A CONTENTIOUS CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY
IN CENTRAL CHINA, 1887

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Christian missionaries, especially Victorian, came in for much criticism and derision, as well as great praise for, amongst other things, their devotion to the Chinese man-in-the-street. During the years of bigoted and the blood and thunder Christianity of the Victorian era it was not uncommon for them to be mocked and lampooned by the expatriate business community, sometimes not without reason.

William Spencer Percival relates a hard-to-believe story in the late 1880s during one of his boating and shooting excursions to the Gorges of the Upper Yangzi. The description of Chinese reaction to such an aggressive missionary is probably reasonably accurate and possibly even moderate for the day; and from today's point of view not without some justification.

His story is related here in full, without comment. While up the river I met a gentleman who was a missionary. He was an Englishman; but belonged to an American-Scotch mission. This may appear to the uninitiated a little mixed, but it is substantially correct.

'Among the various means adopted by the missionary body for Christianising the heathen, this gentleman chose the most curious and original method I ever heard of. Before he was appointed to the mission he was stationed at one of the fortified towns some miles lower down the river. Here he resided in one of the strongholds of Buddha himself, among a people who were entirely ignorant of the first principles of Christianity. I cannot say he hit upon a very wise plan in his style of religious instruction.

'This place, as I have said, was a fortified town, and a very stringent rule of the city - which was occupied by a detachment of troops - was, that the gates should, every night, be closed at ten o'clock. Our worthy Free-Lance of the Cross was very fond of rambling round the country in the cool of the evening, and on many occasions returned long after the gates had been closed. When he found that no entrance was to be
obtained on those occasions, he made a great noise outside, kicked, lost his temper and finally made use of some very nasty words which did not exactly come within the scope of his teaching. This sort of thing occurred several times, and on two or three occasions he passed the night in unpleasant quarters.

'Then he adopted a very unwise plan. He laid a one-sided account of the affair before the military mandarin, and commenced to preach at the people in no unmeasured terms. As his practice was, he continued to stump the town, and soon began to experience a thorn in the flesh during his daily ministrations. He made no attempt to smooth down the growing dislike of the people towards him. The end of it was he was hustled and pelted; made a bolt for it, and reached home in a thoroughly exhausted condition.

'After this he ventured no more among the people, but caused a bamboo scaffolding to be erected in front of his house, about sixteen to eighteen feet high, from which elevated position he continued his preaching. From this comparative place of safety he held forth vehemently against the ungodliness of the people, which soon brought matters to a climax.

'Two or three children happening to die, our reverend missionary was accused of having killed them in some occult manner, for the purpose of stealing their eyes to convert into photographic chemicals. Many Chinese believe that photographic chemicals are made out of deceased children's eyes; if they are not, they say, how could a little water and white powder see to make such correct pictures, especially when they are shut up in the dark in a little black box.

'The natives also complained that the bamboo structure interfered with their fung shui, so down it must come. Our friend rushed to save his property, but was immediately seized by the excited people. Others captured his wife and children; and his furniture and effects, together with the remains of the bamboo, were carried off by numbers of willing hands, only too glad to have found an opportunity of getting rid of him and his belongings. They and all they household gods [sic] were quietly deposited on the banks of the broad and rapid Yangtze, with the intimation that, if ever he attempted to show himself in the town again, it would be a dangerous and unwise thing, for he would be summarily
and severely dealt with.

'So, for the next week or ten days, the outcasts held a family picnic, leading a Bohemian kind of life, with crowds of Chinese coming again and again to rejoice over their discomforts and misfortunes. The natives kept this unfortunate family in a state of continual terror, not knowing whether at any moment they and their belongings might be found floating on the river below.

'Finally, by a bribe to some passing boatmen they got a letter conveyed to the consul at Hankow. The vice-consul was despatched to inquire into the matter. A modus vivendi of some kind - I do not remember what - was patched up, and his Reverence, with his furniture very much out of repair after ten day's exposure to sun, wind and rain, was translated to---------, where I met him.

'Here he conducted himself more peaceably, but whether his damaged reputation had preceded him, or whether people took a natural dislike to him, I cannot say; anyhow, he soon became unpopular, and confined himself a good deal to the house. Then it was that another original and novel idea for the propagation of the gospel developed itself.

'I have already said that he belonged to an American Scotch mission, so he considered himself entitled to dress his two children about eight and nine years of age - in full Highland costume. How he ever fabricated two complete Highland dresses away in the far interior of China, I am at a loss to imagine; but he did so.

'One morning, to the amazement and surprise of the natives of who wondered what new josses were being exhibited so suddenly and unexpectedly, two children appeared at one of the upper windows of his house in brilliant tartan, each armed with a bamboo fishing-rod and line, a bent pin doing duty for a hook on which was fixed a religious tract, which was slowly lowered among the gaping crowd below.

'The Chinese, curious to see what this wonderfully dressed joss had sent them, unhooked the tract, and, being of too independent a nature to accept it for nothing, passed the bent pin through the hole in the centre of a few cash, which was immediately drawn up, and another
hook baited with a tract descended. This was more profitable employment than preaching, and continued for some time. The north country costume seemed to draw congregations, and nothing more offensive was said. When I left I was told that business was fairly prosperous, but nothing compared to its early days. Long before this I expect it is completely played out, and some other original idea for gathering in the cash has been invented.