships in our own times" (Sebastian 2022:349). This sensitivity towards power imbalance is seen especially in postcolonial explorations of translation, which will be discussed below. However, since colonialism is "a relationship of power at the economic, political, and cultural levels" (Kinyua 2017:61), a focus on examining and attempting to counter these relations of power is characteristic of many postcolonial works.

To summarize, while a succinct, universally agreed-upon definition of postcolonialism does not exist, the term generally refers to a response against colonialism characterized by an interest in the ongoing effects of colonization and a sensitivity to the role of power imbalances. It is in this sense that this article will use the term, not primarily as a chronological reference but as a way of describing a stance of resistance and reaction against colonialism (so "anti-colonialism" rather than "after-colonialism").

[3] Usually referring to the period after the withdrawal of colonial rule, although many scholars believe that using the word in this way contributes to the false idea that the effects of colonialism are finished. Others use the term to refer to the period after the start of colonial rule in a place.

3 Postcolonialism and other disciplines

As a critical theory, postcolonialism has significantly influenced the wider academy, with its most notable impact in the field of literary theory.[4] Postcolonialism has also contributed to several disciplines connected with Bible translation, including Missiology, Biblical Studies, and Translation Studies. While not intending to be exhaustive, this section will briefly examine some of the ways postcolonialism has contributed to these fields and point to some of the key writings in each area.

3.1 Missiology

Missiology is one area where postcolonial critiques have often been made. It is commonly observed that Christian mission and colonization have historically been intertwined, although it should be noted that there were a variety of relationships between mission and colonialism (Vähäkangas 2022). Because of the connection between Christianity and colonialism, "Christian mission seen from the perspective of postcolonialism has had to wrestle with the legacy of mission during the colonial period" (Sebastian 2022:348). Indeed, much writing has looked at this relationship between mission and colonialism (e.g., Stanley 1990, Etherington 2005, Robert 2008, and Carey 2011).

Most of these helpfully examine the past, but some works bring the questions of postcolonialism to the contemporary missiological world.[5] Two examples are an edited volume by Longkumer, Sørensen, and Biehl (2016), which examines the concept of power and mission both in historical situations as well as contemporary contexts, and Grau (2011), which proceeds as a "pondering, meditative circumambulation around" (10) many of the key questions and issues. Additionally, Kim et al. (2022) offers several good, accessible introductions (Sebastian 2022; Ahn 2022).

3.2 Biblical criticism

There has also been work in postcolonial biblical criticism, much of it associated with R.S. Sugirtharajah, who notes (2022) that "postcolonial biblical criticism is about which stories get told, who is telling them, against whom they are told, whom to believe, whose interpretations have value and weight, and essentially

[4] There is overlap between postcolonialism's influence on literary theory and on translation studies, which is discussed below.

[5] Included are works such as Stroop (2017), which argue that it is time to leave behind the language of mission.

who is in charge." Sugirtharajah explains that postcolonial Biblical Studies is concerned with (a) "scrutiny of biblical documents for their colonial entanglements" (2001:251); (b) "reconstructive reading of biblical texts… from the perspective of postcolonial concerns" (252); and (c) how to "interrogate both colonial and metropolitan interpretations… to draw attention to the inescapable effects of colonization and colonial ideologies on interpretative works" (255).

This is a growing field with more to be done, but for examples of the range of current work, see Sugirtharajah 2023, which includes three chapters on Bible translation (Israel 2020a; Mbuwayesango 2019; Lee 2019) as well as helpful overviews of the field (Nadella 2021; Sugirtharajah 2022).

3.3 Translation studies

Postcolonial scholars have also significantly contributed to the field of Translation Studies. Spivak, one of the three most influential postcolonial thinkers (along with Said and Bhabha), did much translation as well as writing about translation (see Spivak 2022).[6] Many others have continued to work in this area, with significant contributions from Simon and St-Pierre 2001, Bandia 2003, Bandia 2008, Nadella 2012, Bassnett 2013, and Robinson 2014. Merrill (2012) contains a helpful review of the field and an introduction to postcolonial translation, which Mojola describes as being

> primarily concerned with the links between translation and empire or translation and power, as well as the role of translation in processes of cultural domination and subordination, colonization and decolonization, indoctrination and control, and the problem of hybridization and creolization of cultures and languages. (2017:49–50)

4 Postcolonialism and Bible translation

4.1 Current lack

Given the importance of postcolonial thought for the academy, and the influence of postcolonial critique on Missiology, Biblical Studies, and Translation Studies, one might expect that postcolonialism would be an important voice in the Bible translation movement and in studies of Bible translation. This is especially true

[6] One of Spivak's earliest (and most important) pieces about translation was her preface to Derrida (1976), which she translated. Although his relationship with postcolonial thought is disputed, Derrida is another important voice for Translation Studies who shares many of the concerns of postcolonial scholars.

given the importance of Bible translation in Protestant missions over the last two hundred years, the period in which colonialism was most evident.

There have been calls for those involved in Bible Translation to pay attention to postcolonial thought. In 1996, the journal *Semeia* devoted an issue to "document[ing] what postcolonial criticism might mean for biblical studies" (Donaldson 1996:1), with most of the articles specifically looking at Bible translation. Postcolonial approaches to translation also often receive a brief mention in surveys of contemporary Translation Studies for those involved in Bible translation (e.g., Mojola and Wendland 2002:22–23, Naudé 2002:53–54, Ogden 2002:171–173, Cheung 2013:11–12).

Yet despite this, with rare exceptions, postcolonial criticism has not filtered down into much of the discussion about Bible translation.[7] This relative inattention to postcolonial criticism is unfortunate, for I believe it has much to offer studies of Bible translation, including a realism about the interconnections of translation and colonialism, a sensitivity to power relations, and encouragement towards using translation as resistance. We will look at each of these in turn.[8]

4.2 Bible translation and colonialism

Postcolonial critiques can help studies of Bible translation look realistically at the process and effects of translation. Israel (2011:10) notes that Bible translation is often written about in ways that present "universally positive and enabling effects of Bible translation on receiving cultures", which is not the whole truth.

Israel specifically calls out the work of Sanneh in this context.[9] Sanneh discusses "mission and colonialism" in chapter four of his important work on translation (Sanneh 2009), where he argues that "Protestant missions in their translation work made mother tongues the centerpiece of mission" (162), which "empowered mother-tongue speakers" (163), which "was instrumental in the emergence of indigenous resistance to colonialism" (161). This argument has been influential and has helped nuance some common critiques of missionary translators. However, several postcolonial writers dispute Sanneh's

[7] It is tempting to speculate about the reasons for this. The relative insularity of the Bible translation world from both Translation Studies and Biblical Studies could well be a contributing factor, as could the strongly anti-evangelical tone of some postcolonial writing.

[8] The purpose of this article is not to argue that postcolonialism is correct in every way and should be accepted uncritically, but rather that it should be listened to thoughtfully and openly.

[9] She also mentions Philip Stine and William Smalley by name.

interpretation and criticize his overly optimistic portrayal of the effects of translation, his assumption of the intrinsic inferiority of vernacular languages, and his unquestioned use of Western views of translation (Mbuwayesango 2019:502; Israel 2020a:478; Israel 2020b:453; Nyirenda 2023:30).

Other writers have started to document some of the negative and disabling effects of Bible translation in particular cultures (e.g., Dube 1999). Part of the realism about the negative aspects of Bible translation involves exploring how translations—of all kinds, including translations of the Bible—during the colonial period frequently functioned as "an instrument in establishing colonial systems and structures" (Bassnett 2013:349). Translation was often associated "with political issues of domination and submission, assimilation and resistance" (Robinson 2014:50), and ended up being "an expression of the cultural power of the colonizer" (Simon and St-Pierre 2001:10). The connection of translation with cultural power, and the ways that translation was used to establish and support colonialism, has not always been acknowledged in studies of Bible translation. A realism about this is one of the ways that postcolonialism might sharpen studies of Bible translation.

Postcolonialism would push the conversation further, however. The claim is not just that historical translations happened to be connected with colonialism, but that translation is never "ideologically neutral" (Israel 2023:11) or a "pure, value-free activity" (Kinyua 2017:90). It is always "a political act with both immediate and long-term repercussions" (Israel 2020a, np).[10] Because of the necessarily value-laden nature of translation, "it is therefore essential that any conversation about translations look into the questions of who the translators are, what their agenda is, what means they have employed, and to what effect" (Nadella 2012:53). It is generally acknowledged that Bible translators make their translations purposefully, with the intention (or the hope) that people will convert to Christianity through the translations they do (Tong 2016:27). Some postcolonial critiques of Bible translation see this as an inappropriate goal and reject any attempts to change people's culture (e.g., Mbuwayesango 2020:64). However, even for those who accept the evangelistic goal of Bible translation, the effect of this "agenda" (on the translation and the culture) is seldom explored. An exploration of the purposes of the translators, and how their purposes overlap with colonization, is one of the ways that postcolonialism can improve studies of Bible translation.

[10] This is increasingly acknowledged by those involved in Bible translation. Strauss (2015a; 2015b) has a good discussion of how ideology necessarily impacts translation, and shows how this applies to debates about inclusive language translations of the Bible.

4.3 Power relations in Bible translation

One reason given by postcolonialism for why translation (of all kinds) is never an ethically neutral, "innocent, transparent activity" is because "it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems" (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999:2). Postcolonialism's sensitivity to "the unequal power relations between cultures and hence between languages" (Bassnett 2013:350) challenges "the assumption that [any] translation can take place on a horizontal axis, with source and target languages occupying equal positions of status" (Bassnett 2013:343).[11] Because of the asymmetrical power relationship involved in translation, it is always unequal, whereby "the hegemonic culture exerts its influence and ideology over the weaker counterpart" (Tong 2016:36).[12]

Dube (2017:xxii) highlights that "the Bible has been widely translated over a wide space, time and under unequal power relations and across various cultures", and Israel (2011:11) makes it clear that Bible translation is not exempt from the "asymmetries that lie behind all acts of translation". Israel further explains that it is incorrect to assume that "translating scripture somehow elevates the activity [of translation] above the murky waters of cultural hegemonies where differences may be established and preserved through translation" (2011:11). Postcolonialism urges us to take these power struggles seriously (Dube 2017:xxi), considering how "all translations are re/writings of the original text and that translators are writers, who are always driven by purpose, patrons, publishers, context, politics, ideologies, cultures, among other various factors, on the kind of re/writings they make" (xvii).[13] Dube then utters what could be a summary of postcolonial critiques of translation: "the power factor is central" (xvii).

As Robinson summarizes (2014:56), postcolonialism "encourages us to think about translation in terms of a power struggle: it is not a simple technical process for achieving equivalence but a conflict or contest". This idea of translation as a power struggle is not often seen in studies of Bible translation, although some critiques of Bible translation use the language of violence to describe the

[11] In their introduction to *Translation and Power*, Gentzler and Tymoczko give a good overview of how questions of power have been "brought to the fore in discussions of both translation history and strategies for translation" (2002:xvi).

[12] It should be noted that power and status are not static, simple dichotomies but involve gradations and intersections that are constantly shifting.

[13] As Dube's quote indicates, the postcolonial emphasis on power invites Bible translation scholars to look at how the power of institutions (such as Bible Societies) has influenced the translation process (see Israel 2020b:452 for further discussion of this, and Mak 2017, chapter 2; Tong 2016:32, chapter 5, 250; and Israel 2011:68 for examples).

interaction between cultures.[14] A recent good example of paying attention to the power dimension in translation is Nyirenda (2023:68; cf. 76, 174–175), who notes the "practical exclusions of direct input" by Africans in nineteenth-century Bible translations into Efik and ChiChewa.[15] Nyirenda follows up this historical discussion with a final chapter examining how epistemological hegemony still plays a role in Bible translation in Africa, concluding that "the current scenario is still weighted in favour of the agency of non-Africans" (165), due to the "power relationships in a Bible translation project" (170).[16]

4.4 Bible translation as resistance

Postcolonialism's focus on the effects of translation also invites us to consider responses to translation work. Israel writes:

> While missionary translations were undertaken within the framework of colonial dominance, the faith communities were not mere passive victims but showed various forms of resistance and resilience in their challenging of missionary ethics. (2020b:450)

This invites us to explore how "the colonized always resist and restructure the 'transformation' or 'interpellation' in more or less unpredictable and uncontrollable ways" (Robinson 2014:82). Postcolonialism suggests that resistance should be part of what is considered when studies of Bible translation consider the reception of a translation.

Indeed, postcolonialism invites people to "reclaim translation and use it as a strategy of resistance, one that disturbs and displaces the construction of images of non-Western cultures rather than reinterpret them using traditional, normalized concepts and language" (Gentzler, quoted in Cheung 2013:12). In this context, Dube (2017:xxiv) advocates "savage" readings of the Bible, the practice of using African "languages and concepts" which "are inevitably rewriting the biblical text and giving it a new meaning." While most of Dube's examples of savage readings are local interpretations of the text, it is not hard to see how "savage" translations of the Bible are another implication of the postcolonial emphasis on resistance.

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[14] For example, Carroll (1996:52) sees Bible translation as being involved in the "subjugation of or encroachment on other cultures," and discusses violence done in the Bible, to the Bible, and by the Bible, with the last two connected to translation work.

[15] Cf. Makutoane's discussion (2022) of the effect of power and politics on the orthography of Sesotho.

[16] Hemphill's (2022) suggestions about Bible translation training informed by the idea of decolonization is a good companion piece to Nyirenda's final chapter and is similarly sensitive to power relations.

4.5 Textual choices

Being honest about the negative results of Bible translation (as well as the positive), interrogating the power relations in Bible translation, and being curious about resistance to Bible translations are all ways that those who attend to postcolonial critique can better study the translation of the Bible. But these are mainly matters about the process of translation or the results of it. Does postcolonial critique have anything to offer as we study the text that has been translated? What would a postcolonial critique of the product of a translation project look like?

Given that ideology necessarily influences translation, it is natural to ask how translations done in colonial times or settings might reflect colonial ideology.[17] I am not aware of many studies that do this, but Naudé's examination (2001:121) of how different translations of the Bible into Afrikaans "encouraged the justification of apartheid" is a helpful model.[18]

5 Postcolonialism and Thai Bible translation

After our brief exploration of the field of postcolonialism and our general discussion of some possible contributions it could make to studies of Bible translation, it might be helpful to give a concrete example of some of the insights that postcolonial theories could offer a study of Bible translation in a specific context. In this section I will suggest some ways that postcolonial concerns could complexify the study of the history of Bible translation into Thai. This is not meant to be an in-depth critique of Thai Bible translation from a postcolonial angle, but I hope that this general discussion can hint at how listening well to postcolonial critique might benefit studies of Bible translation (even in countries that were never officially colonies of the Western powers).

[17] Similar to Strauss's (2015b) investigation of how ideology is reflected in the choices made by English translators about gendered language.

[18] Makutoane and Naudé (2009:87) also look at the use of foreign linguistic words and phrases in two translations of the Bible in Southern Sotho, but it should be noted that though they call these "colonial interferences", *colonial* does not have the negative connotations of oppression that it usually does. In fact, these colonial interferences are "to be understood in a positive sense because during the translation of the Bible in Southern Sotho, these interferences became part of the culture and language of the prospective audience, i.e., the translated text is indigenized."

5.1 Thai translation and colonialism

Bible translation into the Thai language (or Siamese, as it was called before 1939) started even before the first Protestant missionaries arrived in the country, with Ann Hasseltine Judson translating the gospel of Matthew between 1816 and 1819 for Siamese prisoners of war in Burma. After the first resident Protestant missionaries arrived in Siam in 1828, they continued translation efforts, finishing the New Testament in 1843, and the complete Bible by 1883. This translation underwent significant revisions in 1940, 1971, and 2011. The 2011 revision is now known as the Thai Standard Version, and in recent years alternate translations have been made, including the Easy-to-Read Version (2001), the Thai New Contemporary Version (2007), the Thai Catholic Bible (2014), and the New Thai Version (2022).[19]

Thailand prides itself on being the only Southeast Asian country that was never colonized by a Western nation (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014:77). Because of this, postcolonialism may not seem to have anything to say about Bible translation in Thailand. Yet while Thailand was never colonized by a Western power, it was deeply influenced by colonialism in the region (Osborne 2021:64, 90; Jackson 2010:38, 40; Jackson 2007:329, 331). Indeed, many scholars use words like semi-colonial, "'indirect rule', 'informal empire', 'cultural imperialism', 'internal colonialism' ... 'auto-colonialism', and 'crypto-colonialism'" (Jackson 2007:332) to describe Thailand in the modern era. Moreover, neo-colonialism has profoundly impacted Thailand, with US cultural and economic influence particularly evident (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014:139). In addition, the postcolonial emphasis on power relations offers a helpful lens through which to examine Biblical translation, even in areas that were not officially colonized.

A postcolonial perspective on Bible translation in Thailand would want to examine how issues of colonialism and translation interacted in the country. The colonial context of Thailand includes the colonization of Thailand's neighbours, so a postcolonial study of Bible translation in Thailand might ask if the fact that Thailand was caught between the imperial ambitions of Britain (in Burma/Myanmar) and France (in Cambodia and Laos) helps explain the prominence of American translators of the Bible in Thailand (Rush 2018:65; Baker and Phongpaichit 2014:77).

Postcolonial scholars would also consider the political allegiances of those involved in translation and would question how American missionary activity in politics might have influenced their work or the reception of that work. As one example of missionary involvement in politics, Stephen Mattoon worked on early Siamese translations of the Bible but also served as the American Consul in Siam

[19] A helpful summary of the history of Thai translations is given by Lorgunpai (2019).

from 1856–1869, taking part in translating treaty negotiations between Siam and Britain (Mattoon 1928:27–33; Wells 1958:26). Postcolonial sensitivities would suggest that Mattoon's role in colonial institutions would have influenced both his translation work and how people responded to this work. Even without as explicit a political role as Mattoon's, American missionaries were representatives of Western culture, and this needs to be investigated for a fuller understanding of Bible translation in Thailand.

5.2 Power relations in Thai translation

Postcolonial authors would also advise researchers to take a close look at power dynamics in the process of translation. One power dynamic that has received recent attention is the work (and lack of recognition of the work) of local translators.[20] The work of local translators (or "helpers") was often minimized; many of their names were never recorded (Noss and Houser 2019:121). While some note of local translators has been made in Thailand (McFarland 1928:3, 307; Krahl 2005:49, 58, 65), a postcolonial focus on unequal power relations suggests that this issue should be considered more seriously.

This is not just a historical issue. While the current board of the Thailand Bible Society (fourteen men, one woman) are all Thai (https://thai.bible/tbs/คณะกรรมการอำนวยการ/), Thai translators took leadership positions surprisingly late.[21] The 1940 and 1971 revision committees of the Thai Bible were both led by missionaries, and it was not until the 1970s that a Thai person became the Executive Secretary of the Bible Society (สมาคมพระคริสตธรรมไทย [Thailand Bible Society] 1988:133).

As can be seen by the current board makeup, power dynamics and gender is also a topic that should be explored regarding the Thai translation. Women have been involved in mission work in Thailand from the beginning and, as was mentioned above, a woman (Ann Hasseltine Judson) was the first Protestant to translate a portion of Scripture into Siamese. Yet women are underrepresented in the history of Thai translations, which is usually told as a story about white men translating the Scripture for the Thai people. There are some tantalizing

[20] Discussions of the work of local translators in different Asian contexts include China (Zetzsche 1999:91, 260–261; Eber 1999:161; Lutz 2008:53; Peng 2021:79–82; Yeo 2021, chapter 10), South Asia (Israel 2011:65), and Japan (Murayama 2007:228).

[21] Given the work of the Thailand Bible Society with minority language groups and the number of Christians in Thailand from ethnic minority groups, I would expect that the board of the Thailand Bible Society would reflect that, although it does not appear that way from their website. This would be another issue of social power that could be investigated.

hints about the unacknowledged work done by women behind the scenes. Eliza Grew Jones produced a Siamese-English dictionary and mentioned that she had translated two books of the Old Testament into Siamese, but this is seldom acknowledged, even by those who mention the work of her husband (J.T. Jones) in translating the New Testament (Trakulhun 2013:1222). One newer translation project on which the main translator was a woman has all the publicity materials produced by her husband, and the translation is sometimes known by his name (see Crow 1999:93–94 for his cultural justification for being the spokesperson for the translation). Postcolonial study of Bible translation would want to look at the power dynamics of gender that have been involved in both the Thai translation work and the study of that work.[22]

The role of institutional power is also something that postcolonialism highlights, and so the influence of key institutions for Bible translation in Thailand should be considered. These organizations include the American Bible Society (active in Thailand since 1850), the Thailand Bible Society (which formed out of the "American Bible Society in Thailand" around 1958), and the Church of Christ in Thailand (a union of churches in 1934).

5.3 Thai translation as resistance

A sensitivity to postcolonial critiques of Bible translation would also invite an investigation of ways in which Thai people have used Bible translation as a form of resistance to missionary (or colonial) theology, ethics, or practice. A survey of new Bible translations by Thai people could be made to examine whether translation is being used as a strategy of resistance to the foreignness of Christianity. While many of the new translation projects have extensive foreign involvement (and many are led by foreigners), it might be interesting to compare new projects under Thai leadership with projects under foreign leadership.[23] Despite the prominent leadership of Gerry Crow, the New Thai Translation might be an interesting study, given its consciously stated opposition to the traditional translation (Crow 1999:3, 200).[24]

[22] For a similar feminist critique of Bible translation in Africa, see Mbuwayesango 2020:57.

[23] I suspect the influence of the Thai Standard Version (which was revised by a mostly Thai translation team in 2011 but has its roots in missionary translations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) is pervasive, even on newer translations.

[24] Another possibility for comparison is the Thai New Buddhist Translation of the New Testament available online at https://tnbt.godat.work, which was translated by Banpote Wetchgama (บรรพต เวชกามา).

5.4 Textual choices

Finally, an investigation of the text of the Thai Bible which has been informed by postcolonial concerns would be interested in the translation choices made over time and how those might reflect the ideology of the translators. While many specific lexical choices could be looked at (e.g., the language used for slavery), we could also consider how postcolonial concerns might facilitate discussion about one of the most notable (and debated) aspects of Bible translation in Thailand, namely that of the use of Royal Language.

Thai Royal Language is a register of language consisting of distinct vocabulary and special affixes which signal the importance of the one being spoken about (Smalley 1994:55–60; Doty 2007:274–275). In Thailand, Royal Language is used for deities, monks, and royalty, and in the Thai Standard Version of the Bible, it is used when speaking of God and Jesus. Critics claim that the use of Royal Language makes the Bible less understandable (Smalley 1994:57; Crow 1999:29; Doty 2007:173–174, 180; Krahl 2005:44), or that it can make Jesus (and/or God) seem distant (Smalley 1994:65; Crow 1999:22).[25] In addition to investigating these questions, postcolonial critics would suggest looking at how the use of Royal Language reinforces social structures of power, and whether the changing use of Royal Language in the Thai Bible demonstrates changing attitudes towards social status.[26]

6 Conclusion

The subtitle of Kuang's novel (*On the Necessity of Violence*) implies a perspective on resistance to colonial power that is expressed near the end of the book by one of the characters (Kuang 2022:432): "Power did not lie in the tip of a pen. … Power could only be brought to heel by acts of defiance it could not ignore. With brute, unflinching force. With violence." Many postcolonial scholars would agree that the appropriate response to colonialism goes beyond the merely academic and

[25] In his comprehension testing of Thai Bible translations, Doty did not find that Royal Language was "a significant impediment to understanding the Thai Bible" (2007:180; cf. 274–275).

[26] I am unaware of any research into these questions. Crow hints at them (see 1999:22–23, 29), although he does not come from an explicitly postcolonial perspective. It should be mentioned that "colonialism" does not just refer to colonialism by a Western Power, and postcolonialism is not just interested in White abuses of power.

involves encouraging active resistance to the impact of colonialism in the world.[27]

And yet this call to violent resistance is not the univocal testimony of Kuang's book. Her last chapter gives the final word to a character who, understanding how translation has been implicated in abusive imperial power, rides off to continue to struggle against the dehumanizing, destructive effects of colonialism in less violent ways—with "ingenuity, persistence, and sacrifice" (2022:541). Postcolonialism's invitation to studies of Bible translation is to do the same—to notice the many ways that translation has been used to reinforce colonialism, to honestly face the ongoing effects of that colonialism and the legacy of power imbalance in Bible translation, and then to continue to actively work against it. In this article, I have tried to help us do this by listening to some of the common themes discussed by postcolonial thinkers, considering how they might impact the study of Bible translation, and illustrating this in the specific context of Bible translation in Thailand.

[27] In the introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Activism*, Gould and Tahmasebian (2020:2–3) identify four paradigms for translational activism, one of which is that of the revolutionary. Buts describes strikes, boycotts, and sabotage in his discussion of activist approaches to translation (2023:274–275).

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