

Presbyterian Mission to the Chinese in California (1850s)

In the era of westward expansion and white settlement on lands bought and seized from Native Americans, a new immigrant group began to arrive in California. Chinese people, including many from Cantonese-speaking regions of Guangdong Province, were drawn to California after gold was discovered in 1848. In the 1860s, Chinese laborers were essential to construction of the transcontinental railroad that connected the vast North American continent. Chinese immigration to the United States continued through the 1880s when the U.S. government bowed to public prejudice against the Chinese and passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, banning further Chinese immigration for more than 60 years.

At the same time, an American religious revival and growing Protestant evangelical movement fueled missions to Asia, Africa, South America, and the South Pacific in order to spread Christianity and western cultural, moral, and educational values. The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. was established in 1837 with the goal of bringing Christianity "to whatever parts of the heathen and anti-Christian world, the Providence of God might enable the Society to extend its evangelical exertions."

Noting the rapid growth in the Chinese immigrant population in California—some estimate that 25,000 Chinese people arrived between 1848 and 1853—the Board sent Reverend William Speer and his wife Elizabeth to establish the first Presbyterian Mission to the Chinese in San Francisco in 1852. William Speer had previously spent four years as a missionary in Guangdong Province and spoke fluent Cantonese. In the first years of the mission, the Speers set up a medical clinic to serve recently arrived Chinese immigrants and laid the groundwork for a mission infrastructure to serve mission stations across California. Subsequent Presbyterian missionaries set up churches, night schools, benevolent societies, and helped train Chinese Presbyterian ministers. The Presbyterian Mission to the Chinese in California continued well into the 20th century.

Please note: the spelling of some Chinese names and places in these sources may be different from those used today. For example, Canton is now called Guangdong.

Document 1: Chinese Presbyterian Mission's 50th Anniversary

Chinese Presbyterian Mission. *Fiftieth Anniversary Historical Sketch* (San Francisco: s.n., 1903)

PHS Call number: PAM BV 2787 .C55 1903

**See especially pages 1-11.*

Source note: The Presbyterian mission to the Chinese in California held its 50th anniversary celebration on June 3rd and 4th, 1903, at the Presbyterian Church of San Francisco in what was then, and still is, the Chinatown neighborhood. This document briefly describes the anniversary festivities and events, and reprints the speeches and papers presented during the two-day celebration. Ira M. Condit (1833-1915) then the head of the San Francisco Mission, gave a speech recalling the history of the Mission to the Chinese in California and noting the mission's accomplishments since it was founded in 1853. Condit and his first wife worked as missionaries in Canton, China from 1860 to 1865, and both became fluent in Cantonese. In 1870, Condit joined the superintendent of the Chinese Presbyterian Mission, Augustus Loomis, and worked in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Oakland until his death in 1915.

Historical context: In his speech, Condit mentions colporteurs and how they helped in the early history of the mission. Colporteurs were people who carried bibles or religious tracts throughout the mission area to share them with potential converts.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this document? Who is their intended audience?
2. What is the tone of the document's introduction (pages 1-4)? What attitudes towards the Chinese participants does the writer display?
3. Given the context, what was unusual or special about this anniversary gathering?
4. On page 6, during Ira Condit's speech, he says that Augustus Loomis "had stood like a wall and battled with this trying, unresponsive work until the iron of inflexible strength entered into the very fiber of his nature." Given what Condit has already said about the mission work, what part of it did he deem "trying" and "unresponsive"?
5. How did setting up schools and other educational opportunities connect to the religious work of the California missionaries to the Chinese (page 6)?
6. Who are the four Chinese ministers ordained by the Presbyterian Church in California, and what work do they do in the U.S. and China (page 9)?
7. Condit notes that most Chinese people who immigrate to America eventually return to their homeland. Given this fact, why does he argue the missionary work in California is particularly important (page 11)?

Document 2: Letter from William Speer

Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Board of Foreign Missions secretaries' files, 1829-1895.

PHS Call number: ARCHIVES RG 31, Box 45, folder 1, letter # 32

Letter from William Speer to Rev. J.C. (John Cameron) Lowrie, San Francisco, August 14, 1854 [manuscript letter and transcript]

Source note: Reverend William Speer (1822-1904) was a Presbyterian minister who had spent four years as a missionary in Canton, China before being appointed the first missionary to the Chinese in California in 1852. Speer used his medical training to help treat Chinese immigrants and also established a small medical practice with doctors doing pro bono work. Speer advocated for Chinese immigrants, defending them in court cases and fighting anti-Chinese legislation. This letter was written a little over a year after Speer founded the Chinese Presbyterian Mission in San Francisco. Speer wrote it to Reverend John Cameron Lowrie (1808-1900), the Corresponding Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Before he worked for the Board, Lowrie had been the first American Presbyterian missionary to India in the 1830s.

Reading questions:

1. Who wrote this letter, and what was their purpose for writing it?
2. Speer writes that the Chinese like “flowery” and “lofty” language, but this is not enough to convince them to convert to Christianity. What *does* lead to success in converting the Chinese, according to Speer (pages 1 and 2)?
3. Why does Speer mention the ship Morrison in his letter? What about this ship is interesting or important (page 2)?
4. Why did Speer think it was necessary to open a dispensary to serve the Chinese immigrants in San Francisco (page 3)?
5. What caused so many cases of scurvy among the newly arrived Chinese immigrants in California, according to Speer (page 3)? Who does he say is ultimately at fault?
6. What duties did Lai Sam perform in the Presbyterian mission, according to Speer? Why do you think he was elected as an “elder representing the Chinese church (page 4)? An elder, in this context, is an elected member of a group of people responsible for governing a local church.

Document 3: William Speer's *An Humble Plea*

Speer, William, 1822-1904.

An Humble Plea ... In Behalf of the Immigrants from the Empire of China to this State. (San Francisco, CA: Published at the Office of The Oriental, 1856).

PHS Call number: PAM E 184 .C5 S7 1856

**See especially pages 28-32, "Morals of the Chinese."*

Source note: Please see the biographical information on Reverend William Speer above, for Document 2. Speer wrote this defense of Chinese immigrants in response to anti-Chinese laws passed in the early 1850s by the California legislature, specifically the laws establishing, and then raising, the Foreign Miners License Tax. This law imposed a hefty monthly tax on Chinese miners and included provisions for aggressive tax collection methods. Speer's defense of Chinese immigrants made an impression on lawmakers in the state, though he was not alone in fighting to have the laws repealed: heavy taxes were driving away Chinese miners and lowering the profits of many others in the mining trade, and taxes on Chinese immigrants directly hurt the shipping companies that brought them to America. Throughout the short time Speer spent in California, he advocated passionately and often effectively for the rights of Chinese immigrants and worked hard to help this immigrant group. He also held what we now consider racist and patronizing views of the Chinese that seem at odds with his humanitarian efforts. In this way, he is a great example of the contradictions common among American missionaries of this era.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this document, and what is their purpose for writing it?
2. Speer starts off the section "Morals of the Chinese" by writing that he "is often made most deeply sensible of [Chinese people's] moral inferiority to the specimens of purity and excellence produced by genuine Christianity" (page 28). Given that he is trying to defend the Chinese from unfair laws, why would he start off his argument by denigrating them?
3. On page 29, Speer mentions four positive traits of the Chinese people. What are these traits, and why might Speer find them important to mention in his *Plea*?
4. Why does Speer quote Lai Chun-Chuen in saying that he wished the US government would ban gambling houses and prostitution (page 29)? What purpose does this statement serve in Speer's broader argument?
5. According to Speer, why are Chinese people particularly prompt in paying their debts (page 30)?
6. On pages 30 and 31, Speer quotes and paraphrases a white American store owner who used to have several Chinese miners as his customers. What does he report about the Chinese miners, and how does this support Speer's argument?

Document 4: Woo Secondary Source

Woo, Wesley S. "Presbyterian Mission: Christianizing and Civilizing the Chinese in Nineteenth Century California." *American Presbyterians* 68, no. 3 (1990): 167-78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23332664>.

Source note: Wesley Woo grew up in San Francisco and worked for many years for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Louisville, Kentucky. Much of his work for the church has been focused on racial justice and community organizing, and he has recently been active in the Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People, a group committed to helping people empower themselves and bring about positive change in their communities.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this article, and who is their intended audience?
2. Why did the Presbyterians see the arrival of Chinese immigrants as “providential” (page 167)?
3. What are the “interlocking processes” essential to the work of Presbyterian missionaries (page 168)? What kinds of work facilitate these processes?
4. Why, in 1853, did some Chinese Californians ask William Speer to be their “chief in this country” (page 170)?
5. How were Chinese individuals and groups targeted during the “anti-Chinese agitation” of the 1880s (page 172)? Based on what you know of the historical context, why was anti-Chinese sentiment so strong at this time?
6. Though Presbyterian leaders such as Ira Condit tried to defend the Chinese against racist attacks, they also blamed the Chinese for many of the problems they faced (page 172). What did they blame the Chinese for, and how do you think Chinese people at the time would have responded to their accusations?
7. How did Chinese Presbyterians in Los Angeles advocate for themselves in the 1870s and successfully get their mission reopened in the 1880s (pages 174 and 175)?
8. How does this document corroborate or refute document 1, the Chinese Presbyterian Mission’s 50th anniversary historical sketch?