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## CHINA'S LINGUISTIC FRONTIERS

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## Kitwe

View towards the City of Kitwe, Zambia. Source: Mike Rosenberg, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

# Learning Mandarin, Interpreting Chinese Characters: An African Christian Exegesis

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*Since 2010, Jehovah's Witness Christians in Zambia have been intensively studying spoken and written Mandarin, establishing new Mandarin-language congregations, and evangelising Chinese migrants. To make their faith more relatable to the migrants they seek to convert, Witnesses demonstrate the biblical origins of the Chinese writing system and the way that biblical stories are encoded in the structure of hanzi. In doing so, Witnesses engage in translating acts of transcreation that reconfigure their relations with Chinese migrants—not necessarily converting them to Christianity but fostering new friendships and mutual cultural appreciation, as well as an anti-xenophobic, anti-nationalist political orientation.*

**O**ne early May evening, I was picked up from my home in one of the 'compounds' (working-class neighbourhoods) of Kombela, a city in central Zambia, by Robin, a member of one of the city's growing number of Mandarin-language Jehovah's Witness congregations. Robin drove me to his middle-class home on the outskirts of the city to join his family as a guest for their weekly family worship session—a time that is employed by Witnesses to strengthen their devotion to Jehovah God in preparation for the Great Tribulation to come.

Joining the family worship were Robin's wife, Miriam, their two daughters, Agness (seven years old) and Grace (five), and a man named Jonah, who, like me, was a 20-something bachelor in the congregation not related to Robin or Miriam through ties of kinship. It was typical for younger, single members of the congregation like me and Jonah to be invited to family worship sessions such as this one hosted by Robin and Miriam, since we did not otherwise have any family in Kombela with whom to share family worship.

## Growing Mandarin-Language Congregations

The congregation Robin's family, Jonah, and I all attended was part of a growing number of Mandarin-language Witness congregations across Zambia. The first Mandarin-language congregations in the country were founded about 2010 by Witnesses when

the Chinese migrant community in the country began to rapidly expand, blossoming from almost nothing in the late 1990s to several tens of thousands, concentrated in urban centres and mining regions. Responding to this expanding community, the global Jehovah's Witness organisation, headquartered in Warwick, New York, sought several volunteers from Witness congregations in various East Asian countries, such as South Korea and Japan, who were already fluent in Mandarin to move to Zambia and begin training Witnesses there.

By the time I began attending the Mandarin-language congregation in Kombela eight years later, this Mandarin-language instruction among Witnesses was already well established, with Zambian Witnesses such as Jonah now fluent enough in spoken and written Chinese to instruct others. At least some of the original South Korean and Japanese Witnesses still lived in Zambia at this time, though most had moved on from Kombela to other regions to assist with the establishment of new Mandarin-language congregations.

## Learning Mandarin through Church

Among the congregation that Robin's family, Jonah, and I attended, there was a range of Mandarin-language proficiency. Jonah, for example, was widely recognised as one of the most capable speakers of Chinese, able to complete challenging linguistic tasks such as simultaneous translation of complex liturgical speeches from English into Mandarin. In other contexts of contemporary interaction between Chinese migrants and local Zambians, it is more typical for a pidgin language—known as 'Shortcut English' at Chinese-operated mines in southern Zambia (Haruyama 2023)—to be used as a medium of communication rather than standard English or Mandarin.

This pidgin tends to have little vocabulary related to religion since it is most often employed in contexts of work and intimate relationships (Haruyama 2024). The evangelical and liturgical registers of Mandarin employed by Witnesses, by contrast, are strongly influenced by formal standards of written Chinese as Witnesses engage in close exegetical interpretation of standard Mandarin translations of the Bible. These registers are also employed, with varying degrees of fluency, in everyday communication with Chinese migrants as Witnesses work to strike up friendships that may provide an avenue to sharing biblical truths.

Though different in age and family status, Robin, Miriam, and Jonah were alike in that (like almost all other members of the congregation) they were Zambians who had begun learning Mandarin as a second (or third, or fourth) language in adulthood. They were also all baptised publishers and pioneers, which are official designations among the Witnesses indicating that they have both fully accepted The Truth of Witness teachings ('The Truth' being an official term Witnesses use to describe their religion) and taken their evangelising responsibilities seriously—a minimum of 70 hours a month

witnessing to those outside the faith. My own relationship within the congregation was quite different as I was one of the very few non-Zambian participants in its regular meetings and my official status was that of a ‘Bible student’: someone who was learning about Witness understandings of biblical truths but had not necessarily accepted all Witness teachings.

Robin and Miriam, both about 40 years old, were part of the founding cohort of Witnesses who had established the Mandarin-language congregation in Kombela six years previously. Jonah, who was 25, had begun learning Mandarin as a teenager when he joined a Mandarin-language congregation with his parents and siblings in Kitwe, a city in northwestern Zambia.

## Relations with Chinese Migrants

After a dinner prepared by Miriam that included braised chicken, *nsima* (Zambian polenta), boiled potatoes, and *chibwabwa* (pumpkin leaves) sauteed with tomato and onion, Robin led us all in a prayer that specially thanked Jehovah for bringing Jonah and myself to join the worship and beseeching His assistance in guiding me in my understanding of the Bible. We then began about a half-hour discussion of religious topics from the Bible before Robin brought out a large printer from a side room and placed it in the middle of the living room floor.

Apparently, Robin had previously asked for Jonah’s assistance in printing out a number of *hanzi* (汉字, Chinese logographic character) flashcards, as Robin wished to improve his comprehension of written Chinese alongside his comprehension of spoken Mandarin. Jonah was widely admired in the congregation for the fluency he had developed in both spoken and written Chinese, and he was often asked by other congregation members for guidance in developing language study strategies such as this.

As we waited for the flashcards to print and Agness and Grace played on the floor, Robin asked me about my own experience of living for several years in mainland China, since no-one else present had ever been there. Robin described some of his experiences interacting with Chinese migrants in Zambia. Even after he had spent years trying to master Mandarin and learn about Chinese culture, some Chinese people would still react with suspicion when he tried to speak Chinese and, on at least one notable occasion, chased him and other congregation members away with large mastiff hounds when they attempted to do a home visit. Robin asked whether in my experience people in China were more ‘open’ than those who had come to Zambia.

I told Robin that, in broad brush strokes, I thought people in China were generally less open to being approached by strangers on the street or at their homes. Furthermore, most people I knew in China had relatively little experience with direct religious evangelisation and with Christianity in particular, in part because of the Chinese Government’s official atheism and hostility to this kind of person-to-person proselytisation.

## The Biblical Origins of *Hanzi*

As I was saying this, Jonah turned from managing the printing of *hanzi* flashcards to concur with me that one of the major impediments to sharing the Truth with Chinese migrants in Zambia was they had very little experience with Christianity and thought of it as a religion solely originating from Europe. Jonah noted that they were often very surprised to learn that Christianity came from the Middle East, and he further observed that by highlighting the connections between Chinese history and the stories found in the Bible, Christianity could become more relatable to Chinese migrants.

As demonstration of this, Jonah began teaching Robin and I about how the ways in which *hanzi* are meaningfully constructed from smaller constituent parts are in fact direct references to biblical events. For example, the Chinese character 想 (*xiang*), which has various meanings but one of the main ones of which is ‘to desire’, comprises the elements 木 (*mu*, ‘tree’), 目 (*mu*, ‘eye’), and 心 (*xin*, ‘heart’). Jonah pointed out that this is a direct reference to the story of Eve desiring the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3:6, which reads: ‘Consequently, the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was something desirable to the eyes, yes, the tree was pleasing to look at. So she began taking of its fruit and eating it.’

Similarly, Jonah pointed out how the character 船 (*chuan*), meaning ‘ship’, comprises the elements 舟 (*zhou*, ‘boat’), 八 (*ba*, ‘eight’), and 口 (*kou*, ‘people’ or ‘mouth’). Jonah demonstrated how this character is a reference to the story of Noah and his family, cited in 1 Peter 3:20, which reads, in part: ‘[I]n Noah’s day, while the ark was being constructed, in which a few people, that is, eight souls, were carried safely through the water.’

As a final demonstration, Jonah showed us the character 狂 (*kuang*), meaning ‘crazy’, which he pointed out comprises two components. The first is 犴 (*quan*), which I recognised as ‘dog’, but Jonah told me it meant ‘beast’, and 王 (*wang*), which we all agreed meant ‘king’. Jonah explained that the character 狂 was a reference to the madness that overtook King Nebuchadnezzar late in his reign, as recounted in Daniel 4:31–33:

While the word was yet in the king’s mouth, a voice came down from the heavens: ‘To you it is being said, O King Neb-u-chad-nez’zar, “The kingdom has gone away from you, and from mankind you are being driven away. With the beasts of the field your dwelling will be, and you will be given vegetation to eat just like bulls, and seven times will pass over you, until you know that the Most High is Ruler in the kingdom of mankind and that he grants it to whomever he wants”.’ At that moment the word was fulfilled on Neb-u-chad-nez’zar. He was driven away from mankind, and he began to eat vegetation just like bulls, and his body became wet with the dew of the heavens, until his hair grew long just like eagles’ feathers and his nails were like birds’ claws.

When I asked Jonah how Chinese people usually reacted when he provided these demonstrations of the biblical origins of Chinese written characters, he explained to us:

Most Chinese are fascinated. Actually, they didn't know that these characters have a reference to the Bible. They think maybe their culture has nothing to do with the Bible. They're fascinated to see that they have some background of the Bible in their culture ... All cultures have similar stories about the Bible. All these stories were actually handed down orally before the Bible was written.

## Sharing Promises with Those of Little Religious Background

Mandarin-speaking Witnesses such as Jonah, Miriam, Robin, and their daughters are exceptional in the Zambian context. Except for a handful of students at the University of Zambia's Confucius Institute (some of whom are themselves young Witnesses seeking to polish their Mandarin skills), I never encountered any other community of Zambians pursuing proficiency in Chinese in my years of ethnographic research. Nor among the many other Zambian Christians with whom I conducted participant observation, including among Seventh-Day Adventists and Pentecostal congregations, did I ever encounter another group of Christians who consistently attempted to evangelise the growing number of Chinese migrants in the country.

Despite their efforts to master Mandarin and to learn about Chinese culture, congregants of the Kombela Mandarin-language Witness congregation were not noticeably successful in convincing Chinese migrants to adopt Witness teachings or to begin attending Witness religious meetings. During the main period of my fieldwork with the Kombela congregation from 2017 to 2019—about eight years after the congregation had been founded—there were at most one or two ethnic Chinese attendees at any given meeting, in a total congregation of about 50 people.

Nevertheless, members of the congregation emphasised to me that the importance of their actions lay in their following Jesus's footsteps: sharing the promises Jehovah God made to humanity, as recorded in the Bible, with 'people of all the nations', including those with little religious background such as those from China. Whether or not any individual Chinese migrants chose to heed these promises was up to them and not directly relevant, in this account, to the obligation of Witnesses to ensure that the good news of these promises was universally shared.

## Translating Acts

Media attention to the growing impact of Chinese migration and investment in Zambia as well as across the African continent has often focused on antagonistic relationships between Chinese managers and African labourers. In conversations with a wide diversity of Zambians as part of my ethnographic research, many expressed a significant level of xenophobic resentment of Chinese in general or at least specific Chinese cultural practices. In some (non-Witness) Zambian church meetings I attended near Chinese-run work sites, for example, congregants would discuss issues of literal Chinese soullessness and the impossibility of Chinese people ever being represented in Heaven.

By contrast, Jonah, Miriam, Robin, and other members of Kombela's Mandarin-language congregation forge very different kinds of relations with Chinese migrants through their innovative practices of mastering Mandarin and incorporating it into biblical exegesis. By reinterpreting *hanzi* in terms of biblical stories, for example, Jonah engaged in a process that involved translation not only of words but also of ontological worlds (Hanks and Severi 2014). As Carlos Fausto and Emmanuel de Vienne (2014) note with respect to other examples of innovative cross-linguistic reworking of Christian forms, this kind of translating act of 'transcreation' operates not only as a semantic or conceptual manoeuvre. It also produces transformations in the practical situation of encounter between Zambian Witnesses and (mostly avowedly non-religious) Chinese migrants.

Only some of these transformations are the explicit aim of the translating act. Though Jonah intended his exegetical interpretation of *hanzi* primarily as a means of making biblical Truth comprehensible and relatable to Chinese migrants, few of the migrants reached by Jonah or other congregation members' witnessing were influenced enough by this Truth to begin regular attendance of Witness meetings. Jonah's translating acts had some effect on the practical situation of evangelisation—as Jonah related and as I confirmed in my conversations with migrants, these biblical stories of *hanzi* were impressive to them—but the effect was not necessarily a great one.

The transformations in the social situation that were very great and noticeable within the context of Zambian society were the friendships and amicability struck up between Zambian Witnesses and (some) Chinese migrants, despite the lack of significant religious conversion. Though during the period of my research few Chinese migrants began regular attendance of Witness religious meetings, many did attend monthly Witness social gatherings, which included an evangelisation component.



## Domesticating Chinese Involvement

Extensive scholarly attention has been paid to how the cross-linguistic dynamics of Christianity were dispersed in various contexts of European colonialism, in Africa and elsewhere. The example of the Kombela Mandarin-language Witness congregation demonstrates how cultural and social forms that were once spread through the expansion of European colonialism are now being deployed by some Zambians to ‘domesticate’ and incorporate controversial Chinese involvement in their country into their own religious world-making projects. ●