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# The Legacy of Robert Morrison

J. Barton Starr

When asked in 1807 by an American merchant if he really expected to “make an impression on the idolatry of the Great Chinese Empire,” Robert Morrison replied, “No, sir, I expect God will.” This well-known exchange, related by Isabella Graham, epitomizes Morrison’s approach to his mission to China.<sup>1</sup> As the pioneer Protestant missionary to a country closed to mission work (both by the Chinese government and by the British East India Company), Morrison knew that his work would be that of a forerunner. He knew that he would have little opportunity to preach the Gospel or to shepherd converts into the sheepfold of God’s kingdom. But he also clearly believed that God had called him to prepare the way for others who would follow in his footsteps. Every study of Christian missions in China and almost every survey history of Christian missions around the world briefly discusses this lone British missionary, and yet surprisingly little substantial scholarly work has been written about him.

Robert Morrison was born on January 5, 1782, in Morpeth, England. At about age three, he moved with his family to Newcastle. His father, James, was a last and boot-tree maker and an elder in the High Bridge Presbyterian Church, the church young Robert later attended.<sup>2</sup> He received his early education first from his uncle James Nicholson (a local schoolmaster) and later from Rev. Adam Laidlaw. During his teenage years, Morrison apparently studied the Bible diligently and was moved by reading articles in missionary magazines. When he was fifteen years old, he “formed the design of engaging as a missionary.”<sup>3</sup> However, for the next few years he continued to work with his father and was briefly and unsuccessfully apprenticed as a patten-ring maker, followed by a stint traveling throughout England with a company of strolling players. At the age of twenty, however, he felt God calling him into a life of mission service in Africa, and in 1803 he went to London to study at Hoxton Academy. The following year, the London Missionary Society appointed him as a missionary. For the next two and a half years, Morrison studied at the Missionary Academy at Gosport, as well as studying medicine at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in London and astronomy at Greenwich. Contrary to Morrison’s expectations to go to Africa, however, the LMS asked him to go to China, there to begin translation of the Bible and to do other work to pave the way for future missionaries. With little hesitation, Morrison accepted the change in assignment and began preparing to go to China.

## Beginning a Lifelong Study

Part of that preparation included beginning to study the Chinese language. Many years earlier a copy of a partial translation of the Bible into Chinese had been given to the British Library.<sup>4</sup> There, with the assistance of Yong Sam-tak, a Chinese man who was in London, Morrison began copying the partial translation and started what would be a lifelong occupation of learning and translating Chinese.<sup>5</sup>

Morrison sailed for China on January 31, 1807, going via the

United States because of the East India Company’s prohibition on missionaries in China. On April 18 he arrived in the United States, where the famous incident cited in the opening of this article took place. Morrison enjoyed his time in the United States and made acquaintances in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston who would become lifelong correspondents and supporters of his work. On May 12 he sailed from New York on board the *Trident*, arriving in Canton on September 6, 1807.<sup>6</sup>

As it was illegal for him to be in Canton as a missionary, he first lived in the American Factory<sup>7</sup> where he undertook the task of learning the Chinese language. Because it was a crime punishable by death for a Chinese person to teach a foreigner the Chinese language, through a series of surreptitious means he employed local Chinese as helpers and teachers. One observer noted that Morrison’s teachers always brought shoes with them

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## In the British Library, Morrison began a lifelong occupation of learning and translating Chinese.

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so that if somebody stopped by unexpectedly, they could claim they were there to repair shoes for Morrison.

It is difficult to classify Morrison’s work because he did so many different types of work. Because of the restrictions placed upon him by the Chinese government, by the East India Company, and by the Macao government, Morrison clearly was not an evangelist in the mode of later missionary evangelists. Apparently, in his entire missionary career, fewer than a dozen Chinese became Christians as a direct result of his ministry. This lack of opportunity to function as an evangelist was sometimes frustrating to Morrison, but he early realized that this would be the case and that God had called him to prepare the way for others.

## Employment with East India Company

Two significant events occurred in Morrison’s life in 1809. First, the East India Company recognized his ability with the Chinese language and employed him as their translator in China. The salary and other benefits from this employment enabled him to work in China with little need for money from the LMS. It also enabled him to be a generous benefactor for a number of projects. Finally, it gave him legitimacy in that he now had a legal right to remain in Macao and Canton as an employee of the East India Company.

Second, in that year he met, fell in love with, and married Mary Morton, whose father was a surgeon with the Royal Irish Regiment and was briefly in Macao with his family. In an apparently happy marriage, Robert and Mary had two children that lived to adulthood<sup>8</sup>—Mary Rebecca and John Robert, the latter quite significant in the later history of British relations with China and then as part of the government of the new colony of Hong Kong. Mary’s brother William also remained in Macao

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with the Morrisons and was under the tutelage of Morrison for a number of years. Later, William became a minister and worked in India. Never very strong, Mary lost her health, and in January 1815 she returned to England with the two children, which initiated a bleak time in Morrison's life. Later, her health somewhat improved, and in 1820 she and the children returned to Macao, but she died there in 1821.<sup>9</sup> Out of respect for Mary and Robert, the East India Company purchased a plot of land in Macao and established a Protestant cemetery so that Mary could be buried with dignity within the city walls. The children then returned to England and Morrison was again alone. Loneliness was one of the themes that persisted throughout Morrison's correspondence over the years as he struggled in his work in Canton and Macao without co-workers until very late in his career.

Only once in his career did Morrison return to England. Leaving China in December 1823, he arrived in England in March 1824 and was reunited with his children. On the voyage to

## Struggling without co-workers, Morrison frequently wrote of his loneliness.

England, he wrote a delightful journal entitled "The Domestic Memoir of Mrs. Morrison" to give his children something to help them remember their mother. In it, he summarized his and Mary's life together and quoted extensively from their correspondence.<sup>10</sup> While in Britain, Morrison was in constant demand as a speaker, helped to establish a language institution for missionaries to begin studying languages in Britain before going overseas, had an audience with King George IV and presented him with a copy of his Chinese translation of the Bible, and in November 1825 married Elizabeth Armstrong.<sup>11</sup> Morrison and his family returned to Macao and China in 1826. He and Eliza had five children, some of whom returned to live and work in China, as did both Mary Rebecca and John Robert.<sup>12</sup>

Living in Canton and Macao for twenty-five years, Morrison focused mainly on translation. In addition to his work with the East India Company, he was called upon to serve as the official interpreter for two British missions to China—the Amherst Mission in 1816 and the Napier Mission in 1834. It is for Morrison's work as translator (and often negotiator) for the Amherst Mission as well as for such incidents as the Topaz affair and the Lintin affair that Morrison has been criticized most severely by historians as an agent of colonial interests. Morrison saw his work in these cases primarily as a functionary doing a job. He also saw these assignments as distractions from his missionary work, and he particularly resented the part he was forced to play in translating and negotiating local disputes. He was aware that his role as an intermediary would also be that of cultural interpreter to both parties and that he would probably be criticized by both sides. When this in fact occurred, he was saddened but not surprised. That later historians would also take similar views probably would not astonish him.

Morrison's first publications were Chinese-language tracts, but within ten years of his arrival in Canton, he had published a translated collection of Chinese literature and a grammar book of the Chinese language to assist other Westerners who wanted to learn Chinese (his primary concern was for missionaries). At the

same time, he continued to work on translation of the Bible as well as a dictionary. The East India Company set up a press and published his six-volume *Dictionary of the Chinese Language* between 1815 and 1822.

His translation work on the Bible began immediately upon his arrival in China, and the first portion (the Book of Acts, based upon the Chinese manuscript in the British Library) was published in 1810. With the assistance of William Milne, a colleague in Malacca, he completed the entire Bible in Chinese in 1819 and published it in 1823 (by the latter date Milne was dead). Although Joshua Marshman published a Chinese Bible in Serampore, India, in 1822, Morrison and Milne's Bible came to be the one used by missionaries throughout most of Chinese-speaking Asia. Morrison, however, was well aware of shortcomings in the translation. In 1819 he wrote to the London Missionary Society: "If Morrison & Milne's Bible shall, in China, at some subsequent period hold such a place in reference to a better translation, as Wickliff or Tyndall's now hold in reference to our present English version—many will forever bless God for the attempt. . . . Granting that many had the *Talent* to do better than we have done, but few appear to have had the *will*."<sup>13</sup> In many places the translation was awkward, infelicitous, or even incorrect. Morrison began very early to make revisions as he understood the language better, and during the late 1820s and early 1830s he encouraged his son John Robert and others (including Karl Gützlaff, Walter Medhurst, Edwin Stevens, and Elijah Coleman Bridgman) to undertake an entirely new revised edition of the Bible that would be more useful.<sup>14</sup> Despite the flaws in Morrison's first translation, Yung Wing, a Yale University graduate (the first Chinese to graduate from any American university), later wrote about Morrison: "The importance and bearing of his dictionary and the translation of the Bible into Chinese, on subsequent missionary work in China, were fundamental and paramount."<sup>15</sup>

## Call for Co-workers

Almost from the day of his arrival in Canton, Morrison sent out frequent pleas for co-workers for the immense task of evangelizing China. The first positive response to his entreaties came in 1813, when the LMS sent William Milne and his wife to join Morrison. However, because he had no official connection with the East India Company, Milne was not allowed to remain in Canton or Macao. After some initial investigations elsewhere, he settled in Malacca. Milne and Morrison established a very close personal relationship, and Morrison grieved over Milne's death in 1822 almost as deeply as he did over the death of his wife, Mary.

In their nine years of collaboration, Morrison and Milne worked on a number of projects in addition to translation of the Bible. They produced two periodicals: *Indo-Chinese Gleaner* (in English) and *Chinese Monthly Magazine* (in Chinese). One of their most high-profile collaborations for the future of mission work in Asia, however, was the establishment of the Anglo-Chinese College in Malacca in 1818. The college had the dual purpose of providing Chinese-language training for future missionaries and of educating local boys, a number of whom played significant roles in later Chinese history. While the college was not everything he had hoped it would be, it was sufficiently successful that Sir Stamford Raffles and Morrison agreed to move it to the new British colony of Singapore. Although Raffles's departure from Singapore thwarted these plans, ten years after Morrison's death James Legge moved the Anglo-Chinese College to newly established Hong Kong.

As Morrison continued to live and work in Canton and Macao, he published approximately forty other works in English and Chinese. In addition, he published for a short time a periodical entitled *Evangelist and Miscellanea Sinica* and served as "assistant editor" (actually, more of a contributor or consultant) for the *Canton Register*, the first English-language newspaper in China. He contributed numerous articles to that and other periodicals. As a result of his publication work, Morrison became known worldwide as a noted sinologue and was granted an honorary doctorate by the University of Glasgow in 1817. Consequently, he carried on an extensive correspondence with scholars as well as with those who supported his work as a missionary.

As the lone Protestant missionary in China, Morrison's frequent calls for co-workers began to bear fruit. First, Milne was sent out, and by the late 1820s others were beginning to turn their attention toward the Middle Kingdom. Morrison's appeals led to the American Seamen's Union sending Rev. David Abeel to Canton in 1830. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions responded to his call for workers by sending Elijah Coleman Bridgman to China in 1830, where he worked under the tutelage of Morrison in learning the language and then as a co-worker until Morrison's death.<sup>16</sup> Soon others were coming in larger numbers, so that by the time of Morrison's death in 1834, there was a small but growing missionary presence on the coast of China.

### Pioneer in Missiological Issues

As the first Protestant missionary in China, Morrison also faced, dealt with, and foreshadowed many of the missiological issues that arose in later years. For example, he briefly tried adopting Chinese dress and manners but soon abandoned the practice as unrealistic and unnecessary for his work. He frequently had to deal with questions as to whether his work, which centered on translation and education, was really "mission work" or not. Did one have to be an evangelist to be a true missionary? Were

## Morrison's most famous convert, Liang Fa, had a successful ministry as China's first indigenous evangelist.

educational institutions and mission work compatible? Morrison also was an early advocate of sending single women missionaries to China. In 1823 he wrote that "[Christian] females are essential; but Missionaries' Wives who are Mothers as soon as they arrive in heathen lands are seldom in sufficient health; nor have sufficient leisure to qualify themselves. Pious young women to acquire the pagan language & teach girls & grown women, would be very useful in the [missionary] Community."<sup>17</sup>

### Notes

1. Throughout the rest of her life, Isabella Graham, whom Morrison addressed as "Dear Mother," remained a correspondent with Morrison and a supporter of his ministry.
2. James Morrison was a farmer before he moved to Newcastle.
3. Morrison to Rev. Alexander Waugh, Hoxton, May 27, 1804, Council for World Mission Archives, School of Oriental and African Studies,

While Morrison saw few direct results from his ministry in terms of conversions, and apparently some of those who did become Christians later either left the faith completely or became less diligent, one of his converts did have a significant influence on the development of Christianity in China. Liang Fa, one of his earliest co-workers, became known as the first Chinese evangelist and had a long ministry along the southern coast of China.<sup>18</sup>

Robert Morrison died in Canton on August 1, 1834, and was

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buried alongside his first wife, Mary, and infant son, James, at the Protestant cemetery in Macao. The causes of death were apparently a fever (brought on by a cold caught in a squall while aboard ship between Macao and Canton) and exhaustion. The Protestant Christian world mourned the passing of a giant in mission history.

What is the legacy of Robert Morrison? He is often praised in articles and books on mission history—and occasionally is vilified in works dealing with imperialism in China because of his work with the East India Company and the two British embassies to China. The truth, as usual, lies somewhere in between. Clearly, he shared some of the prejudices of his early nineteenth-century British contemporaries and the desire of evangelicals to share the Gospel with the "heathen" of China. It is equally clear, however, that as Morrison continued to live, learn, and work among the Chinese, he gained a profound respect for Chinese culture, language, and some of the people. While he 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.

Before Morrison's arrival and years of work in China, Protestant evangelicals had only the vaguest idea of China as a place where the Gospel needed to be shared. One of Morrison's greatest contributions was to bring China to the attention of evangelicals of Europe and America. A diligent correspondent and a frequent contributor to periodicals, he constantly kept the needs of China's masses before the Protestant churches in the rest of the world. It may not be too much to say that without Morrison, Protestant Christianity would have been much later making its way to China. From the time of Morrison's arrival in Canton in 1807, China became more to Protestant Christians in Europe and America than simply an exotic place in the Far East that produced silk, spices, and other unusual products. He is rightfully known as the father of Protestant missions in China.

London Missionary Society (hereinafter cited as LMS), South China, Incoming Letters, Folder #1, Jacket A; Interdocumentation Corporation (hereinafter IDC) MF H-2138, #1.

4. Perhaps translated by the Jesuit missionary Jean Basset (1662–1707).
5. There is no evidence to indicate why Yong Sam-tak was in London, but one of the earliest extant documents by Morrison discusses his

- first meeting with Yong. See Robert Morrison, Memorandum of Conversation with Sam Tak, 1803, LMS, South China, Incoming Letters, Folder #1, Jacket A; IDC MF H-2138, #1.
6. Morrison wrote in his journal and correspondence that he arrived in Macao on Friday, September 4, and in Canton on Sunday, September 6 (Robert Morrison's Journal, September 4, 1807, LMS, South China, Journals; IDC MF H-2138, #564; Robert Morrison to Thomas Wilson, Canton, October 9, 1807, Dr. Williams's Library, London, Archives of the New College, London, L.52/2/5 iv).
  7. The American Factory was a collection of buildings that formed a portion of the restricted enclave in Canton where Chinese officials permitted foreign traders to live and work during the trading season (about five months out of the year).
  8. Their first son, James, was born and died on March 5, 1811.
  9. Mary apparently died of cholera.
  10. "The Domestic Memoir" will be published as part of *The Papers of Robert Morrison*.
  11. I have been unable to locate much information about the wedding itself. Even in her biography of her husband, Eliza does not write about the courtship, engagement or wedding, except to say that the wedding took place.
  12. The five children were Robert, Martin Crofton, Hannah, George Staunton, and Charles Marjoribanks.
  13. Morrison to the Directors of the LMS, Canton, November 25, 1819,

LMS, South China, Incoming Letters, Folder #1, Jacket C; IDC MF H-2138, #31.

14. As early as 1821 Morrison wrote, "It is desirable I should visit Malacca & revise the Scripture Translations" (Morrison to W. Alers Hankey, Canton, October 11, 1821, LMS, South China, Incoming Letters, Folder #2, Jacket A; IDC MF H-2138, #35).
15. Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America* (New York: Henry Holt, 1909), p. 15. Yung Wing named one of his sons Morrison Brown Yung (p. 222).
16. Abeel and Bridgman were both appointed in 1829 and sailed to China on the same ship in 1830. After approximately two years, Abeel came under the auspices of the ABCFM.
17. Morrison also wrote that a longer-term result of sending single female missionaries abroad was that "by serving in this capacity for a time, [they would] be eminently fitted for Missionaries' wives" (Morrison to George Burder and William Alers Hankey, Canton, November 10, 1823, LMS, South China, Incoming Letters, Folder #2, Jacket C; IDC MF H-2138, #36-37).
18. Liang Fa's name in Cantonese (his native dialect) is Leühng Gùng Faat. His pamphlet *Good Words for Exhorting the Age* (in Chinese) strongly influenced Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping Rebellion. For a recent study of this influence, see Jonathan D. Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), pp. 17-68.

## Bibliography

There are many brief works on Robert Morrison, and he is mentioned in virtually every work on missions in China. However, there is no modern scholarly biography. The best available is Marshall Broomhall, *Robert Morrison: A Master-Builder* (London: Livingstone Press, 1924). Another useful work is his widow's biography of Morrison. See Elizabeth Armstrong Morrison, *Memoirs of the Life and Labours of Robert Morrison, D.D.*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1839). The latter is somewhat difficult to find in print but is available on microfiche from Interdocumentation Corporation in Leiden, Netherlands. The main depository of Robert Morrison materials is the collection of London Missionary Society materials at the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. There is a quantity of other material scattered around the world, which at a later date will be brought together in a collected edition entitled *The Papers of Robert Morrison*.

### Works by Robert Morrison in Chinese

- 1811[?] *A Summary of the Divine Doctrine*. Canton[?].
- 1812[?] *The Doctrine of Jesus in Catechism Form*. Canton.
- 1815 *An Outline of Old Testament History*. N.p.
- 1818 *Daily Morning and Evening Prayers of the Church of England*. Malacca: [Anglo-Chinese Press].
- 1818 *Hymns for Nurturing the Spirit*. Macao.
- 1819 *Brief Notes on the Journey to the West*. N.p.
- 1823 *The Holy Bible*. 21 vols. Malacca: Mission Press.

### Works by Robert Morrison, in English

- 1812 *Horae Sinicae: Translations from the Popular Literature of the Chinese*. London: Black & Parry.
- 1815 *A Grammar of the Chinese Language*. Serampore: At the Mission Press.
- 1815 *Translations from the Original Chinese, with Notes*. Canton: East India Company's Press.
- 1815-22 *A Dictionary of the Chinese Language, in Three Parts*. 6 vols. Macao: East India Company's Press.
- 1816 *Dialogues and Detached Sentences in the Chinese Language, with a Free and Verbal Translation in English*. Macao: East India Company's Press.
- 1817 *View of China for Philological Purposes, Containing a Sketch of*

*Chinese Chronology, Geography, Government, Religion & Customs*. Macao: East India Company.

- 1818 *Familiar Lectures on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Philippians*. Malacca: Anglo-Chinese Press.
- 1819 *A Memoir of the Principal Occurrences During an Embassy from the British Government to the Court of China in the Year 1816*. London. Reprint, James Nichols, 1820.
- 1821 *China. A Dialogue, for the Use of Schools: Being Ten Conversations Between a Father and His Two Children, Concerning the History and Present State of the Country*. London: James Nisbet.
- 1823 *Lectures on the Sayings of Jesus: Preached in China During the Year 1818*. Malacca: Mission Press.
- 1823 *Notices Concerning China, and the Port of Canton. Also a Narrative of the Affair of the English Frigate Topaz, 1821-22: with Remarks on Homicides, and an Account of the Fire of Canton*. Malacca: Mission Press.
- 1824 *Memoirs of the Rev. William Milne, D.D.: Late Missionary to China and Principal of the Anglo-Chinese College*. Malacca: Mission Press.
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- 1825 *The Knowledge of Christ Supremely Excellent: The Means and the Duty of Diffusing It Among the Nations*. London: Francis Westley.
- 1825 *Regard to the Affairs of Others: A Discourse Delivered at Hoxton Academy Chapel, February 6, 1825*. London: Samuel Burton.
- 1825 *Thoughts on Missions; Written After a Perusal of Douglas's Hints on Missions*. London: W. Simpkin & R. Marshall. Printed anonymously, but written by Morrison.
- 1826 *A Parting Memorial; Consisting of Miscellaneous Discourses with Remarks on Missions*. London: W. Simpkin & R. Marshall.
- 1828 *Vocabulary of the Canton Dialect*. Macao: East India Company's Press.
- 1832 *Lectures on the Sayings of Jesus*. 2 parts. Malacca: Mission Press.
- 1833 *Admonitions: A Sermon Preached on Board the American Ship, Morrison, at the Whampoa, in China, December, 2, 1833*. [Macao]: Albion Press.
- 1835 *A Voice from China*. London: Richard Baynes & J. Nisbet.