The Morrison Education Society School and the Beginning of Anglo-Chinese Education in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The beginnings of Anglo-Chinese education in Hong Kong can be traced to the opening of the Morrison Education Society School in November 1842. The Morrison Education Society, which had been founded in Canton in 1835 to commemorate the life of Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary in China, established the school in Macao in 1839. Three years later the school moved to a purpose-built site on a hill (now called Morrison Hill) overlooking Victoria Harbour after the cession of Hong Kong to the British, and remained there until 1849, when it was forced to close as a result of financial difficulties. The activities of the Morrison Education Society and its school are recorded in considerable detail in its annual reports which appeared in the pages of the Chinese Repository (hereafter CR), a Canton-based missionary journal, from the mid-1830s until the school’s closure in the late 1840s. The records of the school provide a valuable insight into the nature of Anglo-Chinese education in early Hong Kong, as well as the more general objectives of Western education on the China coast in the mid-nineteenth century. This paper traces the history of the Morrison Education Society School from its inception in Macao in the years immediately preceding the Opium War to its closure ten years later. In particular, it examines the aims of the school in relation to both general education and English language education, the content of the school’s Chinese and English curricula, the methods and approaches which were used to teach and learn the Chinese and English languages, and the influence which the school’s Western teachers and curriculum exerted on its Chinese students.

Robert Morrison - Missionary and Scholar

The arrival of Robert Morrison in Macao on 4th September 1807 is perhaps the most appropriate starting point for the history of Anglo-Chinese education in Hong Kong. Morrison, an Evangelical Presbyterian, had been sent to China by the Directors of the undenominational London Missionary Society with the aim of learning Chinese and translating the Bible into Chinese, tasks which were essential to the society’s ultimate goal of spreading the Gospel in China (Ride 1957). Morrison’s early years in China were
fraught with difficulties and frustrations. Apart from the obvious problems which stemmed from the Chinese government’s prohibition against foreigners learning Chinese and attempting to spread Christianity (Hunter 1911), Morrison’s presence on the China coast was viewed with suspicion by the Catholic authorities in Macao and the representatives of the East India Company in Canton, whose regulations forbade any British person apart from their own employees and merchants to live in the factory area during the trading season. In 1809, Morrison’s fortunes began to improve when he accepted the post of Chinese Secretary and Translator to the British Factory at Canton at a salary of £500 a year (Morrison 1839). Morrison’s position with the East India Company legitimised his presence in China (although his dual role of missionary and Company employee attracted criticism in some quarters), and thus provided the necessary stability to proceed with his Chinese studies and the momentous task of translating the Bible into Chinese, which he completed in 1819. This period also saw the publication of a number of works in English in the field of Chinese language learning, notably *A Grammar of the Chinese Language* (1815), *Dialogues and Detached Sentences in the Chinese Language* (1816), and a six-volume *Dictionary of the Chinese Language* (1815-1823) (Ride 1957). Of perhaps more immediate relevance for the present study was the instrumental role which Morrison played in the establishment of the London Missionary Society’s Anglo-Chinese College at Malacca in 1818 (O’Sullivan 1988).

The Ch’ing government’s proscription of Christianity and the learning of Chinese, and its restrictive regulations governing the residence of foreigners on the China coast effectively prevented Western missionary bodies from carrying out evangelical work in China. The choice of Malacca as the location of the Anglo-Chinese College stemmed from its central position in south-east Asia, its proximity to Chinese settlements in Malaya and Indonesia, and above all the fact that the Dutch authorities would be rather more favourably disposed to the institution than the Mandarins. Malacca was also close enough to the Middle Kingdom for the institution to move to China once conditions became more favourable for missionary work, as was the case after the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, when the Anglo-Chinese College under the headmastership of James Legge was finally able to move to Hong Kong (Harrison 1979). The Anglo-Chinese College, which was in many ways a forerunner of the Morrison Education Society School and the other Anglo-Chinese mission schools in nineteenth-century Hong Kong, was intended to encourage.

The reciprocal cultivation of Chinese and European Literature. On the one hand, the Chinese language and literature will be made
access to Europeans; on the other, the English language, with
European literature and science will be made accessible to the Ultra-
Ganges nations who read Chinese. (Morrison 1839: 513)

In carrying out this objective, its founders hoped that the Anglo-Chinese
College would exert a ‘favourable influence on the peaceable diffusion of
Christian principles, and the general civilisation of the eastern hemisphere’
(Morrison 1839: 513).

The Morrison Education Society

The death of Robert Morrison on 1st August 1834 prompted the leading
figures in the foreign community in Canton and Macao to circulate a paper
proposing the establishment of a society in Morrison’s memory, whose object
would be ‘to improve and promote Education in China by schools and other
means’:

As a knowledge of the Chinese language has been of great advantage
to foreigners, so an acquaintance with the English language will be of
equal or greater advantage to the people of this empire. For the
purpose of conveying this benefit to the Chinese, and of aiding the
work which Dr Morrison commenced, it is proposed to erect, in an
institution characteristic of the object to which he devoted his life, a
testimonial more enduring than marble or brass, to be called the
Morrison Education Society. (CR 1836: 375)

The first public meeting of the Morrison Education Society took place on 28th
October 1836, when the specific aims of the society were outlined:

... the establishment and improvement of schools, in which Chinese
youth shall be taught to read and write the English language in
connection with their own, by which means shall be brought within
their reach all the instruction requisite for their becoming wise,
industrious, sober, and virtuous members of society, fitted in their
respective stations of life to discharge well the duties which they owe
to themselves, their kindred, their country, and their God. (CR 1836:
379)

The prime movers in the establishment of the Morrison Education Society and
the main formulators of its educational aims and objectives were the British
business community in Canton, notably the prominent opium traders Lancelot
Dent (President) and William Jardine (Treasurer), and the small group of Protestant missionaries who had arrived on the China coast in the early 1830s, chief among whom was the American Elijah Bridgman, who was the Corresponding Secretary of the Morrison Education Society and the Editor of the Chinese Repository. At first sight it might appear that unscrupulous opium dealers like William Jardine and Evangelical Christians like Elijah Bridgman would make unlikely bedfellows: their reasons for being on the China coast were quite different, and their interests hardly coincided. On closer inspection, however, it is apparent that the foreign traders and missionaries shared a generally contemptuous view of the Chinese state and society, and a common interest in seeing change and progress in China (Dawson 1967). The free traders wished to see an end to the restrictive trading practices of the Canton commercial system and the opening of the vast China market to the nations of the West, while the missionaries wanted the freedom to proselytise in China. The opening of China to Western business and religion required a change in the attitude of the Chinese people, particularly the ruling elite of scholar-officials, who had traditionally been dismissive of foreign ideas and techniques. For the foreign business and religious communities in Canton in the pre-treaty days, the key to the transformation of China was the introduction of education, in which the role of the English language, as the medium through which the arts and sciences of the West would be communicated, was crucial. The founders of the Morrison Education Society thus saw the diffusion of Western learning through the medium of English and Chinese in its schools as an important means for changing and improving Chinese society.

The Morrison Education Society thus began its work with lofty ambitions. At its annual general meeting in 1837, the American medical missionary, Dr Peter Parker, maintained that the society was ‘not an ephemeral thing, but a concern that reaches far into the future’, which contemplated providing a Western-style education for ‘millions of children, within and without the empire’ (CR 1837: 243). However, before the society could embark on its grandiose scheme to transform the Middle Kingdom it had to find a teacher and some students. At its inaugural meeting in 1836, the members of the society recommended the recruitment of a teacher - ‘young, enterprising, well acquainted with the business of Education’ (CR 1836: 377) - from the United States or England, who when he arrived would be required to learn Chinese and supervise the training of a corps of native teachers who would teach Chinese at the society’s school. While they proceeded with the recruitment of a suitably qualified teacher, a process which was to take over two years, the members of the society in Canton began the difficult task of finding students for the proposed school, and supporting the modest
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educational initiatives which were already underway in Macao. The most notable of these was the small school for Chinese boys and girls run by Mrs Gutzlaff (the English wife of Charles Gutzlaff, a Lutheran missionary and sinologue), where an education in English and Chinese (together with board, lodging, clothing and stationery) was provided free of charge.

Although in later years an English education would be a prized asset for ambitious Chinese in the nineteenth-century treaty ports, in the 1830s, a time of growing hostility between China and the West, studying English in a Western school on the China coast would have been considered an unusual, if not foolhardy act. Apart from arousing the suspicions of the Mandarins, attending an English school would hinder a student’s progress in the laborious process of learning the Confucian canon for the civil service examination, which was the key to socio-economic advancement in late imperial China (Luk 1982), and also risk alienating the student from his cultural heritage. Consequently, before the establishment of Hong Kong as a British colony, any attempt by a Western educational agency to recruit students from ‘respectable’ Chinese families was futile. From the evidence provided in the CR, it would appear that the Morrison Education Society also found it difficult to recruit students from the masses: ‘... were there no impediments in our way, arising from the peculiar character and attitude of this government, we could immediately bring scores, nay hundreds, of these poor children into well-conducted schools’ (CR 1836: 380-1). One of the pupils at Mrs Gutzlaff’s school in Macao and the Morrison Education Society School in Hong Kong, Yung Wing, who was later to study at Yale and play an important role in China’s self-strengthening movement, recalled in his autobiography how unusual it was for a Chinese boy to attend a Western school during this period:

-It has always been a mystery to me why my parents should take it into their heads to put me into a foreign school, instead of a regular orthodox Confucian school, where my brother much older than myself was placed. Most assuredly such a step would have been more in play with Chinese public sentiment, taste, and the wants of the country at large, than to allow me to attend an English school. ... I can only account for the departure thus taken on the theory that as foreign intercourse with China was just beginning to grow, my parents, anticipating that it might soon assume the proportions of a tidal wave, thought it worth while to take time by the forelock and put one of their sons to learning English that he might become one of the advanced interpreters and have a more advantageous position.
from which to make his way into the business and diplomatic world.

(Yung 1909: 2-3)

The first headmaster of the Morrison Education Society School, the Rev. Samuel Brown, arrived with his wife in Macao on 23rd February 1839, and immediately commenced his Chinese language studies. Brown had been a student at Yale, and before accepting the post with the Morrison Education Society had taught at the New York Institution for the Deaf and Dumb (Smith 1985). The society’s school finally opened in Macao on 4th November 1839 with six boys. One of the boys ‘had acquired so much knowledge of the English tongue, as to place him in advance of the rest’, who were apparently learning the language *ab initio* (CR 1841: 569). The school day at the new institution was divided into two equal sessions, one devoted to English studies, in which ‘creditable advances’ were apparently made (CR 1841: 572), and the other devoted to Chinese studies, which were supervised by an elderly native teacher who was ‘very faithful in teaching after the Chinese mode’ (CR 1841: 571). The first year of the school’s operation was not without its problems, which partly stemmed from ‘the want of proper school-books and apparatus’ (CR 1841: 53), but mainly resulted from the tension in Anglo-Chinese relations brought about by Commissioner Lin’s campaign to suppress the opium trade. However, the occupation of Hong Kong by the British in 1841 prompted the leading figures in the Morrison Education Society to consider moving the school across the Pearl estuary, and to this end they wrote to the Governor, Sir Henry Pottinger, on 20th February 1842 to request ‘sufficient ground at Hong Kong, in an eligible site, for a dwelling-house, school-room, etc.’ (CR 1842: 542). Pottinger agreed to this request, and in a meeting with a deputation from the society on 5th April 1842 expressed his keen interest in the work of the society and agreed to be its patron. Having secured the support of the authorities in Hong Kong, the school moved into temporary quarters on the island in November 1842, and in the following April began its operations in a purpose-built school-house which occupied ‘a conspicuous yet retired position, elevated and healthy, and commanding a panoramic view of land and water’ (CR 1842: 544). In one of the specimen English compositions which appeared in the *CR* in 1843, a student at the school described the setting in which the students at the Morrison Education Society School received their education:

It is placed in a beautiful site, and we can see almost all parts of the town and the village of Wongnai chung. ... On the right side is a grove where the music of birds is always to be heard, and on the left too; fields on the front, and some English houses in the rear. It is very
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pleasant for us to see in the morning when all the fields are covered with green. *(CR 1843: 363)*

The pupils at the Morrison Education Society School were thus able to proceed with their language studies in an apparently idyllic environment, unlike their counterparts who attend the two Anglo-Chinese schools which stand on Morrison Hill today, who learn their prepositions and gerunds to the musical accompaniment of jackhammers and car horns.

**The aims and curriculum of the Morrison Education Society School**

In keeping with the Morrison Education Society’s primary aim of providing a bilingual education for the Chinese, the school gave equal emphasis to English and Chinese studies in its curriculum so that, as in Macao, half a day was devoted to each language.

... the pupils in this school should be thoroughly versed in their own literature; otherwise they can never transfuse into it the knowledge which they derive from foreign sources, nor can they be respected among a people, where extensive literary attainments are the only way to eminence and distinction. *(CR 1841: 584)*

However, it would appear from Brown’s reports that he attached more importance to English-medium instruction than traditional Chinese education:

We open to our pupils the sources of knowledge that lie in English literature. While we deny to the Chinese youth nothing that can be gained from his native soil, we give him access to as much as possible of occidental lore ... That part of the man, which is so sadly neglected, it wit the reason, judgment, imagination, affections and conscience, is here subjected to the best culture we can give it through a foreign tongue. *(CR 1842: 550)*

Like other missionary-educators in nineteenth-century Hong Kong, Brown believed that the transmission of Western learning through the medium of English would liberate his students from the fetters of traditional Chinese values and modes of thought and open their minds to a new and better way of thinking. Instruction in the English language was therefore a central element in the development of critical and creative thinking:
If left to themselves, they will be just what their ancestors have been for many generations, bound by the fetters of the most awkward and unsocial language ever spoken, to tread in their footsteps, thinking and knowing only what they thought and knew. So long as they know only their mother tongue, their thoughts must be bounded by its limits. They cannot go a step beyond this. But let them be taught to read and write and speak the English language and their minds are liberated. (CR 1844: 638)

Although learning English was clearly felt to be the key to the enlightenment of the students, an equal amount of time was devoted to Chinese language education. Like many other influential educators in Hong Kong in the past 150 years, Brown argued that the development of proficiency in English should not be at the expense of Chinese: ‘It is highly desirable that ... students devote more attention to Chinese composition. It is essential that they should become masters of their own language’ (CR 1846: 614). There is also some evidence of that perennial concern about Anglo-Chinese schools in Hong Kong, namely that students who receive a ‘bilingual’ education in schools where English is the principal medium of instruction often emerge fully proficient in neither English nor Chinese: ‘they themselves say they write better English than Chinese’ (CR 1842: 547). For much of the colonial period, the emphasis on English and the relative neglect of Chinese in the education system has prompted educators from both Hong Kong and overseas to observe that students in the territory fall between two stools, both linguistically and culturally:

I know of no more humiliating spectacle than to see boys, as we do frequently in Hong Kong, who know English much better than they do Chinese, who entirely neglect their own language when they begin to learn the other, and who when asked for the translation of a letter or a petition fail to render it intelligibly. (Hong Kong Blue Book 1867: 280)

... when both the English and Chinese languages are taught side by side in the same class, the children learn neither English properly nor Chinese satisfactorily. (Hong Kong Government Gazette 1880: 145)

... the schools are open to the accusation that they let their pupils fall between two stools. Their English, as has already been said, is not above reproach, yet, if the writer’s information is reliable, they are so far behind their contemporaries in their knowledge of Chinese, owing, presumably, to the short school time given to that language,
that they have to be specially prepared, sometimes for a year, for
study in a Chinese university. (Burney 1935: 11-12)

The end result of the educational system, based on complaints and
opinions commonly expressed, is a product which can be generally
described as a ‘cultural eunuch’ - someone who knows what things
could or might be like in cultural terms but who is not able to
participate. This product is brought about by a light veneer of
Western culture, glimpsed through exposure to the English language
in schools and the media, on to a less than wholesome body of
Chinese values and culture. (Lord and T’sou 1985: 17)

It would appear from the evidence provided in Brown’s reports that the style
of the Chinese education which the school provided was similar to that of the
traditional Chinese schools on the mainland. The Confucian classics, which
were ‘taught after the fashion of the country’ (CR 1842: 546), were studied
intensively by the students until they were able to ‘back the book’, that is,
recite its contents with the book held behind the back. Perhaps not
surprisingly, Brown was critical of the content of the school’s Chinese
curriculum and particularly the students’ traditional style of learning, which
involved ‘the tedious process of imitating particular passages from the best
authors, without even thinking’ (CR 1842: 549). According to Brown, the
nature of traditional Chinese education was a fundamental cause of the lack of
change and progress in Chinese society:

It teaches the people to look upon these books as the repositories of
all that is necessary or worthy to be learned, and from the highest
personage at court, to the lowest in the field or shop, all have become
accustomed to listen to the voice of gray antiquity for instruction, and
he that is the most patient listener, is the surest of preferment. The
mind of the nation has been systematically taught not to think, and the
reasoning faculty, like their written language, has long ago been
arrested in its improvement. (CR 1842: 549)

Although he recognised the weaknesses of the school’s Chinese curriculum,
Brown was apparently unable to persuade his native teachers to change their
approach: ‘... to suggest a new method of instruction to a Chinese master,
more consonant with our own views, is at once to diminish his interest in his
employment, because he cannot appreciate what goes against all precedent in
his own mind’ (CR 1841: 572). For Brown, however, the weaknesses of
Chinese education stemmed more from the inadequacies of the Chinese
language as a medium for transmitting new knowledge and ideas than from the traditional nature of the methods used:

The thoughts of these people have run in a very different channel to those of any other civilized nation. Their modes of expressing them subserve their own uses, will they be ours? We wish to teach them thoughts to diverge a little from the beaten track, to take a wider range of objects, to become familiar with new truths. But as words are the vehicle of thought, new words must be formed to convey it over unexplored regions. (*CR* 1844: 637)

Brown believed that education in the English language would provide his students with the new vocabulary through which they could acquire new knowledge and ideas:

If any one could do it, it would be some one who has been educated through the medium of a foreign tongue, and thereby gained a knowledge of the new facts that call for new words to represent them, and at the same time has received a good Chinese education. This is precisely the kind of men that we are trying to produce in this school. (*CR* 1844: 637)

**English language education at the Morrison Education Society School**

Like the Anglo-Chinese schools in modern Hong Kong, the Morrison Education Society School provided its students with the opportunity to learn English through the use of the language as the medium of instruction for subjects such as history and mathematics, and through the study of English as a subject. Brown’s annual reports in the early 1840s indicate that the pupils studied geography, history, algebra and geometry through the medium of English. The textbooks which the school used included Keightly’s *History of England* (in 1843 the students apparently studied English history from the Roman invasion to the reign of Charles I), Morse’s *School Atlas*, Colburn’s *Algebra* and Euclid’s *Elements of Geometry*. Since the language (still less the content) of the English textbooks was not adapted to the needs of non-native students, it is not surprising that the boys at the school experienced considerable difficulties coping with English-medium instruction. Brown’s reports, which understandably cast the school’s activities in a favourable light, provide clear evidence that pupils at the Morrison Education Society School often found lessons heavy going:
A lesson in any book for the first two or three years after one of them enters the school, is at once both a lesson on language, and on the particular subject of which the book treats. Hence let it be arithmetic, geography, or history, or whatever else, the language must first be made intelligible, and the subject matter must be arrived at by this laborious process. We often find it necessary to spend more time in interpreting the textbook than in merely reciting the lesson. Not only every new word needs to be defined, but every new form of expression, and every particular idiom or combination of words; and it is not infrequently a half hour’s task to unravel and expound a paragraph of moderate length so that the pupil shall clearly perceive, not merely what each part signifies, but how all the parts hinge upon one another, and are combined together so as to convey an unbroken train of thought. (CR 1843: 625)

The following extract from a letter written by a 15-year-old student called Ashing also highlights the problems which students at the school invariably encountered when studying through the medium of English:

Among all English studies, I like the natural science best, such as mechanics and astronomy, of which I know something. But as the English language is the only channel of my learning, I must therefore spend a great deal of time studying grammar, and reading books. (CR 1844: 383)

The problems which his students experienced when trying to read English textbooks intended for students in the West brought home to Brown the clear difference between English-medium instruction for native speakers and non-native speakers: ‘We need books made expressly for the use of schools in which English is not the vernacular tongue’ (CR 1841: 574). It would appear that the students also had considerable difficulty understanding lectures given by native speakers. In his report for 1846, Brown describes the problems his students experienced in comprehending a series of chemistry lectures delivered in English by one Dr Balfour, a surgeon at the Seaman’s Hospital in Hong Kong:

The earlier lectures were understood in a good degree, after a second explanation from notes taken at the time. But when they came to the consideration of the elementary substances, and their compounds, the chemical nomenclature presented too serious obstacles to be overcome. The lectures were however continued, until at length the boys became discouraged by the array of hard names that were
constantly recurring, and all but one of their number expressed the 
opinion that it was too difficult a subject for them at present, and 
desired to be allowed to spend their time in other studies more within 
the reach of their capacities. (CR 1846: 607)

As might be expected, in lessons where English was taught as a subject, the 
content of the curriculum and the nature of the methods and activities which 
were used depended on the number of years the students had been learning the 
language. The school was divided into four classes. New students to the school 
were placed in the 4th class (which in the mid-1840s had around ten boys aged 
between nine and fifteen), where they commenced their English language 
studies by learning how to read and pronounce simple words using textbooks 
such as Mother’s Primer and Bentley’s Pictorial Reader. The beginners class 
in 1842 apparently learned simple vocabulary about objects in the classroom 
through the use of the question ‘What is that?’ After they had finished the 
primer, they proceeded to study Lexilogus, a collection of 1,200 English 
phrases with Chinese equivalents, which had been specially prepared by 
Brown to aid his students’ acquisition of English vocabulary: ‘This they have 
committed to memory, and reviewed many times; and it has been of great 
service to them, in learning to use idiomatic English in conversation, and to 
understand it in books’ (CR 1842: 551). In the 4th class of 1846, writing on 
their slates and on the blackboard was a prominent activity for the students in 
their English lessons:

It has been partly of sentences dictated to them, partly of sentences 
translated by them at the time from Chinese given them, and partly of 
sentences entirely original. Their knowledge of English is yet small; 
they have made some considerable advance in it, and what they speak 
or write is far less after the Chinese idiom than it once was, and many 
words have been added to their previous stock. (CR 1846: 611)

It is clear therefore that written Chinese played quite an important role in the 
early stages of learning to read and write English at the school. Since the 
students in the 4th class were in their first year of English and since Brown 
was proficient in Cantonese, it is also quite likely that Brown would have 
made considerable use of the language to introduce and explain new 
vocabulary and grammar. In the third class, which in 1846 contained seven 
boys, the students reportedly used the Pictorial Reader and Goodrich’s 
Second Reader. During their second year of English language studies, the boys 
concentrated on reading and writing:
Much time is always spent at the reading lesson, in asking them questions, explaining their differences, and subsequently in writing on the blackboard about what they have read. By this means they have very manifestly both improved in the art of reading and added to their stock of words and knowledge of English. (CR 1846: 609)

Brown’s report on the progress of the third class of 1844 indicated that while some of the boys ‘find little difficulty in mastering English sounds’, others were ‘more impeded by their vernacular pronunciation’ (CR 1844: 629). As might be expected, the second class seem to have been given more opportunities to write and speak English than their younger schoolmates:

The principal aim of their instructor has been to give them as extensive a knowledge as possible of the English language, and the ability to use it. Each boy has been required to write and speak it. As far as practicable their vernacular tongue has been interdicted in the school-room so as to make them use the English language in conversation. Their native language is only resorted to when it is necessary for the purposes of explanation. (CR 1845: 478)

According to Brown’s report of 1846, the third class made very satisfactory progress in their written English, particularly in the relation to grammatical accuracy and the range of vocabulary used:

When they began, their compass of words was very small, and their capability of putting them together very slight. At first, as might be expected, errors were the rule, and correctness the exception. But now, if the case is not reversed, it is so far improved, that the sense of a sentence is no longer left in uncertainty, but is clearly though deficiently set forth. Their knowledge of words is greatly increased, as well as the practical knowledge of the proper mode of writing them. (CR 1846: 610)

Students in the third class seem to have received some instruction in grammar, although Brown is reluctant to call it grammar because his pupils were not required to master the grammatical rules of English, which was presumably the principal method of foreign and classical language learning in Europe and America in the early nineteenth century:

... devoted some attention to what might perhaps be called grammar, though I prefer to call it the structure of the English language, as grammar in the common acceptation of the term implies rules...
Thus, while Brown’s English lessons appear to have focused on explaining how the language is used, he seems as far as possible to have avoided burdening his students with a plethora of grammatical terms: ‘As to grammar, every reading exercise, and every effort at composition, though involving the use of but few of the technicalities of the science, is strictly speaking a lesson in grammar’ (CR 1845: 479-480). Similarly, the most senior boys in the first class, though ignorant of ‘a single rule of Murray or any other grammarian’, were nevertheless able to

... resolve a paragraph into its constituent parts, pointing out the number of sentences and propositions, and these again into their elements, showing the office which each word performs, and generally the reason why it is so employed. Otherwise than this, they have no knowledge of grammar, or at least very little. (CR 1842: 553)

English lessons for the first class appear to have been devoted principally to writing (at sentence, paragraph and essay level), which was taught in a variety of ways. As the following extract from Brown’s 1845 report reveals, some of the techniques which were used to develop the students’ writing skills would be familiar to Hong Kong students today:

As a further step in training them to write, they have been called upon to supply words purposely omitted in sentences - to arrange a sentence or more, in a variety of ways, yet expressing the same idea. Variety of expression has been taught by showing how the participle may be substituted by a conjunction, by changing a verb from the active to the passive voice, and the reverse, and by the substitution of synonymous terms. Objects have been assigned to them to be described, for the double purpose of teaching them habits of close observation and accurate description and so on. (CR 1845: 478)

The students’ recognition of the importance of language use in the process of learning English - hardly an original idea, but after 150 years one that is still viewed with a degree of suspicion in some Hong Kong schools - led them to institute a system of fines for using their mother tongue in English classes:
About four months ago, the boys of the school having noticed a remark, that if they did not speak English, they could never learn it, unanimously resolved that Chinese should be laid aside in conversation, and nothing but English used, except to other Chinese persons ... At first the fines were very numerous and the weekly sums large, but so rare has it become now for any boy to speak in Chinese, that they have dwindled down to almost nothing. (CR 1842: 555-556)

Given the perennial preoccupation about standards of English in Hong Kong, it is interesting to speculate on the level of proficiency which the students at the Morrison Education Society School attained in the language. Brown’s reports on the work of the school during the 1840s generally emphasise the progress which his students were making in their English language studies. However, since Brown was accountable to the members of the Morrison Education Society, who were some of the most influential figures in early Hong Kong, and since the school’s annual reports were written for public consumption, it is perhaps not surprising that the Headmaster’s reports on his students’ progress are generally quite positive. On the evidence of the students’ compositions and letters, which were occasionally published in the CR, it would seem that, compared with senior secondary students in modern Hong Kong, the boys at the Morrison Education Society School attained a very high standard of English. The extracts below are taken from a composition published in 1843. The first extract describes a visit to the school by Hong Kong’s first Governor, Sir Henry Pottinger, and representatives of the Chinese government (who were evidently taking a break from negotiations over Hong Kong’s future as a British colony).

... two Chinese commissioners came to visit Sir Henry Pottinger, with some large war junks and soldiers. When they landed, the servants beat the gongs, some carried beautiful flags, which were woven in gold dragons, the English fired guns, to salute them. The Chinese heard them, and crowded together to witness them, a few days after, they drove out in a carriage to see our school, with Mr Morrison [Robert Morrison’s son, John], and all met together with gladness, and conversed with each other for a long time. They heard our music with gratification, and took some tea, and returned in the same way. (CR 1843: 364-365)

In the idyllic description of Hong Kong and its society below, the attractions of the colony appear to rival those of Bath or Baden-Baden:
The houses are nearly all built along the shore. The hills are watered by fine streams, and many small trees covered the hills, and valleys, fruits are plenty in some places. It abounds in interesting things, compared with other parts of China, and has a fine road, where gentlemen and ladies, ride in carriages, which are drawn swiftly along by horses, and some on horse back. (CR 1843: 365)

Although the specimen compositions published in the CR were apparently ‘original and uncorrected by any but the writer of them’ (CR 1843: 364) caution needs to be exercised when using them as evidence of the students’ proficiency in English. While some of the students may have made rapid progress in their language studies - they received intensive instruction in relatively small groups so conditions were very favourable for language learning - it is quite likely that the content (and presumably the language) of their compositions and letters was (as we shall see) strongly influenced by Brown and the school’s other Western instructors. Nevertheless, there is a fair amount of evidence in Brown’s reports that standards of English at the school were perhaps not quite as high as the students’ published work might suggest. The difficulties which the students apparently experienced when reading textbooks designed for native speakers of English have already been outlined. A further example is provided in Brown’s report for the year 1846, where his account of history lessons based on Keightley’s History of England - ‘as the style was so far from simple, that even after an explanation of all the parts of a paragraph, the idea was not always perceived’ (CR 1846: 609) - (one imagines) barely hints at the tedium and confusion which the students, drawn from the lowest classes of Chinese society and largely ignorant of the West, must have associated with studying the Gunpowder Plot or the Spanish Armada through the medium of a language which they had been learning for only a year or two. The reports of the school’s examining committee, while praising the conscientious work of Brown and his assistants and the students for their academic progress, also suggest that the students’ understandably limited proficiency in English hampered them in their studies at the school:

... notwithstanding the difficulties with which they had to contend, more especially that of learning in a language of which they are not completely masters, the progress of these classes was as great as I should have expected to see in the same number of my countrymen. (CR 1846: 616)

One of the members of the 1846 examining committee, Andrew Shortrede, Editor of the China Mail, offered a frank yet sensitive assessment of the students’ predicament:
In any country, and under any circumstances, it would abash boys enjoying the highest advantages to undergo an examination on a variety of subjects, through the medium of a language they are conscious of being very imperfectly acquainted with, while it is the mother tongue of their examinators; but when the trial is to be gone through by these boys, taken from the lower and ignorant classes, imbued with all the old and deep-rooted prejudices of their countrymen, and unable to understand the utility, or even the full meaning of much that has been told them since they entered the Institution, it is not wonderful that they should appear diffident and confused, and perhaps receive less credit than they are entitled to from strangers. *(CR 1846: 618)*

It would appear, therefore, that the Morrison Education Society’s ambitious aim of ‘opening to the mass of the Chinese mind the vast stores of whatever can delight the taste, purify the affections, expand the intellect, chasten the imagination, and strengthen right principles’ proved difficult to achieve in practice *(CR 1843: 619)*. Brown’s description of the school as ‘a plain unpretending elementary school’ *(CR 1845: 472)* in 1845 was perhaps an accurate reflection of the academic standards which his students achieved during their time at the school.

**The influence of Western education on the students**

In what ways did the Western education which the Chinese students received at the Morrison Education Society School influence their values and beliefs? The following extract from his 1844 report reveals Brown’s unflattering assessment of the moral state of his students when they arrived at the school:

> When a pupil is received into our school, he is young, ignorant of almost everything but the little affairs of his home, prejudiced against all that is not of Chinese origin, the dupe of superstition, trembling at the shaking of a leaf as if earth and air were people with malignant spirits, trained to worship all manner of senseless things ... When looking for the first time on a class of new pupils ... there is usually almost a universal expression of passive inanity pervading them. The black but staring, glassy eye and open mouth, bespeak little more than stupid wonder gazing out of emptiness. *(CR 1844: 632)*
Brown’s principal task as headmaster was therefore ‘to quicken their minds into healthy activity’, ‘to awaken in them a relish for inquiry and discovery’ and ‘to change their vacancy into busy thought’ (CR 1844: 634). The most revealing evidence of Brown’s attempts to free his students from their traditional thinking and open their minds to the ideas and knowledge of the West can be found in the students’ English compositions and letters. We have already suggested that Brown’s teaching would presumably have influenced the language of the texts. However, it is the content of these texts which provides the clearest evidence of the influence which Brown sought to exert on the minds of his students.

Perhaps the most revealing evidence of Brown’s influence on the students is that the Europeans in Hong Kong (apart from the evidently godless sailors) are generally portrayed in a very favourable light, while the Chinese are invariably described in derogatory terms:

There are a great number of police men in the town English and Chinese. The Chinese ones are very cruel, they go out seeking after money in a wrongful way all the day. The sailors on shore are also very bad; they are always drunken, and some of them strike the Chinese and trouble them. (CR 1843: 363)

Their fellow countrymen are often characterised as cunning, deceitful and selfish:

The Chinese who are employed by [the Hong Kong] government are very bad. They go out and seek after money as much as they can. If a Chinese has business to go to the magistrate, he must go to those who know the English customs, and inquire how he can get the upper hand of his enemy, and they will tell him if they give him their interest, they are sure that he will get the better of his enemy, and they charge some money for it. (CR 1843: 365)

In his report for 1843, Brown recounts with evident pleasure an episode at the school which (he believed) revealed the positive influence his teaching was having on the minds of his students, particularly his emphasis on the value of truth: ‘I have heard them, when some instance of falsehood or low cunning has occurred among the natives around them, say with a look of disgust, “that is Chinese”.’ (CR 1843: 628). Given the students’ apparent contempt for the values and morals of their fellow countrymen, it is not surprising that the
behaviour of the Chinese community in Hong Kong is often compared unfavourably with that of the European traders and officials:

The greater part of the Chinese on this island, are opium eaters, proud and insolent. But the governor, [Sir Henry Pottinger, patron of the Morrison Education Society] and officers, that trade with the Chinese are with kindness and gentlemanly [sic]. (CR 1843: 365)

Indeed, further evidence of the alienation of the students from their cultural heritage is provided in a composition entitled ‘Chinese Government’ published in 1845 by a member of the senior class (who had been studying English for about five years). The dominant theme of the composition is the injustice, dishonesty and corruption which pervaded the bureaucracy in late imperial China:

The Chinese authorities consist of thousands of men, among whom, even from the highest to the lowest, it is believed that there are few who act honestly and faithfully in the discharge of the duties of their offices ... The hearts of the Chinese are comparatively dark and foolish; and most Chinese officers are vicious, cruel and selfish; the only object they pursue is wealth. (CR 1845: 506-507)

The content of the students’ letters and compositions thus provides clear evidence of Brown’s desire to change his students’ traditional cultural values and beliefs through exposure to (or indoctrination in) the Christian faith and the arts and sciences of the West.

The employment of Morrison Education Society School students in the treaty ports

The students’ exposure to Western people and ideas at the school, and their proficiency in English (which, in the absence of major initiatives in English language education on the China coast, would presumably have been comparatively high) meant that graduates of the Morrison Education Society School were ideally placed to work as clerks and middlemen for European companies in Hong Kong and the other treaty ports, and as translators and interpreters for the Hong Kong and British governments. Colonial office records provide clear evidence that Pottinger’s support for the school - through the provision of land and financial aid - sprang more from his desire to secure a corps of reliable bilingual Chinese to assist the British in their dealings with the Chinese authorities than a desire to promote Western
education in Hong Kong (CO 129/2: 438). In a letter dated 25th March 1844, the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Aberdeen, emphasised that in return for the annual subsidy of $1,200 from the British government (which had previously been granted to the Anglo-Chinese College) ‘the utmost facility shall be afforded to Her Majesty’s Government for obtaining the services of persons educated by them [the Morrison Education Society] for the performance of public duties in China’ (CO 129/8: 65). Indeed, Pottinger’s withdrawal of financial support for the Anglo-Chinese College, and his unwillingness to provide the college with land for the construction of a school building when it moved to Hong Kong from Malacca, stemmed mainly from his annoyance at the college’s failure to assist the British in the war against China: ‘... not one person of any class or kind could be found at either Malacca or elsewhere in the Straits who would come to assist in the important department of Interpreters during the late war with China.’ (CO 129/2: 265).

As the recipient of government sponsorship, the Morrison Education Society soon found itself under pressure to provide the British with translators and interpreters to assist its consuls in the treaty ports, notably Captain Balfour in Shanghai. As might be expected, the leading figures in the society, Bridgman and Brown, who were anxious to proceed with their mission to transform China through the introduction of Christianity and Western-style education, were somewhat reluctant to allow their students’ education to be disrupted. In a letter to Balfour in October 1843, in which he recommended two of his boys for service in Shanghai, Bridgman, while acceding to Balfour’s request for assistance, expressed his concern about the interruption to their studies which government service would necessarily entail:

Yet in consideration of the patronage and support which His Excellency Sir Henry Pottinger has given to the Morrison Education Society, and the intentions he has expressed of further support, we are especially desirous to meet this first application made by an officer of Her Majesty’s Government. (CO 129/2: 441)

Pressure was also exerted on the Morrison Education Society by the Western merchant community in Hong Kong and the other treaty ports, who were anxious to secure the services of the school’s pupils as clerks and compradors. The steady expansion of Western business on the China coast meant that a knowledge of English became an increasingly valuable asset for enterprising Chinese in the mid-nineteenth-century treaty ports. One consequence of the economic opportunities which could be derived from a knowledge of English was that students tended to adopt a highly pragmatic approach to their education. A common complaint among missionary-educators in early Hong Kong, notably James Legge, was that students attended English-medium
mission schools, such as St Paul’s College and the Anglo-Chinese College, for the sole purpose of obtaining a smattering of English (given the widespread use of pidgin English on the China coast, this was all that was required), which would enable them to obtain a relatively well-paid job in government or business. Given the prospects for socio-economic advancement offered by a knowledge of English, it is not surprising that most pupils would drop out of school as soon as they had acquired a basic proficiency in the language (Eitel 1890-91). The same problem also appears to have afflicted the government-run Central School, whose Headmaster, Frederick Stewart, noted in his report for 1867 that

... when the boys reach that stage in their progress when they would be capable of appreciating, and profiting by, a more advanced course of instruction they leave school for situations in which they can turn their knowledge of English to practical account. They have not yet learned to consider education as an aim in itself. It is, at present, but a means to a particular end, and the minimum amount that can serve their purpose is all that they seek for. (Hong Kong Blue Book: 1867: 279)

Conclusion

In the late 1840s, the financial position of the Morrison Education Society gradually deteriorated. In the mid-1840s, Pottinger’s successor, John Davis, had transferred government funding back to the Anglo-Chinese College (primarily it appears because of the excessive American influence in the society) with the result that the society was entirely dependent upon contributions from the Western business community in Hong Kong. The decline in the society’s revenues was partly the result of the establishment of schools run by other missionary bodies, which meant that voluntary contributions to educational initiatives were spread more thinly, but was mainly caused by the economic depression which affected Hong Kong in the late 1840s. It is also significant that a number of the society’s leading benefactors, notably Lancelot Dent, left Hong Kong during this period. Finally, as a result of the ‘almost hopeless condition’ of its funds (CR 1849: 34), the school was forced to close in the spring of 1849, having according to Eitel (1890-91: 317) ‘lost its hold upon the sympathies of the foreign community’. The closure of the Morrison Education Society School thus brought to an end the first chapter in the history of Anglo-Chinese education in colonial Hong Kong. The experiences of the school’s Western teachers and Chinese students are significant in several ways. Firstly, the records of the
school suggest that a number of the language-related problems experienced by Hong Kong’s Anglo-Chinese schools in the post-World War II period are by no means new, and in some cases, after 150 years, are still unresolved. Perhaps more important, though, was the role which the Morrison Education Society School played in the training of a corps of English-speaking Chinese, who, as middlemen in the political and business spheres, helped bridge the linguistic and cultural gulf between China and the expansionist nations of the West.

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