


## Article

# How to Speak in Tongues: A Historical–Contextual Reading of Paul’s Use of $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha$ /方言 in 1 Corinthians 12–14 from a Multilingual Diasporic Chinese Christian Church Context

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**Abstract:** From its inception, Chinese Christianity has involved speaking in “tongues”, across cultures, about the person and work of Jesus Christ. This article presents a contextual original-language exegesis of the Apostle Paul’s use of the word  $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha$  (*glōssa*) or 方言 (*fangyan*) in 1 Corinthians 12–14 and seeks to understand this contested lexeme in light of the multilingual reality of both the “diasporic” Christian church in first-century Corinth and the diasporic Chinese Christian church today. It is argued that understanding Paul’s instructions regarding  $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha$ /方言 within the context of a multilingual Christian worship culture strengthens the definition of  $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha$  as languages used and understood among inhabitants of first-century Corinth. This reading, while not rejecting the possibility of an “angelic language” (*tianshide huayu* 天使的话语), may offer a more fruitful application for those who shape and participate in the multilingual worship culture of the diasporic Chinese Christian church today.

**Keywords:** Corinthians; tongues; charismata/spiritual gifts; multilingualism; overseas Chinese church; Pentecostalism; Bible translation



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## 1. Introduction

“Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ πάντων ὑμῶν μᾶλλον γλώσσαις λαλῶ...”<sup>1</sup>

“我感谢神，我说方言比你们众人还多...”<sup>2</sup> (1 Corinthians 14:18)

What did the Apostle Paul mean exactly when saying to Christians in Corinth: “I give thanks to God that I speak in *fangyan* (方言) more than you all”?

Debates regarding Chinese Christian terminology are as old as the task of Bible translation in China, with no example more prominent than the “Term Question” (i.e., what Chinese term most suitably expressed “God”). Irene Eber recounts how the “term question”, first raised by Catholic missionaries in the seventeenth century, began as a linguistic or theological issue but eventually sparked a global discussion among missionaries, theologians, and Bible societies both in China and from sending churches in Europe and America (Eber 1999, p. 135). At stake when a Christian addressed “God” as *shangdi* (上帝) or *shen* (神) was not just a stylistic preference, but “whether Chinese were monotheists, polytheists or pantheists; whether there was the belief in Creation; whether the Chinese had the “idea of God”; what exactly was the nature and content of Chinese religion”, and more (Eber 1999, p. 135).

This paper presumes that exploring the *fangyan* question—what precisely should be meant by this biblical term—also has an important role to play in shaping Chinese Christianity today. By engaging with both the biblical text and its Chinese translation, I will argue that understanding Paul’s instructions regarding  $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha$ /方言 within the context of a multilingual Christian worship culture strengthens the definition of  $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha$  as languages used and understood among inhabitants of first century Corinth, and may offer more fruitful and relevant application to religious communities like it today (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Members of the Chinese Union Version Mandarin Subcommittee in 1906. From left to right: Frederick W. Baller (鲍康宁 Bao Kangning), Liu Dacheng (刘大成), Chauncey Goodrich (富善 Shan Fu), Zhang Xixin (张洗心), Calvin Wilson Mateer (狄考文 Di Kaowen), Wang Yuande (王元德), Spencer Lewis (鹿依士 Lu Yishi), and Li Chunfan (李春蕃). (Photo in public domain and cited in (Zetzsche 1999, p. 264)).

Early Protestant attempts to translate the Koine Greek term *glōssa* (γλῶσσα) into Chinese vary from the Lassar–Marshman 1822 rendering of *yiyan* (异言, “foreign speech”),<sup>3</sup> to the 1840 Taiping edition’s *yi Yin* (异音, “foreign sound”),<sup>4</sup> with the Delegates Version (first published in 1852) being the most specific with *zhuguofangyan* 诸国方言 or *geguode xiangtan* 各国的乡谈 (“as the languages or vernacular of “each” or “every nation”).<sup>5</sup> The translators of the Mandarin Chinese Union Version (henceforth CUV)<sup>6</sup>, who first presented the New Testament in 1907, settled with the term *fangyan* to render *glōssa*.<sup>7</sup> Providentially, 1907 was also the same year that Pentecostal missionaries influenced by the Azusa Street revival first arrived in Hong Kong (Wesley 2004, pp. 54–57). While scholars disagree to what extent Pentecostalism permeates the Chinese church today in theology and practice (Wesley 2004, pp. 227–28), what is plain from history is that the introduction of *fangyan* as a Chinese Christian term occurred concurrently with the introduction of Pentecostalism to China. Accordingly, while outside the church, the debates concerning *fangyan* typically center around the linguistic, political, and other factors that determine what is a “local language” or “dialect” in contrast to “national forms” of Chinese language and literature (Liu 2016, p. 217),<sup>8</sup> within the church, Chinese Christians have always read *fangyan* in light of and in conversation with Pentecostalism’s theological distinctive of speaking in “tongues” as a visible sign of the Holy Spirit.

Concerning the continuation or cessation of *fangyan*, Christians are typically presented with one of two positions. Either *fangyan* refers to verbal utterances in a spiritual tongue unintelligible to humans, or **glossolalia**, or *fangyan* refers to “the ability to speak in unlearned human languages”, or **xenoglossia** (Carson 1987, p. 79). In an attempt to accommodate both fundamentalist and Pentecostal or Charismatic perspectives, a statement of faith produced in 1998 by several Chinese house churches declared: “We don’t forbid speaking in tongues (*fangyan*), neither do we force people to speak in tongues (*fangyan*), or insist that speaking in tongues (*fangyan*) is the evidence of salvation” (China for Jesus 1998).<sup>9</sup> In each case, what seems implicitly understood by *fangyan* is glossolalia (after all, it seems unnecessary for a statement of faith to forbid or insist on xenoglossia).

The story of Chinese Christianity, however, cannot be isolated to the church within China. Discussions over the semantics of *glōssa/fangyan* take on an additional dimension when one considers the diasporic and multilingual nature of Chinese peoples since the

introduction of Christianity. A repeated refrain in recent diaspora studies is the linguistic changes experienced by successive generations of overseas Chinese. Diachronically, Alexander Chow has traced the history of the migration of Chinese to the British Isles in order to explain the emergence of English-speaking ministries among British–Chinese Christians who draw from “a multiplicity of languages, cultures, and socioeconomic orientations” (Chow 2021, pp. 15, 18). When Samuel Law observes the Chinese diaspora church today, he notes that the vast majority of present-day diasporic Chinese churches with at least two generations will worship in multiple languages: “Many Chinese churches in Singapore have both Mandarin and English services as well as Teochew, Cantonese, and Hokkien services if they have significant dialect populations. Many Chinese churches in Brazil have Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Portuguese services. Chinese churches in Italy have services in Mandarin and Italian.” (Law 2022, p. 159). In these and many other contexts, the discussion of what “tongue”, language, or culture should be utilised and prioritised permeates every facet of church life. Therefore, a pressing need for many diasporic Chinese Christian communities who worship in mutually unintelligible “tongues” is a contextually informed understanding and practice of what “speaking in tongues” should entail.

Returning to the context of 1 Corinthians, a relevant but less-discussed aspect of first-century Roman Corinth was the presence of a highly multilingual environment due to its geographic, commercial, political, and religious importance within the Greco-Roman world (Witherington 1995, pp. 5–19). This is recognised across the theological spectrum: Fee describes “the phenomenon of different languages” as commonplace in Corinth (Fee 1987, p. 664), while Robertson and Plummer set the scene for a typical inhabitant as follows: “All kinds of languages met at commercial Corinth with its harbors on two seas, and difference of language was a frequent barrier to common action” (Robertson and Plummer 1914, p. 310). More recently, Ekaputra Tupamahu’s analysis of inscriptions found in the Mediterranean region surrounding first-century Roman Corinth provides further material evidence of the multilingualism present among Paul’s original readers (Tupamahu 2023, pp. 48–84). Rather than a church full of Koine Greek speakers, Andrew Spurgeon suggests readers “imagine that Corinth would have been a polylinguistic culture... in such a context, multilinguists and translators would have been highly valued, especially when, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they were enabled to speak in languages previously unknown to them” (Spurgeon 2016, p. 238).

Assuming that the Christians in first-century Corinth sought to evangelise their faith without favouring a single ethnicity (see Acts 18:4), it is appropriate to view Paul as the founding pastor of one of the earliest multilingual diasporic Christian communities. As a “pastor and a task theologian” (Witherington 1995, p. 39), Paul’s Corinthian correspondence sought to address specific needs and problems among them—including the conflicts that emerge from a multilingual diasporic community. Accordingly, 1 Corinthians carries contextual significance for overseas and diaspora Chinese Christians today who are included in Paul’s instructions to “all those everywhere who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ...” (1 Cor. 1:2).

In order to adequately address our initial question, we will proceed to present a contextual historical reading of 1 Corinthians 12–14 in three languages (primarily biblical Greek, Mandarin Chinese, and English). Doing so will also necessitate traversing “between three worlds”: translation, reception, and application.<sup>10</sup> Firstly, in presenting an original-language exegesis of the Apostle Paul’s use of the word *glōssa/fangyan* in 1 Corinthians 12–14, I hope to prioritise the original text and reframe our understanding of *fangyan* within the sociolinguistic context of the first Christian community known to have practised this gift. Secondly, in translating the Mandarin CUV, I hope to expose some of the translation decisions that impact a Chinese Christian’s understanding of the same passages. Finally, in presenting examples of the reception of *fangyan* within diasporic Chinese Christian contexts, I hope to demonstrate how the gift of *glōssa/fangyan* (and its interpretation) can be more fruitfully understood and used today.<sup>11</sup>



## 2. Paul's Use of γλῶσσα/方言 in 1 Corinthians 12

What were Paul's instructions to the first-century church of Corinth concerning their gift of *glōssa/fangyan*? To allow room for historical and practical reflections, the following exegetical survey from the biblical Greek and the Mandarin CUV is restricted to my own translation and brief commentary of each appearance of the lexeme in the following passages: 1 Cor. 12:10, 28–30, 13:1, 13:8, 14:1–27, and 14:39.<sup>12</sup> Given our interest in Chinese Christianity, I will initially avoid using an English gloss by denoting the biblical lexeme as *glōssa/fangyan* and include a back-translation of the CUV for comparison.

UBS: ἄλλω δὲ ἐνεργήματα δυνάμεων, ἄλλω [δὲ] προφητεία, ἄλλω [δὲ] διακρίσεις πνευμάτων, ἕτέρω γένη γλωσσῶν, ἄλλω δὲ ἔρμηνεία γλωσσῶν. (“But to another [she/he is given] works of power, to another prophecy, to another discernment of spirits, to another kinds of *glōssa*, and to another interpretation of *glōssa*.”).

CUV: 又叫一人能行异能, 又叫一人能作先知, 又叫一人能辨别诸灵, 又叫一人能说方言, 又叫一人能翻方言。 (“[The Holy Spirit] also calls a person to be able to do works of power, also calls a person to be able to work prophecy, also calls a person to be able to distinguish spirits, also calls a person to be able to speak *fangyan*, [and] also calls a person to be able to translate *fangyan*”). (1 Cor. 12:10)

Paul's first uses of *glōssa* in 1 Corinthians form part of a list of grace gifts that the Holy Spirit reveals and distributes to Christian believers for the “common good” (12:7). To some, different kinds (or literally, “families”) of *glōssa/fangyan* are given, while to others, there is the interpretation of *glōssa/fangyan*. Notwithstanding the other spiritual gifts like healing (12:9) and works of power (12:10), three things can be observed about the gift of *glōssa/fangyan* here. Firstly, it is a grace gift the Spirit has given to some and not to others. Secondly, as Max Turner has highlighted, one must consider the meaning of the verb *hermeneia* (ἔρμηνεία) or *fanfangyan* (翻方言) in conjunction with speaking *glōssa/shuofangyan* (说方言) (Turner 1985, pp. 18–19). In addition, the use of *glōssa* in the plural indicates that Paul had multiple kinds “of tongues” in view. In summary, Paul introduces multiple *fangyan* as a gift spoken by certain believers in Corinth, which required translation or interpretation by another sister or brother in Corinth with the gift of *fanfangyan*.

[28] καὶ οὗς μὲν ἔθετο ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρῶτον ἀποστόλους, δεύτερον προφήτας, τρίτον διδασκάλους, ἔπειτα δυνάμεις, ἔπειτα χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων, ἀντιλήψεις, κυβερνήσεις, γένη γλωσσῶν... [30] μὴ πάντες χαρίσματα ἔχουσιν ἰαμάτων; μὴ πάντες γλώσσαις λαλοῦσιν; μὴ πάντες διερμηνεύουσιν; (“28 And indeed God has appointed within the church firstly apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers; then miracles, then grace-gifts of healing, helpful deeds, governance, families of *glōssa*... 30 Does everyone have grace-gifts of healing? Does everyone speak in *glōssa*? Does everyone interpret?”).

28 神在教会所设立的：第一是使徒，第二是先知，第三是教师，其次是行异能的，再次是得恩赐医病的，帮助人的，治理事的，说方言的... 30 岂都是得恩赐医病的么？岂都是说方言的么？岂都是翻方言的么？ (God in his church has established: firstly apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers; then the doing of miracles, then grace-gifts of healing, helping people, administration, speaking in *fangyan*... 30 does everyone have grace-gifts of healing? Does everyone speak in *fangyan*? Does everyone interpret *fangyan*?) (1 Cor. 12:28, 30)

Paul precedes verse 28 with an extended “parable of the human body” (Bailey 2011, 325) in order to exhort Corinthian Christians towards unity in diversity rather than division and puffery (1 Cor. 12:12–27). To emphasise his point, he then states three spiritual functions (e.g., apostles, prophets, and teachers) and then notes a number of gifts, including “families” of *glōssa/fangyan*. Regarding 1 Cor. 12:28, Gordon Fee notes that here, as in 1 Cor 12:10, Paul seems to have intentionally listed *glōssa/fangyan* last, despite it being a gift of utterance (Fee 1987, p. 622). This is followed by a series of rhetorical questions

(1 Cor. 12:29), including the following three: "...Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in *glōssafangyan*? Do all interpret?" (1 Cor. 12:30). The point is that no one Christian is supremely gifted and every "member" of the body of Christ is needed. Accordingly, *glōssafangyan* is not highly ranked but instead listed alongside other "grace-gifts" (*enci*, 恩賜).

Here and in 1 Cor. 12:10, Paul's use of *gēnē glōssōn* (γέννη γλωσσῶν) adds a familial dimension that could also be expressed as varieties of *xianghua* (乡话) or "local vernaculars". However, the CUV translation committee has obscured this detail here and in 1 Cor. 12:28 by under-translating *gēnē glōssōn* as *shuofangyan* ("to speak in tongues"). Nevertheless, what remains in view is a gift of conveying various *glōssafangyan* which some members of the church in Corinth possessed. Accordingly, in order to derive explicit biblical warrant, discussions about the gift of "tongues" ought to consider that the original language seems to suggest it can be categorised in some way.

### 3. Paul's Use of γλωσσᾶ/方言 in 1 Corinthians 13

Ἐὰν ταῖς γλώσσαις τῶν ἀνθρώπων λαλῶ καὶ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, γέγονα χαλκὸς ἤχων ἢ κύμβαλον ἀλαλάζον. ("If in the *glōssa* of people I speak—even of angels—but love I do not have, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal").

我若能说万人的方言，并天使的话语，却没有爱，我就成了鸣的锣，响的钹一般。 ("Suppose I could speak ten thousand people's *fangyan*—even the language of angels—but do not have love, I have become a gong, like a ringing cymbal"). (1 Cor. 13:1)

After proposing to show readers a "most excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31), Paul begins the well-known "love" chapter by seemingly citing his own knowledge and use of a *glōssa* "of angels" (*tōn angēlōn*, τῶν ἀγγέλων). Pentecostal and Charismatic interpreters find this verse to support the practice of glossolalia or "communicating in the dialect(s) of heaven" (Fee 1987, 630), while others have suggested Paul had in mind a specific human language considered to be spoken by angels in rabbinic tradition, such as Hebrew.<sup>13</sup>

The first observation to make is that, here, Paul is describing his ability to speak in *glōssa* hypothetically ("If...") for the sake of a broader argument that, for the Christian, the greatest virtue of love should be pursued over and above boasting in one's gifts (1 Cor. 13:1–13). If at the time of writing Paul had not actually fathomed all mysteries and knowledge (1 Cor. 13:2) or had given all he possessed to the poor (1 Cor. 13:3), it stands to reason that he was not necessarily confirming in this verse an actual ability to speak in a myriad of *glōssa* (whether human or angelic).

Secondly, the CUV translation makes explicit a hyperbolic interpretation of Paul's *glōssa* in 1 Cor. 13:1 by inserting the idiomatic phrase 万人的 ("of ten thousand people", or "myriads of"), which is not explicitly stated in the Greek text.

Then, when stating *kai tōn angēlōn* ("and of angels"), instead of restating *fangyan*, the translators selected the Chinese term *huayu* (话语), which more explicitly means "language" or "discourse". For the Chinese reader, the translation of *tianshidehuayu* (天使的话语) concretises the idea of an angelic language as a distinct concept, while concurrently emphasising that Paul is speaking hyperbolically about his own multilingual abilities in this verse.

8 Ἡ ἀγάπη οὐδέποτε πίπτει· εἴτε δὲ προφητεῖαι, καταργηθήσονται· εἴτε γλώσσαι, παύσονται· εἴτε γνώσις, καταργηθήσεται. 9 ἐκ μέρους γὰρ γινώσκομεν καὶ ἐκ μέρους προφητεύομεν· 10 ὅταν δὲ ἔλθῃ τὸ τέλειον, τὸ ἐκ μέρους καταργηθήσεται. (8 "Love never fails; but as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for *glōssa*, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For in part we know and in part we prophesy; 10 but when the completion comes, what is in part will pass away").

8 爱是永不止息。先知讲道之能终必归于无有；说方言之能终必停止；知识也终必归于无有。9 我们现在所知道的有限，先知所讲的也有限；10 等那完全的来到，

这有限的必归于无有了。 (“Love is forever unailing; but prophetic preaching will pass away; speaking in fangyan will cease; knowledge also will pass away. What we currently know is limited, what prophets say is also limited, but once the completion arrives, what is limited will pass away”). (1 Cor. 13:8–10)

This passage indicates a future reality where speaking in *glōssal/fangyan* will cease (*tingzhi*, 停止). While some understand these verses to be Paul’s definitive claim of the cessation of tongues and other *charismata*,<sup>14</sup> for the original readers, what seems more likely from the context is the “coming” of the resurrected Christ that Paul later describes in 1 Corinthians 15:23–24: “...when he comes, those who belong to him [will be made alive]. Then the end (*tēlos*) will come...”<sup>15</sup> In addition, the CUV translators’ choice in 1 Cor. 13:10 of *tēlos* as “completion” (*wanquan*, 完全) rather than “perfection” (*wanmei*, 完美) may further shape the Chinese readers’ understanding of the end that Paul describes. Contra an explicitly cessationist view are the authors of the China for Jesus statement of faith, who “...deny any doctrine that teaches the cessation of signs and wonders or the termination of the gifts of the Holy Spirit after the age of the apostles”.<sup>16</sup>

Our contextual reading means that the various *glōssal/fangyan*, already present in the Corinthian church alongside prophecies and knowledge, were expected to be present in the life of the church until the return of Christ. It is with this *tēlos* in view that Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians of the transient nature of their grace gifts compared with the permanence of virtues like faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13) and therefore that they should “pursue love” (1 Cor. 14:1) in their gathered worship.

#### 4. Paul’s Use of γλωσσά/方言 in 1 Corinthians 14

##### 4.1. Textual Observations from 1 Cor. 14:1–27

So far in 1 Corinthians 12–13, Paul has described *glōssal/fangyan* as: (1) a speaking gift Christians in Corinth were given; (2) a gift that can be interpreted for the benefit of the church body; and (3) a gift that continues until the return of Christ. With fifteen occurrences of the lexeme *glōssa* in 1 Corinthians 14, we now come to the most comprehensive biblical text instructing Christians how to (and not to) speak *fangyan* in the life of the gathered church.

To understand Paul’s argument properly, we will first consider the text of 1 Corinthians 14:1–27 as a whole. In his examination of the *glōssal/fangyan* in 1 Corinthians 14, Bob Zerhusen suggests that three questions emerge upon viewing the phenomena of Corinthian *glōssal/fangyan* along these parameters: (1) whether the *glōssal/fangyan* was a known or unknown language; (2) whether it was a language of humans or angels; and (3) whether the speaker knew or understood the *glōssal/fangyan* they were speaking (Zerhusen 1997, pp. 140–41).

While similarly adopting his method of drawing observations directly from the biblical text (Zerhusen 1997, p. 140), I will group them under three slightly different headings:

1. What was the nature of *glōssal/fangyan*?
2. How did Paul himself practice *glōssal/fangyan*?
3. How did Paul instruct the church in Corinth to properly practice *glōssal/fangyan*?

Firstly, regarding the nature of *glōssal/fangyan* itself, we learn that:

1. The *glōssal/fangyan* in Corinth was primarily spoken not to other people but to God (1 Cor. 14:2).
2. The *glōssal/fangyan* could not be understood (literally *akouō* “to hear”), but “with their spirit they utter mysteries” (1 Cor. 14:2).
3. While prophecy in Corinth could strengthen, encourage, comfort, and edify the church (1 Cor. 14:3–4), the one speaking *glōssal/fangyan* primarily edified himself (1 Cor. 14:4).
4. At times, a speaker could interpret one’s own *glōssal/fangyan* (1 Cor. 14:13).
5. In other cases, a speaker required a brother or sister to interpret their *glōssal/fangyan* (1 Cor. 14:28).

6. Without interpretation, *glōssalfangyan* in the context of the “whole church gathering” risked alienating visitors who were unlearned or unbelievers, who might conclude the Corinthians were “mad” (1 Cor. 14:20–23).

Secondly, regarding Paul’s own use of *glōssalfangyan*, we are also told that:

1. While Paul “would like everyone to speak in *glōssalfangyan*”, unless it is interpreted, his preference is for the greater gift of prophecy<sup>17</sup> (1 Cor. 14:5).
2. If Paul spoke solely in his *glōssalfangyan*, it was no benefit to brothers and sisters without additional intelligible words of revelation, knowledge, or prophecy or a word of instruction (1 Cor. 14:6).
3. When Paul himself speaks in *glōssalfangyan*, his spirit is engaged in prayer while his mind is “unfruitful” (1 Cor. 14:14).
4. Accordingly, Paul instructs the church to pray and sing in the spirit (i.e., in *glōssalfangyan*) but with understanding (*nous*, “mind” or “cognition”), so that outsiders can assent to their thanksgiving and be “built up” (1 Cor. 14:15–17).
5. While Paul freely speaks in *glōssalfangyan* (plural) more than most outside of church settings, in the church, he prefers five intelligible words with his “mind” (*nous*) than myriads of words in a *glōssalfangyan* (singular) in order to teach (literally, “catechise”) others (1 Cor. 14:18–19).

While Charismatic and Pentecostal interpreters are quick to read in these autobiographical statements biblical proof of Paul’s ability to utter a spiritual language, what is less discussed<sup>18</sup> but plain from New Testament biographical accounts is his multilingual upbringing and his demonstrated ability to communicate the Christian message in various human languages. In Acts 22:3, Paul introduces himself (speaking in Aramaic) as “a Jew, born in Tarsus” (a Greek-speaking city within the first-century Roman empire) and recounts his Jewish education under Gamaliel in Jerusalem that involved being “thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors” (conveyed via scrolls written either in Hebrew or Koine Greek). After his post-conversion ministry, Paul became proficient enough linguistically to reason in the Jewish synagogue of Athens with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks (Acts 17:17) and present a speech before well-educated Greek-speaking philosophers (Acts 17:18–31) that included quotations from their poets (Acts 17:28). His biographer Luke even specifically observes first-hand how Paul effortlessly changes languages (or “code-switches”) by addressing his Roman captors in Koine Greek (Acts 21:37) before addressing his Jewish opponents in Aramaic (Acts 22:2).<sup>19</sup> Even within 1 Corinthians, Paul calls upon Jesus in Greek (*Kurios*) and Aramaic (*Mar*) in the same sentence (1 Cor. 16:22). Kenneth Bailey makes a prescient cross-cultural observation: “Throughout his writings Paul managed nobly to express the deep things of God in the Greek language, yet in this text he (with his Jewish background) used his heart language to cry out...” (Bailey 2011, 497).

Like many diasporic Chinese Christians today therefore, Paul was able to give thanks for the ability to speak in multiple *fangyan* (1 Cor. 14:18). Yet out of love, he lays aside his multilingual abilities in order to write to the Corinthians in their common vernacular of Koine Greek.<sup>20</sup>

To conclude, Paul offers the Corinthians the following counsel when they gathered together:

1. Let everything (including the use of a *glōssalfangyan*) be done for building up (1 Cor. 14:26);
2. If someone speaks in a particular *glōssalfangyan* (singular, not plural), this should be limited to two or three “in turn” with interpretation (1 Cor. 14:27–28);
3. If no interpretation is possible in the gathering, the brother or sister may direct their *glōssalfangyan* directly to God while remaining silent in church (1 Cor. 14:28).

At first glance, our survey of *glōssalfangyan* in 1 Corinthians 14 above appears to fit comfortably with descriptions of human languages that required translation into the language(s) that were mutually intelligible in order to edify the church. However, at times, Paul’s description of *glōssalfangyan* seems to support a private, spiritual language spoken



to God and not people (1 Cor. 14:2), where his spirit is engaged but his mind is dissociated or “unfruitful” (1 Cor. 14:14). What other explanation other than the Pentecostal and Charismatic practice of non-cognitive, spiritual practice of glossolalia would adequately explain these facts? To date, there does not seem to be an answer that both coheres with 1 Corinthians 12–14 and matches contemporary church practice.

In the second half of the 20th century, the discipline of linguistics produced numerous field studies of glossolalia speakers. Summarising this research, Don Carson notes that “there is universal agreement among linguists who have taped and analyzed thousands of examples of modern tongues-speaking that the contemporary phenomenon is *not* any human language” and that what is actually practiced among Pentecostal and Charismatic circles is by and large “verbalizations” rather than authentic, lexically communicative languages (Carson 1987, pp. 83–84). Responding to the argument that these examples of glossolalia, while bearing little correspondence to the biblical descriptions in 1 Corinthians, nevertheless appear to result in more good than harm, he observes: “I cannot think of a better way of displeasing both sides of the current debate” (Carson 1987, p. 84).<sup>21</sup>

At risk of further displeasing readers of both Charismatic and non-Charismatic convictions, I would like to demonstrate how reading 1 Corinthians 12–14 from a multilingual diasporic Chinese Christian church context offers a possible solution to the vexed issue of *glōssa/fangyan*. To do this, we shall return to consider the translation of 1 Cor. 14:2 and 14:14.

#### 4.2. A Multilingual Diasporic Reading of 1 Cor. 14:2 and 14:14

ὁ γὰρ λαλῶν γλώσση οὐκ ἀνθρώποις λαλεῖ ἀλλὰ θεῷ· οὐδεὶς γὰρ ἀκούει, πνεύματι δὲ λαλεῖ μυστήρια· (“For the one speaking in a *glōssa/fangyan* speaks not to people but to God; for no one hears [them], but in the spirit he is speaking mysteries”).

那说方言的，原不是对人说，乃是对神说，因为没有人听出来。然而，他在心灵里却是讲说各样的奥秘。（“The one who speaks in a *glōssa/fangyan*,<sup>22</sup> speaks not to people, but rather speaks to God, because no one hears [them]. Rather he, in the spirit, is actually speaking various kinds of mysteries”). (1 Cor. 14:2)

How does one speak mysteries in the spirit if *glōssa/fangyan* are human languages? Firstly, it is worth noting that by translating *pnēumati* as *xinling* (心灵, “psyche”) rather than *linghun* (灵魂, “soul”), the CUV shifts the semantic of 1 Cor. 14:2 slightly towards speaking to God from the “heart” (*xin*) and not solely the (S)pirit. While Charismatics and Pentecostals are quick to pursue this “heart”-felt communication with God through the practice of glossolalia, the idea of communicating in one’s “heart language” (*xindeyuyan*, 心的语言) also features prominently in the context of linguistics and Bible translation. For example, a new enquirer or convert from a different cultural and linguistic background to their evangelist may initially participate in Christian worship that is foreign to them, while simultaneously using their own heart language to speak to God until their ability to speak to people grows.

Secondly, when reading Paul’s description, the use of recent sociolinguistic terms to describe the observed worship experience of diaspora Chinese Christians offers additional lenses to further nuance the nature of speaking in *glōssa/fangyan*. Hatcher and Son describe a growing realisation and need among Bible translators “to move beyond the Western idea of [a single] preferred language toward a more nuanced conceptualization of preferred language(s)” (Hatcher and Son 2022). For example, in many diaspora Chinese churches within a “triplex structure”,<sup>23</sup> it is common for members to enjoy singing hymns and worship songs in multiple languages (e.g., in Mandarin, Cantonese, and English), sometimes within the same service. Conversations before and after the formal worship service are “try-lingual”,<sup>24</sup> where members freely and playfully switch between the three languages understood by one another to various degrees of competency. However, for those unable to participate in this kind of manner (e.g., non-Chinese visitors, children without sufficient grasp of their parents’ *fangyan*, or vice versa), this kind of worship appears to them as alto-



gether mysterious—precisely as described in 1 Cor. 14:2!<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the sociolinguistic concept of translanguaging (McSwan 2017, pp. 167–68) could potentially be what Paul has in mind when recounting the various kinds of *mystēria* being spoken by the worshipping community in Corinth. To Christians adept at translanguaging, their experience of speaking in multiple *glōssafangyan* is less of a second spiritual blessing, and more of a lifelong reality as they communicate with their “full linguistic repertoire” (Hatcher and Son 2022, p. 124).

ἐὰν [γὰρ] προσεύχωμαι γλώσση, τὸ πνεῦμά μου προσεύχεται, ὁ δὲ νοῦς μου ἄκαρπός ἐστιν. (“[For] if I am praying in a *glōssafangyan*, my spirit is praying, but my mind is unfruitful”).

我若用方言祷告，是我的灵祷告，但我的悟性没有果效。（“If I use *glōssafangyan* [in] prayer, it is my spirit praying, but my understanding has no fruit”). (1 Cor. 14:14)

In this verse, Paul states the reason why a person who speaks in a *glōssafangyan* ought to pray for the ability to interpret their speech (1 Cor. 14:13) by noting how if he prayed in a *glōssafangyan*, he would introduce a disconnect between his praying “spirit” (*pnēuma*) and his mind (*nous*), thus being unfruitful. Is there a multilingually informed explanation for Paul’s phenomenon beyond of the Charismatic or Pentecostal concept of “praying in the spirit”? Perhaps so.

Diglossia describes the circumstance where two (or more) distinct language varieties are used within the same speech community. Within this framework, linguists typically differentiate languages between high (H) varieties used in formal domains such as education and worship and low (L) varieties used primarily in informal communication such as home, school, and work domains. For example, Sayahi observed how in the Maltese Islands, the use of Latin was preserved as a liturgical language of worship (H) while Maltese eventually grew to become the national vernacular (L) (Sayahi 2014, p. 223). A common experience among diaspora Chinese Christians is the realisation that, although they may have heard or read from the Bible many times, it was not until it was communicated or translated into a language they were more intimately acquainted with, such as a “mother tongue” (*mu yu*, 母语) or “heart language”, that they genuinely understood what was spoken.

Nevertheless, although diaspora Chinese Christians are often unable to cognitively grasp what is occurring in the less-familiar tongue, they are sometimes still able to engage with Christian worship at a sub-cognitive, spiritual level. Consider the following anecdotal example: an English-speaking member of my diaspora Chinese church grew up listening to her Christian parents singing “*Cyun Yan Wai Nei*” (全因为你)<sup>26</sup>. Despite it being a popular Cantonese worship song, it was not until encountering an English translation as a Christian adult (from the written Chinese) that she finally understood what was meant. In this case, her mind was “unfruitful” like in 1 Cor. 14:14, even though it was possible to be spiritually refreshed by singing in her parents’ mother tongue. In this way, Paul’s critiques of *glōssafangyan* could be reasonably applied to the kinds of xenoglossia that naturally emerge from a multilingual diasporic context.

Similarly, Eli is a six-year-old growing up in a Christian household with English-speaking parents and Cantonese-speaking grandparents. At mealtimes, he has recently learned how to say a simple prayer with flawless Cantonese intonation.<sup>27</sup> He also admits (in English) that “he doesn’t understand what he’s just prayed”. There is an initial “unfruitfulness” to his prayer that is nevertheless spiritually edifying to his family as well as to himself once it is interpreted.

## 5. Towards Reception and Application of γλωσσα/方言 in Today’s Diasporic Chinese Christian Church

The rapid growth of Pentecostalism in the twentieth century, “the most successful social movement of the past century” (Jenkins 2002, p. 8), occurred alongside the growth of the Chinese independent church and its developing theological systems and worship

expressions. As Pan Zhao has articulated, the “spiritual theology” of Watchman Nee, his “Little Flock” movement, and two well-known independent church movements of China (the True Jesus Church and the Jesus Family) are all indelibly connected to the global Pentecostal movement (Zhao 2023, pp. 1–3). Accordingly, discussions surrounding the grace (or spiritual) gift of *glōssa/fangyan* among Chinese Christians must interface respectfully with three Pentecostal convictions: the book of Acts as prescriptive for contemporary Christian life and ministry; baptism of the Holy Spirit as a separate post-conversion experience; and glossolalia as a sign of this baptism.

This paper suggests that reading the *glōssa/fangyan* described in 1 Corinthians from a multilingual context, while not precluding the possibility of angelic languages, offers far more direct application for Christians living among the global Chinese diaspora when read as known languages. With clearer access to the translation choices behind the CUV and its impacts and the recent developments in sociolinguistics, perhaps it is possible to move forward with an understanding of 1 Corinthians 12–14 that coheres with the past while offering more fruitful application for present and future challenges within the diaspora Chinese Christian church context. Three tentative suggestions are offered below.

Firstly, understanding the gift of “tongues” from a diglossic framework has practical application for diaspora churches today, particularly those with first- and second-generation immigrants. For example, in most Chinese church contexts, it remains commonplace for the Mandarin CUV translation (now over 100 years old) to be preferred in readings, prayers, and liturgy (H), even if the preaching and singing are conducted in an entirely different vernacular (L) such as Cantonese, present-day Mandarin, or English. This compartmentalisation of *fangyan* in the multilingual church is rarely noticed or discussed. However, when an H variety is used in worship without being adequately translated into an L variety of language, then there becomes the danger of being simultaneously spiritually engaged in prayer that is cognitively unfruitful, as Paul describes in 1 Cor. 14:14. Multilingual and multigenerational Chinese churches in particular should prioritise and pray for Spirit-empowered wisdom, seeking ways to translate and retranslate for each other so that everyone is edified when meeting together.

Secondly, understanding *glōssa/fangyan* with a multilingual Corinthian lens may also help to reshape the Chinese church’s global missions strategy. Despite ongoing opposition, today there are “myriads” of Chinese missionaries retracing either the ancient Silk Road or today’s Belt and Road in order to fulfil the Christian “Great Commission” (Matthew 28:19–20). Might they benefit from a greater understanding and desire for the grace gift of xenoglossia? After all, even within China, there remains a pressing need for Mandarin-speaking churches to consider the linguistic needs of the millions of “minority” people groups whose “dreams and visions” are shaped through myriads of *fangyan* found throughout the country. Returning to a “missionary-expansion” understanding of the term (e.g., Tupamahu 2023, p. 13) may serve the needs of these overlooked ethnolinguistic groups.

Finally, the practical reflections from Paul’s instructions need not be limited to multilingual worship contexts in Chinese churches. In many Western countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the USA, there is a growing awareness and practice of incorporating the language and culture of indigenous or “first nations” people into the life of the church. While speaking in indigenous *glōssa/fangyan* adds richness and diversity to Christian worship, Paul’s advice as a multilingual practitioner himself is that this ought to be conducted with sensitivity to those of different linguistic abilities and an attitude of love.

In conclusion, a careful reading of 1 Corinthians 12–14 with the diasporic church—both in Corinth and among the Chinese—offers a contextually relevant understanding of how to “speak in tongues”. To paraphrase Paul’s words, the multicultural diaspora church should not forbid speaking in *glōssa/fangyan* during gathered worship yet strive for all things to be done with “beauty and order” (1 Cor. 14:39–40) in service of mutual edification. While the directions and contexts of heeding these instructions will continue to

evolve, Chinese Christianity has and will always involve diasporic people who speak in foreign “tongues”, across cultures, about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, biblical Greek quotations are from the UBS Greek New Testament 5th revised edition (UBS5), 2014 (United Bible Societies 2014).
- <sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise specified, Chinese translations of Bible terms are from the Mandarin Chinese Union Version (CUV), 1919.
- <sup>3</sup> A digital version is available at: <https://www.bible.com/versions/2295-%E5%A7%94%E8%BE%A6%E8%AD%AF%E6%9C%AC-%E6%96%87%E7%90%86%E5%A7%94%E8%BE%A6%E8%AD%AF%E6%9C%AC> (accessed on 28 November 2023). I am grateful to Simon Wong (United Bible Societies Global Translation Advisor) for drawing this and bringing the following translations to my attention.
- <sup>4</sup> See the Taiping Version 1840, p. 202. A scanned copy is available at: <https://bible.fhl.net/ob/nob.html?book=19> (accessed on 28 November 2023).
- <sup>5</sup> A digital version is available at: <https://www.bible.com/versions/2323-%E9%A6%AC%E6%AE%8A%E6%9B%BC%E6%8B%89%E6%92%92%E6%96%87%E7%90%86%E8%AD%AF%E6%9C%AC-%E9%A6%AC%E6%AE%8A%E6%9B%BC%E6%8B%89%E6%92%92%E6%96%87%E7%90%86%E6%96%B0%E8%88%8A%E7%B4%84%E5%85%A8%E6%9B%B8> (accessed on 28 November 2023).
- <sup>6</sup> While three Chinese Union translation projects were planned—two in *wenli* (文理) or Chinese literary style—it was the vernacular Mandarin Chinese Union version completed in 1919 that is still in use today and referred to as the CUV.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert Menzies, in *The Language of the Spirit: Interpreting and Translating Charismatic Terms* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2010), argues that the CUV translators chose *fangyan* due to a “rationalistic bias” (38) and a Calvinistic or Reformed presupposition of “speaking in other languages”. He restricts his argument to Acts 2:4, however, and does not consider Paul’s use of *fangyan* from 1 Corinthians 12–14 specifically.
- <sup>8</sup> To be specific, there are ongoing debates on whether a language, dialect, or vernacular spoken by people in a particular part of China or Chinese diasporic community—such as Hakka, Miao, or Cantonese—constitutes a *fangyan* or a *yuyan* (语言). As Jin Liu avers, “The Chinese language has never been a monolithic entity. A mosaic of diverse, distinct *fangyan*... local languages, dialects, or topolects, is subsumed under this single name.” (Liu 2016, p. 217).
- <sup>9</sup> In Chinese: “我们不禁止说方言，也不勉强人说方言，或强调说方言是得救的凭据。” (China for Jesus 1998, Article 5). The English translation is available here: <http://www.chinaforjesus.com/StatementOfFaith.htm>. The Chinese version is available at: [http://www.chinaforjesus.com/StatementOfFaith\\_Ch.htm](http://www.chinaforjesus.com/StatementOfFaith_Ch.htm). (Both versions accessed on 28 November 2023).
- <sup>10</sup> This is adapted from the three categories of understanding the Bible in modern China (“translation, literary and intellectual reception, and appropriation”), proposed by Irene Eber 1999, 15.
- <sup>11</sup> Given this aim, some of the examples given from the diasporic Chinese church will necessarily draw from anecdotal and personal experience, including my own as an English-speaking minister in a diasporic Chinese church. This qualitative approach coheres with Paul’s own practice as a task theologian, including the use of personal examples to address the Corinthian church’s specific issues (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:1).
- <sup>12</sup> The term *glōssa* is also used in the context of Spirit-inspired utterances in the book of Acts 2:3–4, 11, 10:46, 19:6. See (Menzies 2010; Zerhusen 1995) for a representative Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal interpretation of these occurrences, respectively.
- <sup>13</sup> See, for example, discussions in the Talmud concerning whether the Torah ought to be recited in the “sacred tongue” of Hebrew or any other language and whether angels were familiar with Aramaic or other vernaculars (Sotah 33a (Talmud and Davidson 2012)).

- 14 The classic argument for cessationism is outlined in Benjamin (Warfield 1918), *The Cessation of the Charismata, Counterfeit Miracles*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, pp. 1–32.
- 15 For the cessationist argument of *tēlos* as “the perfect” in 1 Cor. 13:10 see Gaffin, Richard B. Jnr. 1979. *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 109–112.
- 16 In Chinese: “我们否认使徒时代后神迹奇事及圣灵恩赐终止论。” (China for Jesus 1998, Article 5).
- 17 The CUV translates the Greek term here, *prophēteuēte* (προφητεύετε, “that you may prophesy”), as *zuo xianzhi jiangdao* (作先知讲道). See also 1 Cor. 14:39. However, the use of the term *jiangdao* (讲道) among Chinese Christians today almost exclusively refers to the act of preaching God's Word in the context of a worship service. (Menzies 2007) raises the CUV translators' inconsistency in conflating New Testament prophecy with preaching (93).
- 18 In contrast to discussions around the possible languages of Jesus (e.g., Porter 1993), there is comparatively less discussion of Paul's sociolinguistic background among NT scholars.
- 19 An additional implication here is that Luke has recorded a translation of Paul's exchange with the Jewish crowd in Acts 22:2–22.
- 20 The one exception in 1 Corinthians is the Aramaic phrase *maranatha* (1 Cor. 16:22), although Bible translators thankfully follow Paul's advice about *fangyan* by translating it for the readers' benefit.
- 21 Carson himself advocates that *glōssa* could theoretically seem like an unknown language yet convey meaning once decoded (Carson 1987, pp. 85–86), though I have yet to meet a Pentecostal or Charismatic Christian who understands their spiritual practice of glossolalia as akin to the childhood game of “Pig Latin” or the many decipherable software programming languages today.
- 22 While the CUV does not explicitly denote a singular tongue, the singular is more likely in the view given that in this same verse the translators add *geyang* 各样 (“various kinds”) to denote the plural *mystēria* (“mysteries”).
- 23 I.e., three different congregations functioning under one leadership. For an overview of different types of multi-generational Chinese church structures; see (Shin and Silzer 2016, chap. 1, pp. 7–30).
- 24 I am indebted to Donald, a member of such a diaspora Chinese church, for introducing this multivalent term to me.
- 25 In addition, to more monolingual hearers, this kind of speech could be derided as evidence of a “babbling” (Acts 17:18).
- 26 This is an early example of a contemporary worship song written in Cantonese, rather than Mandarin Chinese intonation and meter in mind. The lyrics are available at: <https://sharehymns.hk/lyric.php?songcode=CAL-180> (accessed on 28 November 2023).
- 27 The prayer he memorised was: “感谢天父，赐我饮食，求父洁净，保我平安，奉主名求。阿门！” (“Thank you Heavenly Father [for] giving me food and drink, [I] ask you to cleanse [me], preserve my safety, in the Lord's name [I] ask. Amen!”)

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