

## Overcoming Missions Guilt

*Robert Morrison, Liang Fa, and the Opium Wars*

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### INTRODUCTION

THE PROTESTANT MISSIONARY MOVEMENT had a profound impact on China, but also left an unintended legacy in the West. Western missions guilt is an unanticipated backlash from the missionary movement, which still reverberates today. Did the missionary movement draw the missionaries inexorably into the imperial project and, thus, the sins of the West? Popular culture in America has castigated the missions movement for decades, and missions in America has seemed to be in a defensive mode. Although missions, particularly North American evangelical missions, continued to expand—with an estimated more than 110,000 American and Canadian long-term Protestant missionaries serving today—the missionary movement is nonetheless, in the minds of many Westerners, forever tied with the often discredited imperialistic project. Thus while Chinese Christians and many others in the majority world surely struggle with questions of Christian identity given this association, evangelical Christians in the West find themselves facing their own quandary.

The nineteenth-century missionaries were in many ways a product of the age in which they lived. Clearly, they said and did many things that reflected the broader imperialist, and often racist, era. These “sins” of

imperialism, and, by extension, the missions movement, have created the tremendous backlash of missions guilt. This guilt does not seem to have curtailed missions participation, at least among evangelicals, but it may have other ramifications. I sometimes worry that missions guilt impedes the ability of those of us in the West to understand our past, and thus our evangelical identity. My objective in this chapter is to ask: How can we as Evangelicals in the West today relate to our missions past? How can we identify with this past? How can we get beyond Western guilt stemming from imperialism?

If missions is indelibly tied to imperialism, then it may be impossible to forge a Christian identity apart from the sins of imperialism. And now, as greater numbers of Chinese Christians join the missions movement, how might Chinese evangelicals identify with this period of imperialism and missions history? How will they relate to the past? How might the imperialist past shape Chinese evangelical identity?

In my studies of missions history and missions in China, I have found that in a number of the most egregious interfaces of missions involvement with politics and imperialism, a complex context comprised of multiple factors influenced missionary behavior. Certainly someone unsympathetic to missions and the missions mandate could categorically wave off missionaries as mere tools or stooges of their home governments, but the missionaries involved may be deserving of a better understanding of the sometimes excruciating circumstances surrounding the decisions they made. Such an understanding seems important for Western evangelicals and also for Chinese Christians.

This chapter will focus on one of the thorniest issues in China and the West's shared past: the Opium Wars. Although several critical issues could be evaluated, the Opium Wars and the subsequent Nanjing Treaty ("unequal treaties") should show how a fresh perspective might help offer a new understanding of the legacy of missions in China. The missionaries in the 1830s and 1840s, as will be seen, faced an impossible predicament. In the face of the sometimes brutal persecution of the Chinese converts, the missionaries had to choose to remain silent or to enter into the political discussions on behalf of their Chinese colleagues.

For the missionaries, who often served as official translators for international political negotiations, to fail to speak up in defense of the persecuted Chinese Christians might have been perceived (at the time) as unacceptable, perhaps even unethical. Thus, when presented with the

opportunity at the negotiating table, the missionaries made the fateful decision to advocate for legal protections for Chinese Christians at the conclusion of the Opium Wars. And the die was cast: Christianity and imperialism have forever been tragically linked together. Christianity in China has paid a high price for this decision, which was enshrined in the Nanjing Treaty. However, what other path might the missionaries have followed? They either could have attempted to provide some legal protection for the vulnerable and fragile Chinese Christians, or remained apolitical and continued to witness the brutal suppression of the churches and of the missionary movement in China.

While this chapter takes a more sympathetic approach in examining the early missionaries in China, I am not advocating a naïve return to missions hagiography. Nor do I advocate a celebratory history, which simplistically narrates the “triumph” of God and the Church. I do not intend to provide an apologetic for missions in the past. But, rather, my aim is to ask: How can we as evangelicals today relate to our past? How can we get beyond Western guilt over imperialism? How can we positively define our identity based on our past? I suggest that careful attention to the context of the Opium Wars, avoiding both undue guilt over imperialism and Christian triumphalism, can provide a more satisfying narrative of nineteenth-century missions history in China.

This chapter will first consider the volatile climate in China when Robert Morrison arrived in 1807. Next, a brief sketch of Morrison and his early ministry in the extreme edges of China will be presented. His early convert, Liang Fa, will then be introduced, with a particular look at how their lives intersected. The multifaceted dynamics of their relationship serve as a prototype for the types of complex concerns missionaries would face in 1840 regarding the negotiations of the Treaty of Nanjing. Finally, the Opium War and the Nanjing Treaty will be summarized.

#### CONTEXT IN CHINA:

##### THE ARRIVAL OF PROTESTANT MISSIONS

To understand the role that missionaries played in altering Chinese society and culture, it is valuable to recognize how China was already changing even before the arrival of missions and Western imperialism. China had been a more or less unified empire for at least two millennia, but there was a regular rise and fall of imperial families and even outside intervention in internal Chinese leadership. Most

prominently, the Mongols ruled the Yuan Dynasty in China from 1271 to 1368. When Robert Morrison arrived in 1807, the Manchurian Qing Dynasty had been ruling since 1644. The lengthy and successful rule of the emperor Qianlong ended just before 1800. During the closing years of his reign and throughout the first decades of the nineteenth century, China was undergoing a relentless chain of crises that served as a harbinger of coming radical convulsions. Even without the series of challenges from the West through the nineteenth century, China, it seems, was bound for change.

Eminent Chinese historian John K. Fairbank offers a lengthy list of changes occurring around 1800 in China. This chapter will mention only three. The reign of Qianlong marked one of the many peaks of Chinese civilization, but China was in the midst of tremendous population growth when the missionaries began to arrive in 1807. While in 1741 the population was 142 million, by 1851 it had exploded to around 432 million. Among the many problems accompanying the rapid population growth was the tremendous pressure placed on the government bureaucracy and the traditional civil service exam system. With the government moving slowly to respond to population growth, more and more people were competing for the same number of civil service positions.

With the sharp rise in population growth, more work was needed for ever-diminishing returns. The term “immiseration” has been used to describe the worsening living standards in China. For instance, land of inferior quality took more effort to cultivate and produced less. Also, with the large population, labor was inexpensive and suppressed industrialization. While the West was developing labor-saving ideas, inexpensive labor in China reduced producers’ motivation to innovate similar solutions for production. This led to increased stagnation in China. Indeed, Fairbank argues that the very superiority achieved by Song China would become by 1800 a source of her backwardness, as though “all great achievements carry the seeds of their ossification.” Thus, for instance, the early development of the abacus in China might have later led to stagnation in the area of mathematics.

When Robert Morrison arrived in 1807, China still seemed to be one of the leading civilizations in the world. However, the reality may have been different. In hindsight, it would appear that China was already in decline and may have been moving toward inevitable crises. Western imperialism may have amplified those problems, but China was probably already on the brink of change and a new era.

## ROBERT MORRISON: THE FIRST PROTESTANT MISSIONARY

The powerful Protestant missions movement in Britain could not have emerged in a political or social vacuum. The British missions movement grew up alongside Britain's surging imperial power around the globe. Robert Morrison (1782–1834) of the London Missionary Society (LMS), the pioneer missionary to China, developed his missions calling and passion in this context. He arrived in Canton in 1807 and served in China most of the rest of his life, from 1807 to 1834. With only limited access to the southern coast of China, in 1809 Morrison took on the official role of interpreter working for the East India Company. He also served the British government on two British missions to China. His work as a translator allowed him to retain his residence in China.

In 1818, Morrison started the Anglo-Chinese College outside of China in Malacca,<sup>1</sup> and William Milne<sup>2</sup> was appointed as the first headmaster. The dual goals of the school were to train future missionaries in Chinese and to educate local Chinese boys. In 1823, Morrison and Milne finished a complete Chinese translation of the Bible. Morrison was a recognized expert on China and the Chinese language and authored around forty works in Chinese and English, the most significant being his six-volume publication *A Dictionary of the Chinese Language* (1815–1822). Although Morrison numbered only about a dozen converts during his twenty-seven-year career in China, he laid the foundation for future missions and rightfully earned the informal title, “Father of Protestant Missions in China.”

## LIANG FA: THE FIRST ORDAINED CHINESE MINISTER

Robert Morrison, spurred on by his homeland's zeal for Protestant missions, discovered a new world when he arrived in mid-Qing China, a land with an ancient civilization stretching back thousands of years. Although already possibly in decline by 1807, the early missionaries might not have perceived the dramatic changes that would convulse China in the coming decades. Given the extreme limitations placed on foreigners in China by the central Chinese government, only a small

1. Malacca was on the Malay Peninsula. It was conquered by the Portuguese in 1511 and became a strategic base for Portuguese expansion in the East Indies. In 1641, it was taken by the Dutch and in 1824 ceded to the British.

2. Milne, from Scotland, was the second Protestant missionary in China, arriving in 1813.

handful of Chinese had access to the missionaries and an opportunity to evaluate their message. Not surprisingly, Liang Fa's background matched the profile of a potential early convert to Protestant Christianity.

Liang Fa was born near Canton in 1787, twenty years before Morrison established the tentative Protestant outpost on China's southern coast of Canton. As with many of the Chinese who had an early interest in Christianity, Liang had little education, and missions would offer him an unprecedented opportunity for education and to improve his lot in life. Although not well educated, he brought to the mission the valuable skill of woodblock cutting.

Liang was a prime candidate for work in Malacca, and he accompanied William Milne there in 1815. In Malacca, Liang's skills as a printer were put to good use. With China still almost entirely closed to missions efforts, Christian and evangelistic literature was a high priority of the early missionaries. Liang Fa's publishing skills were thus highly coveted.

While in Malacca, Liang became an early Chinese convert to Protestant Christianity and was baptized by William Milne on November 3, 1816. Liang, who had memorized the Confucian classics and dabbled in Buddhism, had a sense of the importance of moral integrity, but found he lacked the power to achieve his moral ideals. Confucianism had not freed him from his "licentious thoughts," and Buddhist chanting could not relieve his moral guilt. In Christianity, he found the moral and spiritual power he desired.<sup>3</sup> Together in Malacca, Milne and Liang produced the *Monthly Chinese Magazine* for seven years. They also produced a number of Christian tracts. Best known was Liang's evangelistic tract "Good Words to Admonish the World."<sup>4</sup> Liang would also later be involved in the printing of the Chinese Bible in 1823.

In 1819, with China still essentially closed to the missionaries, Liang Fa returned to Canton. As a Chinese person, he was able to penetrate the inland and distribute Gospel literature. While Milne, who died in 1822, and Morrison were still only on the fringes of the Chinese mainland, Liang Fa became an invaluable co-laborer as the first Chinese evangelist. Morrison ordained Liang as an evangelist in 1824. Liang traveled extensively in Guangdong (Canton) Province and regularly distributed

3. Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. 2, 1500–1900 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 291.

4. That tract would have profound influence on Hong Xiuquan, leader of the violent, quasi-Christian, midcentury Taiping Rebellion.

Christian tracts. One priority for Liang was to pass out tracts at the civil service literary exams offered every three years. It was through this literature ministry that a number of the exam candidates converted to Christianity and even become co-workers in the ministry.

During the 1820s Liang Fa was arrested in China, an incident that surely dismayed his Western colleagues. He was severely punished, suffering thirty blows with a bamboo cane. Liang wrote, "I call to mind that all who preach the Gospel of our Lord Jesus must suffer persecution; and though I cannot equal the patience of Paul or Job, I desire to imitate the ancient saints, and keep my heart in peace."<sup>5</sup>

Persecution would become a hallmark of the early Protestant converts in China.

How might the missionaries have responded to such persecution of their beloved Chinese colleagues? Should Morrison, who had now been in China for more than ten years and had developed many contacts among the British and Chinese leaders in Canton, have helped Liang Fa if he had the ability to do so? As one of the key British translators, should Morrison have spent his political capital to help his friend? Morrison did intervene on behalf of Liang, and Liang was released. Thus began a long tradition of Protestant missionary intervention on behalf of Chinese Christians. With persecution still a problem, Liang then returned to Malacca.

Along with Morrison, Liang Fa would continue to pay a high cost for his faithful service. While Morrison was still limited to the periphery of China, Liang again returned to the interior of China where he continued to defy imperial edicts against Christianity. Chinese people were not allowed to convert to Christianity, nor were they allowed to distribute Christian literature. In 1834, about the time of Morrison's death, a number of Liang's Chinese co-workers were arrested. One was severely beaten, and another was put to death. During the brutal investigation, one of the Christians revealed that Liang Fa was the chief leader of their activities. Liang Fa was again forced to go on the run, escaping eventually to Singapore.

Several years after fleeing persecution in China to Singapore, Liang, China's "first Protestant evangelist" and close colleague of Morrison and Milne, was able to return to China in 1839. The persecution had

5. Scott W. Sunquist et al., eds., *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 482.

mercifully subsided. Again, the political context was destined to play a key role in missions and Chinese church history. What had changed in 1839 that allowed Liang Fa to return to China?

### THE 1840 OPIUM WAR

Throughout the early nineteenth century, Britain had been expanding trade around the world. China, however, resisted Britain's trade overtures. With China's scant interest in trade and British goods, British merchants searched for a product that would foster trade with the Chinese empire. They found that product in opium. Missionaries did not necessarily support trade in opium, and in some cases opposed it, but they owed their precarious positions in China to the merchants and the British crown. The missionaries found themselves in an almost impossible position, needing to serve the interests of both China and Britain.

As Britain, strengthened by the Industrial Revolution, expanded trade in Asia, Confucian Chinese perceived the commercial activities as bad for society and thus severely restricted trade. The Chinese limited trade to only a small handful of government-approved agencies (called "*hongs*"). Britain found the limitation intolerable and demanded, for instance, printed tariff rules in order to avoid corruption. Different perceptions of national sovereignty and global relations also led to inevitable diplomatic tensions. For example, in 1793 Lord Macartney was sent to China where the Imperial Court, largely unaware of Europe and Britain's growing economic and military might, treated him as a representative of a vassal state. But the diplomatic mission failed, when, as a "representative of her majesty the queen," Macartney refused to kowtow to the emperor.

Even minor diplomatic crises could also leave missionaries, especially those serving as official interpreters, with potential delicate conflicts of interest. For instance, when a British gunner accidentally killed a Chinese bystander during a cannon salute, China demanded that all parties responsible for the tragedy be turned over. This incident raised complex questions regarding national sovereignty and the adequacy (in the eyes of the British) of Chinese law. The British did reluctantly agree to turn over the guilty party, and an Englishman was executed by the Chinese authorities. These types of events prompted consideration of issues of extraterritoriality and the extent of British interest in protecting British citizens (including missionaries) abroad.

In the 1830s, the Chinese finally made the decision to outlaw opium. Lin Zexu (Commander Lin) was sent from Beijing to the South to halt the existing trade, and he demanded that the British merchants hand over their stock of opium. The British refused, but Lin would not allow the British ships to depart from the Chinese port. After several weeks the British relinquished the opium, and, dramatically, Lin had it washed into the sea. Furious, the traders demanded that the British government pursue war with China in order to force trade concessions. The merchants financed the war, and a small fleet of British ironclads easily defeated China's outdated navy, capturing several coastal cities.

The Chinese were thus forced to the negotiating table. While the missionaries were not necessarily involved in the events surrounding the war, they served as official translators when the two sides sat down to forge an agreement after the war. Robert Morrison had died in 1834, but his son, John Robert Morrison (1814–1843), served as the chief interpreter. He served as the “Chinese Secretary” and prepared the final text of the Nanjing Treaty. Also on the translation team was the well-known German missionary Karl Gützlaff (1803–1851). Both John Robert Morrison and Karl Gützlaff were involved in the translation of the Bible that was completed in 1847.<sup>6</sup> Morrison died prematurely of fever in 1843, but Gützlaff traveled extensively—passing out literature and evangelizing along the Chinese coast. He also founded the China Evangelization Society.<sup>7</sup>

Given the opportunity to sit at the negotiating table for the Nanjing Treaty, how might the missionaries have responded? Conversion to Christianity was still illegal, the missionaries worked with stringent limitations, and the Chinese converts, such as Liang Fa who had fled to Singapore, were brutally persecuted. While the missionaries may have been willing to forgo military protection themselves, an even more problematic question was in view. Should they, for the sake of Christ and the Gospel, push for more access in China? And, more importantly, should they try to provide protection for persecuted Chinese Christians? Would it be right, or even ethical, not to provide protection when they could?

6. The translation team of this exceptional version in classical Chinese also included Walter Henry Medhurst and Elijah Coleman Bridgman.

7. See his colorful story in his *Journals* (Karl F. A. Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages along the Coast of China in 1831, 1832, & 1833* (Boston: Elibron Classics, 2005), and in Jessie G. Lutz, *Opening China: Karl F. A. Gützlaff and Sino-Western Relations, 1827–1852*, *Studies in the History of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

The Chinese believers were not only the missionaries' most effective colleagues in ministry, but surely, in many cases, were, along with their spouses and children, their dearest friends in the world.

The Nanjing Treaty, signed in 1842, opened five new ports to British trade: Canton, Shanghai, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Amoy (Xiamen). The Treaty also ceded Hong Kong to Britain. Missionaries were allowed residence in the Treaty ports, Chinese Christians were to receive protection, and the die was cast. Christianity was forever tied to imperialism.

The "treaty century" would last from 1842 to 1943, when Britain and the United States formally gave up their unequal rights of extra-territoriality. During those decades, the Western powers put increasing pressure on China, forcing an opening to trade. The concessions from China also provided Western missionaries with greater access to China, and greater power—first on the Chinese coast, and, after 1860 and the Second Opium War, in the inland.<sup>8</sup> Chinese Christians also received greater rights and freedoms, while also, at least in some cases, losing credibility among the broader Chinese population.

## CONCLUSION

Liang Fa returned to China in 1839 and continued his invaluable ministry as an indigenous evangelist and ordained pastor. The end of the First Opium War began a new era in the evangelization of China, and both missionaries and Chinese Christians quickly took advantage of the new opportunities. Foreigners were allowed to learn Chinese and to build houses, schools, and churches in the Treaty ports. Liang served as pastor of a small church of about thirty Chinese believers, and in 1848 he assisted the LMS in starting a hospital in Canton. By the time he died in 1855, Christian missions and the Chinese churches had developed a strong and lasting foundation.

Hindsight reveals the intractable problems that the missionaries created during the first half-century of missions in China. To this day, the church's perceived tie to imperialism hampers Christians and evangelism in China. Yet, to condemn the missionaries outright, based on twenty-first century sensibilities and the unforeseen consequences,

8. J. Hudson Taylor took immediate advantage of the concessions that opened the Chinese interior to Western missions after the Second Opium War when he founded the China Inland Mission in 1865.

seems blatantly unfair. It seems, rather, that these missionaries deserve an impartial evaluation that attends to their excruciating context.

A balanced and nuanced understanding of missions in the imperialist past may help missionary efforts in the twenty-first century. As China emerges as an economic superpower, Chinese perceptions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism may shift. China, seeking markets and resources around the globe, may eventually attribute slightly more benign motives to previous forms of Western imperialism. Moreover, Chinese Christians may see more clearly the potential hazards of pursuing missions in the context of national global expansion. If China emerges as a Christian force in global missions, questions of Chinese evangelical identity will also continue to evolve.

In the United States, popular views in American academies may also be challenged. The sometimes selfish motives behind imperialism might begin to be seen as not peculiar to Western civilization, but as a universal proclivity. Further, the more pure and enlightened motives of the earlier missionaries might also be appreciated. And understanding the nineteenth-century context may help Americans today be more sympathetic to the difficult plight of the missionaries in China, who were trying to serve the interests of the Chinese people they loved while furthering opportunities to share the Gospel.

Missions continues to go forward, and it seems that the most effective missions will forge global partnerships. For healthy partnerships, it seems critical to face the past of Western imperialism tied with Christianity. But the evaluation of that past should not only result in criticism, but also be fair to the men and women involved. Though I am not suggesting a return to Christian triumphalism, I do hope to avoid a paralyzing missions guilt.