
The Legacy of William Milne

P. Richard Bohr

William Milne was born in 1785 at Kennethmont, Aberdeenshire, Scotland. After his father's early death, Milne supported the family as a farmhand and carpenter while receiving an education from his mother and a Sabbath school. At sixteen, Milne sensed God's "free grace" remitting the "eternal wrath" that he feared his previous indifference to religion and his "profane swearing" had surely incurred.¹ Three years later, he left the Church of Scotland for the Congregational "Missionary Kirk" at neighboring Huntley, which endorsed the conviction of the Evangelical Awakening that Christians must extend the spiritual revival and social reform taking place at home to their non-Christian brothers and sisters abroad and thereby hasten the in-gathering of the imminent worldwide kingdom of God.

Gratitude for his own redemption, admiration for mission heroes like David Brainerd (1718–47), avid reading of the *Missionary Magazine*, and dedication to "the coming of Christ's kingdom among the nations," inspired Milne to become a foreign missionary,² but not before earning enough money to secure his mother's retirement. The London Missionary Society (LMS) accepted Milne in 1809, sent him to its seminary at Gosport, England, ordained him in 1812 as "missionary in the East," and assigned him to work with Robert Morrison (1782–1834), the English last and boot-tree maker whom the LMS had sent in 1807 as Protestantism's first missionary to the Chinese.³

Eight decades before Morrison arrived in China, however, the imperial throne had banned Christianity as "the ruin of morals and of the human heart,"⁴ because it "neither holds spirits in veneration nor ancestors in reverence."⁵ Since Morrison also served as Chinese translator to the British East India Company (EIC), he could reside but not openly proselytize in Canton's tiny foreign trade enclave. Nor were the Catholic authorities in neighboring Macao sympathetic to Morrison's desire to evangelize in that Portuguese colony. To prepare for China's opening to Christ,

Morrison's task was to translate and publish the Bible, prepare Chinese-language materials for future LMS recruits, and establish a mission beachhead on China's doorstep.

Developing a Mission Strategy

On July 4, 1813, Milne and his wife, Rachel Cowie (1783–1819),⁶ arrived in Macao. After studying Chinese with Morrison in Canton for several months, Milne distributed his mentor's 1813 New Testament translation and preached among several overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, where he also scouted the terrain for a new LMS mission station. Under Milne's management (while Morrison continued to alternate between Canton and Macao) and free of Chinese government interference, he recommended Malacca as best suited to become a center of evangelism, education, and publication.

A traditional entrepôt between South and East Asia on the western Malay coast, Malacca (Melaka) was now a European port (alternating between Dutch and English administrations) friendly to Protestant missions. With 17,000 Muslim Malays, 4,000 Chinese, 2,000 Indians, and 2,000 Europeans and Eurasians, it was easily accessible to other Chinese settlements in Bangkok, Penang, Singapore, and Batavia (Jakarta). From Malacca, Milne claimed, the Word would spread among Southeast Asians and, through the overseas Chinese, into China itself.

In the spring of 1815 the Milnes arrived at Malacca with their young daughter and newborn twins. The British colonial government donated land for Milne's mission near Malacca's western gate. Milne threw himself into Chinese and Malay language study and began preaching in the Dutch church on Sundays. On street corners and in Chinese homes, shops, boats, and temples, Milne distributed the New Testament and explained evangelical faith in the following indigenous terms. God, "formless and invisible" and "Maker of the heavens and the earth, is the only true and living God, and there is none else." God knows that people have sinned and deserve punishment. But because God is "merciful and gracious," he sent Jesus, his only son, to "practice

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virtue, and redeem . . . [people] from their iniquities, in order that all who repent of their sins, and trust in Jesus, should obtain eternal life in heaven." However, those "who do not receive his doctrines, but work iniquity, must go down to hell, (that is, earth's prison) and suffer undefined punishment."⁷

Inquirers were told that in addition to grace, individual salvation required moral action. Milne therefore exhorted the Chinese to "seek God's gracious favor; deal justly with all; let not the rich greedily oppress the poor, nor the poor discontentedly complain of their lot, for both rich and poor must shortly die." He further admonished: "Parents, teach your children to read the sacred book—to write—to trust in Jesus Christ—to venerate the aged—to discharge filial piety to you—to love their brothers and sisters—to pity the poor, and to do good to all men—then all will be well." Finally, people should not set their hearts on "things under the sun [because they] are vanity."⁸

Milne believed that there was much that was good in China. Yet several factors soon convinced him that to "impart the knowledge of the true God—the Triune Jehovah—to this people, will be no easy task." Milne observed that while the skeptical philosophy of the school of Confucius stressed such biblical virtues as filial piety, it also ignored monotheism, the sinfulness of disobeying God's commandments, and the ability of common people (not merely China's ancient sages) to participate in divine providence. Worse, Milne lamented, the Chinese saw Christ as a bodhisattva whose atoning power was based not in miraculous deeds but on fantasy, whose resurrection was simply an act of reincarnation, and whose sacrificial death was ignominious. Moreover, such Buddhist notions as transmigration of souls "confound the Christian doctrine of future retributions. . . ." The missionary's challenge, Milne concluded, was to win converts by finding points of contact between Confucianism and Christianity and by building a communal, educational, and publishing infrastructure in which to embody the Christian message.

Defining Mission Fundamentals

In January 1817 Milne completed the first phase of mission construction in Malacca. The compound included a chapel, where Milne held daily and Sabbath worship (consisting of prayers and homilies on Bible readings) in both Chinese and Malay. The mission also included a library of works in Chinese and English, a printing shop, and living quarters for missionaries, language assistants, translators, and printers.

In China, the Jesuits had proselytized the scholar-official elite before the emperors began proscribing Christianity. But Malacca's Chinese elite were marginally educated merchants who resembled the targets of evangelical preaching, education, and good works back home. Realizing that the Malacca Chinese must become more literate in their own language to understand the written Word, Milne made education a top priority. In mid-August 1816, with contributions from British Army friends in Bengal, he converted a stable on the mission grounds into Asia's first Christian "charity school" for poor Chinese boys. By mid-1818 Milne oversaw six such boys' schools around Malacca—four for Chinese, one for Malay, and one for Indians—where local teachers taught the respective languages and literature as well as Western mathematics. Milne introduced a mentoring system in which older students tutored the younger ones according to fixed lesson plans and textbooks. Moreover, Milne accommodated local custom by opening new schools on "auspicious" days in the lunar calendar, introducing Christian themes in

lessons on Confucian ethics and ritual, enticing students to worship services by first inviting their teachers, and composing a Christian catechism and prayers in indigenous terms.

In 1818 Morrison appointed Milne principal of the Anglo-Chinese College. This institution was to integrate Eastern and Western civilizations by teaching Chinese and Southeast Asian languages as well as the Confucian classics to Asia-based European boys, some of whom might become missionaries. And through courses in English, Scripture, philosophy, history, geography, mathematics, science, and (eventually) medicine, Morrison and Milne hoped that Asian students would not only come to see Christianity as the core of Western culture but also convert and become Protestant clergy, teachers, and social reformers. When the building (which Morrison funded from his own EIC salary) was completed in August 1820, the college included seven students (some were on scholarship), a dormitory, classrooms, a

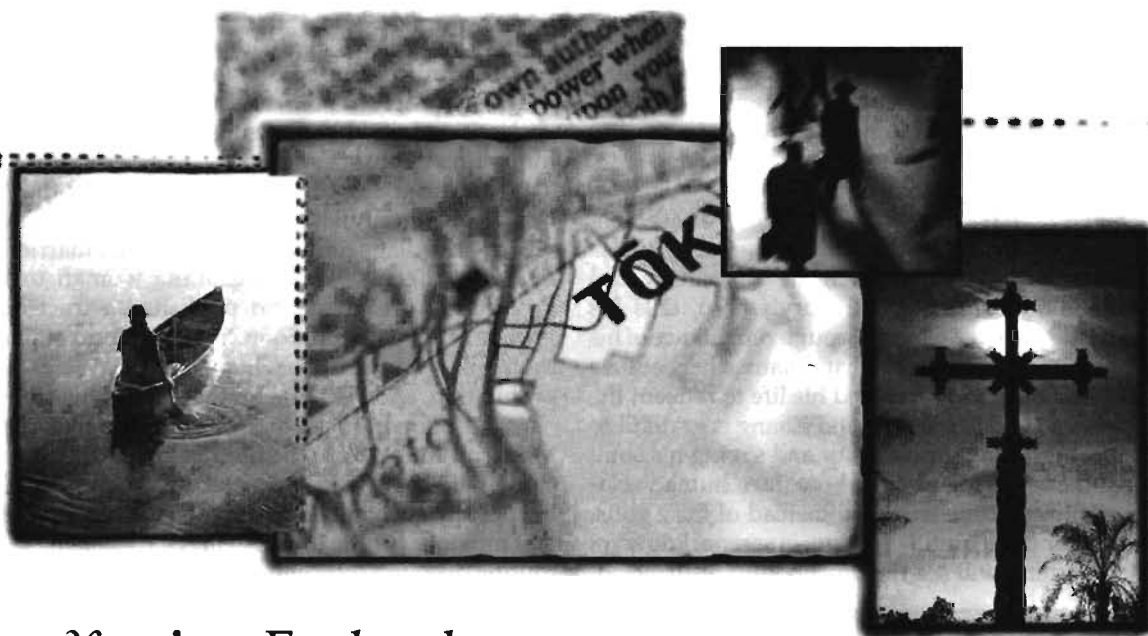
Milne hoped the Christian literature produced at Malacca would penetrate China via merchant vessels.

museum showcasing Chinese and Western antiquities, and a chapel, the daily services at which students were invited (but not compelled) to attend. Milne himself taught geography and Chinese, utilizing Morrison's Chinese-language materials. Among his students were LMS recruits who, once they became language-proficient, worked in the Chinese or Malay sides of the Malacca mission or founded other LMS stations in the region.¹⁰

Milne admired Morrison's view that religious tracts were "the means of exciting serious and godly thoughts, which bring the proud sinner's heart to mercy's throne."¹¹ Milne hoped that, once educated, the overseas Chinese would be moved by those tracts and that the Christian literature produced at Malacca would circulate through the archipelago and penetrate China itself via merchant vessels. By late 1816 Milne had secured English-, Malay-, and Chinese-language presses. In 1817 the LMS sent Walter Henry Medhurst (1796–1857), a printer and gifted linguist, to superintend the Chinese press.¹² The chief Chinese printer was Liang Fa (1789–1855), a poorly educated peasant-turned-woodblock carver who had clandestinely printed Morrison's New Testament in Canton before coming to Malacca with the Milnes.

Publishing began with the second edition of Morrison's New Testament and two widely circulated journals: the *Chinese Monthly Magazine* (in Chinese), devoted to Christianity and Western learning, and the *Indo-Chinese Gleaner*, an English-language quarterly highlighting missions in Asia as well as trends in world religion, philosophy, literature, and history. In addition to writing for and editing these periodicals, Milne translated thirteen Old Testament books for the Morrison-Milne Bible, completed in November 1819. Before the Malacca press published it in 1823, both missionaries were honored with honorary doctorates from the University of Glasgow.

While Morrison focused primarily on translating scriptural and doctrinal works, Milne became the first missionary to portray, in nineteen Chinese-language pamphlets, evangelical theology in the Chinese cultural idiom. Writing in the vernacular style of contemporary Confucian "morality books" and reflect-



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ing evangelical concern for culture's impact on the individual's soul, Milne condemned what he perceived to be Malacca's habits of lying and commercial malfeasance as well as gambling's harm to family and community.¹³ In an 1819 pamphlet Milne characterized that year's cholera epidemic as God's punishment for immorality and a call for people to embrace each other as brothers and sisters under the same creator God. In the *Folly of Idolatry*, Milne lambasted China's deities for feigning God's powers and denounced the practitioners of astrology, divination, geomancy, necromancy, spells, and charms.

In 1819 Milne published his masterpiece: *The Two Friends*. Described by Daniel H. Bays as the "most famous of all nineteenth-century Christian tracts,"¹⁴ the pamphlet gives Chinese voice to evangelical faith. After realizing he is a sinner and fearing eternal damnation, Zhang, the story's hero, tells his friend Yuan that he has been redeemed through repentance of his sinful past and belief in Jesus' "merit." Zhang claims that because Jesus is both God and man and sacrificed his life to redeem the world, he is superior to China's sages. And Zhang is grateful to the Holy Spirit for improving his behavior and saving his soul.

Like other Chinese, Zhang asserts, he values human relationships but worships the one true God instead of false gods. Although ridiculed for being unfilial, Zhang is serene, knowing that Jesus' second coming will see the dead bodily resurrected,

Milne formed a bond with Liang Fa, whose background and spiritual crisis mirrored his own.

judged by Jesus, and sent to hell or heaven as God's kingdom draws near. Meanwhile, the conversion process is ongoing, Zhang insists. So the believer, cognizant of the reality of sin and the last judgment, constantly repents, confesses, forgives, rejects materialism, does not confuse transmigration of souls with resurrection, reforms behavior by following God's commandments, and reads the Bible and prays daily. God rewards prayer not materially but with forgiveness, cleansing of heart, and eternal salvation. Because Christian faith is nourished within community, Zhang believes, Chinese Christians are eager to share their faith with family and friends.

Bob Whyte has insightfully observed: "Too few missionaries were concerned to establish lasting friendships with Chinese."¹⁵ Milne was among that minority; he formed an enduring bond with Liang Fa, the mission printer and contributor to the *Indo-Chinese Gleaner*, whose personal background and spiritual crisis mirrored Milne's own.¹⁶ In fact, Liang had initially resisted Milne's invitations to mission worship, fearing that the Buddha would "soon bring punishment and death on such an opponent of the gods." But carving the woodblocks for Milne's *Life of Jesus* in 1814 and exposure to the missionary's pious demeanor coincided with Liang's growing guilt over his earlier "drunkenness and other kindred vices," including gambling, lust, cheating, and lying. Liang was not consoled by quiet sitting at home, sutra-reading at Malacca's Goddess of Mercy temple, or the resident monk's assurances of Western paradise because, Liang concluded, Buddhist ritual and self-cultivation lacked Christianity's connection with God's moral commandments, from which emerged the "virtuous act" needed to "obtain for-

givenness."¹⁷ After weekly Bible reading and prayer sessions with Milne, Liang became a Christian through a conversion scenario strikingly similar to the one played out in *The Two Friends*.

On November 3, 1816—as Liang acknowledged his sinful nature and vowed to repudiate idol worship, believe in Jesus' atonement, follow God's commandments, and act justly—Milne baptized him. (Milne accommodated Liang's request to perform the rite precisely at noon to avoid the sun's casting shadows on such a sacred ritual.) Liang subsequently thanked the Holy Spirit for casting out his "evil self."

After studying Christianity part-time at the Anglo-Chinese College, Liang emulated Milne's missionary example. In 1819 he visited his village near Canton, where he married and baptized his wife (the first known Chinese woman to be baptized a Protestant), preached, and published a tract denouncing his lineage's idol worship. Soon, however, local officials confiscated the booklets, imprisoned Liang for defying the anti-Christian prohibition, and beat him on the soles of his feet with bamboo.

The following year, Liang returned to Malacca to publish the Morrison-Milne Bible. Sadly, his joyful anticipation of further study with Milne was thwarted. In March 1819 Milne's beloved Rachel had succumbed to dysentery, becoming the first Protestant missionary wife to perish in Asia. Refusing to slow his work routine despite a worsening tuberculosis, Milne himself died on June 2, 1822. From its Orphan Fund, Malacca's Dutch community supported Milne's daughter and three sons, including William Charles (1815–63) who later joined the LMS and collaborated with John Robert Morrison (1814–43) in carrying on their fathers' efforts to Christianize China.

Milne as Mission Pioneer

William Milne exemplifies the first generation of British evangelical missionaries, who, as Max Warren has noted, were buoyed by the democratic, moralistic values and social activism of their emerging "skilled mechanic" class in the early nineteenth century.¹⁸ Artisans such as William Carey, Morrison, and Milne were "inner-directed" improvisers who, with whatever Nonconformist education they could acquire, mastered difficult languages to plant Christianity—despite dangerous circumstances—into time-honored civilizations they came to admire.

As Carey did in his educational, translation, and publishing enterprise at Serampore, Morrison and Milne developed a mission strategy and infrastructure on China's gateway designed to extend evangelical missions into the rest of Asia. The preaching, education, tract writing, and publication to which they dedicated themselves remain mainstays of Protestant missions today. During their remarkable nine-year partnership, Morrison and Milne approached mission through the prism of cultural interchange. Mingling freely with the overseas Chinese, Milne studied their religious life and their Confucianism; in their social ethics he found points of contact with evangelical morality. Working hard to find commonalities to win Chinese converts first to superior Western learning and then to Christianity, Milne's accommodationist approach anticipates one of the most enduring aspects of Christian missions.

Milne pioneered Protestant elementary education in Asia, which became coeducational soon after his death. By 1836, for example, 220 boys and 120 girls were enrolled in Malacca's LMS Chinese schools, with 120 boys and 60 girls in the Malay schools. In 1838 the LMS opened a school for adult Chinese women and in 1839 set up a boarding school for Chinese girls. Some graduates of Milne's schools would, he hoped, seek higher education,

convert, and become Christian pastors and teachers. Among the 70 Anglo-Chinese College students in 1836, 19 chose baptism. The alumni of the school included Chinese government interpreters, clerks, merchants, shopkeepers, ship captains, a medical assistant, and a doctor of traditional medicine. By 1837 three students at the college were preparing for the Protestant ministry.¹⁹ In Malacca alone, there were 250 Chinese Christians in need of such indigenous clergy.²⁰

By the time he died in 1822, Milne had trained ten LMS missionaries in Chinese language and culture. In Malacca and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, these colleagues continued Milne's emphasis on preaching, teaching, and publishing. By the time of Milne's death, they had produced no less than 49 pamphlets on ever-modern printing presses. By 1867, seven years after all of China was opened to evangelism, Protestant missionaries had published 787 religious and secular tracts.²¹

The LMS giant James Legge (1815–97) carried Milne's innovations into a second generation of evangelical missions. Raised in Milne's parish at Huntley, Legge had been led to missions through evangelical revivals, studied Chinese in London with LMS Malacca veteran Samuel Kidd (1799–1843), and was himself assigned to Malacca in 1840. Three years later Legge moved the mission to Hong Kong, one of six coastal enclaves that the First Opium War (1839–42) opened to global trade and Christianity. Convinced, like Milne, that "Confucianism is not antagonistic to Christianity,"²² Legge established coeducational boarding schools there to teach poor students the Confucian classics, knowledge, mathematics, and science. Having also moved the Anglo-Chinese College (of which he became principal in 1841) to Hong

Kong, Legge hoped it would train Chinese Christian leaders able to plant Christianity throughout the treaty ports. But after realizing that the college was falling short in this effort, Legge closed it in 1856. Nevertheless, as Lindsay Ride, vice chancellor at the University of Hong Kong, observed a century later, the college remains the "forerunner of all the British colleges and universities that exist in the Far East to-day."²³

Legge had also brought four Chinese Christians with him from Malacca, including Liang Fa and Ho Tsun-sheen (1817–71). While Legge and Ho wrote Bible commentaries and itinerated around Canton, evangelical ideas had already begun to penetrate China's heartland, thanks to Liang Fa. In 1823 Morrison fulfilled Milne's wish by ordaining Liang as the first Chinese evangelist. Among the villages around Canton, Liang distributed and preached on the Scriptures and Milne's *Two Friends*, baptized dozens of Chinese, and even briefly established a Christian rural "charity school." As mission evangelism, education, publication, and medicine continued to expand in Canton, Liang became a well-known pastor of several small congregations, two mission hospitals, and a chapel at his home in that city.

Liang is best remembered for authoring twenty-one Chinese-language tracts, the most celebrated of which is *Good Words to Admonish the Age* (1832). In it, Liang sought to explain Milne's evangelical faith in Chinese terms and advocated China's immediate conversion to missionary Christianity, because, he thought, the kingdom of God was more imminent than even Milne had supposed.

In 1837 Hong Xiuquan (1814–64) read *Good Words*, identified God as China's authentic ruler described in the pre-Confucian

texts, and concluded that he himself was Jesus Christ's younger brother. Hong's monotheism was so literal that he denied Christ's (and his own) divinity, denigrated the Trinity, and misunderstood the soul and other evangelical concepts. But by embracing moral transformation and iconoclastic reform activism as the antidote to the abuses of the imperial Confucian old order, Hong unleashed the Taiping Rebellion (1851–64), the world's bloodiest civil war, in which 20 to 40 million Chinese perished.

In the mid-1850s Hong claimed that, under his authority as God's vice-regent, his theocratic "New Jerusalem" at Nanjing was the center of a universal, millennial Taiping Tianguo (Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace). Hong engendered revolutionary discipline by superimposing the Ten Commandments and mandating gender equality, universal coeducation, social welfare, and communal land holding.²⁴ Despite Hong's embrace of Western Christians as his "brothers and sisters," missionaries and

Chinese Christians alike condemned his "Sinified" faith. Although no trace of Taiping religion survived, Christian ideas were linked with Chinese sectarianism well into the twentieth century.²⁵

After the Taipings' defeat, evangelical missions continued in China for another eighty-five years. But missionaries split over Milne's accommodationism. On one side was the "liberal evangelical tradition" carried on by Legge, who—having discovered monotheism in pre-Confucian China—accommodated Christian belief to Chinese culture. On the other side were the nonaccommodationists who sought merely to "transplant Christian civilization within China."²⁶ Between these extremes, a Chinese Protestantism, independent of the missionaries, also developed.²⁷ Containing many core evangelical beliefs, indigenous Chinese Christianity survives today, gathering more converts than at any time during the pre-1949 missionary period.

Notes

1. Quoted in [Edwin Stevens], "A Brief Sketch of the Life and Labors of the Late Rev. William Milne, D.D.," *Chinese Repository* 1 (December 1832): 317–18.
2. Quoted in Robert Philip, *The Life and Opinions of the Rev. William Milne, D.D.* (London: John Snow, 1840), p. 37.
3. For an overview of Morrison, see J. Barton Starr, "The Legacy of Robert Morrison," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22, no. 2 (April 1998): 73–76. For the first Protestant missionary generation represented by Morrison and Milne, see Murray A. Rubenstein, *The Origins of the Anglo-American Missionary Enterprise in China, 1807–1840* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996).
4. Quoted in A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor and China's Open Century*, book 1, *Barbarians at the Gate* (Sevenoaks: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), p. 228.
5. Quoted in Lindsay Ride, *Robert Morrison: The Scholar and the Man* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Univ. Press, 1957), p. 12.
6. For a biographical sketch of Rachel Milne, see *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (New York: Macmillan Reference, 1998), p. 461.
7. The excerpts are taken from Milne's 1814 "Farewell Letter to the Chinese of Java," quoted in Philip, *Life*, pp. 141–43, 226.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 225–26, 229, 193.
10. For a study of Milne's educational endeavors, see Brian Harrison, *Waiting for China: The Anglo-Chinese College at Malacca, 1818–1843, and Early Nineteenth-Century Missions* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Univ. Press, 1979).
11. Philip, *Life*, p. 16.
12. For a biographical sketch of Medhurst, see *Biographical Dictionary*, pp. 451–52.
13. In his English-language writings, Milne denounced the growth of Chinese opium addiction, which he attributed to the East India Company's increasing involvement in opium smuggling. See Philip, *Life*, pp. 428–35.
14. Daniel H. Bays, "Christian Tracts: *The Two Friends*," in *Christianity in China: Early Protestant Missionary Writings*, ed. Suzanne Wilson Barnett and John King Fairbank (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985), p. 22.
15. Bob Whyte, *Unfinished Encounter: China and Christianity* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1988), p. 97.
16. For Liang Fa's spiritual transformation, see P. Richard Bohr, "Liang Fa's Quest for Moral Power," in Barnett and Fairbank, *Christianity in China*, pp. 35–46.
17. Quoted in George Hunter McNeur, *China's First Preacher: Liang A-fa, 1789–1855* (Shanghai: Kwang Hsueh Publishing House [1934?]), p. 24.
18. Max Warren, *Social History and Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1967).
19. Harrison, *Waiting for China*, chaps. 15–16.
20. W. H. Medhurst, *China. Its State and Prospects* (London: John Snow, 1838), pp. 320–21.
21. John K. Fairbank, "Introduction: The Place of Protestant Writings in China's Cultural History," in Barnett and Fairbank, *Christianity in China*, p. 1.
22. Quoted in Harrison, *Waiting for China*, p. 114. For a study of Legge, see Lauren F. Pfister, "The Legacy of James Legge," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22, no. 2 (April 1998): 77–82. For an overview of the growth of the Hong Kong church, see Carl T. Smith, *Chinese Christians: Élites, Middlemen, and the Church in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford Univ. Press), 1985.
23. Ride, *Robert Morrison*, p. 22.
24. P. Richard Bohr, "The Theologian as Revolutionary: Hung Hsiu-ch'üan's Religious Vision of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom," in *Tradition and Metamorphosis in Modern Chinese History: Essays in Honor of Professor Kwang-Ching Liu's Seventy-fifth Birthday*, ed. Yen-p'ing Hao and Hsiu-mei Wei (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1998), 2:907–53, and *idem*, "Christianity and Rebellion in China: The Evangelical Roots of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom," in *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*, ed. Roman Malek, S.V.D., 2 vols. (Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Monograph Series, 2001).
25. Daniel H. Bays, "Christianity and Chinese Sects: Religious Tracts in the Late Nineteenth Century," in Barnett and Fairbank, *Christianity in China*, pp. 121–34.
26. Pfister, "Legacy of James Legge," p. 81.
27. Daniel H. Bays, "The Growth of Independent Christianity in China, 1900–1937," in Barnett and Fairbank, *Christianity in China*, pp. 307–16.

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