Cultural Imperialism and American Protestant Missionaries: Collaboration and Dependency in Mid-Nineteenth-Century China

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The term "cultural imperialism" has become an increasingly familiar presence in both academic and popular discourse. Although it continues to raise disapproving eyebrows, much of its current usage is quite casual, suggesting an assumed awareness and acceptance of the term on the part of the audience.¹ This is remarkable for a term with distinct anti-American overtones, whose origin lies in the outrage of Third World nationalists over various forms of dominance that seemed to perpetuate their exploitation and impoverishment in the post-colonial era. For the historian of missions, a no less remarkable change in the conventional pieties of American culture is revealed by the readiness with which many people today will accept "cultural imperialism" as a generic label for foreign missionaries.

However, cultural imperialism has yet to prove its usefulness as a term for analysis for better understanding mission history. My sense is that there are basically two reasons for its limited usage to date. First is the lack of a widely

accepted, precise, and rigorous definition of cultural imperialism. Calling missionaries “cultural imperialists” has served mainly to announce that we no longer share the view that non-Christian religions are false, deluded, and corrupt systems destined to be superseded by Christianity. Beyond that, however, it is not clear whether the term itself suggests any new questions or perspectives on the relationship between the missionary enterprise and the larger history of Western imperialism.

Second, I suspect that many historians have resisted describing missionaries as cultural imperialists because it implies an overly sweeping condemnation of missions. Blanket indictments of missionaries are nothing new, and much energy has already been expended in refuting simplistic and overly generalized depictions. One of the most common has been the idea that missionaries served as a kind of “advance guard” of empire, paving the way for commerce and conquest. This notion persists despite efforts like Stephen Neill’s, in Colonialism and Christian Missions, to refute it as “naive.”

Like others more sympathetic to missions, Neill prefers a case-by-case assessment of missionary imperialism in terms of the degree to which they “deliberately tried to westernize their converts.” The issue of whether missionaries sought to “Christianize” or “civilize” is one with deep roots, going back a time very early in the modern missionary enterprise when missionaries began making efforts to leave their excess cultural baggage at home and export only the Christian religion pure and simple. On the assumption that there is nothing inherently imperialistic about the Christian religion itself and that only the broader trappings of Western civilization have any value to the imperialistic purposes of the

2. Stephen Neill, Colonialism and Christian Missions (New York, 1966), 13-14; cf. Vladiilen Vorontsov, From the Missionary Days to Reagan: U.S. China Policy (Moscow, 1986; trans., 1987), 24-25: “Many Americans acknowledged, as they still do, that the missionary was the ‘forerunner of commerce’...It is still admitted in U.S. official quarters that in the twentieth century the American monopolies Standard Oil Co. and British American Tobacco Co. were, thanks to missionaries, able to function profitably in China.”

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West, scholars ever since have used this framework of analysis as a basic yardstick for taking the measure of missionary imperialism.

At the very least, this line of analysis has demonstrated fairly conclusively that missions operated according to their own agenda in a complex and variable relation with the imperialist enterprise as a whole. Nonetheless, the “Christianization” versus “civilization” model has not entirely escaped criticism. Catherine Albaneese observes that it rests on the arguably naive assumption that “religion is an ingredient separable in theory and in fact from culture.”5 Even Neill concedes that the explicit intentions of missionaries were often subverted by an “‘imperialistic’ spirit” that became pervasive in the late nineteenth century.6 Perhaps missionaries are linked to imperialism by an “imperial culture”7 that bound missionaries to the larger system despite all the efforts they may have made to preach the simple message of Christ crucified.

Taking the concept of “imperial culture” as a starting point, cultural imperialism may be defined as the active expression abroad of a culture that has been shaped by the experience of aggressive expansion and dominance. This definition helps to move analysis beyond conscious intentions and formal policies toward the deeper, cultural forces that shaped missionary behavior. Even more important, “imperial culture” posits a link between missions and imperialism that is not tied to any specific, functional role that missionaries played in the larger operations of the Western powers. It thus makes it possible to recognize the functional autonomy of missions without seeing this as necessarily refuting their imperialistic character. Missionaries may be considered cultural imperialists regardless of whether they served as advance

7. The term is borrowed from Helen Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire: European Women in Colonial Nigeria* (Urbana and Chicago, 1987), 4.
agents, subversives, propagandists, salespeople, or in any other particular way of use to other imperialists.

In short, cultural imperialism represents an approach to connecting missions with imperialism that frames the question in structural, rather than functional, terms. The term “cultural imperialism” itself connotes a form of imperialism distinct and potentially autonomous from political or economic imperialism. The essential relationship between cultural imperialists and other types derives more from analogous ideologies and modes of operation than from overt cooperation. This line of analysis asks, first, whether missionaries shared the beliefs, values, and attitudes of imperialists and, second, whether they in fact acted like imperialists in the policies they adopted and the methods they chose. In this way, arguing that missionaries were cultural imperialists does not depend on proving that their actions directly served the interests of political and economic imperialism.

The danger is that a search for structural parallels between missionary behavior and ideology and that of other Westerners could easily lapse into vague insinuations. This can only be avoided by clearly defining the element of force—the coercive power—involved in the diffusion of Western culture that might have made the work of missionaries imperialistic. Because culture consists of internally held values, beliefs, and attitudes, it seems relatively immune to change by external force. In a recent attempt to define cultural imperialism, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., distinguishes the “mere communication of ideas and values across national borders” from cultural imperialism, which he defines as “purposeful aggression by one culture against another.” But how does one distinguish communication from aggression? Schlesinger concludes, “Such communication becomes aggression only when accompanied by political, economic, or military pressure.” Once again, a functional connection to other forms of imperialism has become the defining characteristic of cultural imperialism.

To develop a concept of cultural imperialism as some-

thing functionally distinct from political and economic imperialism, we need an expanded definition of force and aggression. William Hutchison acknowledges this when he writes that missionaries must certainly be considered imperialists if “the possible instruments of imposition are not limited to guns and power politics—if the tools of the trade include, for example, ordinary persuasiveness backed by vastly superior resources.” Thus, cultural imperialism becomes fully a force in its own right to the extent that we can flesh out Hutchison’s suggestion, pointing up new ways in which the voluntaristic, persuasive methods of the missionary could nonetheless be considered tools of aggression and instruments of domination.

For this purpose, the most useful theoretical groundwork has been done by radical peace researchers, who have been very specifically interested in developing an expanded definition of force. Their key contribution has been Johan Galtung’s structural theory of imperialism. For Galtung, imperialism is not at bottom either economic, political, or military; all of these are types of imperialism no more basic than the two other types he postulates: communication and cultural imperialism. Although all of these types are linked and mutually reinforce the dominance of the “Center” over the “Periphery” nations, it is not in essence the linkage that makes each imperialistic, but the way each reproduces the basic structure of “dominance and power relationships” in the imperialist system. The “tremendous inequality” in these relationships is, for Galtung, what marks them as a form of “structural violence” and hence imperialistic.

Galtung thus finds cultural relationships between the Center and the Periphery imperialistic because they evince a “pattern” that is “parallel” to economic imperialism. The pattern is one in which “the Center always provides the teachers and the definition of that worthy of being taught (from the gospels of Christianity to the gospels of Technology), and the Periphery always provides the learners.” The parallel to economic imperialism is illustrated with reference to

the pattern of scientific teams from the Center who go to Periphery nations to collect data (raw material) in the form of deposits, sediments, flora, fauna, archaeological findings, attitudes, behavioral patterns, and so on for data processing, data analysis, and theory formation (processing, in general) in the Center universities (factories), so as to be able to send the finished product, a journal, a book (manufactured goods) back for consumption in the center of the Periphery—after first having created a demand for it through demonstration effect, training in the Center country, and some degree of low level participation in the data collection team.10

Galtung’s idea of structural inequality in Center-Periphery relations as a form of imperialistic domination borrows heavily from dependency theory. The contribution of dependency theorists toward building a theory of cultural imperialism derives from their critical evaluation of post-colonial elites in Latin America and Africa. In this view, the indigenous elites of these nations functioned, not as autonomous agents promoting a self-sustaining process of modernization and economic development, but rather as collaborators helping to perpetuate neocolonialism and economic dependency in underdeveloped nations. Like theorists of modernization and imperialism before them, the theorists of the dependency school tended to be heavily oriented toward economics, but to the extend that they emphasized the role of indigenous elites, they opened the door for a more critical analysis of social and cultural factors as well.11

During the 1970s, the dependency school was increasingly criticized for an overly pessimistic and deterministic view of development problems.12 Nevertheless, dependency


12. Norman Etherington, Theories of Imperialism: War, Conquest and Capital (London and Totowa, N.J., 1984), 259. Indeed, many of the problems with dependency theories seem to be particularly exacerbated when the focus is shifted from economic to cultural dependence. Evelina Dagnino, “Cultural and Ideological Dependence: Building a Theoretical Framework,” in Krishna Kumar, ed., Transnational Enterprises: Their Impact on Third World Societies and Cultures (Boulder, Colo., 1980), 299, illustrates the tendency toward a one-
theory played a crucial role in articulating the methods of control that supposedly enabled advanced industrial nations to maintain dominance over underdeveloped nations in the absence of formal structures of colonial rule. The key concepts of dependency and collaboration thus can serve as the defining characteristics of structural inequality in all kinds of imperialist contexts where direct violence is absent. One need only bear in mind that these are variables that still need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

The theoretical antipodes of the dependency school—collaboration and dependency versus autonomy and self-determination—thus raise a variety of questions for mission history. In general, if missionaries were themselves prisoners of an “imperial culture,” what impact did this have in shaping behaviors and policies that tended to create and perpetuate cultural dependency in their fields? In what ways did missionaries help to raise up indigenous collaborators useful for bringing about a condition of dependency among their own people? Did the structure of missionaries’ relationships with converts and other clients parallel the inequalities and “structural violence” of political and economic imperialism?

At the same time, we should not assume that missionaries were themselves autonomous and self-determining agents. We should also consider the ways in which missionaries collaborated with the larger imperialist penetration of their fields and consider whether missionaries functioned as dependent or autonomous agents within that larger process.

The example of American Protestant missions to China during the middle decades of the nineteenth century seems especially useful for these purposes. The missionaries of this period, in their support for the gunboat diplomacy of the Opium Wars, offer a well-known and notorious example of...
collaboration with political and economic imperialism. Yet the high degree of cooperation among missionaries and other Westerners did not last, and so the example of early missions to China also illustrates the tenuous and shifting nature of such outright collaboration. The argument of this article, however, is that even as functional ties between missionaries and other Westerners were severed, missionaries’ behavior remained at least as imperialistic in a structural sense as it had been previously.

The opening of American Protestant missions to China during the 1830s was closely connected to a major change in the China trade. In 1834 the British formally abolished the East India Company’s monopoly, and the leading role in the China trade now passed to the “private merchants,” who already dominated the opium traffic. Missionaries’ collaboration with imperialism had its origins in an unusually cooperative relationship they developed with these private merchants. This relationship was initiated by the American firm of D. W. C. Olyphant & Co., probably the only private merchant to refrain from opium trading on principle, but it grew to include the leading firms in the opium business as well.

This collaboration could be explained as strictly a marriage of convenience between partners uneasy in one another’s company and looking forward to the day when they could make it on their own. A number of merchants kept their distance from missionary projects aimed at promoting the Westernization of China, while the American missionaries may have turned for support to the Western community in China only because their principal supporting agency, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, refused to assist their initiatives.14


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Yet missionaries and merchants had good reason for cooperating in efforts to eliminate the system of official restrictions that severely limited their access to the Chinese. Each shared a common interest in expanded intercourse with China regulated according to the dictates of Western interests and Western canons of international law. Meanwhile, until that objective was achieved, all were restricted to the narrow confines of the trading centers and forced into rather intimate daily contact. Until they could gain access to the Chinese in the interior and begin to preach the Word, missionaries literally had nothing better to do than to work with other Westerners in the hope that together they could break down the barriers to freedom of movement.

For their part, merchants and diplomats found missionaries useful because the missionaries were in the business of communication and were among the few Westerners who bothered to learn the difficult Chinese language. Missionaries served the Western community as interpreters for diplomatic and commercial negotiations, as an important source of news and information about China and the Chinese, and as propagandists in support of military interventions. All of this has been the subject of considerable study, especially missionary support for the Opium War, which continues to fascinate historians astounded by the moral and ideological gymnastics of missionaries trying to justify such blatant imperialism. 15 While evading the sleazier side of the war,

missionaries helped to persuade their home audiences that this was all part of God's plan for humbling the arrogant Chinese and creating an opening for the spread of commerce and the Gospel.

As propagandists and interpreters, missionaries proved their value as spokespersons for imperialism, but they were acting more as agents of political and economic imperialism than as cultural imperialists in their own right. For an understanding of cultural imperialism, the chief interest of these activities was the role they played in developing an "imperial culture" that could be used to generate support for cultural attempts to break down the barriers between Westerners and Chinese. Particularly significant in this regard was the Chinese Repository, a journal produced by the missionaries for an audience largely composed of other Westerners involved with China. The Repository could be described as an effort to consecrate the marriage of convenience between missionaries and merchants.

In a general way, the missionary editors of the Repository used the journal as a vehicle to inform and enlighten the Western community about China and the Chinese. Many people assume that, because missionaries sought the most sweeping transformations of indigenous societies, they therefore held the most thoroughly negative attitudes toward indigenous peoples. In this case, however, despite the Repository's broad condemnation of Chinese culture, the missionaries had to deal with the even more negative view that the Chinese were corrupt and degraded beyond hope of redemption. For example, James Matheson of the leading British firm of Jardine, Matheson and Company spearheaded a drive in 1836 urging the British government to adopt a more militaristic policy toward China. Because the Chinese were, in Matheson's view, "a people characterised by a marvelous degree of imbecility, avarice, conceit, and obstinacy," he could see only one recourse: "A glimpse of one or two of our men-of-war stationed off the north-eastern coast of China…would send a thrill of consternation through the whole empire, and do more to incline the Chinese to listen to the dictates of reason.

and justice than centuries of ‘temporizing’ and submission to insult and oppression.”\(^{17}\)

Although missionaries proved quite willing to support gunboat diplomacy, they also hoped to combine it with a positive program aimed at persuading the Chinese of the superiority of Western civilization and thereby obviating the need for direct violence. Such a program required, first of all, persuading Westerners that the Chinese were not so “obstinate” that they would never listen to “reason and justice” except at gunpoint and, second, arousing humanitarian concern so that other Westerners would help them to get the message across. Thus, E. C. Bridgman, the American missionary who began the Repository, rejected blatant racism in characterizing the Chinese. He wrote that “the Chinese are not naturally deficient in mental capacities, and that in useful attainments they have advanced as far as any people ever have gone or can go without the aids of divine revelation.”\(^{18}\) Seeking the source of Chinese degradation in culture and religion, rather than race, the editors of the Repository compiled research that ultimately enabled Bridgman’s associate Samuel Wells Williams to gain a reputation as America’s leading Sinologist through his book, The Middle Kingdom.

A more immediate objective of the Repository was to encourage other Westerners to recognize the human potential of the Chinese and begin to see them as objects of benevolence rather than exploitation. Of course, no one involved was prepared to admit that the Chinese had been treated as objects of exploitation. More characteristic is the view expressed by C. W. King, a partner in the Olyphant firm:

Diplomacy and commerce are high and honorable agents, but the whole end we have in view demands the combination of a loftier instrumentality.... They are to a great extent negative, rather than positive blessings. The curse which has lighted, more or less heavily, on all earthly things, they do alleviate; but it is not to be reversed, by any thing short of true Christianity.\(^{19}\)

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Subordinating the opium trade to the higher goal of a Christianized China was no small challenge, and on that sensitive ground King trod circumspectly, writing, "In a mere commercial sense, the demand for useful exchanges, the encouragement of industry, should not be displaced by wealth-destroying articles. There is no reproduction, where the consumer is consumed in the act of consumption." The embarrassment of the Repository editors became evident when they reprinted an address by John Quincy Adams justifying the Opium War. In theory they could applaud Adams's abstract dictum that "commerce, consisting of a voluntary exchange of property mutually beneficial to both parties,...is founded entirely, exclusively, upon the Christian precept to love your neighbor as yourself." At the same time, the editors felt obliged to insert that "we differ from the lecturer with regard to the influence the opium trade has had upon the war, for it has been without doubt the great proximate cause."

This underlying tension over the opium trade is rarely evident in the pages of the Repository. Clearly, the missionaries recognized that they would never gain merchant support unless they chose in general to ignore the opium question. Rather than trying to redeem the commercial sector, missionaries sought instead to enlist merchant backing for separate projects aimed at redeeming Chinese culture. In this sense, it was easier from the outset to compartmentalize cultural and economic enterprises than to fuse them. Yet if cultural and economic enterprises were so entirely separated, why would the merchants feel any interest in supporting missionary endeavors?

Most likely they were moved by considerations similar to those Terence Ranger attributes to the European colonialists in Africa who created what he calls the "invented traditions" of imperial culture. First, as nouveaux riches whose position in

20. Ibid., 30.
China had only just been accorded full legitimacy, they may well have regarded the sponsorship of philanthropic endeavors as a means of securing their “title to gentility.” Second, the specific results of their efforts could potentially serve to make their business in China “more respectable and ordered.”

This is consistent with the views expressed by the merchants in debate over British policy towards China. Calling the merchants “princes of the earth” moved by a “spirit of noble and persevering enterprise” to open the “vast… field China has afforded for commerce,” James Matheson blamed continued barriers to free trade on China’s Hong merchants, corrupt monopolists unwisely coddled by the East India Company. Matheson and his fellow memorialists argued that, if only these barriers could be broken down, the central government and the Chinese people would be quite open to intercourse with the West. If this were the case, and given that the British government had not yet shown itself willing to put its own muscle behind a “forward policy,” it made sense for the merchants to support cultural outreach efforts that might convince the friendly elements of China to join in an attack on the Hong establishment. If only Chinese of influence could be shown the advantage of superior western goods and institutions, the plan might have a chance.

In any event, merchants did back two missionary projects for cultural outreach during the 1830s. The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China (SDUKC), the first of these projects, was a publishing venture that turned out a magazine and several books offering secular information about the West in the Chinese language. It thus aspired to have a direct impact on attitudes toward the West among the literate population of China. Like all such ventures, it was launched amidst flourishes of optimistic rhetoric. For E. C. Bridgman, the event symbolized the passing of the “age of monopolies,” which he felt was being replaced by “a better spirit[,]… one more liberal, more generous, more active.”

23. Matheson, Present Position and Prospects, 3-15, 77, 81, 125.
India Company, whose monopoly was abolished the same year in which SDUKC was founded, had been at least as inhospitable to missionaries as they had been to private merchants, missionaries and merchants shared a sense of new possibilities. Convinced that the superiority of Western institutions proved the ability of both merchants and missionaries to overcome their Chinese rivals in fair competition, they asked only for a chance to demonstrate their wares.25

Of course, actual results fell short of these lofty expectations. A striking success as an example of cooperation between missionaries and other Westerners, SDUKC had serious limitations as a means of Westernizing China. Only so much literature could be produced by the participating missionaries, and of that they had little control over how it would be received by the Chinese. SDUKC publications did influence some of China's earliest "barbarian experts," but more as a source of information than of inspiration. Although some Chinese officials acquired a relatively positive image of the United States, they were not persuaded to become more like Americans. Rather, they became somewhat more sophisticated in distinguishing the Americans from the British and seeking ways to play them off against one another. The enduring pattern begun in these years was one of learning from the West only what seemed useful to defend China.26

The strategy behind the SDUKC might be called one of "diffuse Westernization" because the message was broadcast widely but with an inevitably minimal and unpredictable impact on individual recipients. An "intensive" strategy for promoting China's Westernization, by contrast, would seek a maximal impact on a smaller audience. In effect, the aim


would be to produce their own “barbarian experts” fully indoctrinated, not just with knowledge from and information about the West, but also with a Western frame of reference. Such Chinese presumably would have the ability, independently of Western supervision, to collaborate on many types of Westernizing projects.

The obvious answer, then, was an English-language school, and in 1836 the foreign community, in its second venture in cultural imperialism, decided to create one. The group formed for this purpose was the Morrison Education Society, named after Robert Morrison, the recently deceased missionary pioneer. Morrison’s son, a British consular interpreter, was instrumental in founding the society, as were the missionary/publisher E. C. Bridgman and his patron, D. W. C. Olyphant, an American merchant. The two most important officers were drawn from the two leading firms in the private trade, Lancelot Dent of Dent and Co. and William Jardine of Jardine, Matheson and Co.27

The Morrison Education Society (MES) enjoyed a brief, troubled, but nonetheless surprisingly influential existence. The initial problem was to recruit a teacher for the school, and that difficulty was not overcome until 1839 when Samuel Robbins Brown, a recent Yale graduate, arrived to take up the position. However, no sooner had Brown arrived than the school was disrupted by the outbreak of hostilities leading to the first Opium War. At the conclusion of the war in 1842, the school’s officers were finally able to construct their own facility in Hong Kong, but by then they were beginning to lose the interest and support of the foreign community.28

27. “Proceeding relative to the Formation of the Morrison Education Society....” Chinese Repository, V (1836), 373-378. In 1841, Jardine was replaced as treasurer by his partner James Matheson.

The Morrison Society’s financial difficulties, which ultimately led to its demise in 1849, were no reflection on the abilities of Samuel Robbins Brown. He was clearly an outstanding teacher who did an effective job of transmitting Western ideas and values to his pupils.29 A few of his students went on to impressive careers that realized the Morrison Society’s objective of training agents for the Westernization of China. Was this, however, a victory for cultural imperialism? The situation calls to mind one of the stock characters of the literature on cultural imperialism: the comprador. Literally, compradors were the Chinese managers of foreign trading firms. Figuratively, the “comprador” has come to symbolize the subservient mentality of alleged collaborators with Western imperialism.30 How well does this stereotype fit MES alumni whose subsequent careers are known?

Only one of them actually made a career as a comprador. Tong King-sing (T’ang Ching-hsing) became one of the leading Chinese in the Shanghai treaty port community as comprador for Jardine, Matheson and Co. In his own way, however, Tong fit the pattern of Chinese who advocated learning from the West in order to defend China. With MES classmate Yung Wing, he founded one of the first Chinese-owned newspapers and became an advocate of industrialization under Chinese ownership and management. To serve that end, Tong left his lucrative post with Jardine, Matheson to manage the China Merchants Steam Navigation Company under the great scholar-official Li Hung-chang, and he was also involved with early efforts to develop mining and railways in China.31 Although much of this put Tong at odds with Chinese traditions, it would be difficult to construe his projects as deepening Chinese dependence on the West.

Easily the most famous of MES alumni was Yung Wing. Yung’s Western education did not end with the Morrison Society school. With two of the other students, he left China with Samuel Robbins Brown in 1846. Yung graduated from Yale in 1854 and returned to China, where he drifted about for many years as a rather begrudging servant of the Western diplomatic and commercial establishment. By his own account, he once refused an offer from Dent & Company to become its head comprador in Japan, explaining that such a position “is associated with all that is menial, and that as a graduate of Yale, one of the leading colleges in America, I could not think of bringing discredit to my Alma Mater.” Yung was thus unfitted for the subservient role of comprador by both his Chinese values and his Western education.

Finally, after many abortive efforts to find a Chinese patron, Yung was awarded official rank by Tseng Kuo-fan and given the opportunity to organize the Chinese Educational Mission. The mission, which lasted from 1872 to 1881, ended prematurely because of the conflict between Chinese officials, who wanted the Chinese students to learn practical Western technology, and Yung, whose ambition was to replicate his own Westernizing experiences in the Chinese boys under his care. Thus, even while Yung struggled to maintain his independence and contribute to China’s modernization under Chinese rather than Western control, he maintained a lifelong commitment to a sweeping form of cultural Westernization. Like Tong, Yung was impatient with traditional Chinese values and too willing to run roughshod over tradition in his efforts to promote development. Unlike the stereotypical collaborator with imperialism, Yung’s ardent nationalism was not empty rhetoric. In later years, he was both able and willing to join with the radical reformers and revolutionaries of the late Ch’ing period.33

33. Yung, My Life in China and America, 46-242; Harris, “Missionaries, Martyrs, and Modernizers,” 302-318, 327-361; Thomas E. LaFargue, China’s First Hundred (Pullman, Wash., 1942); William Hung, “The Closure of the Educational Mission in America,” Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, XXVIII (1955), 50-73. The other two students who left China with Yung and Brown were Wong Foon and Wong Shing. Wong Foon (Huang K’uan) completed his education at the University of Edinburgh and became a pioneer in the intro-
Even the high degree of acculturative change evident in the cases of Yung and Tong failed, then, to produce clear and direct benefits for any imperialist interest. The merchants’ dwindling support for the Morrison Education Society can, however, be explained more simply. In the short run, the achievements of MES were simply dwarfed by the immediate and clear-cut success of military aggression. During the 1830s, the merchants had been appealing to both the British government and the Chinese people. The Chinese responded by trying to shut down the trade that the merchants wanted to extend, and it was the British who answered the call for battering down restrictions on trade. By the end of the Opium War, even many missionaries had come to believe that the gentle art of persuasion was less effective than toughness and force in dealing with the “haughty” Chinese. The opening of five new treaty ports and other concessions forced upon the Chinese by the Opium War enabled the merchants to expand their operations, eliminating to a large extent both their incentive and their occasion for cooperating with the missionaries.

Officials of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions showed the clearest understanding of the long-term limitations of a strategy based on trying to Westernize China. When MES began to lose support from the foreign community in China, the American Board missionaries urged their home board to take up this work themselves. The board rejected their proposal on the basis of an evolving policy growing out of experiences with similar schools elsewhere.

For the missionaries in the field, this decision showed insensitivity on the American Board’s part to the situation in China. The missionaries’ reasons for supporting Westernizing projects had not been fundamentally altered by the Opium

duction of Western medicine in China. Wong Shing (Huang Sheng) was unable to finish his studies because of ill health, but he made a career as a cultural intermediary, helping to bring knowledge of China to the West as an associate of James Legge and knowledge of the West to China as an associate of Wang Tao and Yung Wing. Neither entirely severed their connections to the missionary enterprise, but they remained in the tradition of taking a broad Westernizing approach to missions. Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, 318-319n.
War. The war had expanded without overthrowing the treaty port system. While this meant new opportunities for commerce, for them it meant only new places to hem them in. It would take another war before the missionaries could freely and safely evangelize the great mass of the Chinese people. They looked to the Morrison Society school as at least a fairly promising alternative in the meantime.

The key point of dispute on the matter of taking over the Morrison Society school was instruction in the English language. The missionaries in the field recognized that only English-language instruction would attract a better class of students than “the children of the indigent and orphans.” Such elite students would be attracted to the school by the “emolument it will procure them,” knowing that if they learned English they could land jobs in the Western commercial and diplomatic establishment. Both sides agreed that such materialistic motives were not desirable, but the missionaries hoped that some of the students would convert to Christianity and enlist in service to the mission instead.34 They were thus more than willing to participate in the training of an indigenous elite of collaborators with Western imperialism, so long as the mission gained some benefit.

Rufus Anderson, the American Board’s secretary and the most influential figure in the American Protestant missionary enterprise, was unconvinced. He replied that “we are altogether skeptical as to the expediency of making much use of the English language in a Seminary for Chinese youth, should we establish one. One of the arguments you use in its behalf, viz, ‘the emoluments the language will procure the pupils,’ shows that the study tends to draw them from the mission.” He explained that the American Board was not likely “to sustain an institution, which has not for its leading, controlling object the raising up of a native ministry…, and thus a self-sustaining Christianity [sic] in heathen lands.”35

34. General letter of the Canton missionaries to the Prudential Committee, Sept. 1, 1846, ABCFM South China Papers.
Clearly, no one involved saw any intrinsic value to collaboration with economic and political interests. Both sides recognized that while missionaries might cooperate with merchants and diplomats in some ways, they remained in competition for the services of Chinese they educated. Anderson simply did not believe that the mission could compete successfully, and he was doubtless correct. Yet it was the areas of agreement between the parties to this debate that made it particularly interesting.

A further area of agreement emerged shortly thereafter. In the early 1850s, the mission world was startled by the news of a professedly Christian revolution raging in the Chinese interior. Hung Hsiu-ch'üan, the leader of the so-called Taiping rebellion, claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus invested by God with a holy mission to regenerate China. Initially, most of the Protestant missionaries in China reacted positively to the movement. Before long, however, the climate of opinion shifted. Because Hung's radically unorthodox teachings were beyond the power of the missionaries to control, and because the rebellion spread so much disorder across the countryside, the missionaries almost unanimously withdrew their initial support.36

The common element in both the controversy over educational policy and the missionary response to the Taiping rebellion was a deep, almost instinctive commitment to control. Both the graduates of English-language schools and the Taiping leaders seemed insufficiently subservient for their purposes. Anderson once remarked that a “regard for order and gradual development [sic]…generally characterizes the works of God.”37 Strategies that did not fit this mold were not to his liking, and in this he had plenty of company. An orderly and controlled penetration of other lands is, in one way or another, the goal of cultural, economic, and political imperialists alike. For that reason, they all agreed after the Taiping


37. Rufus Anderson, The Theory of Missions to the Heathen: A Sermon at the Ordination of Mr. Edward Webb, as a Missionary to the Heathen (Boston, 1845), 4.
rebellion that maintaining the Ch‘ing dynasty and strengthening American influence in China offered the best hope for protecting American interests and promoting an orderly process of change.

That does not mean, of course, that missionaries, merchants, and diplomats were always in agreement on the particulars of China policy. During the 1850s, with other doors closed to them, two of the American Board’s pioneers, S. Wells Williams and the famed medical missionary Peter Parker, drifted into diplomatic work. In these roles, both pushed aggressive courses that went beyond the interests of diplomacy. Parker was eventually recalled for his overly zealous advocacy that the U.S. seize Formosa, and Williams was able to take advantage of his position as secretary and interpreter for the American legation to wring major—and destabilizing—privileges for missions. In 1858, an attack on Tientsin by British and French naval forces, which Williams privately referred to as “the Society for the Diffusion of Cannon Balls,” forced the Ch‘ing government to renegotiate the unequal treaties. Almost single-handedly, Williams managed to have inserted into the treaties clauses that not only extended religious toleration to Christianity, but also granted extraterritorial legal rights which effectively placed missionaries and their converts above Chinese law. In the words of Paul Varg, “The treaties had the effect of making the church a partner in Western imperialism.”

These treaties finally opened the Chinese interior for direct evangelization and enabled Protestant missions to operate according to Anderson’s principles. Clearly, then, even in their effort to develop an autonomous strategy solely dedicated to making converts and raising up churches, missionaries depended on the Western powers for protection. Indeed, their dependence became a kind of vicious cycle: the more recourse they had to diplomatic protection, the more they fanned the flames of antiforeign sentiment among the Chinese people, and the more need they had of protection. Although seemingly inescapable, the situation clearly did

not create a conducive setting for proclaiming Jesus Christ as a loving and forgiving savior. Evidence suggests that, among the relatively few Chinese to convert to Christianity, a significant number cynically attached themselves to the mission to take advantage of its legal privileges.39

Nonetheless, compared to the more sweeping programs of Westernization they replaced, Anderson’s policies have indeed seemed to many students of missions to have been relatively enlightened and free from the taint of cultural imperialism.40 Anderson tried to impress on missionaries that their ultimate goal was to found and nurture an indigenous Christian church that would be self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. Striving to minimize missionary paternalism, Anderson hoped to find ways for mission churches to sink indigenous roots with minimal Western trappings. Avoiding in this way a Westernizing strategy conducive to collaboration with economic and political imperialists, Anderson also seemed committed to avoiding a colonial-style “dependence” within the American Board’s autonomous operations.41

On the matter of dependence, however, board policy was seriously contradictory. While encouraging the formation of independent churches under local control, the board adopted a punitive educational policy designed to render graduates dependent on the Protestant missionary establishment for employment. The policy of educating only in the vernacular explicitly sought to deny mission school graduates access to employment opportunities outside of the church.


41. Rufus Anderson, Memorial Volume of the First Fifty Years of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (Boston, ABCFM, 1862), 265-266.
Anderson’s argument that his education policy avoided dependence had more to do with his experiences during the 1820s with the American Board’s ill-fated Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut. The school had been founded in 1816 to train and assimilate young men from the board’s Native American and foreign fields. The young men were then expected to return as Christian leaders for the uplift of their people, but from the outset the school’s greatest value was as a source of publicity to stimulate donations. The students, on the other hand, proved a great disappointment; for example, two Chinese students from the school had returned to Canton in the 1830s and quickly dissociated themselves from the missionaries. In 1825, the school even lost most of its publicity value when a public scandal arose over the marriages of two of the students to local white women, and two years later it was closed.42

To some, that episode was an object lesson in American racism, but the lesson Anderson drew from it was that the American Board did not serve its own interests when it encouraged its students to assimilate into Western society. Even when the students became good Christians and conscientiously returned to their people, they often had problems of readjustment after the “abundant provision” and “paternal attention” they had received in America. Such pampering was responsible, in Anderson’s opinion, for “a very undesirable feeling of dependence on the part of the scholars.”43

Clearly, however, mission finances were at the heart of the issue. The basic, continuing problem was that the American Board was spending a great deal of money to educate young people who were proving to be of little value to its missions. The problem recurred in Lebanon during the period when the board was refusing to support the Morrison Society school. There, the Beirut seminary had to be reorganized.

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43. Anderson, Memorial Volume, 329-332; ABCFM, Annual Report, XXIII (1832), 164.
because the students who had been taught English were going off to work as interpreters for the British army. The same problem with its missions in South India would finally lead the American Board during the 1850s to abandon English-language instruction altogether.

Moreover, there remained one further dimension to the problem. Mission leaders recognized that too much Westernization would unfit young people for the native ministry, leaving them discontent with village life and out of sympathy with their own people. Yet this effort to maintain cultural bonds between pastors and their people also involved aggressive efforts to hold down salaries so that workers would be forced to maintain the lifestyles of their impoverished flocks. Part of the problem with a Westernizing education, Anderson realized, was that after the graduates returned to their native lands, “The expense of maintaining them in any tolerable state of comfort…is much greater than it would be if they had never become habituated to the modes of life in an improved state of society.” Thus, one of the great attractions of vernacular education was that the workers so trained could be paid less than those whose educational experience had both accustomed them to greater comforts and given them the opportunity to seek more lucrative opportunities. In China, the American Board even persuaded other missions in 1869 to enter a wage-fixing agreement aimed at ending competition for the services of Chinese staff. Having already effectively barred mission school graduates from seeking employment in the commercial and diplomatic sectors, this was a final step toward gaining an effective monopoly over their services.

In the broadest sense, mission policy deliberately sought to avoid any association between Christian conversion and material rewards. Likewise, the emphasis on cultivating self-

44. Rufus Anderson, History of the Missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to the Oriental Churches (2 vols., Boston, 1872), 1, 252, 261-263.
46. Anderson, Memorial Volume, 329-332.
47. Carlson, Foochow Missionaries, 79-82.
support in the mission churches promoted the association of Christian conversion with material sacrifice. Again, this had contradictory ramifications for ending the dependence of indigenous churches. In theory, self-support was presented as part of the package for freeing the churches from missionary control. In practice, however, the principle of self-support typically held the greatest appeal for those missionaries most suspicious of converts’ motivations. By emphasizing self-support as a precondition for self-governance, such missionaries tested converts’ sincerity by demanding sacrifices of them.\(^4^8\)

Taken in the context of the missions’ generally grudging and stingy attitude toward the provision of educational and employment opportunities, an obsession with the issue of self-support typically proved self-defeating. Since converts presumably often did in fact hope to gain a better life for themselves by becoming Christians, only those suffering severe destitution were apt to feel they had much to gain from conversion. Not surprisingly, impoverished Christian communities often proved unable to support themselves without mission assistance. In this way, mission policies designed to wean indigenous churches from dependence on mission resources could have the paradoxical effect of actually prolonging dependence.

At the very least, however, such practices entailed an ostensible repudiation of what has always been accounted one of the major functions of cultural imperialism: the dissemination of Western consumption patterns and values.\(^4^9\) Missionaries intended to do everything in their power to assure that converts would not desire Western lifestyles. However, missionaries continued to send out unintentional messages associating Christianity with material comfort and


affluence simply by continuing to live as Westerners. Jane Hunter demonstrates how the enormous efforts that missionaries gave to reproducing American homes, diets, and fashions brought them into closer association with the Western colonial community and institutionalized "racial hierarchies" within missionary households.\(^50\)

Anderson liked to depict the policy of favoring vernacular over English-language instruction, which he imposed with increasing rigidity on American Board missions, as the lesson of experience, a pragmatic rejection of strategies that simply did not work. However, his criteria for evaluating success and failure reveal that his policy choices were more ideological than self-evident. From his vantage, the American Board was a business in which people invested money expecting a return. Mission expenditures on education should therefore result in some tangible profit for the mission, in the form of either new converts, new or better pastors or other mission workers, or improved Christian churches and communities. None of these ends were served by offering English-language instruction, and Anderson thus refused to speculate on the futures of unconverted young men who would seek a missionary education without any intention of repaying the mission with future services. Educating in the vernacular, and ideally limiting that to children of converts, was the only safe investment.

Rufus Anderson thus established a mission policy of minimal value to business interests precisely because he thought like a businessman. In his own words:

Yes, my Brethren, this is the only effectual way of prosecuting missions among the heathen—holding up CHRIST AS THE ONLY SAVIOR OF LOST SINNERS. It requires the fewest men, the least expense, the shortest time.\(^51\)

This gospel of efficiency formed a rationale for attempting to dissociate missions from economic and political imperialists. Clearly, then, demonstrating that missionaries shared the values of other Westerners does not prove that their cultural

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work served the apparent interests of the larger imperialist presence. In China, American missionaries had drawn on shared values to form the basis for cooperative endeavors during the 1830s and 1840s. Yet many of the same values that helped to constitute this “imperial culture” can also be found in the thought of Rufus Anderson, and in this case they had exactly the opposite effect.

At mid-century, then, American Protestant missions had rejected a strategy of Westernization aimed at creating a Christian vanguard among the elite classes of China in favor of a more purely evangelical strategy aimed at gaining intensive influence over what proved to be a marginal subgroup in China. This was not a matter of rejecting cultural imperialism in favor of a non-imperialistic strategy. Each strategy sought a form of cultural dominance over China and depended on assistance from the West's political and economic powers in China. However, each strategy had shortcomings that rendered it largely ineffective as a means of achieving cultural dominance. The weakness of pure-and-simple evangelism was narrowness, both in terms of its message and its influence. With a small contingent of converts reputed to consist of the most impoverished or unsavory characters, the evangelical missions by the end of the century had proved the early American Board missionaries prophetic. As they had feared, the rejection of a broad appeal linking Christian proselytization to Western learning rendered Protestantism a marginal presence in China. Most historians of China agree that missionaries exerted their most important influence on China through the educational and publishing work that regained at least a subordinate role in the later part of the century.52

The weakness of a diffuse Westernizing strategy, on the other hand, was lack of control over those who came under its influence. This impulse to control is the central paradox in the policy initiatives of Rufus Anderson and the most revealing about the imperialist mentality that informed the

American Protestant missionary enterprise. In theory, the whole thrust of Anderson’s policies was toward eliminating control, ending the dependence of “natives” on the mission, and building up autonomous churches. In practice, it usually did not work out that way. The reason, basically, was that Anderson continued to believe that Westernization would be the ultimate result of missions. He merely hoped to place the burden of achieving that goal on their converts.

This was necessary, in Anderson’s view, because the “heathen nations” were such “a vast and mighty ruin.” The “vast intellectual, moral and social transformation” involved in diffusing “our fundamental ideas of morals, manners, political economy, social organization, right, justice, equity” was a project that would take too long and cost too much for a missionary body to undertake. Only a miracle could bring about such a vast transformation, and so Anderson chose to rely on miracles. Missionaries simply had to trust in the influence of the Holy Spirit. The missionary “sets himself to reconcile the alienated heart to God, believing that that point being gained, and the principle of obedience implanted, and a highly spiritual religion introduced, a social renovation will be sure to follow.” When this reliance on a spontaneous process of Westernization under supernatural control proved illusory, the only alternatives for dealing with the converts were either to “doubt the genuineness of their conversion” or, as Anderson advised, to be patient and extend their tutelage.53

Anderson’s approach to mission governance can be compared, in the arena of political imperialism, to the British policy of “indirect rule” (although such a policy was itself often hostile to missionaries). Like Anderson, Lord Lugard, “the architect of the British policy of indirect rule in Africa, … argued that ‘the premature teaching of English…inevitably leads to utter disrespect for British and native Ideals alike, and to a denationalised and disorganised population.’” Lugard therefore rejected the model of French “assimilation” policy as too destabilizing and burdensome. Yet, as Ali Mazrui observes, the difference between British and French policies

53. Anderson, Theory of Missions, 6, 10.
“narrowed considerably” the longer colonial rule lasted, as
the British built universities where “metropolitan standards
and metropolitan values” predominated.54

T. O. Beidelman describes aptly the parallel between
missions and political colonialism in his study of a Church
Missionary Society mission in East Africa. He writes:
The C.M.S.….claimed to anticipate the day when the mission
would be replaced by an indigenous church; yet this was in
actual practice resisted…. Missionary resistance to this stated
goal parallels the secular sphere where administrators, who claim
to be training Africans for self-government, persist in arguing
that their apprentices remain unready for self-rule.55

This kind of parallel demonstrates that missionaries could
indeed be considered cultural imperialists in Galtung’s
“structural” sense. That is, missionaries acted out of cultural
patterns and expectations very much like those of other impe-
rialists to fashion their own form of colonial rule over sub-
jects who were taught to be obedient and self-denying until
the day came when they showed themselves able to assume
responsibility for their own affairs.

Both phases of American Board missionary work in mid-
nineteenth-century China, then, are open to interpretation
in terms of our analytic categories. In the first phase, a more
secular program of cultural outreach designed to impress
Chinese with the superiority of Western civilization did indeed
promise more direct functional benefits to the larger imperi-
alist enterprise and therefore fostered a collaborative relation-
ship between missionaries and merchants. As cultural imperialism,
however, the structural weakness of this effort proved to be an insufficient dependence in the indigenous
Chinese collaborators that missionaries had hoped to pro-
duce. In the second phase, the American Board turned to an
educational policy aimed at producing collaborators whose
services could be monopolized by the mission. Though lack-

54. Ali A. Mazrui, “The Impact of Transnational Corporations on Edu-
cational Processes and Cultural Change: An African Perspective,” in Kumar,
ed., Transnational Enterprises, 210-211.
55. T. O. Beidelman, Colonial Evangelism: A Socio-Historical Study of an East
African Mission at the Grassroots (Bloomington, Ind., 1982), 213-214.
ing functional value for the larger imperialist enterprise, this new policy proved nevertheless even more imperialistic in at least one important sense. Now those Chinese who came under missionary influence were placed in a relationship of greater structural dependence on their Western patrons. Understanding cultural imperialism in structural terms may therefore make it necessary to reverse the old dictum that “Christianizing” mission strategies were less imperialistic than “civilizing” strategies. One purpose of abandoning a “civilizing” strategy was to assert even greater control over dependent and unequal Chinese converts.