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ROBERT MORRISON AND THE FIRST CHINESE-ENGLISH DICTIONARY

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A little-known item in the Cornell University Library’s Rare and Manuscripts Collection is a Chinese-English dictionary with the call number Asia Rare PL1455.M88+. On the top right hand corner of the dictionary’s title page appears the signature of its compiler, Robert Morrison (January 5, 1782 – August 1, 1834). This dictionary was originally part of the collection of Charles W. Wason,1 the founder of Cornell’s East Asia collection. Like other items amassed by Wason, the dictionary is unique, and the story of its author is fascinating. This paper will recount the epic story of how Robert Morrison, with his missionary devotion and undaunted courage, surmounted unconceivable hardships to complete this monumental work. It will then examine the salient features of this uncommon dictionary.

1 Charles W. Wason graduated from Cornell in 1876 with an engineering degree. In 1909 he received a book, Letters from China with particular reference to the empress dowager and the women of China by Sarah Pike Conger, as a Christmas gift from his mother-in-law. Wason wrote on the front flyleaf of the book, “This book was . . . the commencement of my Chinese Library.” Wason, though having a tremendous interest in China, had no knowledge of the Chinese language. He hired Arthur H. Clark, a rare and choice book dealer in Cleveland Ohio, to help him collect Chinese books. Clark advised Wason to turn one of his living quarters into a private library. In 1918 Wason’s private collection of approximately 9,500 books, 1,200 pamphlets, 550 manuscripts, and a number of documents, drawings, and maps was donated to the Cornell University Library. A Dictionary of the Chinese Language by Robert Morrison is in good condition from cover to cover. The six volumes of the dictionary may be consulted in the Reading Room of the Rare & Manuscripts Collection of the Cornell University Library.
The Need for a Dictionary

It all started with a circular from Rev. William Moseley, a member of the British Royal Asiatic Society, in March 1789. Christian missionary work in China faced great challenges because foreign missionaries were not allowed and because of the difficulty of the language. Rev. Moseley proposed in the circular that a society be established to translate the Bible into Chinese. However, since little was known about China and the Chinese language, many people in Europe questioned the possibility of acquiring the language, even less of expressing in it the truth of the Scriptures. Some respectable Oriental counselors adamantly asserted that it was practically impossible because the nature of the Chinese language would not allow translations to be made into it. Rev. Moseley was not discouraged and instead devoted himself to do whatever necessary to prove and promote his proposition. He pointed out that Lord Macartney in his mission to China in 1793 gave the Chinese emperor the memorial of Britannic Majesty that was translated into the Chinese language. Moseley also found in the British Museum a manuscript in Chinese that turned out to be the Acts and St. Paul’s Epistles. Moseley insisted that, as Chinese was the language spoken by one third of mankind, it was imperative to translate the Gospel into Chinese and to bring the good news to the great but long neglected land of China. The London Missionary Society (LMS) eventually passed a motion on a mission to China. The goals of the mission were to quietly stay in China if allowed, to learn the Chinese language, to translate both the Old and New Testaments and other religious tracts into that language, and to print and distribute them.

Initially the LMS intended to send two or three people on the mission. However, it turned out that it was difficult to recruit the right persons for this mission (Latourette, p.211). In 1804 Robert Morrison, a Scottish missionary, offered his service to the LMS and was accepted but was unsuccessful in convincing a companion to go with him. Apart from the problem of loneliness, Morrison foresaw formidable obstacles ahead including the learning of the language. But he was a man of faith and perseverance. He considered going to China as his duty and obligation. In a letter dated November 18, 1804 he wrote, “These difficulties seem to me very great. If we go, my brother, we must have the sentence of death in ourselves; not to trust in ourselves, but in the living God.” (Morrison E. vol.1, p.70).

To prepare Morrison for his China mission, the LMS introduced him to Yong Sam Tak (容三德), a young Chinese from Canton, who was in London to seek instruction in the English language and sciences. Morrison studied with Yong Sam Tak for a short time to acquire the basic language skills for him to start his work in China. They worked together to transcribe the Manuscript Harmony of the New Testament in the British Museum. Morrison later took the copy of the manuscript with him to China, and it proved to be extremely helpful in his translation of the Bible.

In a letter dated January 20, 1807 the secretary and treasurer of the LMS expressed their great satisfaction with Morrison’s perseverance and competence in studying the Chinese language. The letter also stated “. . . we trust that no objection will be made to your continuing in Canton, till you have accomplished your great object of acquiring the language. When this is done, you may, probably, soon afterwards begin to turn this attainment into a direction which may be of extensive use to the world: perhaps you may have the honour of forming a Chinese Dictionary, more comprehensive and correct than any preceding one; or the still greater honour of translating the sacred Scriptures into a language spoken by a third part of the human race.’’ (Morrison, E. vol.1, p.96)

When Morrison eventually set sail for China, he fully comprehended the daunting mission that he would undertake by going to an unknown land containing millions of people untouched by Christianity. In his diary entry of January 28, 1807 Morrison wrote: “I am alone; to go alone; --O that I may not be alone;
but that the good hand of my God may be upon me, and the angel of his presence go before me.” (Morrison, E. vol.1, p.103) It was this strong faith that enabled him to work simultaneously on compiling the Chinese-English dictionary and translating the Bible into Chinese. The dictionary he compiled was the first Chinese-English dictionary widely used by people in both East and West, and it has served as a milestone in the early promotion of communications between China and the West.

Trials and Triumphs in Compilation of the Dictionary

Fifteen years elapsed from 1807 when Morrison said farewell to his family and friends to 1822 when the last part of his dictionary ready for the press. During this period Morrison endured one painful trial after another. Besides his feelings of loneliness when he first arrived in Canton, the immediate threat to him was the lack of any means to make a living. The cost required for living in Canton and the little money he received from the LMS constantly fretted him. To cut down expenses, he rented a dark room in the basement of an abandoned French warehouse. Doing everything in one room with his books and papers spread around greatly hindered his work, especially when visitors rushed in without any notice. Unlike other Europeans in Canton, who had heat in the winter months, Morrison tried not to incur this expense because he needed money for Chinese books and a Chinese tutor. Still, while he was troubled at times by his poor financial situation, his faith was also strengthened during this period of his life. “I hope that the Lord will incline the hearts of those, who, as he permits, have it in their power to aid me, to do it, and that I shall be permitted to continue. Hitherto he has disappointed many of my fears. He had done great things for me.” (Morrison, E. vol.1, p.156) In 1809 his financial situation took a turn for the better when he was employed as a translator for the East Indian Company (EIC), which provided an income sufficient for him to continue his dictionary project with confidence and financial security.

The difficulty of learning Chinese and acquiring a language teacher was another stumbling block Morrison faced. As soon as he set foot on Chinese soil he found out that the Chinese were prohibited from teaching their language to foreigners. Unlike many foreigners in Canton who mostly conducted commercial affairs, Morrison came with an entirely different purpose that had the potential risk of offending the Chinese government. In a letter to his father dated October 18, 1807 he indicated that he was in a state of great anxiety. “How to look, and speak, and act, so as to excite no suspicion in their minds as to my intention, is very difficult to know.” (Morrison E. vol.1, p. 178) He took the initiative to engage in conversation with people in local stores and to entertain visitors in his own lodgings with the purpose of developing his language skills.

While he sought every opportunity to improve his language, he also tried hard to disguise his real intention. For a time he even changed his living style to live like a native, dressing in a Chinese frock coat, wearing a pig-tail and eating in a Chinese manner. Soon afterward he realized that the change of his appearance made him quite conspicuous and caused the Chinese to become more suspicious of him, and he returned to European style. He was able to find a Chinese boy to be his language tutor, but since the boy was from the countryside Morrison picked up from him coarse pronunciation and vulgar expressions. He discovered that neither spoken Mandarin nor the written language was understood by a great number of people where he lived. Morrison never stopped trying. He eventually became acquainted with two Chinese men who were better able to
provide him with the services that he needed. Ko Seen-sang, a man of letters, was very knowledgeable
in Chinese with excellent handwriting. Abel Yun, a native of Shansi, had spent much of his life with
other missionaries and was fluent in Latin. In a letter to his brother dated November 29, 1807 Morrison
wrote about his study with Abel Yun, “I’m now, dear brother, fully engaged in the study of the Chinese
language; a professed Christian of the Romish Church is my chief instructor; he is connected with the
missionaries at Peking.” (Morrison, E. vol.1, p.180)

Acquiring the Chinese language became ever more critical as the months passed. In his letter of
October 2, 1808, Morrison shared that he had been laboring to understand the Chinese language
morning, noon, and night. In February 1809, Morrison met Mary Morton, his future wife, and spent an
evening with her family. Even while seeking the affections of his fiancée he felt a burden on his
conscience. “By not applying to my studies my mind is uncomfortable; so desirous am I to acquire the
language,” he wrote in his diary. (Broomhall, p.60) Not sure of how long he would be allowed to
continue to stay in China, Morrison asked his Chinese assistants to help him acquire books as a means
for him to carry out his mission. He soon collected about five hundred volumes on Chinese language,
religion, history, philosophy, medicine, and code of laws.

By the end of 1808 Morrison felt renewed confidence in his Chinese and believed that he could continue
to make significant progress in his language skills. By then the translation of the New Testament was
partially completed and he continued to work on the dictionary. As he stated, “The Dictionary is daily
being filled up.” (Morrison, E. vol.1, p.239) Though his knowledge of Chinese was increasing rapidly,
Morrison was in a precarious situation because of the disturbances occurring in Canton. Most British
citizens had left due to the increasing hostility toward foreigners. Morrison was viewed by some as a
fool for staying in Canton since he did not intend to make a profit by doing business there. He stated,
“My crime is, wishing to learn the language.” (Morrison, E. vol.1, p.255) He was fearful of losing his
books that he had acquired with huge expense and effort. When no other Chinese dared to be close to
Morrison, Yong Sam Tak, his language partner in London, ventured forth to stand by his side and
offered to help him transport all his books to Macao.

All along Morrison and his Chinese assistants experienced menace from the Chinese government. The
study of the Chinese language was conducted in secret, and books had to be constantly hidden from
sight. Some Chinese assistants were taken away by officers for examination. Although a number of
Chinese assistants left him out of fear, some faithful ones chose to continue to work with him. Ko
Seen-sang would happily correct the idioms of Morrison’s translation and evaluate the final pages ready
for typesetting. Things became worse in 1812 when the Chinese government issued an edict making
the printing of books on Christian religion a capital crime. Even in the face of this frightening threat
Morrison was not swayed. One of his assistants carried poison so that, should he be caught, he could
end his own life instead of being tortured in prison. (Broomhall, p.55) Morrison was hopeful because
some accomplishments towards the fulfillment of his mission had already been realized in his
translation of the scriptures and the compilation of the dictionary. “Should I die soon, it will afford me
pleasure in my last moments” he wrote in the letter dated April 2, 1812. He believed that if he were
killed a Chinese would publish the Scriptures he translated.

While Morrison was working industriously and making progress on the first part of the Dictionary, his
health was deteriorating rapidly under extreme mental and physical fatigue and distress. Almost
invariably he had to work fourteen to sixteen hours a day and often his hands were too weak to hold
the pen. At this critical time his newly-wedded wife joined him as his faithful companion in sharing
the burden. “My much beloved Mary Morrison laboured with me in the study of Chinese. . . . She was

2 The French Admiral Drury led an English garrison to Macao in 1808 due to protests there. The Chinese, offended
by this interference with their rights, withheld all supplies and ordered the suspension of trade. Unfortunately
Drury overestimated troops. He approached Canton via the river with his entire squadron. (Boulger, vol.2, pp. 20-
23) The Chinese used every means in their power to resist the English invasion and came out victorious. Morrison
described the situation as “At that time there was an almost entire desertion of Canton by the English. I also
found it necessary to quit in the utmost haste. Captain Montague, of the Warley, politely took me on board of his
vessel at Whampoa. I do not enter into a detail of my difficulties on that occasion.” (Morrison, E. vol.1, p.255)
rejoicing in hope and patient in labour.” (Morrison, E. vol.1, p.286) However, Morrison had to leave his family for about six months each year due to his duties as a Chinese translator for the EIC. Mary, having no relatives in the neighborhood and no Christian friends to talk to, had a really difficult time when he was away from home. To make matters worse, their first son died the day he was born. The young parents faced tough opposition from the local Chinese when they attempted to find a burial place for the baby. Morrison encountered the same opposition when he later tried to bury Mary in 1821. The couple was happy and expecting another child when Mary was suddenly struck by cholera and died in her husband’s arms. Morrison, with deep sorrow, intended to inter Mary’s body in the same place where their first child James was buried. The local Chinese authority refused permission, but The Committee of the English Factory came forward to aid Morrison in his bereavement and purchased a piece of ground for Morrison to bury his wife.

Morrison was sometimes weary of the monotony of toiling over both the Dictionary and the Bible. “Writing the Dictionary is such very dry work—and translating is not much better. One’s mind is kept so much applied to mere words. The deprivation, however, is all in a good cause.” (Morrison, E. vol.1, p.517) Much to Morrison’s delight an intelligent young man and a devout Christian, William Milne, came to China together with his wife to help Morrison with the overwhelming work. He was grateful to Milne for sharing the translation of the Scriptures and for taking the responsibility of printing and distributing them. With the assistance from the Milnes Morrison was now able to devote more of his time to the Dictionary. This however did not last long, as William Milne became ill and died in 1822 at the age of 37. When the news of Milne’s death reached Morrison, he described his thoughts in the following words,

“Yesterday, July 4, nine years ago, Mr. and Mrs. Milne were received at Macao by me and Mrs. Morrison. Three of the four—all under forty—have been called hence and have left me alone and disconsolate. But good is the will of the Lord, they all died in the faith and hope of the Gospel; all died at their post. They have left their bodies in the field of battle. They were faithful unto death in their saviour’s cause.” (Broomhall, p.132)

Morrison wept much over their deaths, over being left friendless and desolate. His mind was agitated by fear. However he was also clear that he had “a race to run, a battle to fight, a work to perform, and an account to give on the hour of death.” Morrison responded to the challenges, “Fear, I know, is salutary, and I never said, ‘Don’t be afraid’—but I said, ‘Trust in God;’ and I daily alluded, in my prayers, to our being prepared for all God’s will concerning us.” (Morrison, E. vol.2, p.99)

1823 brought much joy to the solitary life of Morrison with the publication of the last part of his Dictionary of the Chinese Language. He had been working on it for more than fifteen years with extraordinary perseverance, industry, and ingenuity. Several times the publication of the dictionary was hardly able to continue due to external pressure and threats. The cost of publication, twelve thousand pounds, was far more than Morrison or a religious society without adequate means could cover. Fortunately the directors of the EIC recognized the value of the dictionary and considered it of incalculable benefit, not only to missionaries, but also to their own employees. They generously agreed to print the dictionary at their sole expense. Meantime they decided to send out Mr. P.P. Thoms to China with presses to help with the printing. Unfortunately after the work of printing had begun there was a quarrel at the printing office, and a disgruntled Chinese worker took one printed page of the dictionary to the local magistrate. The police came to seize the papers and the type, and several type-cutters were sent to prison. Morrison calmly told the other workers to trust in God to deliver them. As the press and the dictionary were the property of the EIC, a compromise was reached between the company and the magistrate to release the workers and return the type. It was indeed a great relief and excitement to see the completed dictionary!

The dictionary was marvelous work of one man. Some scholars called it an encyclopedia in terms of its scope and content. Going beyond the normal coverage of a dictionary it also described significant Chinese historical figures and events and introduced important philosophical, literary and religious works. Ever since Morrison arrived in China in 1807 he made a great effort to build up a personal
library of Chinese books. He also studied Chinese by translating the classics. His profound knowledge in Chinese in many subjects drawn from his library and the knowledge he learned from his Chinese teachers enriched and expanded the contents of his dictionary.

Distinguishing Features of Morrison’s Dictionary

In the contemporary research findings on the achievements of Morrison some confusion and disputes exist as to the structure and total page numbers of Morrison’s dictionary. Since Cornell University Library has a complete original copy of the dictionary, we are able to record meticulously the available details directly from each of the volumes and lay to rest the disputes.

Morrison’s dictionary is composed of three parts or six quarto volumes published in different years. Part I has three volumes with Volume I published in 1815 containing 18 pages in the preface, 930 pages in the dictionary proper, and 2 additional pages consisting of advertisements. Volume II, published in 1822, is composed of 884 pages, and Volume III, published in 1823, is composed of 908 pages. Part II has two volumes: Volume I published in 1819 contains 20 pages in the preface and 1,090 pages in the dictionary proper, and Volume II published in 1820 contains 6 pages in the preface, 178 pages in the first section, and 305 pages in the second section of the dictionary proper. Part III was published in 1822 with only one volume containing 5 pages in the preface and 480 pages in the dictionary proper.

Each part of the dictionary is a complete and independent unit in itself. Part I, titled Zidian (字典) in Chinese and A Dictionary of the Chinese Language-Part I in English, revolves around the 214 Chinese radicals, based on which all the Chinese characters together with English translations are arranged and demonstrated. Volume I starts with the very first radical and ends at the 41st radical; Volume II starts with the 42nd radical and stops at the 119th radical; and Volume III begins with the 120th radical and ends the dictionary with the last radical, the 214th.

Part II, titled Wuche Yunfu (五车韵府) in Chinese and A Dictionary of the Chinese Language-Part II in English, has two volumes. Volume I is a syllabic dictionary in which Chinese words are arranged in alphabetical order according to their number of syllables. Volume II is composed of two major sections. The first section stops at page 178 and contains an index of the characters occurring in this volume and a table of characters from the Kangxi Dictionary (康熙字典). The second section is an independent section starting from page 1 and finishing at page 305. It is a synopsis of various forms of Chinese characters.

Part III has only an English title, A Dictionary of the Chinese Language-Part III. It can be regarded as an English-Chinese dictionary because the words in the dictionary are arranged according to the English alphabet beginning with the letter “A” followed by “Abandon” and ending with the word “Zodiac” with the Chinese rendition of Huangdao (黄道).

All of the six volumes were printed by P.P. Thoms in Macao, published and sold by Black, Parbury, and Allen, booksellers to the East India Company, London. The publication of the complete dictionary immediately attracted the attention of scholars worldwide, and there was growing demand for the second part of the dictionary, as it was said to be the best and most useful volume for the increasing number of students and missionaries who were interested in China and the Chinese language. In 1913 Chun Wha Printing Co. (中华印书馆) in Shanghai reprinted the second part of the dictionary in a pocketbook size, which made it much more affordable and easier to carry.

It is interesting to note that Morrison gave Part II of his dictionary the Chinese title Wuche Yunfu (五车韵府). Originally Wuche Yunfu was the title of a Chinese book that collects characters and arranges them according to their sounds and tones. The compiler of the book was a scholar with the surname Chen (陈) who died before his book went to press. One of Chen’s students, Han Yihu (含一胡), took care of Chen’s manuscript and traveled far and wide attempting to verify and make additions to it. As recorded in the preface of Part II of Morrison’s dictionary, the scholars hired by the emperor to compile
the Kanxi Zidian (康熙字典) made much use of Wuche Yunfu. In 1812 Morrison rearranged Wuche Yunfu according to syllables instead of sounds and tones. With a Chinese dictionary titled Fenyun (分韵) in hand, as well as the aid of the alphabetic dictionary of the Roman Catholic missionaries, Morrison compared side by side the sound-based Wuche Yunfu with the radical-based Kangxi Zidian. He became aware that dictionaries arranged according to sounds and tones were too confusing to natives and were even more of a puzzle to foreigners. Sounds and tones were often questionable subjects among scholars. With much labor and skill Morrison modified the original Wu Yunfu, took advantage of the Kangxi Zidian, and added words from his readings. The fruit of his seven years of assiduous work is his own version of Wuche Yunfu or a Dictionary of the Chinese Language-Part II.

On Oct. 8, 1819 Morrison wrote in the preface of his Wuche Yunfu: “There are beautiful pieces of poetry, interesting and instructive portions of History and Biography; and important Moral Maxims, in Chinese that is a language amongst the most ancient and the most extensively known on earth, . . . it is the living language of five nations, which together, constitute one third of the mankind.” A quick examination of Wuche Yunfu reveals all these outstanding features demonstrated in Morrison’s dictionary. Far more than a mere dictionary of the Chinese language, Morrison’s dictionary is a history book, a biography, a collection of idiomatic expressions and common sayings of the Chinese people, and, last but not least, full of the Christian evangelical message expressed in many ways.

Morrison realized that, unlike Western languages, the Chinese writing system is a combination of hieroglyphic and phonographic elements. As his dictionary was intended for foreigners to study Chinese, the analysis of Chinese characters’ formation would greatly aid its users in their ability to comprehend and memorize the Chinese words. The following dictionary entries demonstrate how Morrison tried to help the users of his dictionary understand the structure of the Chinese characters.

“信, from man and word, a man of his word, sincere; unwavering; true to one’s word, truth, to believe, faith”

“曰, from mouth and a line representing the breath coming out. To speak, to say, to call or denominate; is called, is designated. 曰Confucius said; 曰 the book says, it is written”

“诱, from words and elegant. To speak to in a pleasing strain, to advise, to put forward, to teach, to lead, to mislead, to seduce, to tempt, to induce, sometimes in a good sense. 勿诱导 cheat and befool with specious pretexts. 勿诲来诱 to induce to come and learn; 勿诱为非 to seduce people to do what is vicious”

“仰, from man and to look upwards. To raise the head and look upwards with expectation or desire; 久仰 long looked up; I have long regarded you; 仰天长叹 looking up to heaven, gave a long sigh”

“婴, from two pearls and a woman. An infant at the breath, a sucking child, a female infant; 婴孩 or 孩儿 a child, an infant; 嬰抱 an infant in its parent’s embrace”

“章, from sound and ten; a perfect number; a piece of music completed. 文章 elegant literary composition, prize essay; 奏章 a luminous statement presented to the Emperor; 皇章 imperial laws and regulations; 大章 the great rules laid down by ancestors; the name of an ancient piece of music”

Morrison’s dictionary also provides numerous phrases putting the key character in a setting that helps the learner enhance their ability to appropriately use the word. The following are some examples.

“人, a human being. 古人 one of the ancients; 圣人 the perfect sages of antiquity who possess innate, and intuitive knowledge; 贤人 sages of the second order, to whom study was necessary; 愚人 the illiterate and uninformed; 好人 a good man, 弊人 a bad man, 善人 a moral man, 惡人 a wicked man; 妇人 a married woman, also used
for woman generally, 内人my wife, 尊夫人your lady, your wife; 商人a merchant, 工人a mechanic, 农人a husbandman, 土人a scholar; 畏人 or 夷人a foreigner, the latter is the more respectable term, the same may be expressed by 远人a distant man, one from remote parts; 中人a middleman, one who acts between two parties; 人中the central spot between the nose and mouth”

“取, to take, to lay hold on, to seize what is not given, to receive what is offered, to be taken. 过取take too much, 窃取to take by stealth, 私取to take privately or clandestinely, 公取to take publicly or justly, 乱取to take at random, whether just or unjust, 正取to take what is just or proper, 徵取to levy duties, 挟取to seize with nippers, to extort money; 取中to select the successful candidates at the literary examinations, to be selected, 取出to take out, 取意to take its meaning, 取法to take an example from others, 取入to bring in, 取去or取除to take away, 取乐to pursue pleasure, 取名to take a name, to be desirous of notoriety, to covet fame, 取信to take a letter, or to induce belief, 取舍to take and to part with, 取笑to ridicule or laugh at a person, 取妾to take a concubine, 取妻to marry a wife”

Many people have used Morrison’s dictionary as an encyclopedia. Its rich resources in Chinese philosophy, history, literature, performing arts, culture, and customs can be demonstrated by some of the following examples selected from the Dictionary. Expressions of a similar nature permeated every part of the dictionary.

“常, constant, usual, common; 五常仁义礼智信 the five constant virtues, benevolence, justice, decorum, knowledge and truth”

“纸, paper, it should be written without the dot; 蔡倫Tsae Lun (A.D.940) cut to pieces old cloth, pounded and made paper of it”

“醉, drunk; 醉不醉人人自醉wine intoxicates no man, man intoxicates himself”

“城, a walled town or city; 墓地曰佳城the place of a tomb is called a happy city”

“戏, to play and laugh, a theatrical exhibition; 未净生丑丑外, 末is called 老生, and generally typifies a principal character, as a father, uncle, or any person somewhat advanced in age; 净is used in reference to characters with painted faces, or those wearing masques, being subdivided into 红净red and black; 生 is invariably a male character, and is subdivided into 正 and 小chieft and lesser; 旦is invariably a female character, and is distinguished into 正旦 小旦 and 老旦, besides which there is occasionally a 贴旦 which, in general is a servant or some such person; 丑seems often to typify a character disagreeable, either from personal deformity, or some other cause, and is also called 小花头; the last 外is a 粉面or painted face character, and often one with a grotesque and long beard”

“猜, to conjecture, to guess; 猜拳to guess the number of fingers thrown out, or stretched straight from a previously folded hand, which is a drunken amusement of the Chinese. When the opponent guesses the right number of fingers thrown out, at the instant he speaks, he wins, and the person throwing out his fingers has to drink as a forfeit”

“孟子, Mencius, a disciple of Confucius, writer of that portion of the Four Books, which goes by his name, B.C. about 350: contemporary with Xenophon, and Socrates”

“春, spring season; 春秋spring and autumn, name of an historical work compiled by Confucius, giving an account of the sixth century before the Christian era”

Morrison’s dictionary, though surprisingly rich in contents of historical information, it is, first and foremost, a dictionary of the Chinese language. The dictionary includes vocabulary and phrases of all kinds, illustrating various Chinese linguistic features. One example is the ubiquity of Chinese four-character idiomatic expressions, chengyu (成语), throughout the dictionary.
“成，to perfect, to finish; 成人之美to assist people in affecting their virtuous purpose”
“仁，benevolence; 仁民爱物 benevolence to the people and love to all creatures”
“泥，mire, mud; 拖泥带水 dragged through mud and water, an obscure style”
“转，to turn, to revolve; 转眼成空 in the twinkling of an eye it ceases to exist, all becomes a vacuum, said of sensual pleasure and the vanities of the world”
“人，a human being; 人定胜天 men’s fixed purpose is superior to heaven. This seemingly impious expression is intended to rouse people to determined efforts”

The Dictionary contains formal, polite, archaic words, as well as vulgar, humorous and modern ones. Dialects and words of derogatory and figurative nature can also be seen throughout the dictionary.

“作死的事情 that which is done in an unusually disorderly manner”
“不是打就是骂 if he does not thrash me, he is sure to rail at me”
“爷们 attendants of officers of government in public offices; 大丈夫 a great man; 咱老子 my father”
“王八 and 鳖 are terms of abuse, denoting one who lives on his wife’s prostitution, one lost to virtue; 王八蛋 a bastard, in opprobrious language”
“光棍 a naked stick, denotes a person possessed of nothing, who goes about swindling”

Finally Morrison’s dictionary frequently reflected the calling and disposition of a Christian. The concepts and beliefs of Christianity were unpretentiously transmitted in his dictionary.

“光，light, splendor, 主光 the sovereign light, this phrase is also applicable to the light or glory of Deity, as in the following phrase 神光普照 the light of Deity illumines every place”
“信，faith; 坚信, firm belief; 大信大福, great faith (in Providence) great happiness; 信德, truth, faith”
“典，a constant rule, a canon; 恩典, express great favor, grace, much kindness and bounty; 神恩 divine favor, 感恩 to be moved by favors, to be grateful”

A dictionary of such a colossal size and scope accomplished by one man single-handedly would inevitably fall short of perfection. There are instances of mistreatment of characters with the same form but more than one meaning and sound in Morrison’s dictionary. What deserves our attention is how Morrison listed the character “ch’ow” in his dictionary. His definition of “臭” is “smell or flavor generally, offensive smell, stink”. Some of the examples he gave to illustrate the meaning of the character are:

“香臭 hēang ch’ow, a fragrant smell; 悪臭 ngū ch’ow, a bad smell; 逸嗅万年 e ch’ow wan nèen, to leave an eternal reproach on one’s name; 其臭如兰 k’e ch’ow joo lan, it smells fragrant as the Lan-flower”.  

Morrison attempted in his effort to demonstrate that “臭 ch’ow” has two distinctive connotations. It implies the smell in neutral sense as well as a smell of disagreeable nature. But actually in Chinese “臭”, the same word, has two different sounds associated with it depending on how it is used. If it refers to a stinking smell it is pronounced as “chou” or as Morrison put it “ch’ow”. When it is used as merely a smell, neither pleasant nor offensive, it should be pronounced as “xiu”. Therefore, “臭” in the last example “其臭如兰” should be pronounced as “xiu” rather than “ch’ow”.

Some of the explanations given in Morrison’s dictionary are misleading. For example, “蛮妻横子无法可治” was interpreted by its face value as “there are no laws that can govern a barbarous wife and an
obstinate son.” This interpretation is off the point, as the phrase actually suggests that there isn’t a
good way to handle a disobedient wife and son at the domestic level. In the case of the word “郎中”,
it was described in Morrison’s dictionary as “a certain officer in the government at the capital.” In
fact “郎中” has another more common meaning of “a traditional Chinese doctor.” In addition there is
occasionally a blatant error here and there in the dictionary. For instance, “招郎入室” was translated
as “inviting a bride to enter a cottage.” But “郎” ought to be “bridegroom” indicating that the son-in-
law is invited to live in the house of his wife’s parents.

A quick survey of Part I of the dictionary, Zidian (字典), yields much satisfaction and many surprises. Zidian was compiled based on the English translation of a Chinese work, Yiwen Beilan (艺文备览). One cannot help marveling at the grand scope of Zidian. For example, the illustration and explanation of the character “学” (to receive instruction, to practice, to imitate, to study, to learn, the place where people study) alone took up forty pages. It covers the traditional Chinese educational system from xueguan 学馆 (private school) to fuxue府学 (government school at the prefecture level), includes the imperial examination system from xiucai 秀才 (county candidate) up to hanlin 翰林 (member of the royal academy), and touches upon a variety of terms relating to learning. It even supplies a list of
books for classical study. Its richness of information was unprecedented.

Morrison made a succinct statement of his purpose in compiling the dictionary, which is found in the
preface he wrote for Wuche Yunfu: “The author’s object has been, and the intention of the dictionary
ought to be, to communicate the language to Europeans.” Ever since the publication of the first
volume of the dictionary in 1815 Morrison’s dictionary has won critical acclaims from scholars all over
the world. A professor in Paris commented that the second part of the dictionary was the best Chinese
Dictionary of its kind. (Wuche Yunfu, p.i, 1913). Joseph Remusat, a distinguished professor of Chinese
in the Royal College of France, wrote to Morrison in 1817 saying that he had proposed to the learned
society in France to compile such a dictionary. He was glad that Morrison had “the glory of putting it
into execution” (Morrison, E., vol.1, p.491). Another scholar informed Morrison that the Chinese
Dictionary had an extensive circulation in Europe, saying that he saw the first number in the private
museum of the King of the Netherlands. He then praised the dictionary by saying “when finished, it
will be an invaluable treasure to every student of Chinese.” (Morrison, E. vol.1, p.494). In November
1828 a surgeon from Japan told Morrison that Japanese translators were rendering his dictionary into
the Dictionary into the Russian language. Many years later Endymion Wilkinson once again affirmed
Morrison’s Dictionary as “the first Chinese-English, English-Chinese dictionary” in his reference book
published by Harvard University Asian Center in 2000. (Wilkinson, p.92)

More importantly Morrison intended his Dictionary to be of essential service to future missionaries.
(Morrison, E., vol.1, p.270) With a strong mind and extraordinary strength he worked laboriously on
the Dictionary as a means to help missionaries preach the Gospel to the Chinese and to promote
worldwide communications. As early as 1812 the LMS in a letter to Morrison highly praised him for his
work on the dictionary and recognized its extraordinary value to missionary work. (Morrison, E., vol.1,
p.322) Rev. T.W. Pearce in a speech delivered in 1907 at the Centennial Conference of Protestant
Missions in China expressed his deep gratitude to Morrison by saying “There are still those among us,
who as young missionaries, learned the Chinese language by the aid of Morrison’s dictionary.”
(Conference Committee, p.34) It was acknowledged that the compilation of the dictionary was a
Herculean task which only a man of the greatest spirit and energy could have accomplished. (Church at
Home and Abroad, p.115)

Morrison never stopped working. He breathed his last breath on August 1, 1834, at work in China. On
his tombstone was inscribed: “Robert Morrison, D.D., The first protestant missionary to China, where
after a service of twenty-seven years cheerfully spent in extending the kingdom of the blessed
REDEEMER, during which period he compiled and published A DICTIONARY OF CHINESE LANGUAGE,
founded the Anglo-Chinese College at Malacca, and for several years laboured alone on a Chinese
version of THE HOLY SCRIPTURES, which he was spared to see completed and widely circulated among
those for whom it was destined.” (Townsend, p.154). Morrison’s dedication and contribution to the world was also appropriately summarized in his obituary notice: “He was, without any doubt, the first Chinese scholar to make the Chinese language known to foreigners.” (Chinese Repository, p.178) Morrison is gone, but the Dictionary he compiled stays, which has benefited many people, and will benefit many more in the days to come.

Liren Zheng is the Curator and Xian Wu is the Chinese Studies Bibliographer of the Wason Collection on East Asia at Cornell University Library. They are grateful to the editor of JEAL, Gail King, for her comments and suggestions in revising this paper.

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