

**Samuel Wells Williams:
The Scientific Missionary in China and his *Middle Kingdom***

John Haddad

Introduction:

In the early nineteenth century, ordinary Americans knew precious little about China. Marco Polo and the Catholic missionaries of the sixteenth century were still cited as authorities. To imagine China, Americans looked to Chinese landscapes on blue and white porcelain, pictures on tea chests, and some of the fabulous tales of the *Arabian Nights*, such as “Aladdin and the Lamp,” which were set in China. You mix this imagery all together and you get a pleasing Oriental stew, containing some fact, some myth, and plenty of fantasy. By the late nineteenth century, we see radical change: a few American universities are making an effort to subject Chinese language and civilization to serious study. What genealogy can we give to the emergence of American Sinology?

The life and works of Samuel Wells Williams (1812-1884), an American missionary, may perhaps be imagined as a proto-Sinologist or as a bridge figure between the two historical moments described above. Before Williams was a missionary, he harbored a passion for science. Plants, animals, and bugs – not scripture – were his hobby, his passion, and the focus of his college training. In the 1830s, Williams arrived in China with an intellect patterned by the classification schemes of what we might call Enlightenment or Pre-Darwinian science. Influenced by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, Williams believed one could understand the world by describing, naming, and classifying all that was in it. In Canton, Williams applied this highly structured epistemological approach to Chinese civilization, generating in the process a vast reservoir of knowledge. During a furlough in the 1840s, he poured his knowledge into *The Middle Kingdom* (1848), a single text that ambitiously covered --or tried to cover--all of China, past and present, in encyclopedic fashion [IMAGE: Cover of *MK*] [IMAGE – Link to complete *MK*].

This essay suggests that science played a crucial role in shaping the structure of *The Middle Kingdom*, America’s first authoritative study of Chinese civilization. Science altered the way Williams perceived the Chinese. Unlike other American missionaries, who maintained a single-minded focus on sin, souls, and scripture, Williams was compelled by his scientific method to venture outside of an evangelical framework and to explore Chinese civilization more broadly – to look at Chinese art, philosophy, and statecraft, among other topics. In this way, he acquired an appreciation for the Chinese, so much so that, later in his life, he became a sort of missionary in reverse: someone who attempted to explain the ways of China to Americans. He held the utopian belief that total knowledge of China could be both attained by a single scholar and compressed within a single text. As this unrealistic goal proved frustrating, the field of China studies fragmented into the modern discipline of Sinology in the United States.

The Early Years

Samuel Wells Williams was born in 1812 in Utica, New York, to what would become a very large family of 14 children. There, he forged a lifelong bond with his neighbor and schoolmate, James Dwight Dana.¹ [IMAGE: Full text: *The Life and Letters*

of *Samuel Wells Williams*, 1888, Hathi Trust] After Williams completed high school, where he had shown considerable academic promise, he dreamed about continuing his education at the college level by following Dana to Yale. The two young men hoped to study natural history under Benjamin Silliman, the top geologist in the country. Unfortunately, Williams's father had other plans. William Williams owned and operated one of the largest printing houses in western New York, and he fully expected to pass on the family business to his first son. He refused to pay for a Yale education, choosing instead to make his son his apprentice. To Samuel Wells Williams, the disappointment was profound. He would later regret that he had not insisted more vigorously on attending Yale, even if that had meant paying his own way by finding a job in New Haven.²

Though he would not join Dana at Yale, Samuel Wells Williams did continue his formal education. After he had spent several months working with his father, it became abundantly clear to both father and son that the latter, though an able printer, possessed absolutely no business sense. Williams simply would not be able to run the family business. After Samuel's mother died in 1831, William Williams relented and agreed to fund several additional years of education for his son. By way of the recently completed Erie Canal, Williams traveled to Troy, New York, and enrolled at the Rensselaer Institute.

The Rensselaer Institute had been founded in 1824 to encourage the application of science to practical affairs.³ Yet when Williams arrived, he found only six students enrolled, and the school could not even provide him with a bed. Williams wrote to Dana in New Haven: "To tell you the truth, James, I never, never experienced such a disappointment, such an utter failure of expectations, in my life."⁴ While Dana successfully moved to the center of America's intellectual world at Yale, the equally talented Williams remained on the periphery.

Despite this inauspicious beginning, Williams grew to enjoy the curriculum at the Rensselaer Institute, which placed heavy emphasis on natural history. Through his study of botany, entomology, zoology, and mineralogy, Williams learned how to collect, classify, and sketch natural specimens according to the system developed by the Swedish botanist, Carl Linnaeus.⁵ These experiences studying the natural world apparently instilled in him a reverence for the Creator. In a letter to his father, Williams wrote enthusiastically about the revelations he had received from his astronomy class, describing the sun, stars, nebulae, the Milky Way, and the vastness of the universe. "Yet the goodness and infinite wisdom of the Creator," he continued, "is as much shown in the formation and habits of the water-spider as in these suns, the size of which we cannot conceive." To Williams, the goal of science was to discern God's blueprints for the universe, and with this noble purpose in mind, the young student decided to become a naturalist.⁶

Meanwhile, his father learned that the fledgling Protestant mission in Canton was in dire need of a qualified individual to operate its printing office. The notion that one or more of the Williams boys would spend their lives engaged in missionary work had come up before. Samuel's mother had experienced a religious awakening following his difficult birth, and prior to her death she made a fateful promise in church: "I give two of my sons." Her words were not forgotten.⁷

When Samuel learned that his father had volunteered him for the position in China, he immersed himself in a single night of intense meditation, reluctantly agreeing

to go in the end. Quite possibly, the recent passing of his mother played a role in his decision. While Williams accepted the post in China, he harbored one serious reservation. “So deeply has the love of the works of God...got imbued into me,” he wrote his father, “that I fear, if I went [to China], any object of natural history would interest me more than anything else.”⁸ Williams feared that his passion for science would distract his attention away from his responsibilities as a missionary printer. Yet, Williams eventually found a way to synthesize his love for science with his religious obligations.

The China Mission

Williams was not naturally predisposed to a deeply religious life. In fact, he wrote of deriving no pleasure from religion as a youth and of accepting Christ into his heart only after being subjected to heavy “maternal suasion.”⁹ Yet once Williams had committed himself to God and Christ, Protestant Christianity proceeded to reconfigure his worldview, just as natural history had before. The mind of Samuel Wells Williams became papered with a vast cosmography, with earth hanging precariously midway between Heaven and Hell. Believing that both God and Satan vied for influence over the human world, Williams developed an overarching objective in China that could not have been more grand in scale: to evict the devil from the Chinese empire and to open the hearts of a full quarter of humanity to Christ. To him, China became a vast battleground upon which warring supernatural forces were poised to collide.

On October 25, 1833, Samuel Wells Williams stepped off the *Morrison* at Whampoa and ferried up to the foreign factories. [INLINE IMAGE: Canton Foreign Factories] He moved into the American Factory, where he lived without paying rent in the quarters of D.W. Olyphant, an American merchant who possessed a strong passion for missions.¹⁰ At that time, the Protestant mission, though charged with transforming China into a Christian stronghold, consisted of only a small handful of men, the most important of whom were Robert Morrison (British) and Elijah Bridgman (American). To date, the mission had secured but two Chinese converts.¹¹ Clearly, much work remained to be done.

Williams quickly learned why conditions were so unfavorable for missionary work. First of all, missionaries constituted a small minority in what was otherwise a colony of foreign merchants. “Collected from all parts of the world,” Williams wrote, the merchants were animated by “the single desire to make money.” The avarice of these “wicked men” increased the difficulty of his job. Since the merchants were so visible, the Chinese viewed their behavior as reflective of the morals and values of Christian lands. And when these men trafficked in opium, it was that much harder for Williams and others to sell the Gospel. For this reason, he referred to merchants as “active guerilla parties of the evil one,” meaning Satan.¹²

Second, the Qing government thwarted the ambitions of the missionaries by erecting obstacles. Williams and the others were barred from venturing beyond the narrow perimeter of Canton’s foreign factories, a limitation on their mobility that severely curtailed their evangelism. Making prospects bleaker still, the Qing government also built barriers designed to block meaningful communications between foreigners and Chinese. The most important of these concerned language: Chinese subjects were forbidden from teaching their language to foreigners.

Despite this restriction, Williams understood language to be the key to the success of the Protestant mission. If he could not speak to the people of China and could not print religious tracts in Chinese, the Christian cause was obviously hopeless. To learn Chinese, Williams undertook a clandestine Chinese language program, hiring teachers who took him on as a student only at tremendous personal risk. One teacher brought shoes to every lesson so that, should Chinese officials abruptly intrude upon a lesson, “he could pretend he was a Chinese manufacturer of foreign shoes.” Robert Morrison’s instructor resorted to more drastic measures. He carried poison to each session, believing a quick death preferable to the torture that would result from the discovery of his illegal activity.¹³

In addition to tutorials, Williams launched an ambitious program of self-study. For an average of five to six hours a day, he adhered to a strict regimen that required him to write Chinese characters over and over again, in meticulous and methodical fashion.¹⁴ [IMAGE: *English and Chinese Vocabulary in Court Dialect* (1844) Rock Storage Cutter XZC W67] To add an element of practical experience, he sought out conversations with ordinary Chinese during walks that he took on an average of twice each day. Arising each morning half an hour before sunrise, Williams typically would stroll out into the public square to enjoy the cool morning air and chat with the Chinese vendors preparing to sell vegetables. After dark, he would venture out again. He found that the Chinese would react to him varying degrees of cooperation; while some called him a “teacher” or a “gentleman,” others spurned him as a “foreign devil.”¹⁵ As he got better, he tried to engage the Chinese in serious conversations about the Savior but discovered they preferred to “ask the price of your jacket” or “discuss the size of your nose.”¹⁶

As Williams placed language study at the top of his list of priorities, other ambitions necessarily suffered, one of which was science. “I have latterly paid but little attention to natural science,” he wrote his brother in 1835, “having concluded to wait until I have acquired sufficient knowledge of the Chinese language. It is now the chief end of my desires & of my life to promote the cause of Christ among this people.” Though Williams regarded natural history as a worthy intellectual pursuit, he also understood it as a decidedly personal ambition. He knew that to be a missionary, he needed to adhere to God’s divine plan – even if that meant subordinating his own interests. However, while deemphasizing natural history, Williams did not abandon it completely. In a letter to his brother, he wrote excitedly about 300 species of fish he had examined. Yet amid all this exuberance, one senses the concomitant pang of guilt of one who felt he was shirking his religious responsibilities. In the same letter, he admitted apologetically, “I cannot keep my fingers off these pretty flowers & curious bugs.” [INLINE IMAGE: find, Chinese natural history or nature images from scroll] The implication was that he should.¹⁷

The Chinese Repository

Along with language study, Williams devoted much of his time to the publication of the *Chinese Repository*. [IMAGE: Vol.1 (1832-3) Hathi Trust; Vol.16-17 (1856) Google Books] Launched by Elijah Bridgman and published in Canton on a printing press obtained by Olyphant, the *Repository* possessed a clear mission: to inform the people of the West about China in a disinterested fashion. To explain the rationale for the new publication, Bridgman pointed out that China and the West, though adept at the

trade in material goods, have enjoyed “so little commerce in intellectual and moral commodities.” With the *Repository*, Bridgman addressed this intellectual deficit. He did not, however, use the monthly journal to advance the cause of Protestant missions, and for this reason, its articles covered a diverse array of topics, most of which were secular. In fact, with merchants constituting much of the journal’s circulation, Bridgman and other contributors supplied content on matters related to trade and to Chinese policies affecting foreigners.¹⁸

Along with his responsibilities as the *Repository*’s printer, Williams also contributed content. Throughout the periodical’s twenty-year run, only Bridgman authored a comparable number of articles. In writing for the *Repository*, Williams faced the same temptation that confronted all Westerners writing about China. He could easily portray the Chinese as peculiar, and their customs as different from those in the West, and in this way pass simplistic East-West comparisons off as legitimate ethnography. Yet Williams resisted this temptation, choosing instead to hew to the periodical’s mission: to disseminate the most accurate information on China available.¹⁹ Toward this end, Williams wrote more than one hundred major articles between 1833 and 1851.²⁰ Of course, the prominent storylines he covered during his tenure as writer, editor, and printer revolved around Sino-Western trade relations. But of a mind steeped in natural history, Williams was also able to depart from matters related solely to commerce and politics to explore a diverse array of fields.

In the areas of geography and topography, he described China’s provinces, the largest cities and towns of the empire, and the most prominent rivers and mountain ranges. [IMAGE: Map of China by SWW, Hay Maps G7820 1861. W55x] In the area of natural history, he combined his own fieldwork around Canton with the best available published sources; he wrote articles on rocks and minerals, the tea plant, bamboo, lions, horses, bats, flying squirrels, cormorants, bees, and wasps. He reviewed books on China written by European and American authors. Most importantly, he used his articles to paint in piecemeal fashion a colorful portrait of Chinese life: diet, rice cultivation, festivals, the filial behavior of children, female education, dialects, pagoda-building, literature, theater, religion, mythology, and ancestor worship. [IMAGE: [link to Repository article](#)] Finally, Williams also served Canton’s foreign community by composing pieces that were directly related to their interests; he discussed Chinese imports and exports, developments in the various internal rebellions threatening the empire, the status of the Protestant mission, and the ascension of a new emperor to the throne. Of course, many of his topical pieces centered on opium: the smuggling by merchants, the problem of addiction in Chinese society, the response of Chinese officials, and the British military action.²¹ [IMAGE: [link to opium article](#)]

When taken together, the more than one hundred major articles that he wrote for this periodical, when combined with the thousands of others he edited, formed an unofficial first draft of his future masterwork, *The Middle Kingdom*.

Opium War

In time, Williams became increasingly frustrated by Christianity’s lack of progress. As long as missionaries were contained within the Foreign Factories, it was impossible to access the larger Chinese population. For this reason, he longed for a *deus ex machina*—a powerful external force that could smash the prideful Chinese government

into submission and compel it to open up the country to missionaries. And that is exactly what he got.

In 1839, Williams wrote to his brother, “I am glad things in this region are coming to a crisis, for almost anything is better than the old dull way, . . . hampered and restrained beyond description.”²² The crisis to which Williams referred was China’s escalating conflict with England over the lucrative yet illegal opium trade. While Williams’s despised the opium trade because it ruined Chinese lives and taught the Chinese people to distrust Christian, he paradoxically favored England’s war to preserve the pernicious trade. “As a nation,” he wrote, the Chinese “are inconceivably conceited & proud & cannon balls are a mean of disabusing them. . . . Punishment [from] the hand of God [would be] of great. . . service to this wicked people.”²³ In short, behind the British military force, Williams discerned the Hand of God. The persistently pagan Chinese—“this wicked people” stuck in their “old dull way”—must open their hearts to Christianity, Williams believed, or face Divine intervention in the form of an English battering ram.

The war concluded in 1842 and, as a part of the Treaty of Nanking, the Chinese agreed to open five treaty ports to foreign trade and influence. Williams should have been ecstatic, but he was not. Ever since the war’s end, he had waited patiently for the boatloads of Americans missionaries he thought would come to take advantage of this historic opportunity to proselytize in China. After all, this was a moment of seismic importance in God’s war against Satan. *China was opening, but where were the Americans?* When he turned an ear to the United States, he heard only the deafening silence of apathy, and this left him feeling “depressed.”²⁴

Adding to his melancholy, Williams also felt underused by God. At precisely the juncture at which he had expected God to give clarity to his mission in China, he instead felt abandoned and adrift. In God’s cosmic chess match against Satan, Williams had happily volunteered to serve as a white pawn – a selfless foot soldier committed to a divine cause. Understandably, God had relegated the eager pawn to the side of the chessboard during the Opium War. However, now that the great conflict had concluded, Williams fully expected to feel the hand of God putting him back into play. That nothing had happened left him feeling confused. He was heaven’s forgotten man.²⁵

Furlough

In 1845, Williams headed home to the United States on furlough, his primary purpose being the purchase of new printing equipment. He was in for a rude awakening. Williams arrived in a country caught in the throes of nationalist fervor, thinking not of Christianity’s great chance in China but rather of a war with Mexico. Though Americans did speak often about the Chinese, Williams saw that it was only to ridicule the losers of the Opium War. China was now “the object of a laugh or the subject of a pun.” In particular, Williams was bothered by a derogatory poem that, to his annoyance, people repeated in his presence:

Mandarins with yellow buttons, handing you conserves of snails;
Smart young men about Canton in Nankeen tights and peacocks’ tails.
With many rare and dreadful dainties, kitten cutlets, puppy pies;
Birds nest soup which (so convenient!) every bush around supplies.²⁶

The demeaning verses, Williams believed, epitomized this disturbing new attitude towards China. Americans now laughed at the Chinese out of crass xenophobia, viewing them as comically foppish and effeminate in appearance, and as adhering to a diet that was bizarre and “grotesque.” At this point, Williams’s mission in life achieved sudden clarity: he must disabuse Americans of their misconceptions and teach them the truth about Chinese civilization, even if the Chinese, like children, had not yet seen the light of God. At last, God had tapped the white pawn and shifted him back to the center of the cosmic chess match.

At first, Williams’s chosen vehicle for accomplishing his objective was the traveling lecture. In an extensive tour that covered the Northeast and much of the Midwest, Williams delivered his two-and-a-half hour lecture to thousands.²⁷ “I...hope that the information the people have received regarding China will not end in mere curiosity,” he wrote, “but produce more sympathy in behalf of the moral life of the nation.”²⁸ It was during his lecture tour that Williams made a flattering discovery about himself: he knew more about China than anyone in the United States, and perhaps as much as anyone in the entire Western world. Though he lacked institutional credentials, his experiential credentials were unmatched. Who else had lived in China for a decade; had learned the language (written and spoken); had read Chinese classics in literature, religion, statecraft, and philosophy; and had studied China’s natural history?

[INLINE IMAGE: Newspaper ad for lectures, such as New Hampshire’s *Farmer’s Cabinet* of 3/4/47]

MISCELLANY.

DOMESTIC LIFE OF CHINA.

The correspondent of the Boston Recorder at New York, gives the following sketch of the third lecture of a series delivered there, by Mr. S. S. Williams of the Canton mission, on China and the Chinese :

“Mr. Williams’ third lecture was delivered last evening, on the Domestic Life of China, and embraced a variety of topics, as their architecture, food, dress, domestic manners and regulations, etc. The usual building materials, Mr. W. says, are brick and mud; the mud is a compound of river sand, lime, and usually oil; it is laid up in a mould and beaten hard, forming a compact, durable wall, more permanent even than brick. The bricks are blue, while the tiles of which the floor and roof is made are red; the houses are all of one story, lighted from the top. The appearance of a house is that of a dead wall with a large gateway; in larger establishments there are also two smaller entrances; these open into a small court, paved and surrounded by covered passages to the body of the house. The roof projects several feet, and is supported by pillars meeting a purlin plate; beneath the roof and before the door hang lanterns bearing the owners’ name and title. The principal apartment is decorated with lanterns, landscapes, and long scrolls, bearing extracts from the Chinese classics.—

During his furlough, Williams also began to receive recognition inside intellectual circles. In addition to earning accolades for his lectures, he became an elected member of the American Ethnological Society. After reading a paper on China at a meeting held in the home of the president, Albert Gallatin, the latter acknowledged Williams's mastery of the subject. In addition, John Russell Bartlett, the Secretary of the Society, noted that Williams's reputation had reached Europe. The "eminent Sinologists of Europe," Bartlett wrote, now ranked Williams as "among the profoundest adepts" in Chinese "literature and philology."²⁹ The man who did not attend Yale was starting to receive recognition as a giant in his field. It was time to write a book.

The Middle Kingdom

Williams began writing *The Middle Kingdom* in New York in 1846. The apartment of his brother, Henry Dwight Williams, served as his temporary home and office. In writing this book, Williams was actuated by exactly the same motive that had convinced him to deliver lectures.

I am not mistaken as to some of the motives which induced me to undertake a book upon the Chinese, and one of them was to increase an interest among Christians in the welfare of that people, & show how well worth they were of all the evangelizing efforts that could be put forth to save them from disorganization as a government, depradation as a people thro' the effects of opium, and eternal ruin to their souls. Ignorance is a cause, an explanation, & a motive for indifference to a subject, and to remove this ignorance removes some of those reasons for inaction.³⁰

This letter encapsulates Williams's overall view of the Chinese. Though he did not approve of Chinese society in its present state, he believed that its glaring flaws in the areas of government, religion, and morality were manifestations *not* of biological inferiority but rather of the pernicious influences of opium, inept government, and the devil. Even with Satan locking the entire nation in a stranglehold, the Chinese still could boast a rich intellectual tradition. Thus if a book could teach American readers about the truth of this civilization, and eradicate crude stereotypes, the once-mocked Chinese could be embraced as a worthy, oppressed people in desperate need of Christ's liberating power. Then a truly wonderful transformation could take place: American people and dollars would flow into the Protestant missions, allowing them to save a quarter of humanity.

Fortunately for Williams, he did not begin such an enormous literary task with a blank page. His articles for the *Repository* and his recent lectures acted as drafts for the planned book.³¹ Still, the goal was ambitious. He intended to consolidate everything he knew about China into a single work, without either resorting to summaries or omitting details. "I find my manuscript stretches on like a long-standing account of lawyer's fees," he joked, "and I wish 'twere clipped."³² Apparently, nothing was clipped. The final work, completed in 1848, was comprehensive to the point of being encyclopedic: it consumed two large volumes and stretched to a length just over twelve hundred pages. Williams had not just *written about* China, he had endeavored to *reproduce* China in textual form.

The work was in fact so long that Williams felt compelled to justify the length in his preface. "If...the volumes seem too bulky for a general inquirer to undertake to

peruse,” he wrote, “let him remember the vastness of the Chinese Empire...and he will not, perhaps, deem them too large for the subject.”³³ With these words, Williams equated his book with the country itself; since China was large, the book should be long as well. And if the book stood as a textual reproduction of the country, then the act of reading the book necessarily became tantamount to taking an armchair tour of China. With this theme of virtual travel in mind, Williams arranged for an illustrator to draw a large Chinese gateway that, when situated both on the book’s cover and frontispiece, acted as a portal to China [INLINE IMAGE **Frontispiece to *The Middle Kingdom* (1848)**] This gateway was complete with ornate dragons and Chinese characters that, when translated into English, tellingly stated: “Among Westerners there are wise people. Kind people love all people, strangers as well as relatives.” With this inscription, Williams issued a challenge to his readers to open their minds and modify their view of China. In this sense, *The Middle Kingdom* was as much about Americans as it was about the Chinese.



Of course, the overarching purpose of his book was religious—to advance the cause of Protestant missions in China. Williams makes this point abundantly clear in his preface. “Respecting the origin, plan, and design of the present work, I may be allowed to express the humble hope that it will aid a little in advancing the cause of Christian civilization among the Chinese.”³⁴ However, if religion provided the official impetus for the book, science offered a *modus operandi*. Williams gathered, arranged, and presented his information by following a scientific model. In this way, the religiously-inspired *The Middle Kingdom* bears the distinct imprint of the Rensselaer Institute.

To understand the role of science on Williams’s mind, one need only scan the chapter titles and sub-headings. Williams categorized all aspects of Chinese life just as a naturalist trained in the Linnaean system would classify species. He devoted the first four chapters to China’s geography, covering the provinces, the colonies (Manchuria, Mongolia, and Tibet), and a general overview of the topographical features of the empire. He next moved on to China’s natural history, covering mineralogy, botany, zoology, herpetology, ichthyology, and entomology. Shifting to the human sphere, he composed two chapters that explained the government, the legal system, the administration of the laws throughout the provinces, and the treatment of criminals. He also discussed at length both the education system and the examination system, which produced the scholar-officials who ran the government. Not surprisingly, one chapter describes the Chinese written language, a subject Williams knew well. The two chapters on Chinese literature explore the Five Classics and the Four Books; the significance of Confucius and Mencius; and the nation’s histories, fictional novels, ballads, and poetry. Williams also studied the state of the arts and sciences: math, astronomy, military science, anatomy, astrology, music and painting.

Indeed, almost no category was safe from Williams’s exhaustive inquiry. He examined Chinese architecture, the manner of dress, and the diet. His study of Chinese social life offers depictions of ceremonies, festivals, marriage (including the custom of polygamy), naming practices, and the various pastimes of the people, such as gambling. In addition, Williams devoted space to Chinese commerce (complete with statistics of China’s imports and exports), agriculture (including tea production), and the mechanical and industrial arts (metallurgy, glass, porcelain, lacquer, silk, and carvings in ivory). Not surprisingly, Chinese religion consumes an entire chapter, as does the role of Christian missions in China, past and present. The book also contains a thorough history of the Chinese empire, one that stretches from antiquity to the present, with the more recent history centering on China’s intercourse with the outside world. Finally, *The Middle Kingdom* concludes with two full chapters that focus exclusively on the conflict with England and the opening of China. In sum, Williams made sense of China – its vastness and complexity – by imposing a rigid system of classification over it.

Missionary Salvation

In all areas of *The Middle Kingdom* that describe China’s people, Williams walked a tightrope. He admitted as much in the text itself with a statement that rendered his motives transparent: “We do not wish to depict the Chinese worse than they are, nor to dwell so much on their good qualities as to lead one to suppose they stand in no need of the Gospel.”³⁵ In other words, the Chinese needed to come across as immoral and corrupt on the one hand, yet as human and therefore redeemable on the other. To

accomplish the former, Williams formulated a critique of Chinese morals that, upon first glance, appears harsh. He reported that the Chinese “are vile and polluted in a shocking degree,” and that “their conversation is full of filthy expressions and their lives of impure acts.” He went on to enumerate the myriad vices of which this people were guilty: “falsity,” “mendacity,” “[t]hieving,” “licentiousness,” a lack of “[h]ospitality,” “[f]emale infanticide,” and “cruelty towards prisoners.”³⁶

Yet as unambiguously negative as these words appear, we cannot fully understand them by viewing them in isolation. In the following passage, Williams places his critique in the proper context:

In summing up the moral traits of the Chinese character...we must necessarily compare it with that perfect standard given us from above; while also we should not forget that the teachings of that book are unknown. While their contrarieties indicate a different external civilization, a slight acquaintance with their morals proves their similarity to their fellowmen in the lineaments of a fallen nature. As among other people, the lights and shadows of virtue and vice are blended in their character, and the degree of advancement they made while destitute of the great encouragements offered to perseverance in well-doing in the Bible, afford grounds for hoping that when they are taught out of that book, they will receive it as the rule of their conduct.³⁷

When Williams refers to “the Chinese character” as immoral, he is not pronouncing the Chinese racially inferior to the people of Western nations. Rather, he is measuring the Chinese against “that perfect standard,” by which he means the ideal of heavenly virtue contained in the Bible. In fact, far from highlighting racial difference, Williams emphasizes the innate sameness of the peoples of the earth. The “different external civilization” that the Chinese possess is mainly superficial and masks a much deeper “similarity to their fellowmen.”

Of course, the underlying “similarity” shared by the people of the world was not something Williams chose to celebrate. It was instead the crux of the great problem to which he had devoted his entire life: humanity’s fall from grace in the Garden of Eden and its subsequent quest for redemption. He believed that Chinese vices flowed not out of innate biological inferiority but rather out of the “fallen nature” of their souls. Likewise, he attributed the Christian virtue that he found in Western nations to the people’s exposure to the Word of God. But whereas citizens of Christian nations enjoyed opportunities to read the Bible, and many (but not all) had availed themselves of its truths, the Chinese had historically not been as fortunate. Thus, if the Bible could penetrate China, Williams earnestly believed that the people would turn to Christ *en masse*. When they did, the slough of sin, vice, and iniquity in which they currently wallowed would dry up and vanish. In sum, immorality in China was a pervasive ill for which there existed a magic bullet: the missionary movement.

The Reception

As Samuel Wells Williams sailed out of New York harbor in June of 1848, he could look back on the achievements of his furlough and savor them with satisfaction. He had established himself as the country’s leading authority on China. He had reached

thousands on a lecture tour. And he had written an important book on China. While the task of writing *The Middle Kingdom* had been formidable enough, Williams had also encountered difficulty locating a publisher. No publishing firm wanted to gamble on an encyclopedic work that neither exoticized or sensationalized its subject. In fact, he only succeeded in convincing the publishing house of Wiley and Putnam to accept his manuscript after Gideon Nye, a wealthy China trader, promised to reimburse the publisher for any losses incurred from poor sales.³⁸ When *The Middle Kingdom* entered book stores early in 1848, reviews were generally positive. Reverend Samuel Brown, a fellow missionary in China, read all the reviews in the New York newspapers and was able to make a favorable report to his friend: "I see it has been very highly lauded by the press in N. York."³⁹

Yet Brown understood the most obvious pitfall of a 1200-page book. "It is not everybody that will read such a work," he wrote. "Still fewer will pay \$3 to procure it."⁴⁰ Indeed, many reviewers, though praising the content, predictably complained about the book's length and the author's lack of style. Williams "is far from being a finished or polished writer," wrote one, "nor has he sufficiently studied brevity, either by the compact adjustment of his materials or the omission of needless details."⁴¹ Williams himself wondered if those who had purchased the book would "rather have their money returned than wade through so many pages."⁴²

Though the size proved to be a deterrent, the intellectual community embraced *The Middle Kingdom*. Almost immediately, it became universally regarded as the definitive authority on China. For this achievement, Union College conferred upon Williams an honorary degree (LL.D.) in 1848; it must have been a meaningful moment for a man who felt acutely his lack of institutional credentials.⁴³ While the cumbersome book was seldom read by the average reader, it did succeed in becoming the single most important reference work on China. For this reason, one can measure its influence less by its sales and more by the frequency with which it was cited in other works.

For example, on January 26, 1854, a Reverend Scott delivered a lecture on China at the Mechanic's Institute in New Orleans. Scott began his presentation by admitting his ignorance on the subject of China. To illustrate, he jokingly made reference to the only two Chinese words he knew: "tea" and "junk." Despite his lack of knowledge, Scott demonstrated his full awareness of the condescending mockery that then suffused Western attitudes towards the Chinese. "No people on the globe have been more subjected to ridicule than the Chinese," he said. "They have been regarded as 'the apes of Europeans,' and their civilization such as it is, their arts, laws, and government considered as the burlesque of ours." Scott proceeded to review the standard list of cruel stereotypes and to repeat the derogatory poem that had earlier riled Williams. However, after reviewing the usual insults, Scott did something interesting. He informed audience members that, if they were expecting more of the same, they would leave disappointed. After invoking *The Middle Kingdom*, he went on to deliver a lecture that owed almost all of its content to that masterful work.⁴⁴

A Sinologist

Let us advance forward almost thirty years to 1876 when Williams prepared to leave China and return to the United States for good. Despite the evangelical objectives that had launched his career, Williams spent most of his final two decades in China in the

service not of the American Board of Foreign Missions but of Uncle Sam. Williams had become a government employee and sometimes official.

Shortly after arriving home, Williams received gratifying news from the institution he had longed to attend as a youth. Yale had decided not only to confer upon him the degree of Master of Arts but also to create a faculty position for him: he would be the first to occupy the Chair of Chinese Language and Literature. It was the first of its kind in the United States.⁴⁵ Since the college library's holdings were devoid of Chinese texts, Williams worked with friends in China to effect the transfer of a sizeable library of Chinese books, totaling 1,280 volumes. The Yale Library now had an East Asian Collection.⁴⁶ In 1878, Williams delivered his first lecture and remarked later that the "audience was good," despite a heavy snowstorm and a presentation that he described as less than "exhilarating."⁴⁷

Protesting Chinese Exclusion

Since his teaching responsibilities hardly taxed him at all, Williams devoted substantial time and energy to the plight of the Chinese living in the United States. By the late 1870s, the so-called "Chinese question" had become the topic of a national debate. The anti-Chinese movement began in California where most of the Chinese population lived and worked. After the market crash of 1873 threw many Americans out of work, demagogues like Dennis Kearney, who claimed to speak for the interests of white labor, castigated industries for letting white workers go and hiring less expensive Chinese immigrants in their places. Kearney simultaneously used incendiary language to incite unemployed white workers, prodding them to channel their rage towards the Chinese. At political rallies and in the newspapers, the Chinese were painted as human vermin who took industrial jobs from deserving white Americans, added nothing to society, and sent their earnings back to China. In 1877, Kearney started the Working Man's Party, whose members rallied under the slogan, "The Chinese must go!"

In 1878, Kearney took his anti-Chinese campaign onto the national stage. Though pro-business politicians in the Republican Party might have defended the Chinese, their pragmatism instead dictated that they too adopt an anti-Chinese platform. Many joined in the ruthless scapegoating of the Chinese so as to secure some of the anti-Chinese vote. In 1882, this tragic drama culminated in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. A nation that had once critiqued China for its exclusionary policies towards foreigners had built its own Great Wall out of legislation.⁴⁸

Filled with indignation, Williams stepped forward as an advocate for Chinese immigrants in the late 1870s and early 1880s. He gave talks on the subject, published several articles that refuted the arguments of the anti-Chinese demagogues, took a trip to Washington to address Congress, and even sent a letter to President Rutherford B. Hayes arguing against the exclusion of Chinese immigrants. This letter was written by Williams and contained dozens of signatures from members of the Yale faculty.⁴⁹

The Death-Bed Edition

Yet Williams's largest project was of a literary nature: he decided to revise *The Middle Kingdom*. The revision proved to be no easy task, given that Williams needed to update his statistics, include an account of events that had taken place since 1847 (such as the Taiping Rebellion and the Second Opium War), and incorporate new knowledge that

had become available since the first edition. As Williams proceeded to add more content to a two-volume work previously criticized for its excessive size, he admitted to having “difficulty in digesting my material in my mind.” What was worse, he even began to question the viability of his project. “China,” he confided to his diary, “is too big a subject to put into two octavo vols.” Williams, it appears, was starting to realize that the grand dream of covering China in a single work was perhaps, in the end, pure folly.⁵⁰ Despite these doubts, the indomitable Williams forged ahead.

Unfortunately, in 1881, health problems that the author summed up as “age, weakness, and decay” signaled that he was running out of time. For the first time, he confronted the “disturbing” possibility that he would probably die before completing the revision. *The Middle Kingdom*, he wrote, “looms up larger than ever, a mountain too high for me to climb.” As his motor skills began to deteriorate, Williams found that he could not hold his hand steady enough to write legibly. That wonderful stamina and energy that had sustained him for four decades in China now seemed utterly “used up.” In his diary, he called upon God to lend him additional strength: “May God graciously preserve me to finish this revision, if it will be helpful to his cause in China.” Yet quietly, he began to prepare himself for what he called “the final disappointment.” On January 26, 1881, fate dealt him a devastating yet expected blow: Sarah Walworth Williams, his wife of more than three decades, died. In his diary, a shaken Williams bid her farewell: “Dear wife of my life, mine for one third of a century, adieu till we meet on the Sea of Glass.”⁵¹ Then in January of 1882, his already slow progress on his book came to a crashing halt when a fall on a slippery sidewalk resulted in a broken arm. Williams’s dream was now in jeopardy.⁵²

Fortunately, in 1881 Williams’s son Frederick looked over the work his father had completed thus far and discovered the extent to which the latter was struggling. The added chapters were, in Frederick’s words, “a confused and prolix narrative.” Fortunately, Frederick agreed to assist his father with the editing, and with his much-needed help, the retired missionary was able to see the massive project through to completion.⁵³

And it was massive. When the publisher released the revised edition of *The Middle Kingdom* in 1883, it had grown by a full third since its previous incarnation, now totaling over 1600 pages. Though blindness prevented Williams from reading his own completed work, he enjoyed holding the two volumes in his hands and feeling their substantial heft. And as with the first edition, Williams still cared deeply about the verdict rendered by readers and critics. “He made no pretence of concealing his interest in the press notices of his work,” Frederick observed, “which were read to him as they appeared.” One review in particular that Frederick clipped out of *The Critic* must have cheered his father’s spirits:

Those whose conception of China is that of a land of rat-eaters need...conversion. No one can now inform himself about the Chinese without seeing in them a civilized nation. Not to know China as civilized argues ourselves barbarians. It would also be well if the average American, and especially the average Congressman, could learn one thing – viz: that we are not in any danger of a Mongolian deluge...In spite of advanced years and feeble health, our author may yet live to see the absurd and un-American bill repealed.⁵⁴

“Conversion” was the key word. Americans were the ones who needed to change their thinking. With the revised edition, Williams had become a missionary in reverse.

With the publication of the revised *Middle Kingdom*, Williams’s final act of loyal service to God was complete. Having nothing left to accomplish, the aged missionary promptly entered into rapid decline. That he had survived this long convinced Frederick that the hand of Providence had intervened: “It seemed as though his life had been spared to see the consummation of this important endeavor, after which he faded gradually away.” On February 16, 1884, Williams died in his bed without suffering. After the funeral was held on the Yale campus, his body was removed to Utica, where he was buried next to his wife.⁵⁵

Conclusion

If one is searching for the official bureaucratic start of American Sinology, it might be Williams’s Chair at Yale. But as for Sinology’s intellectual origins, was it born out of Williams’s compelling need to revise the *Middle Kingdom* in the 1880s? Though Williams only hints at this point, implicit in his massive overhaul of the work was his quiet admission that the Chinese – like the finches Darwin observed on the voyage of the *Beagle* – were evolving and always would. Williams seemed to recognize that, though he might capture this growth and change one final time before death, his project was hopeless: *China could not be systematically, scientifically comprehended by one mind or one book*. In a Thomas Kuhnian sense, the cracks and fissures of the earlier orientalist paradigm in which Williams had worked all his life were probably apparent even to him.⁵⁶

Only an academic field that evolved as fast as China changed could comprehend this vast, complex, and dynamic civilization. For within that field, no single human being would ever again have to clean the Aegean Stables, as Williams had attempted to do. Instead, the study of China, like that of Europe or the Middle East, would be divided into ever smaller units, dispersed across time, and distributed among many minds engaged separately in studies of China’s literature, philology, language, government. Of course, within these divisions, sub-divisions would appear that would break down topics further. In this intellectual setting, a single summative work on China, were someone to attempt it, would appear an anachronism.

In 1955, Kenneth Scott Latourette, an expert on Chinese diplomacy, reflected on his graduate education at Yale in the early twentieth century. He referred to Samuel Wells Williams as the first Sinologist and fondly recalled reading the *Middle Kingdom* in a seminar. Who assigned this text and served as Latourette’s mentor? The answer is Frederick Williams, Samuel’s son, who occupied a China Chair at Yale. Though Williams’s great text was revered, at no point in his education was Latourette instructed to write something like *The Middle Kingdom* himself. Rather, Frederick Williams and the other professors helped him find his individual niche. The days of the generalist, such as a scientific missionary, were over.

NOTES

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- ¹ Frederick Wells Williams, *The Life and Letters of Samuel Wells Williams, LL.D.* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1889), 20.
- ² Frederick Wells Williams, 30-32.
- ³ Frederick Wells Williams, 30-32.
- ⁴ Frederick Wells Williams, 34.
- ⁵ Letter to James D. Dana, Yale College, April 23, 1832. Box 1. Series 1. Samuel Wells Williams Family Papers. Manuscript Collections, Yale University Library. Hereafter, this collection will be cited as SWWFP.
- ⁶ Frederick Wells Williams, 37-38. See also Jiang Qian, "Samuel Wells Williams and the Attitudes of U.S. Protestant Missionaries toward the Opium Trade and the Opening of China, 1830-1860" (M.A. Thesis, The University of Toledo, 1992), 4-5.
- ⁷ Samuel Wells Williams, "Autobiographical Sketch" (April, 1878). Box 13. Series 2. SWWFP.
- ⁸ Frederick Wells Williams, 39-40
- ⁹ Frederick Wells Williams, 27.
- ¹¹ Samuel Wells Williams, "Autobiographical Sketch" (April, 1878). Box 13. Series 2. SWWFP.
- ¹² Letter to Sarah Walworth, August 30, 1847. Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP.
- ¹³ Frederick Wells Williams, 58-59.
- ¹⁴ Letter to Peter Parker, August of 1839 (the letter does not contain a precise date). Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP. Approximate two of the hours were devoted to the study of Japanese. In 1836, Williams met three Japanese sailors in Macao whose vessel had been blown away from the Japanese coast by a storm. In 1837, Williams and others failed in their attempt to repatriate the men (and establish contact with the Japanese) in what was called the "Morrison Expedition." Yet after their efforts were repulsed, Williams employed them in his printing office and studied Japanese with them regularly. Frederick Wells Williams, 83, 93-100.
- ¹⁵ Frederick Wells Williams, 107-108.
- ¹⁶ Letter to Frederick Williams, July 29, 1840. Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP.
- ¹⁷ Letter to Frederick Williams, May 15, 1841. Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP.
- ¹⁸ Fred Drake, "Bridgman in China in the early Nineteenth Century," *American Neptune* 46 (1986): 38.
- ¹⁹ Frederick Wells Williams, 62.
- ²⁰ After the various treaties that followed in the wake of the Opium War, foreigners were free to live and work in several ports. Thus, by 1851, there was no longer a concentration of foreigners living in Canton that needed the *Chinese Repository*.
- ²¹ "List of Articles by S. Wells. Williams in the Chinese Repository." Box 13. Series 2. SWWFP.
- ²² Letter to Frederick Williams, August 29, 1839. Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP.
- ²³ Letter to Frederick Williams, November 30, 1840. Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP.
- ²⁴ Letter to Frederick Williams, May 29, 1843. Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP.
- ²⁵ Letter to Frederick Williams, June 15, 1843. Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP.
- ²⁶ Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1848), xiii-xvi.
- ²⁷ Frederick Wells Williams, 147-148. Though preferring western New York and Ohio, Williams did not avoid the East Coast altogether. He offered lectures in New York, New Haven, and probably other cities as well. Letter to Samuel Wells Williams from James Dana. October 10, 1846. Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP.
- ²⁸ Frederick Wells Williams, 147.
- ²⁹ Frederick Wells Williams, 151. Samuel Wells Williams, "The Present Position of the Chinese Empire," John Russell Bartlett, "The Progress of Ethnology," and Albert Gallatin, "Introduction to 'Hale's Indians of North-west America and Vocabularies of North America,'" *Transactions of the American Ethnological Society* (New York: Bartlett & Welford, 1848), clxi, 148, 279.
- ³⁰ Letter to Sarah Walworth, August 23, 1847. Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP.
- ³¹ Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom* vol. 1 (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1848), xiii-xiv. A perusal of the work's footnotes reveals that the *Chinese Repository* was one of the more frequently cited sources for information.
- ³² Letter to Sarah Walworth, November 11, 1847. Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP.
- ³³ Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom* vol. 1 (1848), xiv.
- ³⁴ Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom* vol. 1 (1848), xvi.
- ³⁵ Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom* vol. 2 (1848), 99.

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- ³⁶ Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom* vol. 2 (1848), 95-99.
- ³⁷ Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom* vol. 2 (1848), 95.
- ³⁸ Frederick Wells Williams, 163.
- ³⁹ Letter to Samuel Wells Williams from Samuel Brown. February 10, 1848. Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP.
- ⁴⁰ Letter to Samuel Wells Williams from Samuel Brown. February 10, 1848. Box 1. Series 1. SWWFP.
- ⁴¹ *North American Review* (October, 1848), 269. Another reviewer agreed with the first that "the number and variety of his sources...are too abundantly exhibited." *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (April, 1848): 319-320.
- ⁴² Frederick Wells Williams, 162-163.
- ⁴³ Frederick Wells Williams, 162.
- ⁴⁴ Reverend Dr. Scott, "Lecture on the Chinese Empire," delivered in New Orleans before the Mechanic's Institute, January 26, 1854. New York Public Library.
- ⁴⁵ In 1879, three years after Yale had established its professorship in Chinese Studies, Harvard followed suit by hiring Ko Kun-hua from China. Professor Ko and Samuel Wells Williams enjoyed a strong, but short, friendship. Professor Ko died the following year. Frederick Wells Williams, 450-453.
- ⁴⁶ See list of Chinese titles. Box 17. Series 2. SWWFP. This was not the first time that Williams had brought about the transfer of Chinese books to American institutions. In 1869, he orchestrated an exchange of texts between the United States Government and the Chinese Government. See Tsuen-hsuei Tsien, "The First Chinese-American Exchange of Publications," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (1965): 19-30.
- ⁴⁷ Letter to Robert Stanton Williams. February 1, 1878. Box 14. Series 2. SWWFP.
- ⁴⁸ See Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).
- ⁴⁹ Frederick Wells Williams, 414. Letters to Robert Stanton Williams (February 1 and 6, 1878). Letter to Henry Blodgett, Peking (February 7, 1878). Box 13. Series 2. See "Letter to President Hayes by the Faculty of Yale College, Feb 21, 1879," Box 13. Series 2. SWWFP.
- ⁵⁰ See entries for March 9 and 10, 1881. "The National Diary 1881." Box 14. Series 2. SWWFP.
- ⁵¹ Entry for January 26, 1881. "The National Diary 1881." Box 14. Series 2. SWWFP.
- ⁵² To Sophia Gardner Williams Grosvenor Gray (January 17, 1882). Box 13. Series 2. SWWFP.
- ⁵³ Frederick Wells Williams, 449.
- ⁵⁴ *The Critic* (November, 1883). See "Reviews of the Middle Kingdom." Box 16. Series 2. SWWFP.
- ⁵⁵ Frederick Wells Williams, 460-461.
- ⁵⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).