

American Missionaries and the Opium Trade in Nineteenth-Century China

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The nineteenth century witnessed profound changes in interstate relations as the nations of the West struggled to acquire wealth, power, and prestige in the competitive context of the industrial revolution. The diplomatic rhetoric of the era spoke in progressive terms of a community of equal nations governed by the liberal ideals of the European Enlightenment, but the reality of Western expansionism revealed a less principled agenda. Those societies incapable or unwilling to participate in the new world order were regarded as antiquated or immature and thus in need of reform or even, to borrow a recently popularized phrase, “regime change.” The less honorable aspects of Western imperialism were thus scrupulously hidden behind the “civilizing mission” publicly proclaimed by most of the major Western powers. But as the historical evidence amply attests, the changes forced upon the traditional societies of the non-Western world were fashioned primarily to facilitate a more thorough exploitation of their natural and economic resources.

There were also, however, major cultural forces at work shaping the new international order in the nineteenth century. The missionary movement provided the most prominent example of this. Christian missionaries, deeply motivated by the zeal of their convictions and the imperative force of their religious ideology, served as the vanguard of Western cultural penetration wherever they ventured to establish themselves. And while their methods and goals were not always in harmony with those of their profit-seeking countrymen, missionaries would come to serve a predominant role in shaping the earliest formal diplomatic relations between the Western powers and the traditional

societies and governments of the non-Western world. One of the most interesting examples of this is found in the development of early Sino-American relations and the negotiation of the first formal treaties between the United States and the imperial government of Qing dynasty China.

One of the most contentious and morally problematic issues that Americans were obliged to address in their early diplomatic relations with the Chinese was the opium trade. The impact of the opium trade on the social and economic fortunes of nineteenth-century China has long been one of the more controversial topics in the history of Sino-Western relations. This is particularly true with respect to the broader ethical and political questions of moral culpability. Indeed, assessing the interacting roles of enterprising smugglers, “conniving” Chinese officials, Christian missionaries, and the British and American governments is a subtle task that requires the consideration of a broad range of integrated factors and motivations. Fortunately, there is no shortage of sources from which to study the views and objectives of those who either participated in or were obliged somehow to contend with the opium trade. Missionary documents, treaty-port newspapers, the diplomatic correspondence of both Chinese and Western officials, along with many other pertinent contemporary records provide a wealth of information regarding opium in China. The object of this paper is to examine how America’s earliest Christian missionaries to China responded to the opium trade and how they influenced the policies of their government toward it in the years surrounding the establishment of the treaty-port system.

E. C. BRIDGMAN AND EARLY MISSIONARY OPPOSITION TO THE OPIUM TRADE

In the decade prior to the Opium War (1839–1842), the number of Protestant missionaries in China rarely numbered over a half dozen individuals, for missionary activity was strictly prohibited under the stringent regulations of the “Canton system” of trade.¹ The most influential group of American missionaries in East Asia at this time were representatives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign

¹ Under the “Canton system” most Western trade with China was confined to the single port of Canton, where foreign merchants were closely supervised by a Chinese merchant guild, or Cohong, and contact between Westerners and Chinese strictly limited.

Missions led by E. C. Bridgman (1801–1861), America's first missionary to China.² Imbued with the evangelical zeal and millenarian vision of the Second Great Awakening, E. C. Bridgman arrived at his post in Canton in February 1830, and over the next few years he became one of the first Americans to acquire a mastery of the Chinese language, earning wide recognition as the foremost American expert on Chinese society and politics.³ Bridgman was thus among the most notable members of that first generation of Protestant missionaries to China that played an important historical role as pioneering scholars and cultural intermediaries.

In 1832, for example, Bridgman began publishing the world's first journal of Sinology, the *Chinese Repository*, to provide a scholarly forum in English for the study of Chinese civilization.⁴ Bridgman and his early colleagues also initiated numerous efforts to convey some knowledge of the outside world to Chinese readers, publishing various books and journals in Chinese that addressed such topics as world geography, Western history, and natural science. Indeed, as Zou Mingde has noted in his study of early Protestant missionaries in China, their numerous and varied publications in Chinese had “provided progressive Chinese with some recognition and understanding of the world, and provided creative possibilities for the introduction of Western scholarship.”⁵ And while the early missionaries would win very few Chinese converts to Christianity, their contacts with Chinese commoners and officials

² The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was an interdenominational organization formed in 1810 for the purpose of supporting and directing the activities of Christian missions abroad. See Clifton Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World: The First Half Century of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1810–1860* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969).

³ A detailed account of E. C. Bridgman's missionary career in China may be found in Michael C. Lazich, *E. C. Bridgman (1801–1861): America's First Missionary to China* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000).

⁴ Although missionaries wrote a disproportionately large number of the articles in the *Chinese Repository*, during its two decades of publication the journal earned high reputation as a scholarly and informative source of knowledge on a wide variety of subjects pertaining to East Asia.

⁵ Zou Mingde, “Yapian zhanzheng qian jidujiao chuanshi zaihusde wenhua huodong” [Cultural Activities of Christian Missionaries in China Prior to the Opium War], *Xiandai shi yanjiu* 5 (1986): 5. Among the most notable examples of this sort of publication was the *Dongxiyang kao meiyue tongzhi* (East-West Examiner and Monthly Recorder), a periodical that contained articles on Western technology, natural science, world history, and geography, leading one modern Chinese scholar to describe it as “the first modern Chinese-language periodical published in China.” See Cai Wu, “Tantan dongxiyang kao meiyue tongzhi: Zhongguo jingnei diyizhuan xiandai zhongwen qikan” [The East-West Monthly Examiner: The First Modern Chinese Periodical Published in China], n.s., 2.4 (Taipei: National Central Library Bulletin, 1969).

alike would mark the earliest beginnings of Sino-American cultural and political relations.

Shortly after his initial arrival in Canton, Bridgman had privately expressed his deep concern about the problem of opium in China, but given the precarious circumstances of life in the foreign factories he cautiously refrained from publicizing his opinions. After all, his close associate, Robert Morrison, the other Protestant missionary in China at that time, was employed by the British East India Company, which had a considerable financial interest in the trade.⁶ Therefore, while declaring indignantly to the American Board that the drug “is death to China,” Bridgman warned that “it is here a most delicate subject to touch upon” and requested that his private condemnation of the trade not be printed in the *Missionary Herald*, a popular missionary journal published by the American Board in New England.⁷

As Bridgman became more securely established at his missionary post, however, he began to attack the problem of opium in China much more boldly and publicly. This was made possible largely because his chief financial supporter was the philanthropic New York merchant D. W. C. Olyphant, whose firm Olyphant and Company had steadfastly refused to participate in the drug trade. Bridgman, therefore, no longer asked the American Board to delete his criticisms of the opium trade from the *Missionary Herald*. In May 1832, for example, an excerpt from his journal printed in the *Herald* characterized opium as one of the “greatest evils afflicting Chinese society” and described how “the practice of smoking the ‘black commodity’ is widely prevalent, from the royal palaces to the meanest hovels, exerting, from one end of the empire to the other, and through all the ranks of society, a most deadly influence.”⁸ Such accounts represented the first time many Americans had heard of the opium trade in China, and Bridgman’s accounts of its insidious effects no doubt left a deep impression on the minds of many of his readers.

Following the termination of the British East India Company’s monopoly on trade in China in 1833, and Lord Napier’s bungled attempt to force open the doors of China in 1834, the Qing authorities became much more concerned about Westerners in China and the

⁶ Robert Morrison was sent to China in 1807 as a representative of the London Missionary Society. He was the first Protestant missionary in China.

⁷ See Bridgman to Everts, Canton, June 19, 1830, in *Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* (Yale Divinity School Library), reel 256.

⁸ Excerpt from *Bridgman Journal*, April 8, 1831, printed in the *Missionary Herald*, May 1832, p. 138.

increasingly harmful effects of opium smuggling.⁹ Indeed, high officials of the imperial government began in 1836 to debate various solutions to the problem, even considering the possibility of legalizing the trade as a means of bringing it under greater control.¹⁰ Western merchants in China followed these proceedings as closely as they could from the seclusion of their factories in Canton and even began to debate the implications of the trade more seriously among themselves. Naturally, Bridgman was eager to facilitate this discussion any way he could; therefore, he and S. Wells Williams, a missionary and trained printer sent to China by the American Board in 1833, allowed the *Chinese Repository* to become an open forum for the study and debate of the entire opium question.¹¹

From May 1836 to April 1837, Bridgman and Williams printed seventeen articles on the history and present state of the opium trade in China, most of which illustrated the various ways that the drug was exerting an evil influence on the moral, commercial, and political life of the nation. Included among these articles were translations of key memorials on the subject sent by Chinese officials to the Daoguang emperor.¹² The publication of these documents provided foreigners with privileged insights into the differences among Chinese officials over how best to handle the opium problem and revealed some key economic and political dimensions of the issue that would otherwise have remained unknown.

Several of the most informative articles on opium written for the *Chinese Repository* were produced by Bridgman himself, who believed that a well-informed public would readily recognize the evils of the trade and would desire to see it halted. In one such article on the “Cultivation of the Poppy,” for example, Bridgman reviewed historical ref-

⁹ William John Napier (Lord Napier) was sent to China in 1834 as the first British superintendent of trade. During the course of his mission, he offended the Chinese governor of Canton by refusing to abide by Chinese regulations regarding official protocol, fatally undermining his effort to win some reforms in the Canton system.

¹⁰ See Xu Naiji’s memorial to the emperor in which he argues for the legalization of opium on the assumption that it could thereby be more effectively regulated, and taxed, by the Chinese government. Translated by J. R. Morrison in the *Chinese Repository* 5 (July 1836).

¹¹ Samuel Wells Williams was appointed to the China mission by the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions. He arrived in Canton in October 1833. See *Memoirs of Protestant Missionaries to the Chinese* (Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1967; repr., Taipei: Ch’eng-wen Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 76–79.

¹² These included, among others, such documents as Xu Naiji’s original proposal for the legalization of opium and the rebuttal of this policy initiative by the prominent Court official, Chu Cun. See *Chinese Repository* 5 (July 1836): 138; *Chinese Repository* 5 (January 1837): 390.

erences to the drug in Western literature and explained how the opium poppy was grown and processed, describing its cultivation in British India and its spread to China.¹³ At this time, however, Bridgman was not particularly forthright in attacking those who were specifically responsible for smuggling the drug. This is not too surprising, for some of the largest offenders, such as the British merchants William Jardine, James Matheson, and Lancelot Dent, were all major contributors to the several philanthropic organizations that Bridgman and his colleagues had recently founded.¹⁴ Bridgman, nevertheless, did his best to expose the harm inflicted by the drug by, among other things, drawing upon testimonials written by the Chinese themselves. One article, for example, consisted of a translation of a “blind beggar’s remonstrance against the use of opium” in which the Chinese author lamented opium smoking as “a dire calamity, planted among us by foreigners . . . [that] has destroyed, of the sons of our flowery land, tens of thousands.”¹⁵

AMERICAN MISSIONARIES AND THE OPIUM WAR

Unfortunately, the efforts of Bridgman, Williams, and other contributors to the *Chinese Repository* to turn Western opinion against the opium trade did little to thwart the activities of the smugglers. Despite considerable public outcry at home, British firms such as Jardine, Matheson & Company were able to use their considerable clout with ministers of the British government to forestall any official effort to bring the trade to a halt.¹⁶ And as Charles Stelle has illustrated in his study, American firms such as Russell and Company had also steadily increased their involvement in the trade and had joined with the British in resisting any formal attempt to bring it to an end.¹⁷ Bridgman’s hopes for a more “just and honorable” relationship with the

¹³ Bridgman, “Cultivation of the Poppy,” *Chinese Repository* 5 (February 1837): 473.

¹⁴ This included such pioneering associations as the Medical Missionary Society, the Morrison Educational Society, and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China.

¹⁵ Bridgman, trans., “Sin pun keen yang yen,” *Chinese Repository* 7 (November 1838): 391.

¹⁶ W. Travis Hanes III and Frank Sanello illustrate the powerful influence of Jardine, Matheson, & Co. over Lord Napier, Lord Palmerston, and other key ministers of the British government in their excellent study titled *Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another* (Naperville, Ill.: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002).

¹⁷ Charles Clarkson Stelle provides a detailed account of American involvement in the opium trade in *Americans and the China Opium Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Arno Press, 1981).

Chinese thus fell increasingly victim to the greed and unscrupulous profiteering of Western opium smugglers.

By the middle of 1837, the Chinese government had concluded its own debate on the issue by resolving to enforce more strictly its anti-opium decrees and thus bring an end to the illegal trafficking in the drug. In an imperial edict sent down to Chinese officials in Canton, it was ordered that the opium store ships stationed at Lintin Island and other locations near the mouth of the Pearl River be directed “to quit their anchorage and all return to their country.”¹⁸ And the following year, the Qing government dispatched the imperial commissioner, Lin Zexu, to Canton with the task of strictly enforcing Chinese laws prohibiting opium smuggling. As the governor-general of Hubei and Hunan since 1837, Lin had acquired considerable experience dealing with the opium problem, and his views on the issue had impressed many Court officials during their extensive discussions. Therefore, after a series of nineteen separate audiences with the Daoguang emperor, Lin was given plenipotentiary powers to investigate the situation in Canton and take whatever measures necessary to bring the situation under control.¹⁹

Arriving in Canton by boat on the morning of March 10, 1839, Lin wasted little time in putting his aggressive new plan into action. On March 18 he issued a decree to the Westerners that ordered them to take all the opium in their store ships anchored at Lintin and other places and deliver it up to the Chinese authorities, “that these officers may openly take possession of the whole, and have it burned and destroyed so as to cut off its power of doing mischief.”²⁰ In addition, Lin demanded that “a bond be drawn up, written in the Chinese and Foreign character, stating clearly that ships afterwards to arrive here shall never to all eternity dare to bring any opium: should any ship after this bring it, then her whole cargo on board is to be confiscated and her people put to death; and that they willingly undergo it as the penalty of their crime.”²¹

¹⁸ From a translation of an official report printed in the *Canton Register* (October 3 and 10, 1837).

¹⁹ Chang Hsin-pao provides an excellent account of Lin Zexu's career in *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964). Also see Arthur Waley, *The Opium War through Chinese Eyes* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1958).

²⁰ Translation of proclamation included in Slade, *Late Proceedings and Events in China* (Canton Register Press, 1839; repr., Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1972) pp. 27–30.

²¹ *Ibid.*

To ensure that his commands were precisely implemented, Lin threatened with strangulation those Cohong merchants suspected of conniving in the trade and insisted that all foreigners presently in the foreign factories be held hostage until his orders were fulfilled. Following a tense standoff of several weeks, the British merchants in Canton assented to turn over their holdings of opium, winning them their release, but refused to sign the bond that would have allowed a resumption of legal British trade. Thus, unwilling to accede completely to Lin's demands, the British departed Canton and eventually took up a defensive position on the sparsely populated island of Hong Kong. The American merchants, on the other hand, led by the example of Olyphant and Company, and strongly encouraged by Bridgman and his missionary colleagues, finally consented to sign Lin's bond and were therefore allowed to continue their commercial activities unmolested. This action by the American merchants was in the face of strong objections by the British. Even the American consul at that time, Peter Snow, although lacking the authority to intervene, had expressed his disapproval of their acquiescence to Lin's demands.²²

The day following the final exodus of the British on May 24, the American merchants gathered to address a memorial to the Congress of the United States expressing their opinion of the events leading to the crisis and suggesting a future course of action. The recommendations that it contained were virtually the same as those that Bridgman and Williams had long advocated in the pages of the *Chinese Repository*. The merchants, led by C. W. King of Olyphant and Company, declared their firm opposition to the opium trade, noting "whether we view the subject in a moral and philanthropic light, or merely as a commercial question, we are extremely desirous to see the importation and consumption of opium in China at an end."²³ They also notified their government of their decision to sign the pledge of Lin Zexu, stating that they believed that the Chinese government was sincere in its efforts to bring the trade to an end and "would in the future abstain from dealings in the drug."²⁴

Although Bridgman was aware that the current crisis was likely to lead to a protracted struggle between China and Great Britain, he had hoped that it was the first step toward ending the traffic in opium.

²² See Stelle, *Americans and the China Opium Trade*, p. 74.

²³ Memorial of Forbes and others, May 25, 1839, cited by Charles Clarkson Stelle in *ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Reporting to the American Board in May 1839, he wrote: “Opium . . . is now showing its legitimate effects on the traffickers. We hope the traffic has received its deathblow. Our little community has been held these two months constantly in painful—fearful suspense. Nor does the prospect brighten. England, India—and Christendom—must now awake to the evils of this ‘hurtful thing.’”²⁵ Further publicizing these sentiments in the *Chinese Repository*, Bridgman wrote: “when the minds of western nations are duly sensible of these dire evils, to which they have long been accessory, they will not only desist from their former courses, but like true Christian philanthropists, they will strive to repair the desolations already made.”²⁶

The American missionaries supported Commissioner Lin’s efforts to eradicate the drug trade, and were pleased to see the opium held by the smugglers handed over to Chinese authorities for destruction. In fact, Bridgman had even responded to an invitation by Lin to come witness the destruction of the opium.²⁷ Publicly describing his meeting with the commissioner afterward, Bridgman wrote: “from the whole drift of the conversation and inquiries during the interview, it seemed very evident that the sole object of the commissioner was, and is, to do away with the traffic in opium, and to protect and preserve that which is legitimate and honorable.”²⁸

Shortly after his meeting with Lin, Bridgman printed the Commissioner’s famous letter to the queen of England calling for the suppression of the opium trade in the *Chinese Repository*, noting how during their interview Lin had expressed “an anxious desire to know how he should convey such a communication to the English sovereign.”²⁹

As Bridgman was no doubt well aware, printing the letter in the *Chinese Repository* virtually ensured that it would be seen by at least some officials of the British government. Indeed, although Lin himself had eventually arranged for it to be carried to England by Captain Warner of the merchant vessel *Thomas Coutts*, the Foreign Office refused to receive it when they were informed of its contents.³⁰

In September 1839, several months after Commissioner Lin’s

²⁵ Bridgman to Board, Canton, May 15, 1839, in *Papers of the American Board*, reel 257.

²⁶ Bridgman, “Crisis in the Opium Traffic,” *Chinese Repository* 8 (May 1839): 4.

²⁷ Lin recorded his encounter with Bridgman and King in his journal. See Arthur Waley, *The Opium War through Chinese Eyes*, p. 50.

²⁸ Bridgman, “Crisis in the Opium Traffic,” *Chinese Repository* 8 (June 1839): 76–77.

²⁹ See “Letter to the Queen of England,” *Chinese Repository* 8 (May 1839): 9.

³⁰ See Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War*, p. 138.

seizure of the opium and the British exodus from Canton, the American missionaries reported their situation to the American Board and offered some thoughts on the significance of recent events. In this report, the missionaries characterized opium as “an evil scarcely less, perhaps greater, than both slavery and intemperance combined” and pointed out some of the ways in which the evils leading to the present crisis have mounted because of this “flowing poison.”³¹ The most disturbing aspect of the opium problem, they affirmed, was “the notorious fact that foreigners, enlightened nations, and Christian people, have been the chief agents in providing and in administering this drug.”³²

Bridgman had publicized some of these same views in his introduction to a new volume of the *Chinese Repository* in May 1839.³³ Sketching the history of the opium trade in China under the auspices of the British East India Company, he described in great detail its accelerated expansion “under the conditions of *free trade*.” Bridgman was greatly disturbed by the acquiescence of British authorities that had come under the influence of wealthy traders, remarking pointedly that in England today “no man received a less ready welcome to the highest ranks of society because his eastern fortune had come from the sale of opium.”³⁴

Bridgman’s criticism of the role played by Western traders had thus become much more forthright than it had been previously, and while he still refused to cite specific names, he emphasized more strongly than ever the moral culpability of the smuggler, denouncing the act of trading in opium as a “fruitful source of evils, destroying life, property, and morals.”³⁵ Indeed, Bridgman charged the Western governments with much of the responsibility for the opium trade, arguing that they had abdicated their rightful guardianship over the behavior of their citizens abroad. As he pointedly remarked, “the course of western governments, respecting all their interests here, has been calculated to degrade, rather than to elevate the foreign character. . . . Our national character is in the dust, prostrated by our own folly and negligence.”³⁶

³¹ Mission to Board, Macao, September 7, 1839, in *Papers of the American Board*, reel 257.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Bridgman, “Crisis in the Opium Traffic,” p. 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3. The role of William Jardine and other wealthy merchants involved in the opium trade in influencing the policies of the British Foreign Office at the time of the Opium War is described in detail by Hanes and Sanello in their book *Opium Wars*.

³⁵ Bridgman, “Crisis in the Opium Traffic,” p. 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

MISSIONARY INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN OPIUM POLICY

In the years immediately preceding the Opium War, the attitudes of many Americans toward China had been greatly influenced by the essays and articles of Bridgman and his fellow missionaries in Canton. As Tyler Dennett explained in his monumental study of early Sino-American relations, the writings of the American missionaries “had stimulated in the United States an ever growing philanthropic interest in the Empire and their reports on the evils of the opium trade were a powerful factor in shaping public opinion.”³⁷ Officials of the American government did not, therefore, hesitate to publicly condemn the smuggling of opium in China, particularly in light of the pledge by the American merchants in Canton to abstain from it. In an address to the House given shortly after the opium crisis broke out, Caleb Cushing, a representative from Massachusetts, commended the Americans at Canton for manifesting “a proper respect for the laws and public rights of the Chinese Empire, in honorable contrast with the outrageous misconduct of the British there.”³⁸ Of course, Americans had been involved in the opium trade for many years—a fact that Cushing would undoubtedly have been aware of—and it was only under the threat of expulsion from Canton that some of those guilty of participating in the trade had sided with Olyphant and Company in signing Lin’s bond. Nevertheless, as Charles Stelle describes the politics of the moment, “the combination of opportunities to decry a traffic in an unsavory commodity and to expatiate on the shamelessness of the British proved an irresistible temptation to American self-righteousness.”³⁹

Shortly after the Opium War began, Dr. Peter Parker, who had been operating a missionary hospital in Canton on behalf of the American Board mission, took the opportunity to travel to America aboard the *Niantic* at the expense of Olyphant and Company. This journey came at a crucial time for the American Board mission, and its members clearly welcomed the chance to have one of their number travel to America to explain in person the circumstances surrounding recent events. Given his celebrity status as the healer of thousands at his hos-

³⁷ Tyler Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1922), p. 102.

³⁸ *Congressional Globe*, 26-1, March 15, 1840, p. 275. Cited by Stelle in *Americans and the China Opium Trade*, p. 80.

³⁹ Stelle, *Americans and the China Opium Trade*, p. 80.

pital in Canton—a fact widely publicized in the *Missionary Herald* and other New England periodicals—Parker had little trouble finding attentive audiences. After spending a short time in New Haven in December 1840, he left for Washington with the intention “to call the attention of the men in power to the relations of America to China.”⁴⁰

During this visit he was met by President Martin Van Buren and Secretary of State John Forsyth and was introduced to the influential senator from Massachusetts—and future secretary of state—Daniel Webster. Webster showed considerable interest in Parker’s opinions and asked him to commit them to writing for closer examination. Given the crucial role Webster was destined to play in shaping American policy toward China, there can be little doubt regarding the importance of Parker’s carefully written list of concerns and recommendations.

In his letter, Parker assured Webster that the issue of Sino-American relations “is not a subject that has been taken up precipitately, but one that has been a subject of consideration and unqualified approbation with gentlemen of intelligence, who contemplate it quite independently of personal ends.”⁴¹ This was obviously a reference to Parker’s missionary colleagues in China, who sincerely believed that they were the most capable of delivering a just evaluation of the crisis. Parker’s letter even gave the impression that he and his colleagues in China had prepared the ground for American mediation of the conflict between Great Britain and China. Alluding to the amiable contacts they had made with Commissioner Lin, Parker noted that “the mediation of America was a subject of frequent conversation with Chinese of intelligence,” and “not to speak too confidently, there is a strong presumption that the Chinese will be happy to avail themselves of such a mediation.”⁴² As Parker explained, “the Chinese only wish for a method of pacification and restoration of commerce by which the government shall not ‘lose face,’ or credit, and at the same time it effects the cessation of the opium traffic.”⁴³

Although Parker’s recommendations to Daniel Webster and other high officials failed to prompt the American administration to directly intervene in the conflict, his sermons and addresses to various organi-

⁴⁰ From the journal of Peter Parker, cited by Rev. George B. Stevens in *The Life, Letters, and Journals of the Rev. and Hon. Peter Parker, M.D.* (Boston and Chicago: Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Society, 1896), p. 183.

⁴¹ Parker to Webster, Washington (undated), cited in *ibid.*, p. 184.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

zations and institutions—including the Senate and House of Representatives—stimulated a conscientious concern for events in China and brought the issue of America’s relationship with the country to public attention. And as more news of the Opium War that had broken out between Great Britain and China reached America, many within the American government grew increasingly apprehensive about the aims of the British in China and the potential impact of the war on American interests there. Furthermore, many Americans were greatly disturbed by reports that their countrymen were once again becoming involved in opium trafficking and began to insist that their government bring a halt to any smuggling by American vessels. The newly elected President Tyler therefore ordered the East India Squadron, under the command of Commodore Lawrence Kearny, to proceed to China under terms of strict neutrality to both look after the interests of legitimate American traders and “to prevent and punish the smuggling of opium into China either by Americans or by other nations under the cover of the American flag.”⁴⁴

Arriving in Macao in April 1842, Kearny discovered that some American ships had indeed resumed smuggling opium. Eager to impress the Chinese with a clear token of America’s opposition to the trade, Kearny’s first act upon reaching China was to instruct the American vice-consul at Canton, Warren Delano Jr., to publicly inform American merchants that “the Government of the United States does not sanction ‘the smuggling of opium’ on this coast under the American flag in violation of the laws of China,” and that “upon difficulties arising therefrom in respect to the seizure of any vessels by the Chinese, the claimants certainly will not under my instructions find support, or any interposition on my part.”⁴⁵ In addition, Kearny notified Chinese Governor-General Qigong, through a message translated by Bridgman, that he intended “to inquire regarding the smuggling of opium by his own countrymen, and not to allow them, or others under his nation’s flag, to engage in that contraband trade.”⁴⁶

Although Kearny lacked the legal mechanisms necessary for effectively punishing violators, he proceeded to do what he could to demonstrate his government’s opposition to their activities. In May 1843, for

⁴⁴ Cited by Stelle in *Americans and the China Opium Trade*, p. 82.

⁴⁵ Doc. 1, *American Diplomatic and Public Papers: the United States and China 1*, Jules Davids, editorial director (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1973), p. 5. Also printed in the *Chinese Repository* 11 (April 1842): 259.

⁴⁶ Kearny to Governor of Canton, April 27, 1842, doc. 9, *American Diplomatic and Public Papers* 1, p. 22.

example, he found a legal pretext to seize the *Ariel*, a schooner known to be smuggling opium under the American flag, confiscating the vessel's papers and cargo and sending it back to Macao.⁴⁷ Kearny's actions and pronouncements enraged many British, who took every opportunity to deride the hypocrisy of the United States government—after all, even the newly appointed American consul in Canton, Paul S. Forbes, was known to have some connections with the opium trade.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, it was clear that there were major differences in the official attitudes of the two Western governments toward opium smuggling—a fact that would be reflected in the first formal American treaty with the Chinese government.

MISSIONARY DIPLOMACY: THE TREATY OF WANGXIA

The Sino-British Treaty of Nanjing that ended the Opium War in 1842 represented an important turning point in Sino-Western relations, for it brought an end to the restrictive Canton system of trade and marked the beginning of China's more open treaty port system. And while the American missionaries were unhappy that the conflict had not brought an end to the opium trade (mention of it was deliberately left out of the British treaty), they were elated at the prospects of establishing Christian missions in the five newly opened ports.⁴⁹ Indeed, their joy at opening China much more widely to missionary activity, coupled with their helpless frustration that the conflict had failed to resolve the opium issue, led them to refrain somewhat from their strident criticism of opium smuggling by Westerners. This has led some historians, such as Clifton Phillips, to suggest that they had “quickly shifted their ground,” when in reality they had, more accurately, merely bowed to the inevitable, interpreting the tragic injustices of the Opium War as the inscrutable instruments of God's plan for the country's ultimate

⁴⁷ The ship was owned by a private American trader named George W. Fraizer. See Kearny to Sec. of the Navy, May 19, 1843, doc. 6, *American Diplomatic and Public Papers* 1, p. 15.

⁴⁸ Forbes was eventually requested to disassociate himself from any involvement with the opium trade if he wished to retain his position. See State Department to Caleb Cushing, June 12, 1843, doc. 7, *American Diplomatic and Public Papers* 1, p. 17.

⁴⁹ According to Gregory Blue, continued opposition from the court in Beijing and the strength of the anti-opium lobby in Britain can both be cited as factors explaining why British negotiators did not insist that the Qing government legalize the trade. See Gregory Blue, “Opium for China: The British Connection,” in *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839–1952*, ed. Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 35.

redemption.⁵⁰ Writing of his experience as a translator to Kearny, Bridgman remarked:



Amid the distresses and perplexities which have overtaken the inhabitants of this land—by the introduction of opium, by the continuance of war, by inundations, by divisions of counsels, by the tumults of the people—God is evidently carrying on his own great designs; and in wrath he will remember mercy, bring order out of confusion, good out of evil, and make even man's wickedness promotive of the divine glory. His promises are sure; none can stay his hand; the heathen shall be given to his Son; and all the ends of the earth praise him as Lord of all.⁵¹

This sort of millenarian rationalization of the opium trade did not mean that the missionaries had relinquished their strong moral objections to it, but it did appear to render them somewhat more acquiescent toward its continued proliferation. Believing that God had somehow ordained such evils as the part of some great historical pageant of redemption relieved the missionaries of a considerable measure of guilt for the actions of their less scrupulous countrymen. In fact, articles vigorously condemning the evils of the opium trade virtually vanished from the pages of the *Chinese Repository* following the Opium War, and for a time it seemed as though the missionaries had practically forsaken their campaign to have the issue addressed more forcefully by their government.

Soon, however, a new opportunity arose that offered the American missionaries fresh hope that they could still effect some positive change in Western policies toward the opium trade. At the end of 1843 they received word that President Tyler was sending an American diplomatic mission to China under the leadership of Caleb Cushing to negotiate the first American treaty with the Chinese government.⁵² Cushing was accompanied on the mission by Fletcher Webster (son of Daniel Webster) who would serve as the legation secretary. Parker had met the incoming President Tyler just prior to his return to China, and his recommendations to the president and his new secretary of state, Daniel Webster, were clearly reflected in the instructions given to

⁵⁰ Clifton Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World*, p. 189.

⁵¹ Bridgman, "Notes of a Trip Up River to Canton in the U.S. Ship Constellation," *Chinese Repository* 12 (June 1843): 336.

⁵² Caleb Cushing, the son of a Newburyport shipbuilder, was a former representative to the House from Massachusetts and a current member of the Committee on Foreign Relations.

Cushing. One of the primary objectives of the Cushing legation was to ensure that American ships enjoyed the same privileges to trade at the newly opened ports as those allowed Great Britain and to insist on the principle of “most-favored-nation” in all future relations between China and America. Webster also instructed Cushing to convey the American government’s willingness to abide by Chinese commercial regulations, which included their explicit prohibitions against opium smuggling.⁵³ And although Webster’s instructions regarding the smuggling of opium did not call for any active interdiction of the trade by American authorities, Cushing was told to make it clear that “if citizens of the United States, under these circumstances, are found violating well-known laws of trade, their Government will not interfere to protect them from the consequences of their illegal conduct.”⁵⁴

While the American Board had frequently warned its missionaries against any involvement in the political diplomacy of East Asia, its executive committee expressed an unusually lively interest in the potential prospects of the Cushing mission. Writing to Bridgman in June 1843, the secretary of the American Board, Rufus Anderson, remarked: “the object of Mr. Cushing’s mission, as we understand it, falls in with yours, though it be not the same, and it will contribute, we trust, in no small degree to facilitate the measures for the religious improvement of the Chinese empire, which we have specially in view.”⁵⁵ The American Board therefore made an exception to its previous injunctions to refrain from any involvement in political affairs and offered Cushing the crucial services of its missionaries in China as consultants and translators.

Anderson had specifically recommended Bridgman or Williams, noting that Parker, who had returned to China from his extended trip to Europe and America in October 1842, lacked a sufficient knowledge of the language to serve well in this capacity.⁵⁶ Parker, however, had achieved considerable renown as an expert on Chinese affairs during his visit to the United States and had made numerous contacts among influential members of the government—not to mention his marriage to Harriet Webster, a relative of Daniel Webster. So, when Cushing

⁵³ May 8, 1843, doc. 65, *American Diplomatic and Public Papers* 1, p. 152.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Anderson to Mission, Boston, June 8, 1843, cited by Phillips in *Protestant America and the Pagan World*, p. 192.

⁵⁶ This offer was made to Cushing through Governor Samuel T. Armstrong of Massachusetts, a member of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Anderson to Armstrong, Boston, June 8, 1843. See Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World*, p. 192.

arrived in China, both Bridgman and Parker were recruited to assist him with the delicate task of negotiating America's first formal treaty with the government of China.

After considerable haggling with Chinese officials over matters of protocol, the missionaries finally met with Imperial Commissioner Qiying and his assistants in June 1844 at the Buddhist temple to the Goddess of Mercy in the village of Wangxia just outside Macao. Following some preliminary deliberations, Fletcher Webster, Bridgman, and Parker produced a draft of the treaty Cushing hoped to have approved and presented it to Qiying's subordinates for inspection. This document contained most of the provisions that would eventually make up the **Treaty of Wangxia**, including several articles that were of supreme importance to the missionary negotiators themselves, not the least of which was the provision relating to illegal smuggling. **Unlike the Treaty of Nanjing, which scrupulously avoided any mention of the opium trade, the Treaty of Wangxia declared that any Americans "who shall attempt to trade clandestinely with such of the ports of China as are not open to foreign commerce, or who shall trade in opium or any other contraband article of merchandize, shall be subject to be dealt with by the Chinese government, without being entitled to any countenance of protection from that of the United States."**⁵⁷ In addition, the United States vowed to take steps to "prevent their flag from being abused by the subjects of other nations, as a cover for the violation of the laws of the Empire."⁵⁸

In effect, the provision on opium merely exempted Westerners from the unprecedented protections afforded Americans in China by yet another treaty provision devised by the missionaries that secured foreigners "extraterritoriality." Extraterritoriality prevented the Chinese from prosecuting Western lawbreakers within the framework of the Chinese legal system. While this provision was intended to protect Americans from what was perceived as the cruel and primitive Chinese legal system, it amounted to a grant of legal immunity inasmuch as American consular officials consistently failed to uphold their agreed upon judicial responsibility to oversee the legal conduct of their countrymen. And the Chinese, hesitant to risk another war by angering the foreigners, were reluctant to enforce any laws that might be construed as violating the foreigner's newly granted extraterritoriality. Thus, as

⁵⁷ Treaty of Wangxia, Article 33, doc. 13, *American Diplomatic and Public Papers* 2, p. 128.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Stelle has pointed out, the anti-opium provision of the Treaty of Wangxia did little to slow the traffic, for by leaving enforcement in the hands of the Chinese it in effect liberated the traffic from molestation.⁵⁹

Although Cushing and his missionary advisors appeared sincere in their effort to stem the opium trade by officially acknowledging its illegality and vowing to prevent Americans from engaging in it, the United States would never commit the resources necessary to effectively restrict American opium smuggling in China, and in the years following the Treaty of Wangxia the trade expanded greatly. The missionaries had therefore accomplished little more than to morally exonerate themselves from the evil actions of their countrymen by placing the burden of halting the trade primarily on the shoulders of the Chinese. Of course, this was now made considerably more difficult by the other provisions of the American treaty that the missionaries helped formulate. In other words, the protections now afforded Westerners by the provision of extraterritoriality and the forcible opening of the treaty ports to greater penetration by Western merchants made any Chinese effort to thwart smuggling or, for that matter, to defend themselves from various other forms of social and economic exploitation virtually impossible. Indeed, as Liang Biying has pointed out, the Treaty of Wangxia was an important signpost in the history of Sino-American relations and represented the key turning point between two eras, marking, in effect, the beginning of the American cultural and commercial invasion of China.⁶⁰

OPIUM AND THE GOSPEL IN TREATY PORT CHINA

During the early years of the treaty port system, the illegal opium trade continued to flourish and expand, and its corrupting influence on the political and commercial life of China's coastal ports increased dramatically as the number of those profiting from smuggling grew. The devastating impact of widespread opium addiction on Chinese society also increased alarmingly. As S. Wells Williams had remarked on the plight of the Chinese in a letter to his brother, "the poverty induced by the opium trade is harder and harder upon them, and the lower classes are devoting themselves to robbing, piracy, and emigration in order

⁵⁹ See Stelle, *Americans and the China Opium Trade*, p. 109.

⁶⁰ Liang Biying, "Meiguo chuanjiaoshi yu meiguo dui hua zhengce" [American Missionaries and America's Policy Toward China], *Guanxi shehui kexue* 2 (1992): 60.

to procure food and work.”⁶¹ But with new mission stations quickly sprouting up at the various treaty ports, the attitudes of American missionaries toward the opium trade began to change. While they continued to voice concern over the pernicious effects of the trade on the welfare of the Chinese people, emphasis was now placed upon the negative impact that opium smuggling had on Chinese attitudes toward the moral character of Westerners in general. This shift in emphasis was largely because preaching the gospel had become an increasingly frustrating and fruitless effort given the unsavory connection drawn by the Chinese between Western opium smugglers and Christian missionaries. Indeed, missionaries in all the newly established stations began to chafe under the charges of hypocrisy that were now leveled against them by those Chinese to whom they preached their message of Christian salvation and benevolence. According to Lyman Peet, of the newly established mission at Fuzhou, “no questions have been more frequently put to me by the people of this place during my sojourn among them than those which relate to the subject of opium. ‘Is it not brought from your country? Are not your Jesus Christ’s men engaged in selling it to us?’”⁶² Similarly, William Aitchison, a close associate of Bridgman, noted how opium was one of “the most frequent topics of interrogation” while preaching in the streets of Shanghai, making it among “the mightiest obstacles to the triumph of vital religion.”⁶³

In an essay on the opium trade written for the *Chinese Repository* in 1851, S. Wells Williams attempted to account for the lack of converts won in the new treaty ports by noting that “the little success which has attended Christian missions in China is owing to the frown of God upon the cause, in consequence of the way in which the Christian name is exhibited in China in connection with the opium traffic.”⁶⁴ Thus, much of the criticism leveled against Western missionaries by the Chinese arose from the fact that opium was a harmful and illegal commodity, and that despite their vigorous advocacy of the rule of law—not to mention the Golden Rule—Westerners were the chief

⁶¹ S. W. Williams to Rev. W. F. Williams, Canton, July 20, 1850, cited in Frederick Wells Williams, *The Life and Letters of Samuel Wells Williams, LL.D.* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1889; repr. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1972), p. 175.

⁶² Cited by Ellsworth C. Carlson in *The Foochow Missionaries, 1847–1880* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 70. The American Board appointed Lyman Birt Peet a missionary to the Chinese in 1839. He was sent to the newly established American mission in Fuzhou in 1847.

⁶³ Letter to the American Board from Mr. Aitchison cited in the *Missionary Herald* (June 1856), p. 165.

⁶⁴ Williams, “An Essay on the Opium Trade,” *Chinese Repository* 20 (July 1851): 485.

importers of the drug. Indeed, the connection drawn in the minds of many Chinese between the missionaries and the illegal activities of their countrymen was discrediting all missionary claims of benevolent intent and undermining their assertion that Christianity represented a superior foundation for moral behavior. It is not surprising, therefore, that many missionaries began to hold the view that the opium trade, or rather the stigma of lawlessness that was associated with it, was becoming a major obstacle to the spread of the gospel in China.

Instead, however, of reenergizing missionary efforts to have their governments help eradicate the trade, such concerns caused many missionaries to begin tentatively considering the formal legalization of the drug. Ironically, this was the position long advocated by opium smugglers themselves. Throughout this period, there were numerous articles in the various treaty port newspapers that blamed the “serious embarrassment and difficulty” associated with the trade as “chiefly arising from its abnegation by our own authorities.”⁶⁵ Needless to say, most smugglers were greatly discomforted over being castigated as outlaws by both the Chinese and some of their fellow countrymen. Their solution was to have the trade legally recognized in some fashion by both their own government and that of the Chinese, thus legitimizing what had become an integral part of Western trade in China. Missionary rationalization for their own changing position was that legalization would bring an end to the deceit, violence, and corruption associated with the present system and thus somehow make it less morally degrading.

This remarkable transformation in the attitude of key members of the missionary community was reflected in articles that Bridgman and Williams began to print in the *Chinese Repository* as early as 1847. In one such article, an unnamed merchant argued for legalization by noting how the present system “supports numbers of pirates and smugglers, committing the most horrible and atrocious deeds, . . . [thus] if opium itself be no evil, it draws many evils about it which disgrace those engaged in its traffic.”⁶⁶ “Mortified” that the drug was not formally legalized by the treaties following the Opium War, this same merchant lamented how the failure of Western governments to provide protection for the traders—as in the explicit denial of such protection in the Treaty of Wangxia—had caused them to be viewed by the Chinese as

⁶⁵ From an anonymous essay published in *The North China Herald*, October 9, 1858.

⁶⁶ “The Opium Trade: Proposition of a Merchant to Legalize or Abolish the Traffic,” *Chinese Repository* 16 (January 1847): 40.

“an unruly set of vagabonds.”⁶⁷ For this reason, the writer argues, “all our good actions are forgotten by the Chinese merchants, who never fail to point out to us this chief defect in our intercourse with them.”⁶⁸

While Bridgman and Williams did not wish to appear too hasty in modifying their own position on this subject, they clearly indicated their willingness to reconsider the issue. In their introduction to yet another article by a merchant who supported legalization they remarked, “Though we cannot, (at least for the present) give our opinion in favor of legalization, still we are not prepared to say that, if the traffic were legalized, its evils, and the evils flowing from the use of the drug, would be augmented. One thing is clear to us—the whole subject is worthy of the most careful discussion in all its bearings; and we invite our readers to take it up, and put the whole question in its true light.”⁶⁹

Indeed, over the next several years the *Chinese Repository* published several other major articles in favor of legalizing the opium trade, indicating the extent to which the editors were themselves becoming supporters of this position. By the mid-1850s, in fact, it was clear that the attitudes of American missionaries toward the opium question had undergone a fundamental transformation. Humanitarian concern for the impact of opium on the health and welfare of the Chinese people had now been supplanted by a greater concern over the impact of its illegality on the reputation of Westerners in general, and thus on the winning of greater numbers of converts to Christianity. There was no greater proof of this change than the influential contribution made by American missionaries to the agreements associated with American Treaty of Tianjin negotiated in 1858.⁷⁰

MISSIONARY REVERSAL: AMERICAN OPIUM POLICY AND THE TREATY OF TIANJIN

In the decade following the Opium War, the major Western powers grew increasingly dissatisfied with the newly established treaty-port system. The commercial benefits of trading at the recently opened ports

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ From “The Opium Trade: . . . Remarks on the Character of the Traffic,” by a resident, *Chinese Repository* 16 (April 1847): 179–180.

⁷⁰ This was the second major treaty between the American and Chinese governments. It was negotiated in 1858 simultaneously with similar treaties that the Chinese government was forced to negotiate with the British, the French, and the Russians.

fell far below expectations, and many foreigners living in China were frustrated over what they considered to be the dilatory and obstructive policies of Chinese port officials, such as the confrontational Imperial Commissioner at Canton, Ye Mingchen.⁷¹ Therefore, the British began to demand major revisions in their original 1842 agreement with the Chinese, and they were not hesitant to exercise their overwhelming military superiority to coerce the Chinese into granting the additional concessions they now desired.⁷² Using the pretext of an incident that occurred in October 1856, when Chinese naval officials forcibly boarded a ship that was once under British registry, the *Arrow*, in search of opium and pirates, the British consul at Canton, Harry Parkes, and his superior, Sir John Bowring, initiated, in effect, an undeclared war against the Chinese.⁷³ Sometimes referred to as the Second Opium War, military hostilities commenced with an attack on Canton in December 1857 and continued sporadically along the coast until May 1858, when a squadron of British ships, joined by French naval forces, sailed northward and took the strategic Dagou forts at the mouth of the Beihe River leading to Tianjin.⁷⁴

Forced to acknowledge the hopelessness of defending against the foreigners, the Xianfeng emperor sent Guiliang, a member of the grand council, and Huashana, president of the Board of Civil Appointments, posthaste from the capital to Tianjin to “investigate matters and act.”⁷⁵ From this point on, negotiations between China and the foreigners assembled at Tianjin proceeded under the menacing threat of British and French cannon, and although the Chinese struggled to the end to resist some of the more onerous demands of the British chief negotiator, Lord Elgin, Guiliang was compelled to report to the emperor that

⁷¹ J. Y. Wong explores Western impressions of Ye Mingchen and his supposedly xenophobic administration of foreign relations from his headquarters in Canton in his incisive study titled *Deadly Dreams: Opium, Imperialism, and the Arrow War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁷² The basis of the British demand was that they enjoyed, through the “most favored nation” provision of their treaty, the right to renegotiate the terms of their 1842 treaty after a period of twelve years—a privilege originally granted to the Americans in the Treaty of Wangxia.

⁷³ J. Y. Wong provides a detailed analysis of the conflicting testimony surrounding this incident in *Deadly Dreams*, concluding that actions taken by the British were unjustified by either international law or the particular circumstances of this case.

⁷⁴ The French were initially prompted to join the British in order to seek redress for the execution of a French missionary, M. Pere Chapdelaine, in the interior of China. See Wong, *Deadly Dreams*, pp. 267–268.

⁷⁵ See Edict to the Grand Secretariat, May 28, 1858, doc. 334, in Earl Swisher, *China's Management of the American Barbarians: A Study of Sino-American Relations, 1841–1861, with Documents* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 471.

“the English and French are exceptionally arrogant and we cannot lightly try their sword-point; of this Your slaves are absolutely certain. So for the time being the effective plan is to rely on concession to effect an immediate conclusion.”⁷⁶

Carefully watching developments from abroad and wishing to partake of the benefits likely to accrue from the gunboat diplomacy of the British and French, the American president James Buchanan had earlier sent William B. Reed to China to explore means to negotiate similar treaty revisions for the government of the United States. The United States had vowed to remain neutral in the actual military conflict, however, so when the British and French naval expedition sailed toward Tianjin, Reed was obliged to trail inconspicuously behind, hoping simply to avail himself of whatever opportunities might open up from the British and French display of force. Thus, while Reed could still claim to uphold the letter of American neutrality, he compromised the spirit of his instructions at every turn—although, in all fairness, the letter and spirit of his instructions were themselves inconsistent. As Dennett describes this inglorious episode in U.S. diplomatic history, “An American envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary was to be dispatched to the other side of the world to stand under the tree, with his basket, waiting for his associates above to shake down the fruit.”⁷⁷ In the end, the terms of the treaties negotiated by the major powers at Tianjin were quickly determined, and by the end of June 1858 another key turning point in the history of Sino-Western relations had been mapped out.

Just as Caleb Cushing was obliged to rely upon the advice and assistance of Bridgman and Parker during his negotiation of the Treaty of Wangxia in 1844, Reed was completely dependent upon the services of the American missionaries S. Wells Williams and W. A. P. Martin.⁷⁸ In fact, while awaiting Williams’s arrival in Shanghai prior to proceeding to Tianjin, Reed even called upon Bridgman to help with some official business, later praising his “constant and most valuable counsel” in a letter to American Secretary of State Lewis Cass.⁷⁹ Thoroughly commending the invaluable role played by the American missionaries, Reed wrote, “I could not but for them have advanced one step in the

⁷⁶ Guiliang, Memorial to the Throne, June 26, 1858, doc. 372, in *ibid.*, p. 506.

⁷⁷ Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia*, p. 305.

⁷⁸ W. A. P. Martin was an agent of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church stationed in the treaty port city of Ningbo from 1850 to 1860.

⁷⁹ Reed to Secretary of State Cass, June 20, 1858, cited by Dennett in *Americans in Eastern Asia*, p. 556.

discharge of my duties here, or read, or written, or understood one word of correspondence or treaty stipulations.”⁸⁰

The American Treaty of Tianjin that Reed had negotiated in consultation with his missionary advisors was similar in most respects to that negotiated for the British by their plenipotentiary, Lord Elgin. It was somewhat more conciliatory in tone, however, and unlike the British agreement, provided some minimal rights and protections to the Chinese on matters pertaining to such things as extraterritoriality.⁸¹ There was also a formal promise to exert the good offices of the United States “if any other nation should act unjustly or oppressively,” in the hope that American mediation could “bring about an amicable arrangement of the question.”⁸² But the relatively benevolent tone of the American agreement was made possible only because the American negotiators knew they could rely upon British force and the “most-favored-nation” clause of their own Treaty of Tianjin to win those concessions that were truly of the greatest importance to them.

On the question of opium, however, the American treaty, like that of Great Britain, was notably silent. This did not mean that Reed was unconcerned about the issue; on the contrary, he had been strongly opposed to the trade prior to his arrival in China and had been instructed to reaffirm his government’s anti-opium stand in the terms of the new treaty. But following his visit to Shanghai, Reed found that the overwhelming majority of foreign residents, missionaries included, were of the opinion that legalization was preferable to the system of semi-legalized smuggling presently in place.⁸³ There was little doubt that the opium question was high on the minds of his missionary advisors. Following a meeting with one Chinese official during the course of their negotiations in May 1858, for example, Williams recorded in his journal how the gentleman “quoted the 6th commandment against the English, alleging that they could not be Christians, for they killed the Chinese with opium merely for gain.”⁸⁴ This association in the minds of the Chinese had long embarrassed and infuriated the American missionaries, and Williams had become firmly convinced of the need for some means to at least mitigate the stigma of lawlessness that surrounded the trade.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ See doc. 56, *American Diplomatic and Public Papers* 1, p. 85.

⁸² Article I. See *ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸³ See Stelle, *Americans and the China Opium Trade*, p. 128.

⁸⁴ Journal of Williams, May 15, 1858, cited in F. W. Williams, *Life and Letters of Samuel Wells Williams*, p. 175.

Lord Elgin was also under great pressure to have the drug legalized. British merchants and missionaries shared the American view that legalizing the drug would be preferable to the lawlessness and immorality currently associated with the trade. Indeed, according to J. W. Wong, subsequent to the first Opium War, the British had persisted in their effort to persuade the Chinese authorities to legalize opium.⁸⁵ And British missionaries were, of course, subjected to the same humiliating charges of hypocrisy leveled by the Chinese against all the foreign missionaries operating in China. But neither Elgin nor Reed was willing to force attention upon the topic of legalization during their negotiations with the Chinese at Tianjin. To coerce the Chinese to legalize the drug under the threat of arms ran contrary to the professed moral and political values of both men. They therefore agreed to leave the question out of the formal negotiations at Tianjin and instead pursue an alternative resolution of the issue when a more detailed supplemental commercial agreement was worked out with the imperial commissioners at Shanghai.⁸⁶

In fact, Reed had received a letter from an American merchant in Shanghai suggesting that including opium on the list of taxable imports maintained by the Chinese authorities might amount to its de facto legalization.⁸⁷ Reed later informed Elgin of this idea and assured him of his full support should the British attempt this strategy during their consultations with the Chinese.⁸⁸ Therefore, not surprisingly, when the major powers finally settled the details of their commercial agreement in October 1858, opium was listed among the various goods subject to tariff, in effect legalizing the drug. According to Wong, the Chinese negotiators were willing to accede to this request conveyed by Elgin largely because the governor-general of Liangjiang, He Guiqing, had already been deliberately contravening instructions from Beijing by surreptitiously levying a duty on the drug to get revenue to fight the Taiping insurrection.⁸⁹ So, when the idea was brought up to add opium to the list of taxable goods, there was no objection from the nervous Chinese. Elgin and Reed were therefore able to win their desired goal of having the drug legalized without having to do so under circum-

⁸⁵ See Wong, *Deadly Dreams*, p. 413.

⁸⁶ Article 26 of the British Treaty of Tianjin had arranged for a subsequent conference to be held in October 1858 in Shanghai to deliberate on the details of supplementary commercial agreement.

⁸⁷ Letter from U.S. merchant to Reed, August 28, 1858, cited in Wong, *Deadly Dreams*, p. 414.

⁸⁸ Reed to Elgin, Shanghai, September 13, 1858, cited in Wong, *Deadly Dreams*, p. 414.

⁸⁹ See Wong, *Deadly Dreams*, p. 415.

stances that might have been interpreted as blatantly immoral or contradictory to international standards of justice. In other words, the British and the Americans won by stealth that which they would have been embarrassed to secure under military coercion at the treaty negotiations in Tianjin.

Williams's later assessment of the significance of the new agreement on opium reflected the conflicting sentiments of the missionary community, while disingenuously placing primary responsibility for legalization on the shoulders of the British:

The Chinese government has yielded in its long resistance to permitting this drug to be entered through the custom-house; so the opium war of 1840 has at length ended in an opium triumph, and the honorable English merchants and government can now exonerate themselves from the opprobrium of smuggling this article. Bad as the triumph is, I am convinced that it was the best disposition that could be made of the perplexing question; legalization is preferable to the evils attending the farce now played, and we shall be the better when the drug is openly landed, and opium hulks and bribed inspectors are no more.⁹⁰

Of course, the missionaries also were now "exonerated from the opprobrium of smuggling," for inasmuch as "the brand of immorality and smuggling was removed from its diffusion throughout China," they could no longer be called upon by the Chinese to account for the illegal conduct of their countrymen.⁹¹ Thus, for the sake of easing their own consciences and, perhaps, more effectively spreading the gospel in China, the missionaries helped to open the country more widely to the importation of opium. And in the years following the signing of the Treaties of Tianjin, the importation of the drug increased dramatically as opium addiction became one of the most devastating scourges ever to afflict the Chinese people.

CONCLUSION

The official policy of the American government with regard to the opium trade in treaty port China was largely the product of the changing attitudes of a small number of American missionaries. This is not

⁹⁰ Cited by Frederick Wells Williams in *Life and Letters of Samuel Wells Williams*, pp. 291–292.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

to say that commercial and political interests did not also contribute to determining American policy on this issue, but missionaries were particularly influential in shaping the contents of their country's first treaties with the Chinese. Indeed, their mastery of the Chinese language and experience in dealing with Qing officials were indispensable to the diplomatic representatives of the United States. As Reed explained in a letter to the secretary of state, Lewis Cass, "without them as interpreters the public business could not be transacted. I could not but for them have advanced one step in the discharge of my duties here, or read, or written, or understood one word of correspondence or treaty stipulations."⁹² The American missionaries were also highly regarded as moral authorities, whose opinions had proven to be a deciding factor in determining American policy in East Asia.

Sadly, and ironically, the conflicting interests of the American missionaries in China at the time of the Treaties of Tianjin prevented them from advocating the kinds of measures that might have prevented the expansion of the opium trade in East Asia in the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, the de facto legalization of the trade in the commercial treaties negotiated at Shanghai opened the way to the large-scale importation of opium in China. As Kathleen L. Lodwick has pointed out in her study of Protestant missionaries and the opium trade, "legalization clearly did not diminish the demand for opium but rather caused its use to increase yearly."⁹³ But Lodwick's study fails to note that missionary endorsement of legalization at this time was one of the chief factors behind American willingness to accept it as a legally traded commodity in the Shanghai commercial treaty. Thus, while the missionaries had indeed long recognized opium as one of the greatest evils afflicting Chinese society and had vigorously endeavored in the years prior to the Opium War to eradicate it as an article of Sino-Western trade, they must share a large measure of the historical responsibility for creating the conditions that permitted the continuation and expansion of the opium trade following this crucial turning point in Sino-Western relations.

⁹² Reed to Secretary of State Cass, June 20, 1858, cited by Dennett in *Americans in Eastern Asia*, p. 556.

⁹³ Kathleen L. Lodwick, *Crusaders against Opium: Protestant Missionaries in China, 1874-1917* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

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