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*An Information War Waged by Merchants
and Missionaries at Canton: The Society for
the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China,
1834–1839**

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Abstract

This paper explores the efforts and impact of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China (1834–1839), which existed during the five years before the First Opium War. It contends that the Society represented a third form of British engagement with the Chinese, alongside the diplomatic attempts of 1793 and 1816, and the military conflict of 1839–1842. The Society waged an ‘information war’ to penetrate the information barrier that the Qing had established to contain European trade and missions. The foreigners in Canton believed they were barred from further access to China because the Chinese had no information on the true character of the Europeans. Thus, they prepared ‘intellectual artillery’ in the form of Chinese language publications, especially on world geography, to distribute among the Chinese, in the hope that this effort would familiarize the Chinese with the science and art of Westerners and thereby cultivate respect and a welcoming atmosphere. The war metaphor was conceived, and the information war was waged, in the periphery of the British informal empire in Canton, but it contributed to the conceptualization of war against China, both in Canton and in Britain, in the years before actual military action. Behind the rhetoric of war and knowledge diffusion in Canton, lay a convergence of interests between merchants and missionaries, which drove both to employ information and military power to further their shared aim of opening China up for trade and proselytizing.

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Introduction

When the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China (hereafter, the Society) was founded in Canton on 29 November 1834, its committee declared:

We are now, then, to make the trial, whether the celestial empire, after it has defeated all efforts to bring it into an alliance with the civilized nations of the earth, will not yield to intellectual artillery, and give to knowledge the palm of victory.

The committee were ‘glad to engage in a warfare’ that involved the publication of books in Chinese—the intellectual artillery.¹ Through publication and distribution of these books, the founding members of the Society—which consisted of Anglophone merchants and missionaries in Canton—believed that the Chinese would have access to the information barred by the Qing Dynasty and would subsequently understand the true character of the Europeans and be willing to engage with them.

Thus began the information war in the years before the First Opium War of 1839–1842, a war against the Qing authorities, which aimed to win the hearts and minds of the Chinese by familiarizing them with Europeans.

The year 1834 marked the end of the monopoly of the English East India Company in China. The atmosphere of the Canton foreign community was buoyant, while the self-confidence of the British merchants was high, both in their national power and in the ‘progress’ of the Europeans, even though the Western merchants were still allowed to trade only in Canton, and missionaries were theoretically banned from entering China. The merchants, tapping into the discourse of the free trade, were eager to remove restrictions in order to access the vast Chinese market, whilst a wave of missionary zeal that swept through revivalist movements in Britain and America reached the coast of Qing China. Together, the merchants and missionaries believed that both trade and gospel would benefit the Chinese and bring China into the ranks of the civilized nations.

The Qing Empire had been tightening its grip on foreigners in China since the mid eighteenth century, after closing down ports other than Canton and banning Christianity a few decades earlier in 1723. European merchants in Canton were allowed to trade and

¹ ‘Proceedings Relative to the Formation of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China’, National Archives UK (NAUK), FO17/ 89; also in *Chinese Repository* 3:8 (December 1834), pp. 378–384.

communicate with Qing officials only through a limited number of Chinese merchants, whilst being subject to strict regulations on their personal movement.

In limiting contact between Chinese and foreigners, the Qing erected an information barrier to prevent foreigners from knowing China, and Chinese from interacting with them. The information barrier was established for security reasons, in the light of Qing concerns that Europeans might conspire with rebels, especially on the southern coast, to overthrow the empire. Given Qing control, the justice in the information war was well-founded. In establishing the Society, the Westerners meant well, and believed that the new knowledge being passed on to the Chinese would benefit them as much as it had the Europeans, particularly the British.

Research on the decades before the First Opium War, in particular since John King Fairbank and Susan Barnett, has highlighted the Protestant missionaries' legacy concerning the spread of Christianity and their role in China's modernization.² The equally rich literature on the opium trade and the opium war explores the effects of that war in opening up China to direct Western influence and thereby inaugurating the entangled relations between China and the West.³

² Examples of the extensive works on Protestant missionaries of this period: Hsi-t'ung Chang, 'The Earliest Phase of the Introduction of Western Political Science into China', *Yenching Journal of Social Studies*, 1:5 (July 1950). Susanne Barnett, 'Protestant Expansion and Chinese Views of the West', *Modern Asian Studies*, 6:2 (1972); Susanne Barnett, 'The Chinese Repository and Western Literature on China 1800 to 1850', *Modern Asian Studies* 7:2 (1973). John King Fairbank (ed.), *The Missionary Enterprise in China and America* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974). Suzanne Barnett and John King Fairbank (eds), *Christianity in China: Early Protestant Missionary Writings* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985). Daniel Bays (ed.), *Christianity in China, from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). Murray Rubinstein, *The Origins of the Anglo-American Missionary Enterprise in China, 1807–1840* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1996). Michael Lazich, *E. C. Bridgman (1801–1861), America's First Missionary to China* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000). Lars Peter Laamann, *Christian Heretics in Late Imperial China: Christian Inculturation and State Control, 1720–1850* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006). Jessie G. Lutz, *Opening China: Karl F. A. Gützlaff and Sino-Western Relations, 1827–1852* (Eerdman's Publishing Co., 2008). Su Jing, *Malixun yu zhongwen yinshua chubanshan (Robert Morrison and Chinese Printing)* (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 2000); *Zhongguo Kaimen: malixun ji xianguan renwu yanjiu (China Opening up: a Study on Robert Morrison and Other People)* (Hong Kong: Jidujiao Zhongguo zongjiao wenhua yanjiushe, 2005); *Shangdi de renma: shijie shiji zai hua chuanjiaoshi de zuowei (The Foot Soldiers of God: the Deeds of the Missionaries in China in the 19th Century)*. (Hong Kong: Jidujiao Zhongguo zongjiao wenhua yanjiushe, 2006.)

³ The major works of research on opium and the war in China: Hsin-pao Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964). Jack Beeching, *The Chinese Opium War* (London: Hutchinson, 1975).

Based on these well established studies and attempting to go beyond, this paper focuses on the foreign community in Canton. This shift of focus seeks to shed light on the history of these decades in its Cantonese context, and in particular to contextualize the publications of the Society in a Canton where Westerners were trying to break out of their containment by Qing China.

The Society itself has been a sideline investigation of three papers, seen either as one of the earliest attempts to bring the fruits of modernization into China or as an alternative to war. This paper broadly agrees with the modernization thesis but will revise the war alternative argument.⁴ By extensive research into the history of the Society that hitherto has not been achieved, this paper argues that in the context of Sino-British relations, the information war was a third form of British engagement with the Chinese, along with the diplomatic attempts of 1793 and 1816 and the military war of 1839–1842.⁵ The war metaphor employed in establishing the Society also

Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War, 1840–1842: Barbarians in the Celestial Empire in the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century and the War by Which They Forced her Gates Ajar* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975). James Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992). Mao, Haijian, *Tianchao de bengkui (The Collapse of the Celestial Dynasty)* (Beijing: sanlian shudian, 1995). J. Y. Wong, *Deadly Dreams: Opium and the Arrow War (1856–1860) in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Timothy Brook, and B. T. Wakabayashi (eds), *Opium Regimes. China, Britain, and Japan, 1839–1952* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2000). W. Travis III Hanes, and Frank Sanello, *The Opium Wars: the Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another* (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2002). Glenn Melancon, *Britain's China Policy and the Opium Crisis: Balancing Drugs, Violence and National Honour, 1833–1840* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). Joyce Madancy, *The Troublesome Legacy of Commissioner Lin: The Opium Trade and Opium Suppression in Fujian Province*. (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2004). David Bello, *Opium and the Limits of Empire: Drug Prohibition in the Chinese Interior, 1729–1850* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2005). Yangwen Zheng, *The Social Life of Opium in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴ For the modernization argument, which this paper will not repeat, see Murray Rubinstein, 'Propagating the Democratic Gospel: Western Missionaries and the Diffusion of Western Thought in China, 1830–1848', in *Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica* 11 (1982). For the papers on the understanding of the Society as an alternative to war, see Fred Drake, 'E. C. Bridgman's Portrayal of the West', in Barnett and Fairbank (ed.), *Christianity in China*; and Michael Lazich, 'The Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China: The Canton Era Information Strategy', in Michael Lackner and Natascha Vittinghoff (eds), *Mapping Meanings: The Field of New Learning in Late Qing China* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

⁵ For MacCartney's journey, see E. H. Pritchard, *The Crucial Years of Early Anglo-Chinese Relations, 1750–1800* (Washington: Pullman, 1936). James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham; London:

contributed to the discourse that led to the waging of the military war, by making the war ‘imaginable’.⁶ The information war is analytically separable from the military war, for it was initiated and achieved in Canton by the merchants and missionaries, and thus differs from diplomatic attempts and the military assault, which heavily involved the actions of the metropolis. To the tradition of British imperial historiography this paper makes a case that actors on the periphery of the informal empire—with certain connections to the metropolis—created by themselves a form of engagement with the Chinese: the information war.⁷

Establishment of the Society

Since the late 1820s, the trade of independent ‘country traders’, which consisted mainly of opium, had overtaken that of the East India Company. The end of the Company was on the horizon, and nobody expected that its monopoly charter would be renewed. A new spirit was in the air.⁸ This was the milieu in which the concept of ‘diffusion of useful knowledge’ appeared.

The *Canton Register* (published 1828–1846) in 1831 ran a competition for the best political economy essay which could impart

Duke University Press, 1995). Robert Bickers (ed.), *Ritual and Diplomacy. The Macartney Mission to China 1792–1794, Papers Presented at the 1992 Conference of the British Association for Chinese Studies Marking the Bicentenary of the Macartney Mission to China* (London, 1995). Frances Wood, ‘Closely Observed China: From William Alexander’s Sketches to His Published Work’, *British Library Journal*, 24:1 (1998), 98–121. J. L. Cranmer-Byng, ‘Lord Macartney’s Embassy to Peking in 1793, from Official Chinese Documents’, *Journal of Oriental Studies*, 4 (1957), pp. 117–187. Maxine Berg, ‘Britain, Industry and Perceptions of China: Matthew Boulton, ‘useful knowledge’ and the Macartney Embassy to China, 1792–94’, in *Journal of Global History* 1:2 (2006), 269–188. For Amherst’s journey, see George Thomas Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings and Occurrences during the British Embassy to Peking in 1816*.

⁶ Ulrike Hillemann argues that the changing perceptions of China made war against the country imaginable; see *Asian Empire and British Knowledge: China and the Networks of British Imperial Expansion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 104–105.

⁷ Some key works redressing the relations between British imperial metropolis and periphery: C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: the British Empire and the World 1780–1830* (London and New York: Longman, 1989); and *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Also, Kathleen Wilson (ed.), *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁸ Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China, 1800–42* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 15–16, and Chapter II.

the free trade ethos to the Chinese. The advertisement explained that the ‘prize is given by a gentleman who wishes to patronize the diffusion of useful knowledge in the Chinese language’.⁹ The *Canton Miscellany* (1831), in its first issue, argued: ‘The Nations around us are, notwithstanding all their arts and industry, not yet civilized. . . the Evil being apparent, the next thing is to find a remedy’. The authors considered that individual ‘effort is unequal to the task’, so they proposed that ‘local Societies be formed in India, the Straits, and China, for the diffusion of useful knowledge in the Native language’. They believed that ‘the Merchants seem the best men to commence the work’.¹⁰

The next year, 1832, the *Register* published an article entitled ‘Progress Society’, which commented that in China, ‘knowledge and civilization have rather decreased than increased for many centuries; and unless a European intercourse of literature take place, they are likely to be stationary or retrograde for many centuries to come’. The article called for the foreign community in Canton ‘to set up a Chinese Press, from which Newspapers, Reviews &c., should be issued’.¹¹ Up to this point, the concept of useful knowledge was mainly concerned with imparting ‘free trade’ to the Chinese, which was, at best, a self-appointed civilization mission.

The call for the ‘diffusion of useful knowledge’ took a new turn in May 1833 when another call for a ‘Chinese Press’ clearly spelt out the connection between knowledge diffusion and the image of foreigners that the Chinese supposedly possessed. It stated that the publications in Chinese were to be ‘calculated to remove the absurd prejudices of this people, and give them a juster [sic] idea of foreigners, their sciences, arts, and discoveries’.¹² Now the spread of the ‘European intercourse of literature’ was designed to remove the ‘prejudices’ of the Chinese. Two weeks later, in answering this call, the Prussian missionary Karl Gützlaff (1803–1851) advertised his ‘Prospectus of a Monthly Periodical in the Chinese Language’ in the *Register*, appealing for patronage. Gützlaff presented his idea for a magazine as a counter to the ‘high and exclusive notions’ of the Chinese by making them ‘acquainted with our sciences and principles’.

⁹ ‘Prize Essay’, *Canton Register* 4:12 (18 June 1831). The *Register* was the first English newspaper at Canton, founded by James Matheson.

¹⁰ ‘Civilization’, *Canton Miscellany*, pp. 11–12. The *Miscellany* was published by the East India Company staff in Canton.

¹¹ ‘Progress Society’, *Register* 5:5 (8 March 1832).

¹² ‘The Press in China’, *Register* 6:6 (31 May 1833).

Gützlaff argued that the ‘empty conceit’ that stemmed from the lack of information concerning the West on the Chinese side ‘has greatly affected the interests of the foreign residents at Canton’.¹³ Gützlaff explicitly made the point that the restrictions placed on Westerners were due to inadequate and insufficient knowledge of the West. This connection was meaningful to the Canton foreign community because the Canton System, with its tight regulations, had long been a source of dissatisfaction to them.

William Jardine (1784–1843) answered Gützlaff’s appeal and underwrote the first six months of the magazine in exchange for Gützlaff’s interpreting work, and his medical service on board the opium-selling voyage of the clipper *Sylph* along the eastern coast of China.¹⁴ In the following two years, Gützlaff published the *Dongxiyangkao meiyue tongjizhuan* 東西洋考每月統紀傳 (*Eastern Western Monthly Magazine*, 1833–1838) with the aim of making the Chinese understand Westerners better. The magazine did cause a certain excitement when it was distributed to the Chinese. The *Register*, the *Chinese Courier* (1831–1833) and the *Chinese Repository* (1832–1851) all reported the popularity of this magazine; the *Register* vividly described that some issues ‘have been read with eagerness’ and ‘portions of their contents have been copied and hawked about the streets for sale’.¹⁵

The idea of employing ‘intellectual artillery’ came into focus in the English public sphere at Canton and took on the form of a society when news reached Canton that a ‘Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge’ (hereafter, London Society) had been founded in London in 1826.¹⁶ Facing increasing criticism from other publishers in Great Britain for publishing much cheaper books and magazines aimed at lower-class people, the London Society decided at their fifth annual meeting that they should counteract these criticisms by launching a media campaign to disseminate pamphlets defending their position.

¹³ ‘Prospectus of a Monthly Periodical in the Chinese Language’, *Register* 6:10 (15 July 1833). For Karl Gützlaff, see Jessie Lutz, *Opening China: Karl F. A. Gützlaff and Sino-Western Relations, 1827–1852* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008).

¹⁴ Greenberg, *British Trade*, pp. 139–140. For Gützlaff’s account on the voyage see Karl Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages along the Coast of China, in 1831, 1832 & 1833*.

¹⁵ ‘Chinese Monthly Magazine’, *Register* 7:15 (15 April 1834); ‘The Chinese Magazine’, *Chinese Courier and Canton Gazette* 3:6 (23 September 1833); and ‘The Chinese Magazine’, *Chinese Repository* 2:5 (Septembre 1834), 234–236. *Chinese Courier* was founded by the American merchants W. W. Wood, and the *Chinese Repository* was a monthly journal on Asia published by missionaries.

¹⁶ For the Society, see Harold Smith, *The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge 1826–1846* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Dalhousie University, 1974).

One such pamphlet arrived in Canton and was published in the 1833 November issue of the *Repository*.¹⁷ Three appeals for the formation of a similar society were advertised after news of the London Society's establishment had spread. The third appeal promised the publication of a 'prospectus' in 'a short time'.¹⁸

The plan was, however, brought to an abrupt end by the arrival of Lord William John Napier (1786–1834) in July 1834 as the first Trade Superintendent to China; his position replaced the Select Committee of the East India Company in charge of the trade. Napier requested to communicate with the Viceroy of Canton directly that he was to be recognized as a representative of the British Empire. The Canton authorities refused to interact on his terms, and he untimely died of fever in September of that year. His death was grieved by those of the Canton foreign community who had hoped the new appointment would bring changes to trading conditions in China, especially when they believed that Napier would not have deteriorated so rapidly had the Chinese allowed him to go down to Macao sooner and by direct river routes.¹⁹ It was not until late November that the whole 'Napier Fizzle' was brought to an end. Now, with exasperation and discontent, and an even greater sense of community, the Society began operations in earnest, in late November 1834.²⁰

The Society's inspiration, the London Society in London, was part of a wider social reform movement that had developed in the first part of the nineteenth century. The major force behind the London Society was Lord Henry Brougham (1778–1868), who had just helped push through the Reform Act of 1832, two years before the founding of the Society. A mild reformer, Brougham viewed the London Society partly as a provider of educational opportunity to the lower classes, and partly as a means to divert radical revolutionary forces that were gathering strength among them.²¹ In addition to the affiliation of the Society to the London Society, a connection between Brougham and Canton also existed through the *Edinburgh Review* (1802–1929), of which Brougham was one of the founders and from which the

¹⁷ 'Literary Notices', *Repository* 2:7 (Nov 1833), 329–331.

¹⁸ 'Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China', *Register* 7:26 (1 July 1834).

¹⁹ For Napier affairs, see Beeching, *The Chinese Opium Wars*.

²⁰ *Register* 7:49 (9 December 1834).

²¹ For Brougham, see Michael Lobban, 'Brougham, Henry Peter, first Baron Brougham and Vaux (1778–1868)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (www.oxforddnb.com [accessed 23 October 2011]).

major Canton newspapers often reprinted progressive ideas. When the inspiration of the London Society's social reform ideas about 'diffusion of useful knowledge' came to Canton, they mingled with the pressing issue to open up China for trade and for proselytizing Christianity.

Planning 'intellectual artillery'

When the committee of the Society declared that the preparation of 'intellectual artillery' was intended 'to engage in a warfare' at their meetings, it was less than two months after Lord Napier's untimely death. The anguish and dismay amongst the British community, especially the group of merchants associated with Jardine Matheson & Co, was palpable. The rhetoric in Canton was moving towards war as a solution to their plight, and the funding of the Society was one way they expressed this frustration.

In the five years following the foundation of the Society, the merchants and missionaries regularly held meetings in Canton to discuss their plans of operation for the Society when the trading season started in early autumn.²² These plans were then published annually in the *Repository* and occasionally in the *Register* and the *Canton Press* (1835–1844), and were therefore available to the Canton foreign community, as well as to subscribers of the newspapers and journals in Singapore, Sydney, Bombay, Cape Town, Hamburg, England, America, and elsewhere.²³

The meetings were a process through which committee members learned about both the Chinese and their own interests. The first year report, published in December 1835, showed that the Society had only got as far as deciding to publish material on universal geography and world history. They believed these subjects would teach the Chinese that the world was more than the Middle Kingdom—which was a Sinocentric idea, often grounded in their own understanding of China—and that foreigners were not barbarians—an equally exaggerated understanding.²⁴

²² For the regulations of the Society, see *Register* 7:49 (9 December 1834).

²³ For the circulation of the *Chinese Repository*, see *Repository* 5:4 (August 1836), 159–160.

²⁴ 'First Report of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China', *Repository*, 4:8 (December 1835), 354–361; For the argument concerning the over-used terms of 'tribute system' and 'Sinocentrism', see John E. Wills Jr., 'Tribute,

In the second annual report, the committee formulated a detailed plan covering eight subject areas which the committee deemed necessary to introduce to the Chinese. These were ranked by the Society in order of priority: history, including biography; geography, including travel; natural history; medicine; mechanics and mechanical arts; natural philosophy; natural theology; and *belles lettres*. Additionally, there was also another category for ‘miscellaneous subjects’, which included magazines and other publications.²⁵

By the time of the third annual meeting, the committee felt that it was necessary to examine what was already available in Chinese before they could continue the work of the Society. John Robert Morrison (1814–1843) presented his investigation of Chinese knowledge by going through the ‘catalogue of works contained in the imperial library at Peking’, or the *Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書 (*Complete Library of Four Branches of Books*), 36,304 volumes, 1782). Morrison compared the *Complete Library* with the knowledge developed in the West and claimed that the classic branch (*jing* 經), the first branch of the four, is a ‘philosophy, which, leaving alone all speculations concerning the origin and future state of man, confines itself almost wholly to the relations between man and man in this life’. The history and geography branch (*shi* 史), he said, is ‘almost exclusively national. . . while the existence of other nations, and the practical lessons to be learned from the rest of mankind, are almost wholly forgotten’. John Robert Morrison was also dissatisfied with the ‘useful arts of life’, which were a part of the branch of the collections (*ji* 集); he reported that only agriculture and weaving were available for study, whilst astronomical and mathematical sciences were ‘chiefly derived from Europeans’. Thus, he concluded: ‘Seeing that so many are the defects of Chinese literature, it becomes our imperative duty to exert our utmost energies to supply their lack of knowledge’.²⁶

By assuming that the *Complete Library* represented the knowledge of the Chinese in its entirety, the report falls into the discourse of the Confucianist outlook that set out to compile this giant collection in the Qianlong 乾隆 Emperor’s time (1736–1795). Take the *jing*,

Defensiveness, and Dependency: Uses and Limits of Some Basic Ideas about Mid-Qing Dynasty Foreign Relations’, *The American Neptune* 48 (Fall 1988).

²⁵ ‘Second Report of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China’, *Repository* 5:11 (March 1837), 507–513.

²⁶ ‘The Third Annual Report of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China’, *Repository* 6:7 (November 1837), 334–340.

for example: Confucian learning may be the only learning listed in this category, but the Daoist classics and the lengthy, translated, well-developed Buddhist canon, which were rather underrepresented in the *Complete Library* under the Confucian worldview, were put into the category of *zi* 子 (masters' works), which would have been compatible with what John Robert Morrison named the knowledge concerning the 'origin and future state of man'. It would be more justifiable, for instance, for Morrison to have compared Christianity with these writings, since Christianity and Confucianism are rather more compatible in the aspects of their relationships with authorities and their ideological roles to those authorities.

The knowledge in the *shi* department that most concerned the meeting may not have correlated with the knowledge of history and geography of the West—or as the Society called it, 'our own knowledge',²⁷ but it was sufficient to prove that there was abundant geo-historical information about Westerners, compiled mainly by Jesuits in the seventeenth century, and Chinese language travel accounts of foreign lands. Had the committee not from the beginning set out to identify the deficiencies within Chinese knowledge, they would have noticed that the existing information was rich enough for any Chinese reader to learn of the existence and states of the 'outside world', including the West.²⁸ This might have suggested to the Society, to the Western community in Canton, and to readers of the Canton print media in the port cities of Asia, Europe, and America, that the explanation for the restrictions placed upon foreigners might lie somewhere else, namely in the Qing's security concerns. Nevertheless they believed that lack of knowledge was the reason the Qing confined trade to Canton, and why Christianity was banned. Thus presenting knowledge to the Chinese received its justification.

In its fourth year, the committee took great interest in the Chinese book market in order to understand what the Chinese were reading and what books were most popular. Two types of books, the 'Chinese almanac', or Yellow Calendar (*huangli* 黃曆/皇曆 or *tongshu* 通書) and the 'Collectanes of elementary and useful information' were identified by the Society as candidates for publication, for these books were widely found in Chinese households. They planned to replace the maps in the Yellow Calendar with world maps and put Western geographic and historical knowledge into the 'Collectanes' that were

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ 'The Third Annual Report', *Repository* 6:7 (November 1837).

consulted by ordinary Chinese in everyday life. In this way, the information of the Westerners and the wider world could reach every Chinese.²⁹

These ideas, along with some other plans for publications, were never put into practice by the Society. When the fourth annual report was presented to the meeting, the opium confiscation in Canton, that would later lead to a three-year war, was less than four months away. Some of the plans, however, would have their influence in the late period of missionary publications in China. Publication of the almanacs, for instance, was carried out by the missionary Davie Bethune McCartee in Shanghai under the title *Pingan Tongshu* 平安通書, with four issues appearing between 1850 and 1853 that contained numerous maps and geo-historical articles.³⁰

The longer the Society members waged their information war, the more they learned about the Chinese. The Society, however, could not afford to have a high opinion of the Chinese, for the very existence of the Society was, to a great extent, built upon a necessarily negative representation of China. The situation is akin to the Protestant missions' opinions concerning China, whereby 'to say something positive about the Chinese would serve to undermine the rationale of the missionary enterprise'.³¹

Preparation for writing, translating, and printing

Although British merchants had been trading in China since at least the mid seventeenth century, in the 1830s, there were only a handful of people who could speak Mandarin or Cantonese. Daily business was conducted in pidgin. When the Society was founded in 1834, there were only three people—John Robert Morrison, Bridgman, and Gützlaff—who were able, with the help of Chinese assistants, to write in Chinese for publication.

With these limited resources, the results of preparing 'intellectual artillery' were not at all satisfying to the committee. They knew very well that simply being able to write was not enough to attract

²⁹ 'Fourth Annual Report of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China', *Repository* 7:8 (December 1838), 400–401.

³⁰ See Xiong Yuezhi, *Xixue dongjian yu wanqing shehui* (*The Eastwards Diffusion of Western Knowledge, and the Late Qing Society*) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1994), p. 171.

³¹ Rubinstein, *The Origins*, p. 131.

attention in a Chinese society where literati-style was regarded as a basic skill. This problem surfaced in the committee's third annual report. John Robert Morrison commented on a manuscript they had received, saying that the style of the writing was 'necessarily tainted with foreign idioms and adapted to foreign modes of thought and expression'.³²

From the very beginning, the society attended to the problem of translation. They wished to make their transliterations as close as possible to the 'pronunciation of the court (or mandarin) dialect'. Neologisms such as *huo zheng chuan* 火蒸船 (fire steam boat) and *huo zheng che* 火蒸車 (fire steam car) were coined to translate 'steam boat' and 'steam train', respectively. The Society also needed the Chinese nomenclature to contest the negative designations of foreigners. Examples given by the American missionary Elijah Coleman Bridgman (1801–1861) of terms to be contested included *hung-maou kwei* (*hongmao gui* 紅毛鬼), 'red-haired devils', and *keang-koo kwei* (*jianggu gui* 講古鬼), 'old-story-telling devils', meaning missionary preachers of the gospel.³³ They preferred that the Chinese call them by the names they wished to be called rather than regard them as 'devils'.³⁴

Printing was another problem the Society faced. From the very beginning, the Society commissioned two movable metallic types. One was made by Reverend Samuel Dyer (1804–1843), who was inspired by Robert Morrison (1782–1834) to come to Asia and specialize in making a movable type in Penang, and the other was made in Paris by Marcellin Legrand, with the help of sinologist Jean-Pierre Guillaume Pauthier (1801–1873).³⁵ By 1839, when the fourth annual report was published, these two movable types were not yet constructed. The Society also made an application for the use of the former East India Company's movable type, which was constructed by P. P. Thoms in

³² 'The Third Annual Report', p. 334.

³³ 'First Report', pp. 354–355; and 'The Third Annual Report', pp. 335–356. For the translated term, see Aihanzhe (ed.) *Dongxiyangkao* (*Eastern Western Monthly Magazine*), p. 185.

³⁴ The term 'devils' originated in the context of European pirates on the south China coast during the early years of the encounter between China and the West. See Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 96–107.

³⁵ For Samuel Dyer and Legrand working on movable type, see Su Jing, *Malixun yu zhongwen yinshua chuban* (*Robert Morrison and Chinese Printing*) (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 2000), pp. 191–202.

order to publish Robert Morrison's *A Dictionary of the Chinese Language* (1815–1823).³⁶

These moveable types may not have helped the Society's publications, even if they had been available in Canton, because a series of events that took place throughout the second half of 1830s prompted the Qing government to reinforce its ban on foreign printing. Lord Napier's appeals to the Chinese public, conveyed via placards posted throughout Canton during the summer of 1834, moved the Qing authorities to issue a reinforcing edict banning all Chinese printing houses from undertaking any work for foreigners. Following the tract-distributing trips made by Gützlaff and Edward Steven to Fujian in April 1835, the Qing government kept a vigilant watch on the movements of the foreign community.³⁷ Prior to this reinforcement, Gützlaff could, albeit illegally, publish his monthly magazine inside Canton city using Chinese printing facilities in 1833.³⁸ The result of this ban was that the Society needed to find alternative printing facilities 'beyond the jurisdiction of the Chinese'. Two places were proposed for this purpose by William Jardine; one was onboard the ships moored at Lintin Island (Lingding 伶仃) at the lower end of the Gulf of Canton, where the merchants stocked their opium shipped from India and other smuggled goods. These vessels had their own cannons and guards, and they were beyond the reach of the Chinese government. The other proposed location was the Straits Settlements in Malaya, under the control of the British Empire and the Europeans. In the end, the Society's publications were printed in Singapore.³⁹

Publications and their impact

With a safe place established in Singapore for printing, at least eight of the eighteen items proposed for publication (see Chart 1,

³⁶ 'First Report', p. 356; 'Second Report', pp. 512–513; and 'The Third Annual Report', p. 339.

³⁷ For the English version of Napier's placard, see 'Interesting to the Chinese Merchants', *Register* 7:35 (2 September 1834). For the voyage to Fujian, see Edwin Steven's account in *Repository* 4:2 (June 1835), 82–96.

³⁸ 'Chinese Monthly Magazine', *Register* 7:15 (15 April 1834).

³⁹ 'First Report', p. 357. For the opium-receiving boats, see Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War, 1840–1842*, Chapter 4.

CHART 1

Proposals and Publications by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China

Publications Proposed ⁴⁹	Items Published, Author, and Year	Notes
1 'A general history of the world'	<i>Gujin wanguo gangjian</i> 古今萬國綱鑑 by Gützlaff, 1838.	Parts of it were published first in <i>Dongxiyang kao</i> (<i>Eastern Western monthly magazine</i>); 300 copies were ordered in 1838.
2 'A universal geography'	<i>Wanguo dili quanji</i> 萬國地理全集 by Gützlaff, 1838.	Parts of it were published first in <i>Dongxiyang kao</i> .
3 'A history of the United States'	<i>Meilige heshenguo zhilue</i> 美理哥合省國志略 by Bridgman, 1838.	Revised in 1846 and 1862; translated into Japanese in 1864.
4 'The Chinese Chrestomathy in Canton Dialect'	<i>The Chinese Chrestomathy in Canton Dialect</i> , by Bridgman, 1838.	This book is 'for Europeans: the acquirement of the means of personal intercourse with the Chinese and of diffusing among the latter a knowledge of the English language'.
5 'Aesop's Fables'	<i>Yishi mizhuan</i> 意拾秘傳 by Robert Thom (1807–1846), 1838–1839.	This item had been published in parts before 1838. Every story is presented in English, Chinese, and Romanized Chinese. It is partly for the purpose of language learning.
6 'A history of the Jews'	<i>Gushi rudiyaguo lidailiezhuan</i> 古時如氏亞國歷代列傳 by Robert Morrison, 1838.	Re-publication of Robert Morrison's 1815 work; In the last meeting of Society in 1838, it was clearly stated that this book has been published, but I have only seen the 1815 edition so far.

⁴⁹The book titles in the column 'publications proposed' are as given at the meetings of the Society.

CHART 1
Continued.

7	'Chinese magazine'	<i>Dongxiyangkao meiyue tongjizhuan</i> 東西洋考每月統計傳 (Eastern Western monthly magazine) edited by Gützlaff and possibly others. Between 1833–1838.	
8	'A treatise on political economy'	<i>Maoyi tongzhi</i> 貿易通志 by Gützlaff, 1840.	
9	'A map of the world'	<i>Wanguo ditu quanji</i> 萬國地圖全集	This may have been published, but I have not found the map.
10	'A history of England'	<i>Dayingguo tongzhi</i> 大英國統志 by Gützlaff.	Originally published in 1834; in 1837, it was presented to the Society for republication, but in 1838, it was 'accidentally retarded'.
11	'A short treatise on the being of a God'	N/A	Proposed in 1837.
12	'Another notice of the Indian Archipelago'.	N/A	Proposed in 1838.
13	'A geographical and astronomical work, entitled Yuen teen too shwo [<i>Huantian tushuo</i> 環天圖說]'	N/A	Written by John Robert Morrison, but no further discussion or any sign of publication.
14	'Sze Shoo ching wan [<i>Sishu jingwen</i> 四書經文]'	N/A	'By a Chinese person who was educated by the Jesuits'. It was supported for publication at the meeting, but no further information of publication exists.
15	'A small work on general geography, in the form of a traveller's narrative of what he had seen'.	<i>Xiyou diqiu wenjian lue zhuan</i> 西遊地球聞見略傳, by Robert Morrison.	Originally published in 1819; The Society decided to republish, but it had not been carried out by 1838 and was possibly abandoned after the war.

CHART 1
Continued.

16	'Natural Philosophy'	N/A	To translate Lord Brougham's Treatise on the objects, advantages, and pleasures of Science; No further information regarding publication exists.
17	'Almanac'	N/A	The Society did not carry out the plan. But in 1850–1853, four almanacs were edited by Davie Bethune McCartee in Shanghai entitled <i>Pingan tongshu</i> 平安通書.
18	'A complete set of plates exhibiting the anatomy of the human subject of natural size'.	N/A	Proposed by Dr Parker; no disagreement—there was neither further discussion nor publication. Benjamin Hobson published <i>Quantixinlun</i> 全體新論 in 1851, which was carried out as the Society proposed.

numbers 1–8) were published between 1838 and 1839, before the war started. As they were prioritized, the treatises on history and geography were among the earliest books published. *A general history of the world*, *A universal geography*, and *A history of England* were written by Gützlaff, one of the Society's two Chinese Secretaries in charge of writing in Chinese, who at this time was also the interpreter to the Superintendent of British Trade. The other Chinese secretary, Bridgman, turned out one treatise on America and one chrestomathy for learning Cantonese. These books, along with the Society's magazine, were published on the eve of the First Opium War and were the major 'intellectual artillery' of the Society's five years of labour.

The Society also needed to address the problem of distributing the books to the Chinese. The Chinese booksellers were not prepared to risk their businesses by dealing with Westerners, especially after the Napier affair.⁴¹ The only other option was to sell or distribute the books personally via the members of the Society; this was a logical plan, as the missionaries were familiar with this type of direct contact with lay Chinese.

By the time the fourth and final annual report was presented at the general meeting in November 1838, the first few publications were ready to be printed.⁴² The first publication available for distribution during the four years was the *Dongxiyangkao Meiyue Tongjizhuan* (*Eastern Western Monthly Magazine*). In 1835, one thousand sets of the two volumes of the 1833 and 1834 magazines, which Gützlaff had published prior to the establishment of the Society, were reprinted by the Society. These magazines seemed to have been handed out alongside sacred tracts in the Fujian province when Gützlaff and Edwin Steven undertook their tract-distributing voyage in 1835.⁴³ It also seems that after this incident, the publication of this magazine was moved to Southeast Asia. By March 1837, another one thousand copies of the newly-edited two volumes of the magazine were sent to be printed. From 1837 onwards, this magazine would be more or less regularly published each month, until about November 1839. All these late printings of the magazines were completed in Singapore, and they could only be distributed among the Chinese communities in the Indonesian Archipelago, such as Batavia, Singapore, Malacca, and Penang.⁴⁴ Even so, they hoped these books and the information contained in them would somehow reach China. Dr Reverend Parker gave a personal account of how Gützlaff's magazine was received in Singapore in 1835.

I have had opportunity to see the estimation in which the magazine of Mr. Gützlaff is held by the Chinese. While at Singapore a question of chronology

⁴¹ 'First Report'.

⁴² 'The Fourth Annual Report', p. 403.

⁴³ 'Freedom of Press in China', *Register* 8:38 (22 September 1835). In Steven's account, only Christian books were mentioned, but when the *Register* complained about the Canton authorities searching for those Chinese who assisted in the writing and printing of the tracts, it alluded to the distribution of the magazine.

⁴⁴ 'First report', p. 356. 'Second Report', p. 512. 'The Third Annual Report', pp. 339–340. 'The Fourth Annual Report', pp. 403–404. For the publication and distribution of the magazine, see Huang Shijian, 'Daoyan (Introduction)' in *Dongxiyangkao* (*Eastern Western Monthly Magazine*), pp. 3–35.

came up; the inquiry was made, ‘do you know any book that will solve it?’ ‘Yes’. The magazine was produced and the question answered. ‘Is this book correct?’ All affirmed that it was. I adduce this example to show that the works of Europeans are appreciated.⁴⁵

Bridgman’s *Meilige heshengguo zhilue* 美理哥合省國志略 (*A History of the United States*) was completed around the end of 1837 and was published in November 1838. The treatise was not only circulated in Southeast Asia, but Bridgman also presented the books to the prominent Chinese, including the Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu (1785–1850), during the opium wars and negotiations. Bridgman would revise this treatise twice and republish it in 1846 in Canton and in 1862 in Shanghai.⁴⁶

It was the First Opium War that gave the publications of the Society an impact in mainland China. After the Qing Empire was defeated by the British, scholars such as Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1856), Xu Jiyu 徐繼畲 (1795–1873), and Lian Tinglan 梁廷柎 (1796–1861) witnessed or became concerned with the power of the maritime nations, and made efforts to understand these foreigners. When these scholar officials wanted to gather materials to write treatises on the new maritime nations, the publications of the Society were available to meet this need.

Upon his arrival in Canton to implement the ban on opium in March 1839, Commissioner Lin employed Chinese translators and interpreters and commissioned the translations of C. T. Downing’s *The Fan-Qui in China in 1836–7*, *The Encyclopaedia of Geography* (1834) by Hugh Murray, and English newspapers published in Canton—mainly the *Canton Press* and *Canton Register*. He then asked Dr Reverend Parker, a member of the Society, to translate part of the *Elements of International Law* (1836) by Henry Wheaton. Later, he would also ask Parker to help translate a letter written to Queen Victoria.⁴⁷ When Lin’s opium prohibition campaign was brought to an abrupt end in 1841, by factionalism in the Qing court, he gave these materials (which would probably have included the copy that Bridgman had

⁴⁵ ‘First Report’, pp. 359–360.

⁴⁶ For the personal distribution of Bridgman’s book, see Lazich, *E. C. Bridgman*, p. 144 and p. 154. For Bridgman’s revision of the treatise, see Xiong, *Xixue Dongjian*, pp. 117–118.

⁴⁷ Xiong, *Xixue Dongjian*, pp. 220–226; and Su Jing, *Zhongguo kaimen: malixun ji xiangguan renwu yanjiu* (*China Opening up: A Study on Robert Morrison and Other People*; Hong Kong: Jidujiao Zhongguo zongjiao wenhua yanjiushe, 2005), pp. 226–232. For a discussion of the letter to Queen Victoria, see Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires*.

presented to him), to Wei Yuan and asked him to use them to write a book about the maritime nations.⁴⁸

Wei Yuan published *Haiguo tuzhi* 海國圖志 (*Illustrated Treatise on Maritime Countries*) in 50 *juan* (chapters) in 1842, the same year that the First Opium War ended. Later, in 1847, he would revise and expand it into 60 *juan* and 100 *juan* in 1852, adding more materials available in Chinese. *Haiguo tuzhi* resembles an organized scrapbook in that materials from different books were cut and pasted, with minor changes, and sorted by continent and subcategorized by nation. Research shows that items related to the Society occupied a large portion of the 1852 edition; this included 57 entries from Gützlaff's *Wanguo dili quanji* (*Universal Geography*), 26 from the *Dongxiyangkao meiyue tongjizhuan* (*Eastern Western Monthly Magazine*), 14 from *Maoyi tongzhi* (*General Account of Trade*) and 24 from Bridgman's *Meilige heshengguo zhilue* (*A History of the United States*). *Haiguo tuzhi*, in turn, was one of the most important reference books on the subject of world geo-history in the second half of the nineteenth century. The scholar-officials of the Qing Empire referenced this source when it was forced to learn more about the new world power struggles between maritime empires. *Haiguo tuzhi* also eventually made its way into Japan. In 1850 and 1853, it was banned there, but in 1854, after Japan was forced to open its ports to the Americans, it was reintroduced and made an impact on the Japanese reform era.⁴⁹

Xu Jiyu's *Yinghuan zhilue* 瀛寰志略 (*A Brief Description of the Ocean Circuit*), published in 1848, along with *Haiguo tuzhi*, influenced both Qing China and Japan. Xu wrote the book in his own words after he had digested materials collected in Chinese and interviews with foreigners on the subjects of global geography and world history. One of the foreigners he consulted several times was George Tradescant Lay (1799–1845), who was one of the most vocal members at the fourth annual meeting of the Society. Xu met Lay when he was Treasurer of Fujian, while Lay was in the service of the British Consul at Fuzhou 福州 after the war. Lay's Chinese name, Litaiguo 李太郭, was mentioned three times in the book.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ For political factionalism, see James Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁴⁹ Xiong, *Xixue Dongjian*, pp. 255–266. For Wei Yuan, see Susanne Wilson Barnett, 'Wei Yuan and Westerners: Notes on the Sources of Haikuo t'u chih', in *Qingshi wenti* 2:1 (November 1970); and Jane Leonard, *Wei Yuan and China's Rediscovery of the Maritime World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁵⁰ Xiong, *Xixue Dongjian*, pp. 226–239.

Liang Tinglan's *Heshengguo shuo* 合省國說 (*Accounts on the United States*, 1844) and *Lanlun oushuo* 蘭倫偶說 (*Accounts of London*, 1845) also relied heavily upon *Meilige heshengguo zhilue* (*A History of the United States*) and the *Dongxiyangkao meiyue tongjizhuan* (*Eastern Western Monthly Magazine*), respectively. At least until the 1880s, these Chinese publications were the main sources contributing to the understanding of the maritime nations in the new situation of the Qing Empire.⁵¹ They were the channel through which the Society's publications had their impact upon China.

Convergence of interests and the war metaphor

The existing explanations for the founding of the Society, namely those of Fred W. Drake, argue that the foreign community intended 'to open China by peaceful means to trade, Western civilization, and consequently to Protestant Christianity'. Michael C. Lazich makes this line of argument explicit by stating that 'the undertaking was seen as a favourable alternative to military engagement'.⁵² Both these aims indicate a distaste for belligerence. The events at Canton show the opposite—that a war was advocated in the 1830s by the group of merchants associated with Jardine Matheson & Co, especially after the Napier Affair.⁵³

In the heat of the aftermath of Napier's death, the British merchants sent 'a petition home asking for warships to exact reparations for injuries recently inflicted'.⁵⁴ James Matheson (1796–1878), who accompanied Napier's widow, carried the petition back to England and launched a war campaign back in London in 1835.⁵⁵ They

⁵¹ For Xu Jiyu, see Fred Drake, *China Charts the World: Hsu Chi-yu and His Geography of 1848* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975).

⁵² Fred Drake, 'E. C. Bridgman's Portrayal of the West'; Lazich, 'The Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China', p. 316. Also Lazich, *E. C. Bridgman (1801–1861)*, p. 120.

⁵³ For merchants' opinions on waging war with China, see Greenberg, *British Trade*, pp. 196–197; for missionaries' opinions, see Rubinstein, 'The Wars They Wanted: American Missionaries' use of *The Chinese Repository* before the Opium War', *American Neptune* 48 (Fall 1988); also, the *Register* throughout the 1830s.

⁵⁴ 'To the King's most Excellent Majesty in Council, the Petition of the Undermentioned British Subjects at Canton', in Alain Le Pichon (ed.), *China Trade and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 560–563; see also *Register* 7:50 (16 December 1834) and 7:52 (30 December 1834).

⁵⁵ Glenn Melancon, *Britain's China Policy and the Opium Crisis: Balancing Drugs, Violence, and National Honor, 1833–1840* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 41–44.

believed that the insult to Napier was an issue of national honour and a reasonable justification for war. The petition was signed by 35 native British merchants, as well as their clerks and captains in Canton, among them William Jardine, James Matheson, James Innes, Richard Turner, Robert Thom, John Slade, and Thomas Fox; almost all the British members of the Society added their names to the petition. The preparation of a petition for a military war and the founding of the Society—the information war—were in fact undertaken in the same month, November 1834, by the same group of people.⁵⁶ As a result, the war discourse permeated the establishment of the Society. Ulrike Hillemann has argued that the First Opium War only became imaginable after British knowledge of China had evolved in both Canton and London from Sinophilia to a civilianizing mission.⁵⁷ Rubinstein, too, has argued that a process embedded in the American missionary zeal of the early nineteenth century empowered the missionaries, through their interpretations of the scriptures, to employ a war metaphor for their missions in China.⁵⁸ Thus the Society's relation to the military war should be revised: rather than offering an alternative, its establishment was part of the war discourse that initiated and eventually achieved the employment of military force in Canton, on the periphery of the informal British Empire, and in its own right it constitutes a war of information.

To further piece together and theorize the reasons for the Society's establishment, it is worth examining the committee membership, and their interest in the Society. In general, the Society ran with John Robert Morrison and Bridgman in charge of its day-to-day operations, whilst the merchants used their financial weight to sway the direction in which the society was headed. Passages written by Gützlaff and Bridgman allude to the benefits of an open China in commercial terms. In the *Objects of the Society*, Gützlaff stated:

Our intercourse with China has lately been extended and will, under the auspices of a free trade, expand, until it embraces all the maritime provinces of the empire and considers the flourishing region of the Yangtze Keang as a fair field for mercantile enterprise. There will be thus a wide door open for the dissemination of truth.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ 'To the King's most Excellent Majesty in Council'.

⁵⁷ Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*, p. 168.

⁵⁸ Rubinstein, 'The Wars They Wanted'.

⁵⁹ 'Objects of the Society', *Repository* 3:8 (December 1834), 382; also in NAUK, FO17/9.

The first year's report, which was prepared by Bridgman, also explicitly points out the commercial opportunities presented by a vast China:

Such are the wants of man that they are never satisfied: the wants of this nation are great; its natural productions are also great: these have given rise to an extensive commerce, which, so long as those wants continue and those productions are needed, will not cease; and if the first increase as they doubtless will, the latter will do so also; and commerce in the hands of enlightened and philanthropic men will prepare the way for the wide diffusion of useful knowledge.⁶⁰

The benefit of an open China leading to greater commercial opportunity was very much underlined by Gützlaff and Bridgman; it served as an acknowledgement of the merchants' needs by the missionaries, as well as calling for their financial support to the Society.

Each year, the Society selected one president, one treasurer, three general committee members, two Chinese secretaries, and one English secretary. For all five years, the Chinese secretary positions were filled by Gützlaff and Bridgman, while the position of English secretary was held by John Robert Morrison; these three together occupied a total of 15 among the 41 committee positions available over five years. These were the three people on the committee who could write articles in Chinese. In addition to Bridgman and Gützlaff, the only missionary on the committee was Dr Reverend Parker, who held a position on the general committee once in the third year.

The Society was dominated by opium merchants. There were at least ten of them on the committee, occupying 20 of the 41 committee memberships, and most of the time, they filled the posts of president and treasurer—theoretically, the heads of the Society. James Matheson was president for the first year and treasurer for the fourth and fifth years, whilst his partner, William Jardine, was president for the second and third years. Together they guaranteed that Jardine Matheson & Company had a person in the Society's executive posts every year. When an extra English secretary position was created in the fifth year, it fell to Robert Thom, a clerk at Jardine Matheson & Co. at that time. It is safe to say that Jardine Matheson & Co. exerted great influence on the Society. Other opium merchants, such as Robert Inglis and John Cleve Green, also filled the president or treasurer posts, whilst other opium dealers, including Richard Turner,

⁶⁰ 'First Report', p. 355.

William Wetmore, James Innes, and Russell Sturgis, all served on the committee. Non-opium merchants included American merchants D. W. C. Olyphant and his staff member, Charles King, who were accompanied by former East India Company employees John Robert Morrison and H. H. Lindsay.⁶¹

Having opium merchants as members of the Society did not necessarily mean that it was devoid of genuine philanthropic motives. In fact, the same group of people also financed the missionaries' charitable societies. After Robert Morrison died in the summer of 1834, the Morrison Education Society was founded in his honour in 1836. It was run by missionaries, with financial support from this same group of merchants. When the idea of the Medical Missionary Society was put into practice in 1838, the same group of merchants again participated.⁶²

Both societies were founded during the time of the Society, also with the agenda of 'opening China up' alongside their primary medical and educational missions. In an appeal for the establishment of the Medical Missionary Society, the idea of medical training and care as a means to approach 'isolated' China was noted.

And that inquiry after medical truth may be provoked, there is good reason to expect: for, exclusive as China is, in all her system, she cannot exclude disease, not shut her people up from the desire of relief... At any rate, this seems the only open door; let us enter it.⁶³

In its Second Annual Report, the Society announced its cooperation with the Morrison Education Society, promising that some Chinese students would be trained in both English and 'their native language' and that 'these are the persons who must be mainly instrumental in diffusing useful knowledge among the Chinese, their country men'.⁶⁴ Christian values were used to appeal to the merchants in these two

⁶¹ 'Proceedings', pp. 380–381; 'First Report', p. 361. 'Second Report', p. 507; 'The Third Annual Report', p. 340; and 'The Fourth Annual Report', p. 410. There are three individuals, William Bell, Cox, and Thomas Fox, on whom further study is required to identify their roles in the Canton trade.

⁶² 'Proceedings Relative to the Formation of the Morrison Education Society', *Repository* 5:8 (December 1836), 373–381; also in NAUK, FO17/9. For the funding of the Medical Missionary Society, see T. R. Colledge and Peter Parker, *Address and Minutes of Proceedings of the Medical Missionary Society* (Canton: Chinese Repository, 1838).

⁶³ 'Suggestions for the Formation of a Medical Missionary Society', *Repository* 5:8 (December 1836), 370–373, quotation 372–373.

⁶⁴ 'Second Report', p. 513.

societies, but certainly the opening up agenda of these two societies was no less attractive to the merchants. The missionaries who initiated these two societies knew that by upholding the flag of ‘opening up China’, they could always attract financial support from foreign merchants in Canton.

The ambiguous designation ‘opening China up’ allowed the two main constituents of the Society, the merchants and missionaries, to read their own meanings and interests into the proceedings. For the merchants, an open China meant one open to free trade; for the missionaries, it meant a China open to the Christian God. The formation of knowledge about China, along with the war metaphor, was therefore embedded within the context of the Canton foreign community in their wish to break out of their containment by the Qing for the purposes of extensive trade and free proselytizing.

Asserting Christianity

In the first two years of the Society, no Christian-related items were proposed for publication. When the Society’s publication plan eventually suggested that this subject area should be introduced to the Chinese, the ‘natural theology’ of William Paley (1743–1805) was put in seventh place on the list, above only *belles lettres* in priority. Considering that proselytization was the very reason the missionaries were willing to risk their lives to break the law of the Qing Empire, that two of the three hands that were able to write materials in Chinese were missionaries, and that John Robert Morrison was the son of Robert Morrison, the pioneer of the Protestant mission in China, the Christian voice in the Society had been surprisingly quiet thus far.

Two months before the foundation of the Society, Bridgman had commented on the prospects of publications in Chinese that ‘knowledge and science are the handmaids of religion’.⁶⁵ To a great extent, this explains the missionaries’ dispositions regarding the Society and the diffusing of useful knowledge in China. Three books concerning Christianity were proposed for publication in the third year, out of 15 books that had been proposed thus far. All three books were drawn from Robert Morrison’s early writings, which included *A*

⁶⁵ ‘The Chinese Magazine’, *Repository* 2:5 (September 1834), 235.

*Short Treatise on the Being of a God; A History of Jews, and Xiyou diqiu wenjian luezhuan (A Voyage Round the World).*⁶⁶

At the fourth annual meeting, things took a new direction, and the missionaries became more assertive. After the presentation of the annual report, long speeches concerning Christianity were made by Bridgman, Dr Reverend Parker, and George Tradescant Lay. One possible reason for the missionaries' newfound assertiveness was that Lay, a representative of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and thus a strong financial backer, had arrived in Canton. In 1815 the Bible Society had paraded its generosity by giving Robert Morrison £2,000 to support his translation, printing, and distribution of the New Testament.⁶⁷ It is not impossible that Lay tipped the balance in favour of the missionaries with his ties to strong financial support. Just three months earlier, the *Register* had noted that the Society was 'nearly paralyzed at present for the want of funds'.⁶⁸ With highly-charged self-confidence, Lay evaluated the Society in the ordering of a Christian world:

As to the rank of this society, we shall soon perceive that it lays claim to no mean relationship and affinity. If the Bible Societies hold the first place, because they propose to give the word of God to every human being; if missionary societies take the second, because their object is to send men to teach all nations the way of salvation; societies like this may fairly come into the third, because they labour to diffuse among all classes of a community that knowledge, which is the best of all worldly gifts—as it is the grammar and interpretation of God's works, an analytic and synthetic account of those very lessons which they teach.⁶⁹

This spelt out how the Society was linked to Christianity and justified it as missionary work. It contrasted with the situation hitherto, in which the missionaries, entirely dependent on the support of the merchants, had alluded to commercial interests in the meetings. Lay promised that when he was back in England, he would 'endeavour to create sober and enlightened views of her condition [the Society], and, as opportunity shall serve, strive to awaken feeling and sympathy in favour of the praiseworthy and truly excellent undertaking which we are now met to consider'. After this delivery, it was motioned by Bridgman and seconded by James Matheson that the Society change its

⁶⁶ 'Second Report', p. 510. 'Third Report', *Repository* 6:7 (November 1837), 339.

⁶⁷ Rubinstein, *The Origins*, p. 135.

⁶⁸ 'Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China', *Register* 11:32 (7 August 1838).

⁶⁹ 'The Fourth Annual Report', p. 407.

regulation that the ‘resident members shall include native and foreign gentlemen’ instead of ‘resident members shall include native and foreign gentlemen *in China*’.⁷⁰ This was to welcome Lay’s continuing membership and possibly to attract other gentleman in England to the Society. The extension also meant that any further financial support was welcome.

By and large, in its first four years of existence the Society was financed by merchants whose profits derived mainly from the opium trade. Adding to the controversy of the missionaries’ cooperation with merchants, Gützlaff joined the opium ship of Jardine Matheson & Co. as an interpreter, as mentioned above. Gützlaff together with Bridgman and John Robert Morrison all provided their linguistic services either during the war or the signing of the treaty thereafter.⁷¹ Their cosy relations with the merchants and the imperial state were characteristic of the Canton era: missionaries could only operate under the auspices of merchants because they were banned by the Qing, while the Qing policy of disengagement afforded Western nations no choice but to employ the pioneering missionaries’ knowledge of China and Chinese.

Following the First Opium War, the fully-functioning Society, with the high spirits and newly-charged energy of its fifth year, disappeared amid the turbulence. After the war, merchants and missionaries were free to live and trade in the treaty ports. The missionaries gradually established their missionary enterprise, first at treaty ports and then moving inland, preaching Christianity as well as modern Western knowledge.⁷² Some merchant members of the Society returned to their home countries, like James Matheson, who, with the fortune he had made in Canton, went back to Scotland and bought the Isle of Lewis to build Lews Castle. Matheson also became a Member of Parliament in Great Britain in 1843, representing the constituency of Ashburton, a seat first won in 1841 by Matheson’s Canton partner, William Jardine.⁷³ John Cleve Green (1800–1875) took his fortune back to

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 408. For the original regulation, see ‘Proceedings’, p. 383.

⁷¹ Lutz, *Opening China*, pp. 90–91, pp. 99–116; and Lazich, *E. C. Bridgman*.

⁷² Paul A. Cohen, ‘Christian Missions and their Impact to 1900’, in *The Cambridge History of China vol. 10 Late Ch’ing, 1800–1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 543–590.

⁷³ Duncan Bruce, *The Scottish 100: Portraits of History’s Most Influential Scots* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2000), pp. 27–30.

America, and with further investment, became a major benefactor of Princeton University.⁷⁴

A war of information in Canton

Throughout its presence in Canton, the foreign community had been gathering knowledge of China, including military intelligence, especially after the 1831 voyage along the eastern coast. The *Canton Register*, *Chinese Courier*, *Canton Miscellany*, *Canton Press*, and *Chinese Repository*, all of which were launched between 1827 and 1834, served as the community's printed public sphere. This was where the idea of war and the 'Jardine plan'—the backbone of the military strategy after 1841—were generated.⁷⁵ Though the foreign community was divided and a small group of merchants, led by Dent & Co. with the *Canton Press* as their mouthpiece, developed an anti-war outlook, the war argument was nevertheless the dominant voice, if not necessarily that of the majority. Napier's ordeal was reminiscent of Lord MacCartney's and Lord Amherst's frustrated embassy journeys, and through it a discourse formed that national honour was at risk. This further fuelled the idea of both the information war and the real one. William Jardine personally brought this emotive rhetoric and the intelligence established in Canton back to London, bringing it to Lord Palmerstone's attention.⁷⁶ The gunboat strategy was then deployed in Canton, at the new maritime frontier of the emerging British Empire.

The power of the knowledge that made it possible to imagine a war was ultimately supplied by the Canton foreign community in their collective brainstorming within their English language public sphere. Also, in the context of the early nineteenth century post-Enlightenment era, the foreigners in Canton believed in the power of knowledge and its realization in printed media. The Canton foreign

⁷⁴ Alexander Leitch, 'Green, John Cleve', *A Princeton Companion* (Princeton University Press, 1978). Online edition <http://www.princeton.edu> [accessed 23 October 2011].

⁷⁵ For William Jardine's participation and the so-called 'Jardine plan', see Fay, *The Opium War, 1840–1842*, pp. 215–216 and Beeching, *The Chinese Opium Wars*, pp. 110–112. For the significant role that John Morrison played during the First Opium War and in the negotiation of the Treaty of Nanjing, see Su Jing, *Zhongguo Kaimen*, pp. 191–198.

⁷⁶ 'William Jardine in London to James Matheson in China', in Le Pichon (ed.) *China Trade and Empire*, pp. 387–388, 411.

community contrasted with the social reform movements in London chiefly in that its target was the Chinese rather than the London lower classes. Lord Brougham's passion for social reform, expressed in his establishment of the London Society, travelled across the world to Canton, and in the end prompted the information war waged by the Society.

Their own cultural outlook convinced the Canton community that Confucianism was the reason the Chinese viewed foreigners as barbarians and unworthy of engagement, and thus was the source of the restrictions they faced. They were confident that once the Chinese understood Westerners, especially their scientific knowledge and arts, the Chinese would respect them. Another related theory was the belief that the real Chinese were repressed by the Tartar Qing, and they would welcome the Europeans, and even mount a challenge to the despotic Manchu regime, once they understood the true character of the Europeans.⁷⁷ Napier's strategy of appealing to the Cantonese people was based on this underlying understanding, which suggests that the Sinophilia originated by the Jesuits was still in circulation amidst the growing trend of perceiving the Westerners' presence in the non-Western world as a civilizing mission.⁷⁸

The foreign community could not, or were unwilling to, see that the Qing Empire employed a containment strategy to control the Europeans for reasons of dynastic and imperial security. The Qing dreaded that foreigners might conspire with southern coastal anti-Qing sectors, and with religiously-empowered rebels in the hinterland, and they feared trouble breaking out from this distant corner of the empire. Christianity was blocked precisely for this reason.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ See also Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*, pp. 34–106.

⁷⁸ For the Jesuits portrait of China see David E., Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1985); and Lian Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: the Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724* (Cambridge Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2007). For changing perceptions of China see P. J. Marshall, and Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (London, Melbourne and Toronto: J. M. Dent & Son, 1982); and Ulrike Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*. For perceptions of China in general in this period see Robert Markley, *The Far East and the English Imagination, 1600–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁷⁹ For rebellion of the Qing and its relation to Christianity in China see, Philip A. Kuhn, *Rebellion and its Enemies in Late Imperial China: Militarization and Social Structure, 1796–1864*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970). Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: the Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society; a Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (Berkeley:

European merchants were concentrated at Canton so that they could be more easily managed. Pilots were used to count and report the ships that came in and out of Canton, and compradors were planted in their factories to collect intelligence on their activities after landing. Personal and ships' passports, required for arrival and departure at the port, were another means of controlling foreign presence. Hong merchants were collectively held responsible if trouble broke out from the foreign community. On top of all this, foreigners were banned from learning Chinese, buying Chinese books, and using Chinese printing facilities. Leisure walks were only allowed after lengthy petitioning, but were restricted to an island opposite their factory and were required to be held in the company of Chinese linguists, who also reported to the Canton authorities.⁸⁰ Daily contacts with the Chinese were limited to these authorized functionaries, thus preventing Europeans from learning about any aspect of the Empire and, equally as important, preventing Chinese from interacting with foreigners. The reality was, however, that the number of foreigners learning Chinese in the 1830s was increasing; at least Gützlaff, Bridgman, Robert Morrison, John Robert Morrison, and Robert Thom could speak and write Chinese. When Robert Morrison returned to London for furlough in 1823, he carried with him nearly 10,000 volumes of Chinese books.⁸¹

The information war waged with 'intellectual artillery' by the merchants and missionaries in Canton represented another form of engagement with Qing China after Lord MacCartney's and Lord Amherst's frustrated embassy journeys to Beijing in 1793 and 1816. The diplomatic engagement was formed with the understanding that the Qing Empire was a great world power to be reckoned with, and conceived by the East India Company, which as a trader and a semi-official institution, was on relatively friendly terms with the Qing and did not want to disrupt its lucrative tea trade. The war metaphor was created within the context of Western encounters with the Chinese in Canton, as the Westerners attempted to break out of the security apparatus that kept them contained there. The information war also

University of California Press, 1961). Lars Laamann, *Christian Heretics in Late Imperial China: Christian Inculturation and State Control, 1720–1850* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁸⁰ See NAK: FO1048 and FO931 (both files are in Chinese); and Guo Tingyi, *Jindai zhongguo shi* (*Modern Chinese History*; Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1979, first published 1941).

⁸¹ Su Jing, *Zhongguo Kaimen*, p. 123.

anticipated the military engagement that began in 1839 and provided both the theoretical framework and justification for a military war. The interests behind both wars were the convergent aims of the merchants and missionaries of opening China up to trade and proselytizing.

It was by no means accidental that when Commissioner Lin arrived in Canton, among the first things he did was to collect information on the Westerners for the implementation of the opium ban. Yet ironically, the information barrier erected by the Qing for more than 85 years now prevented them from ascertaining the reality of the Europeans. Lin underestimated the strength of the foreign powers and had no grasp of the power of the collective identity behind the merchants—British imperialism—let alone the readiness of Palmerstone's gunboat diplomacy. The Society's publications and other translated information could only afford him a basic knowledge of the nations of the West, but not enough to plan an effective opium policy or a successful war.

By the 1830s, after eight decades of implementation, the security agenda the dynasty had built into its bureaucracy had become mechanical, whilst its justification via Confucian discourse had become the accepted wisdom among bureaucrats. It would take another three decades and a Second Opium War (1856–1860) that brought foreign troops to the gates of the capital, for the bureaucracy to grasp the strength of Westerners and the necessity of reform, first in the military and economic sphere, and then in the political system.

The information war by the Westerners in Canton was a direct counterattack against the Qing barricade of information in and out of China. The Qing policy of containment stemmed from a shrewd understanding of internal threats to the dynasty's security, but it backfired—the information barriers put up to implement the policy ultimately increased the danger by blinding Qing bureaucrats to the external threat they faced. For their part, the foreigners in Canton were led by Qing ideological camouflage to interpret its policy simply in cultural terms. Whether they were genuinely taken in by the colourful Confucian ideology, or wilfully chose to ignore *realpolitik*, they refused to acknowledge that eminently pragmatic security concerns might lie behind Qing policy—concerns that nothing as genteel as 'diffusing useful knowledge' could do much to allay.