

Knocking on China's Door

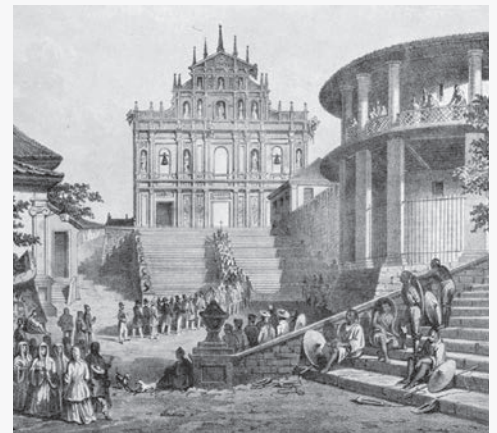
THE FIRST PROTESTANT MISSION

By Elena Vishnevskaya

China's "closed-door" policy, upended by the Opium Wars of 1839–1842 and 1856–1860, safeguarded the Middle Kingdom from unwanted advances by the West. A deep-seated suspicion of foreign infiltration—cultural, political, and economic—was augmented by the arrogance of China's ruling class, who insisted on China's superiority in the world arena. Western aggression of the 1800s forced China to open up trade with other nations and led to the eventual demise of the Qing dynasty. When the first Protestant missionaries arrived from Britain in the early nineteenth century, they entered an inhospitable climate, which made their task exceedingly difficult. With the Qing proscription of Christianity in effect and no Protestant missionary infrastructure in place, they juggled multiple responsibilities in service of their God. While pursuing their religious commitments, they became unwittingly entangled in the imperialist machinations of their native country.

The Roman Catholic order the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, made inroads into China long before Protestants. Jesuits established their mission in the last decades of the sixteenth century and stayed viable until their dissolution in 1775. Jesuit priests made great gains in the Middle Kingdom, thanks to their policy of adaptation to the local culture and close ties with China's educated elites. When Robert Morrison, a pioneering Protestant missionary, arrived in 1807, his was a "frontier phase of [Protestant] contact" with China.¹ Morrison, dispatched by the London Missionary Society, had to chart his own course for a new mission, which would determine the direction of future Chinese Protestantism.

Morrison entered China through the Portuguese colony of Macao on the coast of the South China Sea, where the Portuguese had settled in the middle of the sixteenth century; from there, he traveled to Guangzhou (Canton). Due to the single-port policy of 1759, intended to protect Chinese interests from foreign encroachments, the southern port of Canton was designated by the Qing as the hub for British and American trade. The "Canton system," or the Co-hong, consisted of an association of Chinese merchants that acted as an intermediary between Western traders and the imperial administration. The Co-hong brokers were given exclusive trading privileges by the Qing government, for which they repaid the state by procuring tariffs and overseeing the European population in Canton.² With the creation of the centralized trading system, the Qing state was now better able to exercise control over Westerners, including the British East India Company, which had held trade monopoly in South China since the eighteenth century.³ Foreigners were allowed to reside in Canton only during the trading season and were required to move to Macao for the

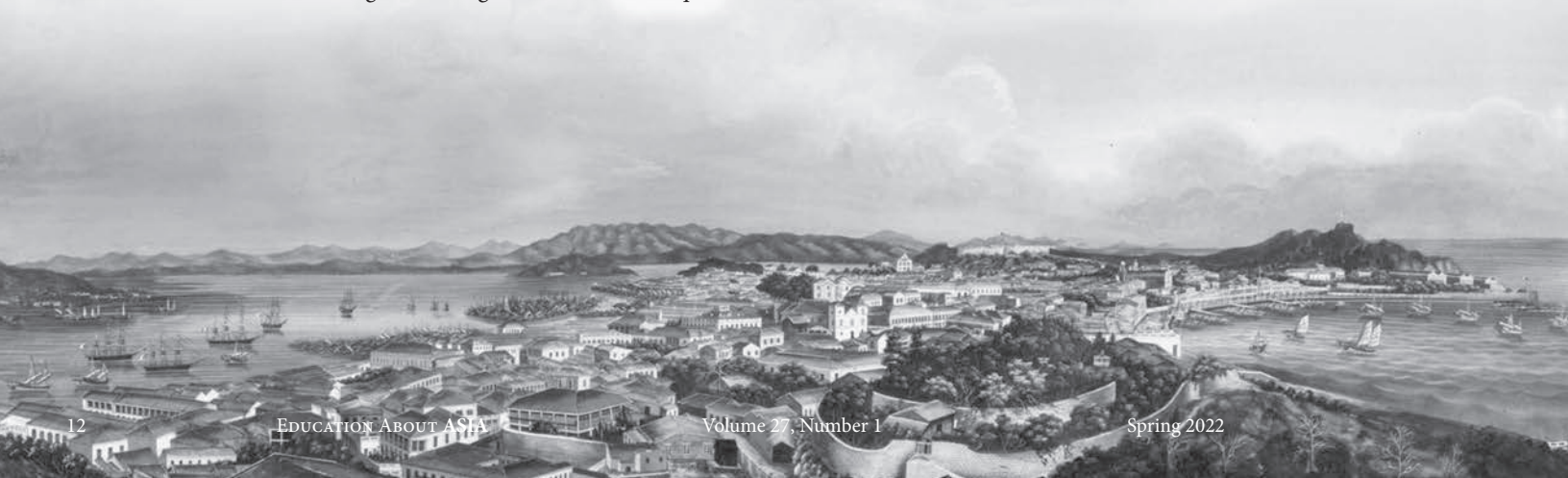


Jesuit Convent, Macao by William Heine, facade of St. Paul's Church, 1854.

Source: MIT, *Visualizing Cultures* website at <https://tinyurl.com/2kb64yz7>.

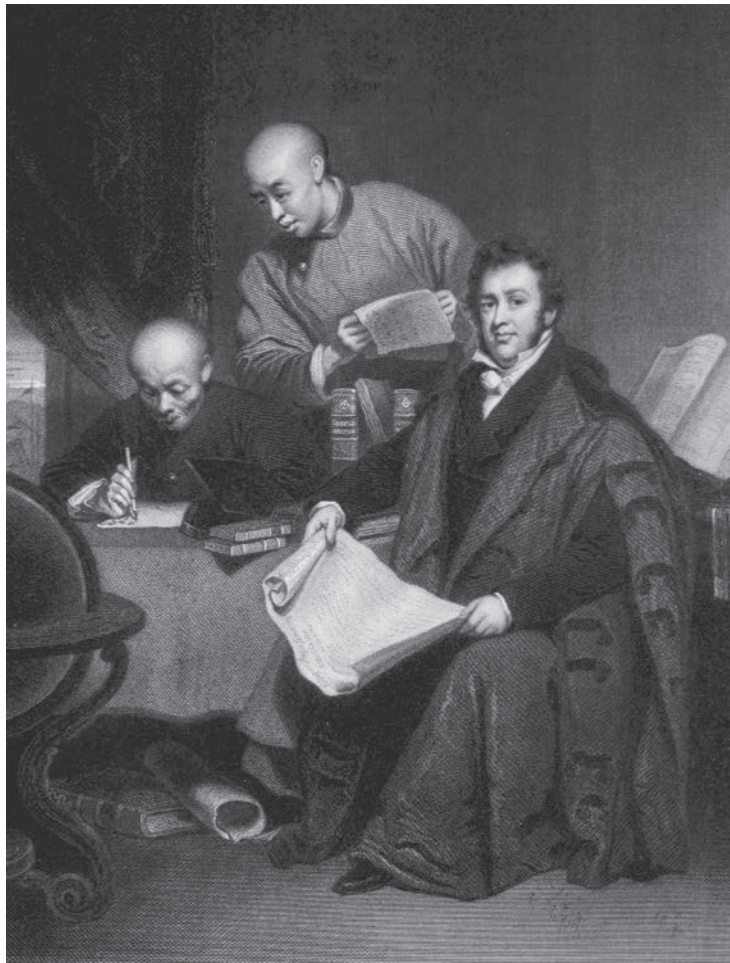
Below: Panoramic view of Macao with St. Paul's Church visible in the distant background (right of center).

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/bdhe9a7z>.





View of the Canton Factories, 1805–1806 by William Daniel. Source: MIT Visualizing Cultures website at <https://tinyurl.com/ycktkdaw>.



From left to right: Li Shigong, Chen Laoyi, and Robert Morrison. 1874 engraving based on the 1828 painting by George Chinnery. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/3tkpfz4>.

Restricted in his interactions with the locals, the missionary spent most of his energies honing his language skills, translating the Bible, and composing philological works and religious tracts.

remainder of the year. Upon his arrival, Morrison discovered that to acquire legal residence in Canton, he would need to get on the payroll of the East India Company. In 1809, he was hired as a translator by the corporation, and his residence quandary was solved.⁴

Ambivalent about his employment with the East India Company because secular duties cut into time much needed for missionary work and placed him in a precarious position of dependence on the secular patron, Morrison nonetheless understood that to “[create] opportunities and [secure] resources,” he had “to reach accommodations with secular interests who dominated the environments in which [he] had to do [his] work. [His] primary concern was to get around the obstacles to [his program] of evangelical activity.”⁵ The Chinese authorities, however, placed additional hurdles in Morrison’s path.

In 1724, the Yongzheng emperor banned Christianity on suspicion of spreading “superstition, immorality, political subversion, and social conflict.”⁶ Adamant to avoid civil disorder and sedition, the Qing dynasty attempted to weed out all movements seen as undermining the dominant state ideology of Confucianism, and Christianity was one of them. The idea of “heterodoxy,” rendered by means of *I-tuan*, *hsieh*, and *tso-tao*, was pitted against that of “orthodoxy,” or *cheng*: Confucian orthodoxy was to be firmly upheld, and any expression of a heterodox ferment coming to the surface of Chinese public life was to be resolutely disallowed.⁷

As a result of Qing hostility toward Christianity, Morrison’s missionary work was impaired. Restricted in his interactions with the locals, the missionary spent most of his energies honing his language skills, translating the Bible, and composing philological works and religious tracts. Even though Morrison did not have formal language preparation, he developed proficiency in Chinese by virtue of the diligent self-directed study of the language. Morrison commenced his language acquisition before his arrival in China, and while on the mission field, he solidified

In Malacca, Morrison and Milne founded an Ultra Ganges mission station, which included a printing center and the Anglo-Chinese College.

his language skills thanks to the linguistic assistance of native speakers. Indigenous instructors not only helped Morrison obtain fluency in Mandarin, Cantonese, and literary Chinese, but also collect a vast Chinese library and complete translation and printing projects.⁸

In 1813, the London Missionary Society sent William Milne to aid Morrison in advancing the China mission; however, due to strict Chinese laws governing work by foreigners, Milne had to eventually relocate to Malacca, an entrepôt between south and east Asia in the Malay Peninsula, which had been familiar with and open to Protestantism thanks to the long-standing presence of the Dutch Reformed Church.⁹ In Malacca, Morrison and Milne founded an Ultra Ganges mission station, which included a printing center and the Anglo-Chinese College. Since Protestant missionaries were banned from China's major ports—other than Canton and Macao—and also the Chinese mainland, Morrison and Milne had intended for the Ultra Ganges mission to become the headquarters of evangelism of ethnic Chinese outside of China. The two had hoped that the Anglo-Chinese College would serve as an educational setting where Asian children would be introduced to Western curriculum and Protestant faith, and European students would learn Chinese culture and language.¹⁰

Together, Morrison and Milne published two missionary periodicals, the *Indo-Chinese Gleaner* in English and the *Chinese Monthly Magazine* in Chinese. Milne helped Morrison finish his translation of the Bible by 1819, and in 1823, a year after Milne's passing, the Bible in Chinese was published. Morrison and Milne were not the first Protestants to produce Christian scripture in Chinese. In 1821, Joshua Marshman, a British missionary to India, who had translated the Bible into several languages and dialects of India, published the Bible in Chinese. Morrison and Milne's text, however, seemed to enjoy a wider missionary application. By Morrison's own admission, his Chinese translation of the Bible was far from impeccable; thus, he set out to revise the translation. He also hoped that his son John Robert and other Protestant missionaries would pursue a revised edition of the Chinese Bible.¹¹

In 1820, Morrison opened a dispensary with an eye to rendering care to the Chinese and learning more about their lifestyle. In this endeavor, Morrison was aided by John Livingstone, a surgeon employed by the East India Company. A mutually benefiting relationship, in turn, afforded Livingstone use of the missionary's Chinese medical literature, which was considerable. Livingstone also amassed his own collection of Chinese medical books, and Morrison did a great deal of translation for his colleague. Traditional Chinese medicine presented an uncharted territory to practitioners of Western medicine, and Livingstone, with Morrison's assistance, was learning a new medical tradition. Their partnership paved the way for future Protestant medical missions, which would help many Chinese in need of essential medical services.¹²

While the number of Chinese converts during Morrison's tenure in China was insignificant, his linguistic and literary output was noteworthy: in addition to translating the Bible, Morrison compiled a grammar of the Chinese language, a dictionary of the Chinese language, a vocabulary of the Canton dialect, and numerous Protestant tracts in Chinese. Furthermore, Morrison introduced Western audiences to China by authoring expository works on the country and translating Confucian classics into English.¹³ Morrison's publications, both in English and Chinese, earned him the reputation of a renowned sinologist and an honorary doctorate from the University of Glasgow in 1817. In 1825, Morrison became a Fellow of the Royal Society—another important validation of his scholarly stature.¹⁴

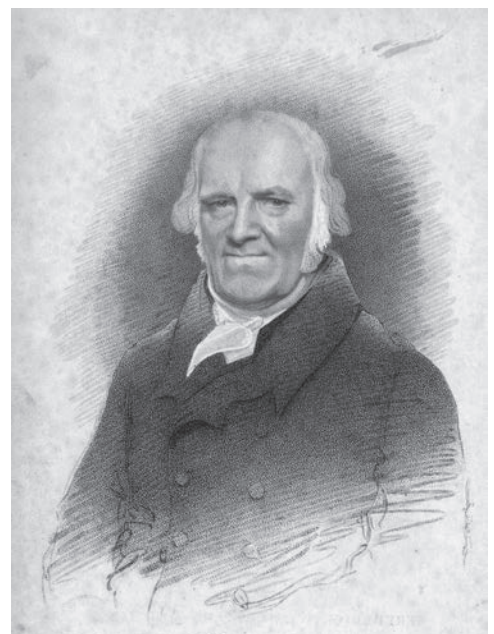
Morrison, as well as Milne, were learned men who valued education and intellectual inquiry. His and Milne's preparation for missions took place at Gosport Academy in England, where the missionaries sponsored by the London Missionary Society trained in the early nineteenth century. The expansive curriculum at the academy included courses in Christian theology, history, rhetoric, philosophy, geography, and astronomy, to name a few. Serious study of languages, both classical and biblical, was another distinguishing characteristic of the Gosport education that would instill an eagerness in the two men to later acquire proficiency in Chinese. David Bogue, founder and director of the academy, emphasized missionary education as foundational to effective missionary work: to him, the successful missionary was equipped with knowledge for the sake of fruitful dissemination



A portrait of William Milne from the Welsh Portrait Collection at the National Library of Wales. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/2p82h5ry/>.



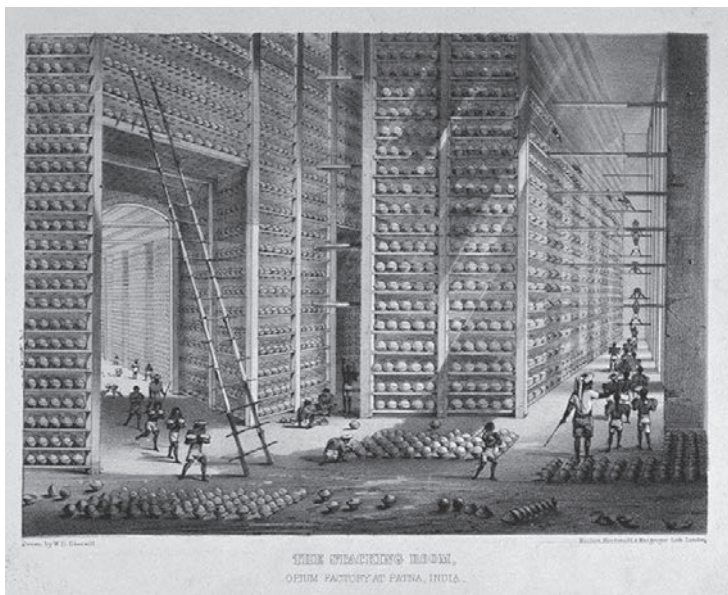
The college in Malacca, Malaya (Malaysia), in 1834. Source: *Wikiwand* website at <https://tinyurl.com/mtph7pcw>.



David Bogue (1750–1825). Portrait from the Welsh Portrait Collection at the National Library of Wales. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/295vtbmz>.



Nineteenth-century Chinese painting depicting wealthy opium smokers. Source: The Wellcome Library in London on the MIT Visualizing Cultures website at <https://tinyurl.com/3htvpr74>.



"The Stacking Room, Opium Factory at Patna India," from *The Truth about Opium Smoking*, 1882. Lithograph after W. S. Sherwill, ca. 1850. Source: MIT, Visualizing Cultures website at <https://tinyurl.com/3htvpr74>.

Morrison appears to have been deeply burdened by the drug trade conducted by his own countrymen and hurting the very people he had crossed the world to minister . . .

of the gospel.¹⁵ Bogue also imparted to his students an urgency to produce a dictionary and grammar of languages spoken on the mission field. His teaching also included instructions for translating scripture into the vernacular, running a printing press, and opening a school for natives.¹⁶ Bogue's tutelage equipped Morrison and Milne for productive overseas missions, though one thing no one could have prepared them for was how to approach the unsavory British business of selling opium to China.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the British carried out a lucrative trade with China via the East India Company, which was established in 1600 to trade in the East Indies. The East India Company would

eventually enjoy trade monopoly in South China, until 1834 when it was repealed by the British Parliament.¹⁷ By the time Morrison arrived in the Middle Kingdom, the corporation sold Chinese merchants Indian opium and bought from them tea, silk, and porcelain for sale back home. The East India Company controlled opium cultivation in Bengal, a northeastern region of India, and auctioned opium to private traders at Calcutta. From there, the drug traffic entered mainland China through Canton.¹⁸ In 1800, the Qing government banned opium trade, but the illicit commodity would remain in high demand. The Chinese authorities would try, unsuccessfully, to shut off opium trade in 1809, 1821, 1828, and for much of the late 1830s. Opium imports depleted Chinese coffers of silver, which China previously accepted as the sole form of payment for tea and silk, and upset the Chinese trade surplus.¹⁹ Narcotic addiction and its deleterious effects on Chinese society also propelled the Qing toward suppressing the opium trade.

Morrison did not condone the British trafficking of opium to China, which he saw as "far from being reputable . . . to the English flag."²⁰ Morrison appears to have been deeply burdened by the drug trade conducted by his own countrymen and hurting the very people he had crossed the world to minister: "Could I hold out the bread of life to the Chinese in one hand, and opium in the other? Could I bestow, with any propriety, in the service of religion, that money which accrued from

In diplomatic terms, China's insistence on its own primacy translated into a condition "that those who wished to deal or trade with China had to come as supplicants to the emperor, Son of Heaven, ruler of 'All Under Heaven.'"

the demoralization and consequent misery of a large portion of my fellow-creatures?"²¹ Morrison's colleague Milne also criticized the opium trade and placed opium in the same group with slavery and gambling, recognizing them all as grave "obstacles" to evangelism, which "are too profitable to those who patronize or encourage them, to hope that a speedy check will be imposed on them." Milne indignantly admitted that "[t]he vast consumption of opium" in China was simultaneously a "source of . . . many evils among the people" and "of . . . much gain to the merchants."²²

The separation of the sacred from the profane would prove nearly impossible for Morrison, who had to rely on the East India Company to provide much-needed legal and financial assistance. Breaking free of those moot ties in a wholesale fashion was begrudgingly seen as impractical and thus detrimental to the mission.²³ Thus, when Morrison was offered the position of Chinese secretary and interpreter for the Amherst embassy to the Qing court, his initial reluctance gave way to willingness to serve in a new capacity. Morrison approached the position as an opportunity to travel beyond Canton to mainland China, where he could network and build rapport with China's governing elites.²⁴

After an unavailing embassy to China led by Lord Macartney in 1793, the English Crown sent Lord Amherst in 1816 to again negotiate trade between China and Britain. Both Lord Macartney and Lord Amherst were expected to offer Chinese sovereigns the same reverence as was customary of all tributaries of the Middle Kingdom, and when the British envoys refused to observe the Chinese ritual protocol, the diplomatic missions failed.²⁵ The tributary system of China's external relations was based on the assumption of China's absolute ascendancy over other nations from which it expected unequivocal subordination. In diplomatic terms, China's insistence on its own primacy translated into a condition "that those who wished to deal or trade with China had to come as supplicants to the emperor, Son of Heaven, ruler of 'All Under Heaven.'"²⁶ Disinclined to enter into a sovereign-vassal relationship, the British defied the exceptionally choreographed etiquette of China's dealings with outsiders and instead sought to mold diplomacy in favor of trade to their own advantage. In the end, both Macartney and Amherst missions demonstrated a huge chasm between China and Britain's understanding of their respective places in the world.²⁷

Reflecting on the mission's failed attempt to improve Sino-Western relations, Morrison observed that "national and commercial intercourse will proceed best under an idea of the equality and



Baron William Pitt Amherst (1773–1857) portrait by Thomas Lawrence, which shows Amherst standing before the Canton harbor and the trading warehouses of Britain, the Netherlands, and the United States.

Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y669969p>.

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The signing and sealing of the Treaty of Nanking, by F. G. Moon, 1846. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/ypt576r8>. Link to the of the persons shown in this image: <https://tinyurl.com/yf8c52j8>.

China, unable to withstand Western aggression, was forced to open a series of “treaty ports” to European trade and sign the Treaty of Nanking, which ceded Hong Kong to the British.

reciprocity of the two countries.”²⁸ While acknowledging that both countries were responsible for alienating each other, Morrison was painfully aware of Britain’s contempt for Chinese conventions and held himself, a servant of God and a cultural intermediary, to a higher standard:

A Christian missionary from England is not sent to India or any other part of the world to introduce English customs, but Christ’s Gospel. He should not be shocked or irritated by the innocent usages of other nations, which happen to differ from his own. A missionary’s views of Providence, and the gracious care of God extended to all parts of his world, should elevate his mind above . . . extravagant love of country. A notion which some people possess, that there is nothing good or comfortable out of England, that all God’s works, everywhere, are inferior and to be despised, in comparison with what he hath done for England, may be called patriotism; but it is a notion that is unjust, and of an impious tendency, and is unworthy of a Christian missionary.²⁹

Eighteen years after the Amherst embassy, the Christian missionary found himself in an awkward situation yet again when he was asked to serve as Chinese secretary and interpreter to Lord Napier, the superintendent of trade. When the trade monopoly of the East India Company was abolished in 1833 and the British government took over all commercial ties with China, Lord Napier was sent to Canton to discuss trade on behalf of his employer. Upon his arrival in July of 1834, Lord Napier wrote a letter to the Chinese authorities, which Morrison translated. In the letter, the British official solicited a meeting with the imperial representative at Canton, Governor Lu Kun. Lord Napier’s apparent disregard for proper channels of communication, that is, through Co-hong merchants who acted as Chinese liaisons in Canton, resulted in the governor’s refusal to meet him and a consequent diplomatic fiasco of the British:³⁰

The great ministers of the Celestial Empire are not permitted to have private intercourse by letter with outside barbarians. If the said barbarian [headman] throws in private letters, I the governor will not at all receive or look at them. . . . All these are points decided by fixed and certain laws and statutes, which will not bear to be wantonly transgressed. To sum up, the nation has its laws,—it is so everywhere. Even England has its laws,—how much more the Celestial Empire.³¹

The tensions between China and Britain continued escalating over the next several years and came to a head in 1839 when an imperial commissioner expropriated opium from the British and destroyed it. The first Opium War (1839–1842) followed shortly, and as a result of a three-year military conflict, China, unable to withstand Western aggression, was forced to open a series of “treaty ports” to European trade and sign the Treaty of Nanking, which ceded Hong Kong to the British. The reluctant opening of China to global commerce inevitably ensued.³² Following the second Opium War (1856–1860), the Chinese government had no choice but to open more “treaty ports,” legalize opium trade, and permit foreigners, including missionaries, into mainland China.³³ Morrison did not witness these political developments, as he died from fever on August 1, 1834.

Morrison’s passing concluded the inaugural stage of the Protestant China mission: “If not the father of Chinese Protestantism, he was certainly midwife at its birth.”³⁴ Assisted by Milne, Morrison prepared fertile soil for the subsequent propagation of Protestant faith in China and Southeast Asia. Both missionaries were inspired by the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival in Britain and the Great Awakening in North America, which emphasized individual piety and spiritual ardor. In leaving behind their home and journeying to China, the two men, undergirded by a universal evangelical outlook, sought to obey the Great Commission, Jesus’s mandate to take the gospel to all corners of the world. There, they focused on translation, writing, education, and publication—all of which would remain the linchpin for future Protestant missions in China.

While Morrison did not completely shed his Western Christian bias, he was highly critical of what he called “false notions of individual superiority, of family greatness, and of the right of some nations to dominate over the rest,” as well as “notions of a mistaken patriotism.”



Portrait of Robert Morrison from *A Parting Memorial*, c. 1825.
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/2p9dh652>.

Morrison planted seeds not only for later British Protestant missions in China, but American ones as well. He gladly served as a corresponding secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and wrote for its *Missionary Herald* magazine.³⁵ Several years before his death, Morrison would be joined in China by two American evangelists, David Abeel and Elijah Coleman Bridgman, whom he took under his wing. Both Americans enjoyed a felicitous introduction to the China mission by Morrison, a seasoned British missionary veteran. Ultimately, Morrison's work of facilitating connections between the London Missionary Society and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions led to the beginning of the Anglo-American China mission in South China.³⁶

In an effort to dispel Britain's ignorance of China and facilitate its interest in Chinese, Morrison founded the Language Institution during his furlough in England in 1825. Even though the language center was short-lived, it showcased Morrison's expertise in the Chinese language and commitment to its careful study.³⁷ Early on in his missionary career, Morrison understood that “[u]ntil the language be acquired, I can do nothing that respects the spiritual part of the work.”³⁸ Morrison envisioned that language learning “will . . . by degrees, tend to promote a fuller and an increasingly cordial understanding between two great Nations, whose amicable intercourse is much calculated to benefit both.”³⁹

While Morrison did not completely shed his Western Christian bias, he was highly critical of what he called “false notions of individual superiority, of family greatness, and of the right of some nations to dominate over the rest,” as well as “notions of a mistaken patriotism.”⁴⁰ Morrison cultivated a deep respect for his second home, where, at his own admission, “there is quite as much mildness and civility in the intercourse of human beings, as in Europe, and sometimes more. And men's actions are as much regulated by law and by etiquette, and so are as much polished, as in any nation they can be.”⁴¹ And even though for Morrison, Christianity was the only true faith imparting meaning and engendering genuine reformation of humanity, he believed in a peaceable manner of evangelism: his twenty-five years of missionary work in China are a testament to this peaceful approach, which had no room for compulsion of any kind. Historical empathy may aid one in recognizing that “[w]hile [Morrison] was not able to move fully beyond himself and the attitudes of his times, neither was he an agent of imperialism in China. He increasingly came to see his role not only as a precursor for other missionaries but also as a bridge between two cultures. That he did not totally succeed in the latter task does not diminish the value of his efforts.”⁴²

All things considered, a story of cross-cultural contact between China and the West in the nineteenth century would be incomplete without an account of Robert Morrison, who spearheaded the earliest Protestant China mission. As Britain followed its appetites for power and dominion around the globe, Protestant missionaries, like Morrison, discovered new peoples they could reach with a message of salvation. And while Morrison's missionary autonomy was fragile, as he often depended on patronage of imperial functionaries and businesses, his commitment to advancing the gospel remained unwavering. Morrison's missionary outlook was similar to that of his Catholic predecessors in that his love of learning and an aspiration to understand the host culture led him to a rigorous study of its language, literature, and philosophy. Like Jesuits, Morrison became a reputable sinologist who interpreted China to the West and, in some measure, helped the West develop an appreciation for the great East Asian civilization. ♦

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39. Robert Morrison, *View of China for Philological Purposes; Containing a Sketch of Chinese Chronology, Geography, Government, Religion, and Customs* (Macao: The East India Company's Press, 1817).
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