

American Protestant Missions in Nineteenth-Century China

By George B. Pruden

Background: Religion and Trade

European Catholics mounted the first systematic effort to convert Chinese to Christianity in the late sixteenth century. Their work was part of the Catholic Counter Reformation, but by 1750, the glory days were over. Jesuits such as Matteo

Ricci (1552–1610) had not only won converts, but gained the respect of influential Chinese and even some emperors in the latter part of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and the early part of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Their success stemmed in part from accommodating the tradition of venerating ancestors (calling it a civil and not a religious practice) and using Chinese terms to refer to God. A rival monastic order, though, had gained the Pope's support in condemning those accommodations. This Rites Controversy came to a head during the early eighteenth century. After Pope Clement IX prohibited Chinese

Christian converts from taking part in ancestor-veneration ceremonies in 1715, the Kangxi Emperor in 1721 banned all Christian preaching in China. Although Catholic missionaries remained in China, their numbers and influence dwindled.

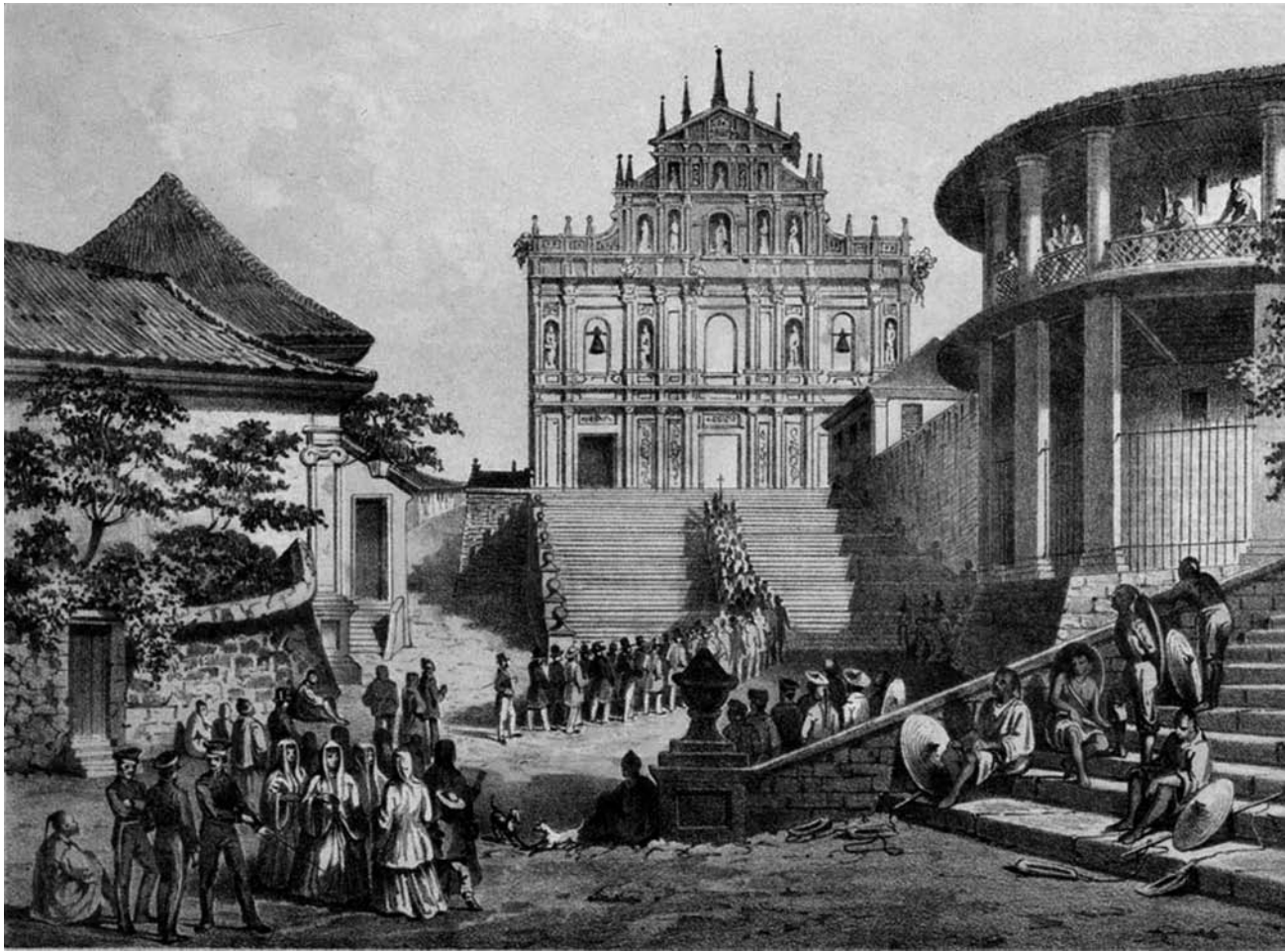


Within a few decades of the decline of Catholic presence in China, western European merchants arrived in growing numbers, eager for trade. Silk and porcelain—at the time produced only in China—fed a growing appetite for *chinoiserie* among the European elite classes. Tea became a popular beverage, not only for the aristocracy, but also for their affluent, social-climbing imitators among the country gentry and urban merchant class. Merchant ships sailed the long sea route around the Cape of Good Hope, across the Indian Ocean, southeast through the Malacca Strait, and up to Guangzhou (Canton). The arduous journey to China and back amply rewarded the intrepid merchants and invoked memories of the lucrative spice trade of previous centuries. Although merchants sought profits rather than converts, their ships provided transportation, and thus the opportunity for Christian (mainly Protestant) missionaries who targeted China for a major evangelical campaign in the nineteenth century.

Opportunity coincided with motive; in fact, many saw a providential hand in the growth of trade with China. The Great Awakening in the late eighteenth century revived spirituality, partly in reaction to the secular Enlightenment and intellectual notions of Deism favored by *philosophes*. Millennialism, especially the form known as pre-millennialism, held that the Second Coming and thousand-year reign of Christ would occur only after everyone on earth had heard the Gospel and thus been given the chance for salvation. Missionary societies sprang up in many countries to support the necessary army of missionaries that would be required for this global undertaking. India was one of the first areas they evangelized; not only did it have a huge population, but it also was accessible through British control. French Indo-China and the Dutch East Indies facilitated entry into Southeast Asia.

Top left image: Portrait of Matteo Ricci. Image source: http://matrix.scranton.edu/images/aboutus/matteo_ricci_lg.jpg.

Top right image: Portrait of the Kangxi Emperor in Court Dress, by anonymous court artists. Late Kangxi period. Hanging scroll, colour on silk. The Palace Museum, Beijing. Image source: <http://www.threemperors.org.uk/index.php?pid=4&view=image>.



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

Hong Kong Museum of Art. Image source: http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/rise_fall_canton_04/gallery_places/pages/cwM_1854_AH644191_StPaul.htm.

China on the other hand, despite its larger population, was closed to foreigners by imperial decree. Even merchants were limited to a six-month trading season and were confined to an island in the Pearl River outside the walled seaport of Guangzhou. Macau was the only European-controlled area of China. Portugal had negotiated an agreement to establish a permanent trading post on this small peninsula near the mouth of the Pearl River in the mid-sixteenth century. Guangzhou lies about sixty miles upriver from Macau, which became the base of operations for European traders and, when they first arrived in the early nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries. Merchants wanted to expand the lucrative trade in Chinese goods and needed access to China's other port cities. Their companies repeatedly requested the government to negotiate with the Chinese court to overturn the exclusion edicts.

The British government sent embassies in 1793 and 1816 headed by Lord Macartney and Lord Amherst, respectively, but their efforts to gain trading rights in Chinese seaports and to station an ambassador in Beijing (Peking) were unsuccessful. Lord Macartney was able to gain an audience with the Qianlong Emperor—delayed by his refusal to perform the obligatory three kneelings and nine prostrations known as the kowtow—and presented a letter from King George III. The emperor's condescending reply thanked the king for his "respectful letter" and haughtily stated that, "we have no need of your country's manufactures." Lord Amherst was unable even to gain an audience with the emperor.

China's self-sufficiency meant that its exports had to be paid with silver, much of it shipped from Spain's mines in Mexico to Manila. For the first time in history, a truly globe-girdling economic system was taking shape: The medium of exchange for Chinese goods came from the other side of the Pacific ocean, and Chinese goods were shipped to Europe via the Indian Ocean. Some Chinese exports even made their way across the Atlantic to the Americas.

Before the United States won independence from Great Britain, American merchants who wanted to take part in the China trade were bound by the British East India Company's monopoly, granted by Queen Elizabeth I in 1600, and were required to purchase licenses from that company to trade in Asia, as the monopoly extended eastward from Suez. Hardly had the ink dried on the Treaty of Paris, 1783 (by which



The *Empress of China* leaving New York in 1784. She arrived at Macao on August 23, 1784, the first ship to visit China under American colors. Image source: http://www.gordonmiller.ca/02_age_of_discovery/Empress-of-China-1784.htm.

Great Britain recognized the independence of the United States of America), when a group of New England merchants named a newly constructed ship *Empress of China* and sent it to inaugurate American trade with China in 1784.

Early Missionary Work and Its Challenges

When Protestant missionaries from Europe and the United States began arriving in China in the early nineteenth century, they faced formidable obstacles besides being restricted to Macau and the foreign-trading enclave outside Guangzhou. In order to preach to the Chinese, missionaries had to learn the language. Merchants generally relied on native Chinese employees who had learned their languages, or communicated in “pidgin,” a hybrid patois (skillfully used by James Clavell in *Taipan*, his historical novel about the British acquisition of Hong Kong). They also at times paid mis-

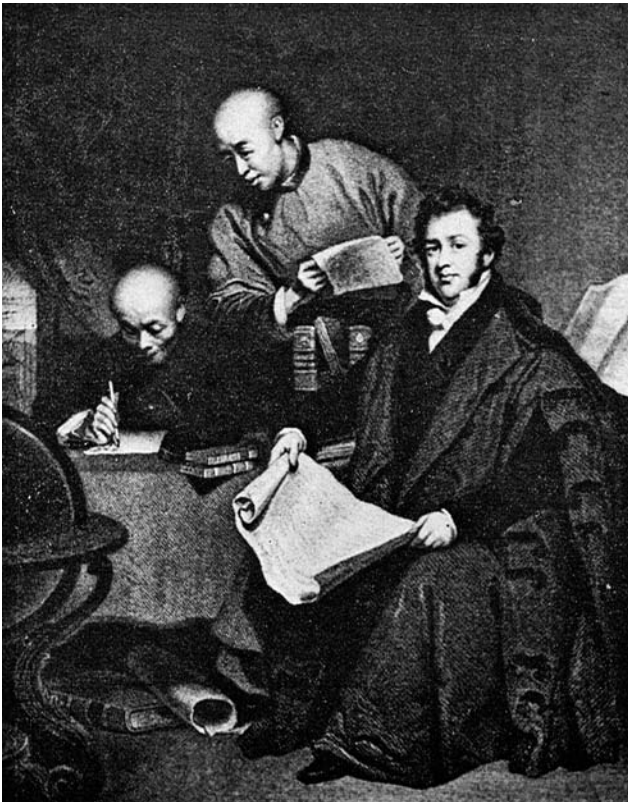
sionaries to serve as translators and interpreters. Missionaries found this employment doubly beneficial. Their salaries were low, so it earned them extra money. And some merchants engaged in smuggling along the unguarded coast, so missionaries would use these clandestine forays to preach and distribute tracts—usually Bible stories or portions of a Gospel they had translated—to Chinese with whom they would otherwise not have contact. A German missionary, Karl August Gützlaff, described how he did this from one side of the British ship for which he was serving as translator, while opium was offloaded from the other.

In the early nineteenth century, even missionaries who were supported by a mission society halfway around the world had to be resourceful in the field. Before foreign banks were established in China, money for their salaries had to be sent by their societies to the home offices of trading companies, which then transferred funds to their China branches for payment to the missionaries. Communications were exceedingly slow. When a missionary wrote to his society, he made several copies of his letter and sent them by different ships in case of a disaster at sea. Those ships made port calls along the way and might take months to arrive. Once received by the society, an answer was dispatched by merchant ship back to China.

It was not uncommon for a missionary to wait a year for an answer to arrive, and by then the situation that occasioned his original letter might have changed significantly.

An additional obstacle was that most Chinese showed no interest in Christianity, which was quite unexpected. Chinese apathy was not the only thing they encountered that had not been anticipated. What little missionaries knew about China before arriving in no way prepared them for the culture shock they experienced. Most of the Chinese they encountered in Macau and the few other places they were allowed to visit were small shopkeepers and a huge underclass of laborers who had to scramble seven days a week just to stay alive. Taking the Sabbath as a day of rest was unthinkable. The wealthy elite disdained all foreigners as inferior—both in their persons and by the culture they represented. China, in this elite view, was already the greatest civilization on earth and had nothing to learn from others.

Robert Morrison arrived in China in 1807, and holds distinction for being the first Protestant missionary. Although he was a native of Great Britain, at the time the British East India Company refused to carry missionaries as passengers to China, so he sailed first to the United States, and from there took a ship to China. Presumably, it wasn't because the Company was opposed to missionaries, but since China was closed to all foreigners, missionaries would complicate an already difficult situation. Morrison worked diligently in Macau and, during the six-month trading season, at the foreign enclave outside Guangzhou. Some years later more missionaries from Great Britain, from other European countries, and the United



Engraving of Robert Morrison translating the Bible with Chinese helpers. Image source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Morrison_at_work.jpg.

The Chinese elite were the least likely to be interested in learning about Christianity or a Western language. Those who did show interest had little stake in the status quo and the most to gain from the free education that missionaries offered.



Portrait of Elijah Coleman Bridgman.

Image source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:E_C_Bridgman_China.jpg.

States joined him. At the time, a Second Great Awakening was occurring in the United States. Besides an emphasis on evangelizing the “heathen,” a decidedly American theological angle was introduced. God, it was believed, had an ultimate purpose for the United States: American missionaries, unfettered by European colonial restrictions, would take the Gospel to the far corners of the earth and thus advance the time of the Second Coming. The Reverend Richard Furman, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, preached a sermon in 1802 where he declared that God had brought the United States into being for no less a purpose than “to lead the world into the Millennium.”

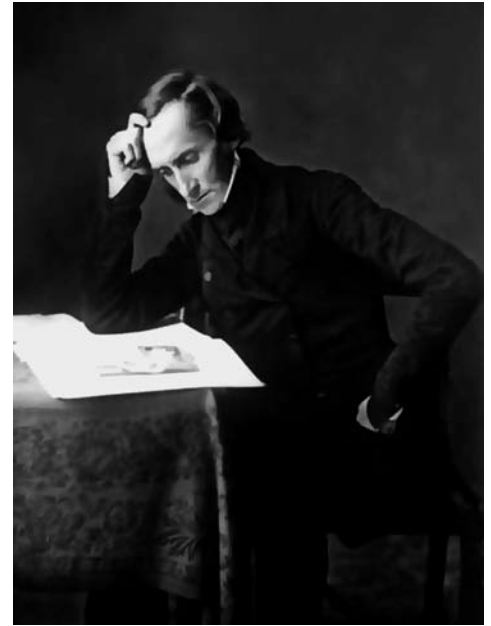
Implicit in this missionary zeal to “save” souls was a sense of moral and cultural superiority. During the Enlightenment, China was held up by *philosophes* as a model of rational

government based on high standards of personal morality, correct social relationships, justice, and sincerity inculcated by the teachings of Confucius. Less than a century later, however, the Western perception of Chinese civilization was that it was moribund, stagnant, and repressive. The Industrial Revolution and an increasing effort to obtain civil and political rights that were transforming the economic, political, and social life of Western countries upended China on their scale of values. Along with Christianity, Western missionaries sought to bring to China the benefits of Western civilization. Some of them came to identify with China and hoped to see it achieve the same transformations that had made the West wealthy, militarily powerful, and politically stable. Ironically, the result was just the opposite: it became, by 1912, poorer, weaker, and so unstable that its 2000-year-old imperial system crumbled into dust when a small band of Chinese revolutionaries challenged it frontally on October 10, 1911. And the number of Chinese who had been converted to Christianity was just a minuscule fraction of the population.

Missionaries who arrived prior to 1841 had no place other than Macau to set up their residences and chapels. Portuguese authorities were generally tolerant of the Protestants, but frowned on their proselytizing Chinese who had already become Catholic Christians. Sailors from many countries who arrived on ship, though, were fair game. It was a limited pool of potential converts, and missionaries from the beginning prayed earnestly that God would open China to them. Whether they prayed or not, merchants had the same desire.

Congregationalists from New England sent the first American missionaries to China in 1829. They had established the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in 1812 that sent its first missionaries to South and Southeast Asia, Africa, the Sandwich Islands (Hawai`i), and the Middle East. All these places were accessible. Eventually, though, China represented too great a challenge and too great an opportunity to ignore. Its hundreds of millions of people had to hear the Gospel in order for the Second Coming of Christ to occur. Elijah Coleman Bridgman and David Abeel were the first Americans sent to China as missionaries. Mounting a multi-phase approach, the ABCFM sent not only evangelists, but also printers, physicians, and teachers. Besides evangelism, its mission workers sought to “raise” Chinese through education and medical care that most of them sadly lacked.

By necessity, other mission societies adopted the ABCFM’s approach, at least to some degree. Unless they developed Christian missionaries among the Chinese, there was no hope of reaching the whole pop-



Portrait of David Abeel.

Image source: http://www.amoymagic.com/Am_Abeel.htm.



Portrait of Young J. Allen.

Image source: <http://beck.library.emory.edu/>

youngjohnallen/document.php?id=yja-20-Jan-1901-JC.00.

ulation with the Gospel. Education was essential. Some early books on China reported that its people were literate. The missionaries found out that this was an exaggeration, at least among the lower classes they encountered. In the interior, where the vast majority of Chinese lived, there were more opportunities to become functionally literate, but in general only wealthy families could afford to hire tutors for their sons to teach them the written language. The Chinese elite were the least likely to be interested in learning about Christianity or a Western language. Those who did show interest had little stake in the status quo and the most to gain from the free education that missionaries offered. Often it was not Christianity these students most desired. Nevertheless, those early mission schools were a foundation for more extensive educational efforts in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

American Mission Work in Late Imperial China

Civil War and its aftermath in the United States caused a decline in American efforts in China, especially by southern denominations, several of which had split prior to the war. Even as mission boards struggled to recover prewar levels of overseas work, other non-denominational, mission-minded groups came into being that sent people to work in China. One of the foremost was the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, established in 1888, under the auspices of the Young Men's Christian Association. It recruited mainly on college campuses. With the ambitious slogan, "The Evangelization of the World in This Generation," the Student Volunteer Movement sent about a thousand young, college-educated men and women to China by 1912, and contributed to a shift in missionary strategy that was already being undertaken by denominational missions. Instead of directing mission efforts toward the ordinary Chinese, they began concentrating on the educated elite, with the intention of infusing Christianity from the top down. As this new strategy developed, high hopes were placed on young Chinese students in missionary schools: some to become missionaries to their own people, and others to rise in positions of prominence in Chinese society, government, and business where they could exert influence. This shift occurred during the last few decades of the nineteenth century, when some Chinese began to question the two-thousand-year-old Confucian-based system of education and government as a hindrance in dealing with Western pressures.

One example of a denominational missionary who pursued this strategy was Young J. Allen, a Methodist from Georgia. He arrived in China in 1860 during the Taiping Rebellion. He spent several years doing itinerant preaching in and around Shanghai and had to take a part-time position teaching English in a Chinese government school when funds from his mission board were cut due to the American Civil War. He found that his students showed interest in lessons only when he included Chinese proverbs or explained aspects of natural science. He became convinced that teaching science would lead them to challenge "their own theories of the world and nature." He became superintendent of the Methodist (South) mission in 1881, and set up a three-tier educational system consisting of a primary school, two high schools, and a college.

In 1868, he established a weekly Chinese-language magazine, *Chiao-hui hsin-pao* (*Church News*). Its intended readers were educated Chinese, so he included articles on natural science, technology, foreign and domestic secular news, with emphasis on China's relations with other countries. Allen even serialized a textbook on chemistry written by W. A. P. Martin, a former missionary. From the beginning, he was supported and encouraged by missionaries of other denominations who shared his optimism that such articles would stimulate critical thinking about China and its place in the world, as well as lead readers to curiosity about and appreciation for Christianity. To this end, he solicited articles written by Chinese Christians about their own country and Christianity, as they might carry more weight with his readership than those written by missionaries. Articles that compared Confucianism and Christianity and topics such as opium smoking, the Chinese education system, foot binding, and the role of women in society were often followed in subsequent issues with comments by readers.

It is impossible to gauge *Chiao-hui hsin-pao's* influence on the unconverted Chinese who read it. The first missionary magazine published in Chinese to last longer than a few years, in 1875 its title was changed to *Wan-guo kung-pao* (*Globe Magazine*) to appeal more to non-Christian Chinese, and continued publication, except between 1883 and 1889, until 1907—a total of more than thirty years. One may assume that most of its readers never sought conversion to Christianity or visited a missionary to discuss religion. Yet the articles and comments must have provoked reflection on and questions about China's deteriorating situation.

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China suffered a demoralizing defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), and was humiliated when nine foreign countries sent troops who quashed the Boxer Rebellion (1898–1900), inflicted harsh punishments in the Protocol, and left occupying forces in control of key parts of the country. The Dowager Empress, the *de facto* ruler of China since the 1860s, was unable to stem the tide of Western encroachment and died in 1908. She named as her successor a two-year-old toddler who was forced to abdicate in 1912 after the Chinese Revolution of October 1911 overthrew the Manchu government and ended imperial rule. No thinking Chinese, taught that the Middle Kingdom was superior to all other countries, could ignore those events and not ponder why that was no longer true. In searching for answers—whether it was the fault of the Manchu Dynasty or due to the amply demonstrated strength of the foreign powers—writings such as those appearing in *Chiao-hui hsin-pao* gave them much to think about.

Paul A. Cohen's study of eight Chinese reformers (see citation in the list of sources) shows that while not all of them were baptized Christians—and most of the Chinese who worked for reform were not Christians—all eight whom he includes in his article

were, in one way or another, products of the Western missionary effort . . . Christianity for these individuals was an important dimension of the overall experience of acculturation. It helped them wrench free from the old culture and was instrumental in enabling them to pioneer a reformist approach. (200)

Although they followed separate careers, and some had more than one, all of them were, in Cohen's words, "tireless promoters of the blessings of Western technology." (209) Among their activities, they promoted legal reform and representative political institutions, managed new Chinese enterprises, served diplomatic appointments, and taught medicine. One student was Sun Yat-sen, who organized and led the revolutionary movement that overthrew the dynasty. Almost all of them were involved in publishing their own and other Chinese works, an important consideration, given how widely printed materials could be circulated. One is reminded of the importance of Gutenberg's moveable-type press in promoting the Protestant Reformation.

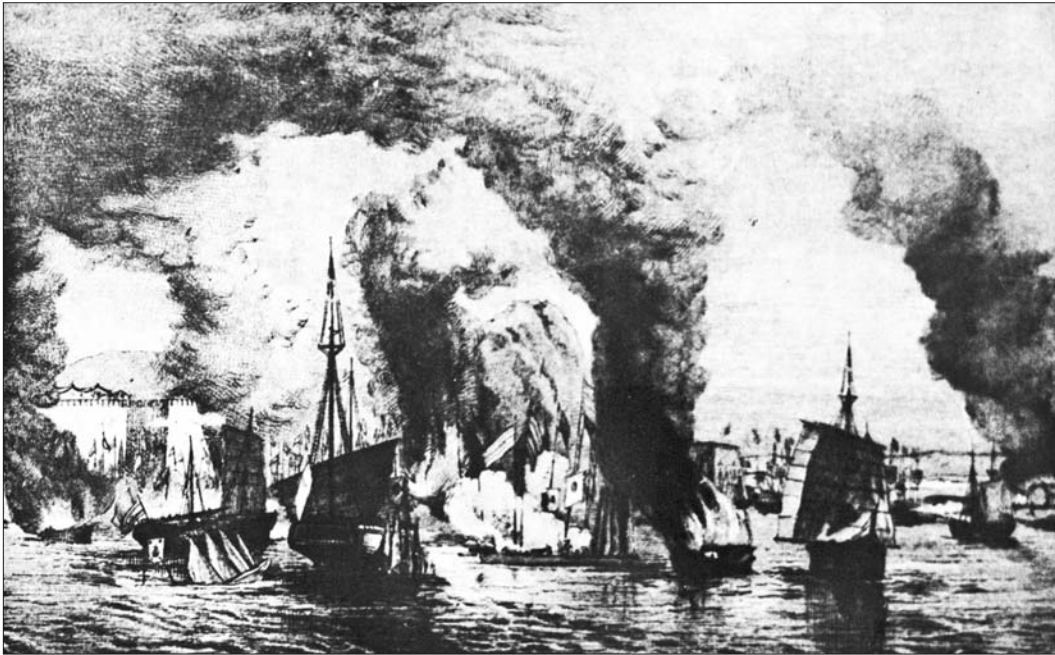
Conclusion

Protestant missionaries went to China in the nineteenth century to spread Christianity and thereby make possible the Second Coming. Once there, they realized the immensity of that objective and realized that China needed much more than a new religion. In contrast to the Western world, which was industrializing and undergoing dynamic changes in its political and social life, China seemed stuck in old patterns that resisted change. In order for Christianity to take hold, other aspects of China had to change as well. In particular, the traditional education system was restricted generally to the elite; the Chinese encountered by missionaries were illiterate and could not read the Bible even when translated into Chinese. In the missionaries' experience, most of the Chinese were desperately poor; many were addicted to opium. They lied, stole, and cheated, and they had little chance of improving any of those conditions unless the missionaries themselves addressed those problems.

So they started schools and began educating young girls, who were considered inferior to boys in Chinese society. And they fought tirelessly to end the practice of foot-binding. Medical missionaries opened free clinics to treat diseases, malnourishment, and general neglect for health and hygiene. Some converts were hired as assistants, language tutors, and translators, and they were trained as native missionaries to their own people. Others, whose education also included study of the traditional Chinese curriculum, were more knowledgeable about their own culture and that of the West, and devoted their lives to improving the deteriorating situation in China.

World history textbooks generally do not include the effects—positive or negative—of Christian mission work in the non-West. That is a lamentable omission, because a balanced analysis of historical change in those areas requires it. This brief overview has tried to show that in late Imperial China, forces were set in motion and events occurred that are impossible to understand without taking missionary work into account.

History rarely develops in a straight line, but it is possible to chart a direct linkage of events between the arrival of Protestant missionaries in China and the Revolution of 1911. Issachar Jacox Roberts, a Baptist from Tennessee, arrived at Macau in 1837 and moved to Hong Kong after the British captured it in 1841.



Actual photo of Naval battle between Taiping-Qing armies on Yangtze River.
Image source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Naval_battle_between_Taiping-Qing_on_Yangtze.jpg.

When the Treaty of Nanjing was ratified in 1843, and five port cities were opened to foreigners, he moved to Guangzhou and set up the first foreign mission station outside the city wall, but not on the island where foreign merchants had been required to conduct business. In 1847, a young Chinese man named Hong Xiuquan came to him for instruction in Christianity. Since he had been given some education in the Chinese Classics to prepare him for the imperial examinations to become an official, Roberts was delighted; this educated young man might become a missionary to his own people. When Hong requested baptism, Roberts cautiously examined his understanding of the faith, to prevent him becoming a “rice Christian,” who converted in order to get a job as an assistant without really being “saved.” Roberts sadly told Hong that he was not ready to be baptized, and Hong—having run out of money—left the mission.



Hong Xiuquan.
Image source: <http://media-2.web.britannica.com/eb-media/59/117159-004-AF41477A.jpg>.

Hong later had a vision that he interpreted as a journey to the presence of the Christian God, who commanded him to destroy the idols, which he understood to mean the other religions of China. He traveled through southern China recruiting people to his God Worshiping Society and was very successful. At some point, nativist and political ideas were added to his message, and his movement became known as the Taiping Rebellion. Capturing cities along the Yangtze River, the rebels took Nanjing in 1853 and proclaimed it the capital of the *Taiping Tianguo*, the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace. Nanjing was a symbolic choice since it had been the first capital of China's last native dynasty, the Ming.

Westerners were initially supportive of Hong and the Taipings, because Qing emperors and their officials had not, in their view, fully honored the Treaty of Nanjing. Hong, on the other hand, let it be known that he would allow foreigners into the interior of China for both trade and Christian missions. Contacts with Hong by diplomats and missionaries, however, raised serious doubts about Hong's sanity and his chances for success in winning control of China, and most Western governments declared neutrality in the rebellion. Hong invited Issachar Roberts, his old teacher, to Nanjing and offered him the post of Foreign Minister, hoping thereby to win Western support. Roberts jumped at the chance and defied the American Commissioner's order not to go in violation of neutrality. Roberts had never won many converts, and had been involved in several incidents that caused the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board to dismiss him in 1853, but he stayed on in China as an independent missionary. He needed vindication, and getting access to Hong's followers offered—in Roberts' view—a heaven-sent opportunity to achieve the success that so far had eluded him. What he found in Nanjing, though, thoroughly disillusioned him. He left after several months and published a scathing denunciation of Hong and the Taiping movement.

While Roberts was in Nanjing, Great Britain and France were winning the Second Opium War (1856–1860) against China. Their decisive victory, made possible because of the government's fight with the

The Republic of China was proclaimed on January 1, 1912, with Dr. Sun as Provisional President. Puyi, the five-year-old boy emperor, abdicated on February 12.

Taiping, as well as with two powerful foreign enemies, led to new unequal treaties with greatly expanded privileges. Western powers, having obtained what they desired, helped the Qing government defeat the Taipings in 1864 in order to preserve their newly won gains. Increased foreign presence in more cities opened by the war treaties caused many problems, and some reform-minded Chinese officials began an effort they called “Self-Strengthening,” meaning that the core values would be retained, but useful modern technology, especially armaments, would be adopted. In order to carry out this plan, the Qing court permitted provincial officials to exercise much greater authority than before, and thus diminished its own power. The humiliations mentioned previously prompted several revolutionary movements that were consolidated under the leadership of Dr. Sun Yat-sen. On October 10, 1911, a small, accidental skirmish in present-day Wuhan between revolutionaries and government forces turned into a rout. As news spread, other uprisings occurred, and the Qing dynasty collapsed. The Republic of China was proclaimed on January 1, 1912, with Dr. Sun as Provisional President. Puyi, the five-year-old boy emperor, abdicated on February 12.



Dr. Sun Yat-sen.
Image source: <http://www.history.com/encyclopedia/wa/images/WHistSunYat-sen.gif>.

Working backward chronologically, the successful revolution of 1911 was precipitated by a series of humiliations brought on by the failures of the ill-thought-out Self-Strengthening Movement. The Movement, itself a consequence of China’s loss in the Second Opium War, can be partly attributed to the Taiping Rebellion (an uprising with Christian overtones), whose leader, Hong Xiuquan, studied with a Protestant missionary in Guangzhou. This sequence is an obvious oversimplification of a complex interplay of events and forces, but an inescapable conclusion is that Christian, primarily Protestant, missions in China during the nineteenth century had a profound impact on Chinese life in many facets—political, social, and economic—and were a factor in the fall of the dynasty and the establishment of the republic. ■

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