A Dilemma between Politics and Evangelism: S. Wells Williams’ Controversial Translation of the “Toleration Article” in the Sino–U.S. Treaty of Tientsin

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Abstract: The Sino–U.S. Treaty of Tientsin (1858), for the first time in history, included an article to ensure the toleration of Protestantism in China, i.e., the Toleration Article. The man behind the article was S. Wells Williams (1812–1884), an interpreter of the U.S. Legation and a former missionary, who negotiated with Chinese officials directly. Williams produced the Chinese version of the clause and its official English translation which led to controversies, for it was deemed unfaithful and humiliating to the Christian communities. This paper revisits this important episode in the history of Protestantism in China. Using first-hand archival materials, it reveals how Williams was forced to “mistranslate” the article in order to satisfy both parties. It further discusses the reasons behind the missionaries’ criticism, which placed Williams in the center of clashes between religious and political interests. Through Williams’ case, the paper foregrounds the crucial roles and difficult situations of missionary translators in diplomatic incidents that shaped the history of Christianity in China. More importantly, it highlights the conflicting interests and ideas in early Sino–U.S. diplomacy and shows how missionary translators worked to mediate the dilemma between evangelism and politics in 19th-century China.

Keywords: S. Wells Williams; missionary translator; history of Christianity; Sino–U.S. relations

1. Introduction

The Sino–U.S. Treaty of Tientsin, signed on 18 July 1858, included a clause allowing the practice of Protestantism in China, i.e., the 29th article, later known as the Toleration Article (The Maritime Customs 1917, I, p. 726). This clause holds a significant position in the history of Christianity in China. It established the legal status of Protestantism in the whole country for the first time and was admitted by Britain and France into their respective treaties with China (ibid., pp. 407, 821). Subsequently, the Qing government’s formulation and implementation of policies related to missionary matters were largely based on these articles (Tiedeman 2009, p. 302).

The Toleration Article owes its existence to S. Wells Williams (1812–1884), a former American missionary who participated in the negotiations at Tianjin as interpreter for the U.S. Legation. He drafted the official Chinese and English versions of the clause and managed to obtain both parties’ approval. Both Williams himself and historians regard the establishment of the article as an important event in his diplomatic career; hence, it is well-documented (Williams 1889, pp. 269–84; Wu 1930, pp. 218–12; Tao 2004, pp. 57–65; Huang 2018, pp. 467–68; Shuai 2021, pp. 19–52). However, existing accounts on the case are mostly based on limited secondary sources and therefore are incomplete. Also, an in-depth analysis is yet to be made of the article’s translation problem, Williams’ roles, and dilemma as a missionary translator working in the diplomatic field.

In fact, negotiations concerning the Toleration Article spanned over 40 days. In this process, Williams had to revise the Chinese draft and its translation several times to satisfy all parties involved. The discrepancies between the Chinese and English texts of the article
soon led to criticism and controversy within the missionary community, placing him in a difficult position. A thorough analysis of the case would shed light on early Protestant missionaries’ translation and diplomatic activities that shaped the history of Christianity in 19th-century China. It would also further reveal the clashes between religious ideas and political interests in early Sino–U.S. relations and foreground the roles of missionary translators in the unique political and cultural context of the mid-19th century.

This paper, therefore, revisits Williams’ roles in the negotiation and translation of the Toleration Article. It first outlines the historical context by briefly reviewing the development of the Qing government’s policy on Christianity in the early 19th century. Drawing on various first-hand archival sources, it then reconstructs the negotiation process and the subsequent controversies in detail and further analyzes how discrepancies between the Chinese and English versions of the article emerged, followed by a discussion on the roles and positions of missionary translators in Sino–American religious affairs.

2. Historical Context: Prohibition of Christianity and the Late Qing Diplomacy

In late 18th century America, the Great Awakening led to the rise of Pietism, reigniting religious passions. Influential theologians like Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803) further encouraged Americans’ interest in missionary work (Rogers 2004, pp. 39–41). In 1812, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was formally established, marking the beginning of the overseas missionary movement. In the 1830s, E. C. Bridgman (1801–1861) and Williams were sent as the first American Protestant missionaries to China. However, the conditions in China were far from ideal for them. According to Bridgman (1835, pp. 429–30), there were at least four major obstacles to missionary work in China, the foremost being the “hostile attitude of the government towards foreigners” and “the laws enacted against the propagation of…… Christianity in particular”.

The Qing government’s prohibition of Christianity can be dated back to the reign of the Kangxi Emperor 康熙帝 (1654–1722, reigning 1661–1722) (Standaert 2009, pp. 312–13) and was carried to its peak by the 1800s. In 1811, the revised Daqing Lvli 大清律例 [Great Qing Legal Code] specifically included clauses against Christianity, equating it with secret societies like the Bailianjiao 白莲教 [The White Lotus], and taking rigorous measures to prevent its promulgation (Bridgman 1837a, p. 51). Consequently, Protestant missionaries in the early 19th century faced even more stringent bans and legal obstacles than their predecessors. Once detected by the authorities, they risked severe punishment, ranging from flogging and imprisonment to exile or even execution by hanging.

The main reason for the Qing government’s ban on Christianity lies in its political consideration. As Tao (2009, p. 47) noted, the court viewed missionary activities as a special form of international relations, with the allowance or banning of missionary work hinging on the potential for reciprocal benefits. It can be said that, to the Qing government, how to deal with missionaries was not solely a religious issue but also a matter of international politics. Therefore, when the Qing government faced unprecedented pressure from Western nations in the 1840s, it was compelled to gradually lift the ban. The process was driven by a series of diplomatic struggles after the Opium War.

In fact, on the eve of the war, missionaries, including Williams, already keenly sensed an impending opportunity to break the ban as tensions between China and Britain escalated (Williams 1824–1846, Williams to Mother 13 June 1839 Macao). Starting in 1837, they advocated for breaking the ban on Protestantism by means of war (e.g., Bridgman 1837b, pp. 1–8; etc.). After the War, the Qing government was forced to sign treaties with Britain, France, and the U.S., granting foreigners the right to reside, build churches, and conduct religious activities at the newly opened five treaty ports (The Maritime Customs 1917, I, pp. 352, 683, 782–83). In 1844, French Minister Théodore de Lagrené (1800–1862) once again compelled the Qing court to abolish the ban on Catholicism in the ports. An edict was issued in accordance, allowing Catholic priests to preach in the port areas, later known as the “Edict of Tolerance”. The following year, Protestant missionaries were granted the same rights (Guo 2005, pp. 111–14). However, this did not mean that Christianity was
fully tolerated in China. In fact, the edict explicitly prohibited missionaries from entering China’s interior to propagate their faith. As noted by Williams (1848, II, p. 372), the edict shows that “the Chinese government has not intended . . . . to allow foreigners to enter to teach them”. He specifically mentioned that the last sentence of the edict was added “with reference to the future probability of deporting them [the missionaries]” (ibid.). It is clear that Williams was not satisfied with the limited freedoms granted by the edict, which partly explains his later efforts for securing the Toleration Article.

Apart from that, missionaries were also dissatisfied with the wording of the edict because it mentioned only Catholicism. Bridgeman and others expressed a wish for clearer language that “included Yesujiao 耶穌教 [a term for Protestantism] as well (Boone et al. 1845, p. 539). ” Williams shared similar views. In addition, the edict, unlike treaties, did not impose obligations on the Qing court but was merely considered “an imperial favor”, limiting its effectiveness (Wei 1991, p. 480). According to Williams (1849, p. 50), after the issuance of the edict, “dislike of the people to foreigners is still retained”, and conflicts between locals and missionaries were frequent in treaty ports. On the other hand, local officials were negligent in enforcing the edict. Elihu Doty (1809–1864), an American missionary in Xiamen, reported that Protestant converts often “failed to obtain protection . . . . when they have been ill treated (NARA 1946b, Doty to Reed, 17 March 1858 Amoy, para. 2)”. He believed the impact of the edict was limited.

The above shows that although the Qing government was forced to gradually ease the ban on Christianity after the Opium War, Christianity was not fully legalized in China by the late 1840s. The Qing court still retained some control over missionary activities. For instance, in 1848, three American missionaries, who had secretly entered Hubei province, were sent back to Hong Kong by local officials (Institute of Modern History Academia Sinica 1968, pp. 106–8). Cases like this were not uncommon and were intolerable for the missionaries. During the 1840s, they were eager to leverage political power to gain the right to preach freely in China. Thus, when the U.S. Legation went to Tianjin to negotiate a new treaty in 1858, the American missionaries in China requested the legation to include religious freedom in the treaty to completely break the nearly century-old ban. Against this backdrop, the Toleration Article emerged. Unlike the edict of 1844, it forcefully broke the ban on Protestantism nationwide and imposed the obligation to protect Chinese converts on the Qing government. So, how was the article written into the treaty, and what role did Williams, the translator, play?

3. Translator as Negotiator: Williams and the Establishment of the Toleration Article

As aforementioned, in the 1850s, American missionaries in China hoped that their government’s diplomatic pressure would completely break the Qing government’s ban on Christianity. However, William B. Reed (1806–1876), the U.S. Minister in charge of treaty negotiations who arrived in China in 1858, had no intention of facilitating this.

Reed studied law at the University of Pennsylvania and served as district attorney and legislator before being appointed as the U.S. Minister to China in 1857. Prior to this appointment, Reed had no connections with China or missionary work (Farley 1970, pp. 269–80). Upon accepting his post, he wrote a 14-page letter to Lewis Cass (1782–1866), the Secretary of States, reporting his plans for the diplomatic mission. In this letter, he did not mention the missionary matters at all (NARA 1946b, Reed to Cass, 16 May 1857 Washington D.C.), indicating his lack of interest in the issue.

In March 1858, just before the legation headed to Tianjin, Doty and nine missionaries wrote to Reed, expressing their hope that the legation would strive to completely lift the ban on Protestantism by a treaty clause. In their letter, they made several detailed requests regarding the wording of the clause: firstly, Chinese converts shall “not be banned from obtaining liberty and official rank because of their Christianity”; secondly, Chinese people “shall not be liable to any pains or penalties because of intercourse with foreign missionaries (NARA 1946b, Doty to Reed, 17 March 1858 Amoy, para. 4)”. More importantly, he reminded Reed that the clause should refer to Protestantism as Yesujiao, and “not to
be comprehended in the term Tiheen-choo-keaou [Tianzhujiao 天主教], which is properly applied only to the Church of Rome (ibid., para. 5).”

Reed did not respond positively. He told Doty that the “practical difficulty… is very great. In that case much must be left to the unaided and perhaps unprotected efforts of zeal (NARA 1946b, Reed to Doty, 27 April 1858 Gulf of Peichili, para. 4)” In fact, Reed’s indifference towards missionary matters also reflected the stance of the U.S. State Department. In the 1800s, the U.S. government’s priority in its China policy was to develop trade while maintaining stable bilateral relations. Missionaries were seen as potential threats since they always clashed with Chinese laws, leading to international conflicts that the U.S. government wished to avoid. Cass specifically mentioned in his instructions to Reed that “the U.S. does not seek to enter China for any other purposes than those of lawful commerce, and for the protection of the lives and property of its citizens (NARA 1946a, Cass to Reed, 20 May 1857 Washington D.C., para. 11)”, ignoring the missionaries’ desire to evangelize the hinterlands. Moreover, the negotiation objectives listed in the instruction only included securing “religious freedom to all foreigners in China (ibid., para. 7)”, which did not call for the freedom of preach or address the issue of protecting Chinese converts. Given Reed’s own lack of enthusiasm for religious affairs and Cass’ instructions, it was natural that he would not accede to the missionaries’ requests.

Unlike Reed, Williams, a former missionary, joined the legation with the intention of advocating for greater freedom for missionaries in 1857. Thus, when Reed first arrived in China, Williams had high hopes for him. According to Williams’ journal, on 27 April 1858, he dined with Reed and explained in detail the principles and benefits of missionary work, citing activities in China, Japan, and Madagascar as examples. To his disappointment, Reed “has not heretofore taken much interest in the principle and operation of the missions” (Williams 1858–1859, 27 April 1858, para. 2). He later wrote to his brother that Reed was “not what is called religious people” (Williams 1854–1861, Williams to Brother Frederick 7 December 1858 Hong Kong, para. 2). He also noted that Reed considered religious freedom a dispensable issue in the negotiations. 1

Under these circumstances, Williams took on the role of drafting and translating the Toleration Article on his own, using his position as an interpreter. Over 40 days of negotiations, he acted as both interpreter and negotiator, first establishing the Chinese version through two rounds of talks, and then translating it into English. The negotiations between Williams and the Qing representatives can also be seen as a form of translation, not only because they were handled by a missionary translator but also because drafting the article in Chinese was an interlingual activity.

3.1. Round One: Misdirection and Misunderstanding

According to Williams’ biography compiled by his son, he proposed the Toleration Article to the Qing officials on 13 June 1858 and admitted it into the treaty on June 18 (Williams 1889, pp. 269–84), a narrative commonly accepted by existing scholarship (e.g., Wu 1930, pp. 218–12; Tao 2004, pp. 57–65; Ji and Chen 2007, pp. 467–68; Shuai 2021, pp. 19–52, etc.). However, this is not the case. Sources in U.S. diplomatic papers and Qing historical records indicate that negotiations regarding the tolerance of Christianity began in early May.

On 26 April 1858, legations from Britain, Russia, France, and the United States gathered at Taku Fort 大沽口, where Viceroy Tan Tingxiang 谭廷襄 (?–1870) represented the Qing government in negotiations. While the British and French refused to meet with Tan, citing his lack of plenipotentiary, the American and Russian Ministers showed goodwill towards him. On the afternoon of May 3rd, Williams accompanied Reed and others in a meeting with Tan, where they had preliminary discussions on issues like exchanging credentials and revision of the Sino–American treaty signed in 1844, also expressing willingness to mediate the conflict between China and Britain (Williams 1858–1859, 3 May 1858). The next day, Tan received instructions from the court to inquire about the demands of the U.S. Legation (Zhongguoshixuehui 1978, III, p. 268). On 7 May, Williams drafted an
11-article treaty revision, which included the demand for the lifting of the ban on Christianity:

嗣后中国人有尊奉耶稣基督圣教者，华宪不得因此加罪。当道光二十四年间，经钦差奏奉上谕俯准，将习天主教为善之人，免其治罪。此款无非推广之耳。

(Guo 1966, IV, p. 132)

[Hereafter, Chinese who profess the Holy Religion of Jesus Christ shall not be punished by Chinese laws. During the 24th year of the Daoguang Emperor’s reign, it was approved by an imperial edict, upon the memorial presented by the imperial commissioner, that those who practice Catholicism for good shall be exempt from punishment. This clause is nothing but an extension of that policy.]

From the above, it is clear that Williams cited the edict of 1844 as historical grounds to request the lifting of the ban on Christianity. It is also clear that Williams was conservative in drafting the proposal, only suggesting that Chinese converts could be exempt from punishment, without expressively mentioning the missionaries’ privilege of entering China’s interior. This was because he believed that the Qing government was “not ready to grant such extensive change (Williams 1858–1859, 7 May 1858, para. 2)”. Thus, he ambiguously stated that the clause merely extended the leniency granted to Catholicism by the edict of 1844 to include Protestantism as well.

The Qing government was reluctant to relax its stance on religious issues. The Xianfeng Emperor 咸丰帝 (1831–1861, reigning 1851–1861) instructed Tan Tingxiang that since there were existing policies, “no further discussion is needed” (Zhonghuashuju [1866] 1985, p. 853) This was a strategic retreat aiming to maintain the status quo. Tan understood this well. On 10 May, he met with the U.S. Legation as per the emperor’s instructions to discuss the issues of exchanging credentials, trade at ports, and navigation on inland rivers, etc. Williams’ proposed clause on Christianity, “[the clause] that most likely to do good to China was not even discussed (Williams 1858–1859, 10 May 1858, para. 5)”.

On 13 May, Tan reiterated the results of the previous meeting to Reed, stating that he would grant approval for “all matters that are reasonable”, except for inland navigation and the residence of American Ministers in Beijing (Institute of Modern History Academia Sinica 1968, p. 289). Tan’s communication did not explicitly reject the request to lift the ban on Christianity, which Williams interpreted as tacit approval, so he began drafting the formal clause (Williams 1858–1859, 13 May 1858). On the evening of 14 May, he received news from the Russian Minister Yevfimiy Putyatin (1803–1883) that the Chinese were “ready to allow missionaries to travel anywhere in China without passports (Williams 1858–1859, 14 May 1858, para. 3)”. This further convinced Williams that the Qing government was not only going to lift the ban on religious activities but also grant greater freedom to missionaries. Reed reported this to the Secretary of State as well (NARA 1946b, Reed to Cass, 21 May 1858 Gulf of Peichili).

However, Putyatin’s claims are highly dubious. Firstly, although Putyatin had a strong desire to promote the promulgation of the Russian Orthodox Church in China, he was not authorized by his government to do so (Xiao 2010, pp. 132–33). Hence, from the beginning of his interactions with the Qing officials, he never proposed any missionary-related demands. This is evidenced by the memorandum he submitted to the court on 1 May, which only requested the opening of additional trading ports and the renegotiation of the borders between the two countries along the Amur River (Guo 1966, III, pp. 351–52). Subsequent negotiations between Putyatin and Tan also focused on these two issues without touching on the missionary matters (ibid., pp. 353, 354, 357–58).

Nonetheless, Putyatin was not entirely unable to intervene in negotiations on religious issues. Since France had taken the lead in requesting protection for its missionaries, and the French Minister, Jean-Baptiste L. Gros (1793–1870), refused to meet with Tan, the exchange of views was conveyed by Putyatin, who claimed to be a mediator, seizing the opportunity to pursue his personal goals. On 3 May, when Tan’s attempts to meet with the British and French Ministers failed, he sent his subordinate Bian Baoshu 卞宝书 (1815–1872)
to the Russian legation to gather information. In the name of the French Minister, Putyatin requested a complete abolishment of the Christian ban (Jia [1867] 1979, p. 735). Bian gave a non-committal response and reported back to the Emperor (Guo 1966, IV, p. 22). On 7 May, Xianfeng ordered a clear response against Putyatin’s request (ibid., p. 23). It is evident that the emperor not only opposed lifting the ban but also opposed issuing passports for missionaries to set foot into China’s interior, to prevent events like the “Chapdelaine Incident” from happening again. Two days later, the emperor reiterated in an edict that foreign missionaries who break the law in the inland should be sent to the consulates for investigation—and this should be included in the treaty and adhered to forever (Jia [1867] 1979, p. 759). The emperor’s stance was firm. On 12 May, Tan Tingxiang reported that he had responded to Putyatin according to the edict (ibid., p. 771). Therefore, Putyatin should have been aware of the Qing court’s attitude, which contrasted greatly with what he told Williams.

It is clear that Putyatin’s negotiations with Tan were not going smoothly. In fact, his insistence on demarcating the boundary had greatly displeased the Emperor. Xianfeng criticized the Russian Minister in a dispatch, saying his demands were insatiable, his behavior detestable, and even instructed Tan to turn to America for help (ibid., p. 777). On 13 May, after being ignored by Tan for two days, Putyatin took the initiative to request a meeting, which led to Bian’s visiting the Russian legation for what Putyatin described to Williams as “reopening negotiations”. However, this meeting also did not touch on missionary matters (Guo 1966, IV, p. 371).

From the analysis above, it is safe to say that Putyatin’s claim to Williams is unfounded. We cannot discern Putyatin’s intentions, but given the circumstances, it is likely that he intended to use the U.S. Legation to achieve his own goals: if the Qing government agreed to let American missionaries into the inland, Russia could also gain this right through the most-favored-nation clause.

After meeting with Putyatin on May 14th, Williams spent at least four days drafting the various clauses of the Sino–American Treaty, including the Toleration Article (Williams 1858–1859, 18 May 1858). Misled by Putyatin, Williams shifted from his conservative stance to a more aggressive approach, demanding the right for missionaries to freely enter the inland. This draft is not found in the Qing government’s archives, and has thus been overlooked by scholars. The Chinese version of the draft has not yet been found, but an English version of the clause draft was located in Williams’ journal:

Hereafter it shall be lawful for any citizen of the United States, preaching the doctrines of Jesus Christ, or distributing the S.S. of the O. & N.T. or other good books, to pass freely without let or hindrance, thro’ all parts of the Ta Tsing Empire and therein to expound the said doctrines by words or writings, being also allowed the privileges of residence and safe treatment. And hereafter no Chinese who professes the said doctrines shall be punished interfered with by the officers of government on account of his faith. (Williams 1858–1859, 18 June 1858, para. 4)

Williams noted that it was first proposed to the Chinese at Daku based on the edict of 1844 (ibid., para. 5). The English text cited above shows that the draft greatly exceeded the initial demands. The draft not only granted missionaries the privilege to travel and reside in the inland unimpeded but also allowed for unrestricted propagation of Christianity. As Williams told his brother, it was “complete free toleration (Williams 1854–1861, Williams to Brother Frederick 15 May 1858 Gulf of Peichili, para. 1)”.

On the afternoon of 19 May, Williams brought the draft to the Qing officials. According to Williams’ journal, some clauses were passed without objection, while “those relating to toleration……were copied off to show the commissioner (Williams 1858–1859, 19 May 1858, para. 2)’. The Qing officials initially thought the U.S. demands were mostly about indemnity, ports, and the exchange of official documents, considering the rest as minor details. They were prepared to concede a few points to facilitate negotiations, not anticipating Williams’ last-minute addition of free propagation of Christianity (Jia [1867] 1979, p. 791). Since the Emperor had already decreed against British and French missionary
activities, they did not dare to make concessions to the U.S. without further instructions. However, before the negotiations concluded, Williams received a note from Reed informing him that Britain and France had decided to declare war and requesting his immediate return to the U.S. Legation. Consequently, the talks ended prematurely, and the next day, the Anglo-French forces attacked the Daku forts. On the 21st, Tan Tingxiang communicated with Reed, stating that due to the change in circumstances, all matters previously reported by this minister should be re-submitted for imperial approval (Institute of Modern History Academia Sinica 1968, p. 291). Thus, the negotiations between Williams and the Qing government regarding the Toleration Article were temporarily halted.

3.2. Round Two: Compromise and Rewriting

The news of the Anglo-French forces’ capturing Taku Forts shocked the Qing court. Consequently, the Xianfeng Emperor ordered Tan Tingxiang to be dismissed and appointed Guiliang 桂良 (1785–1862) and Huashanana 花沙纳 (1806–1859) to handle the negotiations. Tan thus informed the legations that there would be no further discussions until Guiliang’s arrival in Tianjin (Jia [1867] 1979, p. 826). On 2 June, the fleets of the four nations entered Tianjin, escalating the tension within the court. As a result, Xianfeng reactivated the senior official Qiying 耆英 (1787–1858) to lead the peace talks (ibid., p. 865). In Tianjin, facing the threat of the warships, Tan and others were eager to compromise with the United States and Russia, hoping they would mediate the crisis (Zhongguoshixuehui 1978, III, p. 333). The Emperor agreed to the plan but opposed the clauses on the residence of foreign ministers in Beijing and missionary activities in the hinterland. On May 28th, as Guiliang headed to Tianjin, the Grand Councilors drafted responses to various clauses, stressing that the missionary matters should be “handled according to existing treaties” (Jia [1867] 1979, p. 830).

Guiliang arrived in Tianjin on 4 June. On 7 June, Reed met with him, appointing Williams as the representative to draft terms with the Qing’s appointed Zhang Tingyue (?–1875). The next day, Williams and Zhang negotiated for four hours. According to Williams’ journal, no clauses “were objected to, not even the one granting toleration, which…… had been accidentally omitted (Williams 1858–1859, 8 June 1858, para. 2)”. On 9 June, Guiliang requested Reed to provide the missing 31st clause (i.e., the Toleration Article) for further discussion. However, when Williams met with Zhang again on 10 June, Zhang responded that he had no clear instructions from Guiliang regarding the clauses (Williams 1858–1859, 10 June 1858). Zhang’s delayed response was due to Guiliang’s receipt of instructions upon arriving in Tianjin: “treaty clauses will be considered after Qiying’s arrival (Jia [1867] 1979, p. 865)”. At this time, Guiliang’s meetings with foreign nations were merely to buy time for Qiying.

With Qiying’s arrival in Tianjin on 9 June, the pace of negotiations accelerated. On 12 June, Zhang Tingyue rejected the Tolerance Article draft proposed by Williams, stating that the rights demanded were too extensive (Williams 1858–1859, 20 July 1858). However, that evening, Williams learned that Qiying had already granted a missionary clause to the Russians. He obtained the Chinese version of the Russian clause and drafted a second version of the Toleration Article based on it. Manuscripts from the archives clearly show the modification made by Williams:

[ART. VIII XXXI The Religion of the Lord of Heaven Holy Religion of Jesus Christ, teaches men to do good. Hereafter, all persons in China who teach and practice it peaceably shall alike be entitled to compassion and protection, and neither be molested nor persecuted, nor forbidden to propagate and practice it. A fixed number The number of Russians Americans who may enter the country through

Williams 1858b]
open ports to propagate this faith shall be allowed settled by the consul in conjunction with the local authorities on the border coast, and passports shall be given to them as evidence that they are good men, after which they can pursue their calling."

The manuscript reveals that Williams’ modifications to the Russian clause were simple: he changed 天主教 [the Religion of the Lord of Heaven, a term for both Catholicism and Orthodox church at that time] to 耶稣基督圣教 [the Holy Religion of Jesus Christ, a term for Protestantism] and 俄国 [Russia] to 美国 [the United States], largely retaining the wording of the Russian clause. On 15 June, Williams presented this draft to Zhang Tingyue, demanding “whatever any other nations had (Williams 1858–1859, 20 July 1858, para. 1).” Zhang acknowledged the accuracy of the Russian clause in Williams’ possession, but the two sides failed to agree on the regulations for verifying missionary passports. Zhang opposed the joint verification of missionary entry qualifications by Chinese and American officials; Williams believed issuing passports was unnecessary (ibid.). More importantly, he thought a passport system led by the Qing government would subject missionaries entirely to Chinese law. Thus, Williams sought not just equal rights with Russia but complete freedom from Qing control for missionary activities.

On 16 June, Williams revised the draft again, removing provisions concerning the passport systems, which was again rejected by Zhang. After that, both sides made concessions, agreeing to copy the Russian clause entirely with a single modification: adding the words “also known as Catholicism 又名天主教” after “the Holy Religion of Jesus Christ (Williams 1858c)”. Early on the 17th, Williams had his assistant transcribe the clause and sent it to Zhang for review. In the evening, news came that the clause had been accepted. However, at 9 p.m., Zhang (1858) sent a note stating that “Christianity has traditionally been associated with family trade, different from missionaries of other nations”, and rejected the clause again. Moreover, Zhang (ibid.) drafted another version of the clause, confining American missionaries to treaty ports.

An explanation is needed as to why the Qing government treated the missionary clauses of Russia and the U.S. differently. Firstly, the Russian treaty was handled by Qiyiing directly. According to records from the Russian legation, on 9 June, Qiyiing had a confidential meeting with Putyatin, who agreed to help dispel the demands of the other three nations for opening inland treaty ports and stationing ministers in Beijing. In return, Qiyiing was to accept Russia’s demands promptly. Eager for Russia’s mediation, Qiyiing promised that night to sign a treaty with Russia as soon as he received the imperial seal (Chen 2009, p. 270).

Qiyiing readily accepted Russia’s missionary clause partly because he was eager to conclude the deal and partly because, in his view, there was a precedent for Russia to send missionaries to China (Jia [1867] 1979, p. 372). Since the signing of the Treaty of Kyakhta in 1727, Russia had been sending Orthodox missions (i.e., the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission) to Beijing with the Qing court’s permission and support, uninterrupted even after the court banned Christianity (Xiao 2009, pp. 27–28, 30). However, the Russian mission did not seek to propagate their faith in China. Over the past century, their religious activities had been minimal, which the Qing government took note of (Sun and Standeart 2004, p. 426). In 1858, there were only four Russian priests in Beijing, who could not even meet the religious needs of the local Russian descendants, let alone conduct missionary work. Furthermore, as mentioned above, it was Putyatin’s personal wish to include a missionary clause in the treaty, for at that time, neither the Russian government nor the church had an interest in missionary work in China. Even Palladius Kafarov (1817–1878), the head of the Ecclesiastical Mission, had personally raised objections to Putyatin (Chen 2005, p. 220). After the treaty was signed, Palladius wrote to the Russian Holy Synod, stating that for Russia, missionary work in China is “like building a house on sand (Xiao 2009, p. 138)” and advised against investing in missionary efforts. Palladius had a close relationship with Qiyiing and had private contact with him before the Sino–Russian negotiations.
Widmer 1965, pp. 64–65), so Qying was most likely aware of this. Therefore, for Qying, who was eager to sign a treaty with Russia, the Russian missionary clause had no substantive significance.4

The situation with the U.S. was different; after the 1840s, a large number of American missionaries flooded into the treaty ports, while enthusiasm for missions to China remained high within America. In the eyes of the Qing government, the influx of American missionaries into the hinterland was not only “harmful to people’s hearts” but also difficult to manage. Hence, at the Sino–American negotiation table, the Qing officials vigorously guarded against this, drawing a line at preventing American missionaries from entering the interior of China. This is why Guiliang and others opposed the draft proposed by Williams and even suggested that “the words ‘interior’ in the Russian clause must also be changed (Zhang 1858)” to prevent Williams from claiming the same right based on the Russian clause.

The restrictions were not only unacceptable for Williams but also met with opposition from Reed. Since Reed and Guiliang had previously agreed to sign the treaty on 18 June, Reed proposed to give up the Toleration Article to avoid complications. Williams had no choice but to accept Reed’s suggestion (1858–1859, 17 June 1858).

A dramatic turn occurred on the morning of 18th June when Williams decided to make a final attempt; he abandoned the Russian clause and redrafted a more general version:

第二十九款 耶稣基督圣教，又名天主教。原为劝人行善，欲人施诸己者，亦如是施于人。嗣后，所有安分传教习教之人，当一体矜恤保护，不可欺辱凌虐。凡照教规聚集祈祷，分散圣书者，他人毋得骚扰。

[ART. XXIX The Holy Religion of Jesus Christ, also called the Religion of the Lord of Heaven, in its origin is designed to persuade men to do good and to do to others as they would have others do to them. Hereafter, those who quietly profess and teach these doctrines shall be entitled to compassion and protection, and shall not be harassed or persecuted. Any person who according to these tenets peaceably teaches and practices the principle of Christianity, shall in no case be interfered with or molested.]

In this draft, Williams reverted to his original strategy. He avoided mentioning the nationality of the missionaries and their rights of entering any part of the country, to circumvent the Qing government’s recent restriction against American missionaries entering the inland. He also specifically linked the purpose of Christianity with the Confucian maxim. Zhang Tingyue, upon receiving the draft, still insisted that missionary activities be limited to the treaty ports. Williams and his assistant W.A.P Martin (1827–1916) went straight to Guiliang, and after some debate, Williams agreed to change the phrase “gather to pray and distribute holy books” to “peaceably propagate and practice”. The article was thus finally included in the treaty (Williams 1858–1859, 20 July 1858).

The above details how Williams drafted and incorporated the Toleration Article into the Sino–American treaty. It is clear that during the drafting and negotiation of the article, Williams, the translator for the mission, also played the role of a negotiator. He used his key position in the legation to propose the lifting of the ban on Protestantism at the start of negotiations with China; in the subsequent two rounds of negotiations, he leveraged the Russian mission to secure the right for missionaries to propagate Christianity in China. Lacking support from the U.S. Legation, Williams suffered from setbacks repeatedly. In the end, it was his drafting of the clause in vague terms that led to its admittance in the treaty. Williams’ pursuit of the Tolerance Article reflects his difficult position between the U.S. Legation and the Qing government. As a missionary translator in a diplomatic scene, he sought to advance his religious agenda without the full support of his superior, while also having to contend with the Qing government’s stance on maintaining the ban on Christianity. His role as a translator not only placed him on the edge between China and the U.S. but also gave him the opportunity to influence the religious relations between the
two countries. Unexpectedly, the wording of the Chinese clause and issues in its English translation would bring him even greater trouble.

4. Translator on the Edge: Controversies on Williams’ Translation of the Article

After finalizing the Chinese version of the Tolerance Article, Williams immediately informed Reed and began translating it into English for its incorporation into the treaty text, ensuring a smooth signing that afternoon. Reed accepted Williams’ request but was dissatisfied with the vague wording of the Chinese version. From a politician’s perspective, Reed believed the new treaty should reflect the mission’s attention to American interests in every aspect, and thus, he wanted each clause to highlight the rights secured for U.S. citizens (NARA 1946b, Reed to Cass, 30 June 1858 Tientsin). This approach was partly to fulfill the Secretary’s instructions and partly to gain public favor and political capital. He instructed Williams to make some changes in the translation, specifying the religious rights of American citizens in the English text (Williams 1889, p. 225). Williams followed his order, leading to inevitable discrepancies between the English and Chinese versions of the article. The final English and Chinese texts of the article are as follows:

第二十九款 耶稣基督圣教，又名天主教。原为劝人行善，欲人施诸己者，亦如是施于人。嗣后，所有安分传教习教之人，当一体矜恤保护，不可欺辱凌虐。凡照教规安分传习者，他人毋得骚扰。

ART. XXIX. The principles of the Christian religion, as professed by the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, are recognized as teaching men to do good, and to do to others as they would have others do to them. Hereafter, those who quietly profess and teach these doctrines shall not be harassed or persecuted on account of their faith. Any person, whether citizens of the United States or Chinese converts, who according to these tenets peaceably teach and practice the principle of Christianity, shall in no case be interfered with or molested. (The Maritime Customs 1917, I, p. 726)

In the translation cited above, Williams, after finalizing the Chinese version, translated 凡遵照教规安分传习者 [any person who peaceably teaches and practices the Christian doctrine] as “Any person, whether citizens of the United States or Chinese converts, who according to these tenets peaceably teach and practice the principle of Christianity”. This alteration exploited the vagueness of the Chinese text, specifying the clause’s applicability to both American citizens and Chinese converts, thus achieving Reed’s political objectives. This change reflects Williams’ compromise with the mission’s political intentions.

Besides this modification, there is another discrepancy between the cited translation and the Chinese version. The Chinese article’s definition of Protestantism is phrased as 耶稣基督圣教，又名天主教, 原为劝人行善 [The Holy Religion of Jesus Christ, also named the Religion of the Lord of Heaven teaches men to do good], which could be construed as conflating Protestantism with Catholicism. Williams’ translation altered the subject from 耶稣基督圣教 to “The principles of the Christian religion”, and listed both Protestantism and Catholicism as subscribing to these principles, which conveys a different meaning from the original text and avoids the issue of conceptual confusion.

Does this translation suggest Williams’ misunderstanding of the Chinese wording? In Williams’ journal, we find a literal translation of the Chinese clause where he translates the aforementioned Chinese phrase as “The doctrines of Jesus, also called the religion of the Lord of Heaven, teach men to do good (Williams 1858–1859, 20 July 1858, para. 10)”. Here, Williams translates 又名 as “also called”, which aligns with the meaning of the Chinese clause. This indicates that he was well aware of the meaning of 又名 and therefore understood that the wording of the Chinese clause could lead to confusion between the two sects.

It should be noted that Williams did not choose such phrasing in the Chinese clause voluntarily. In fact, both Williams and other American missionaries consciously distinguished themselves from the Catholic priests, even displaying a sense of competition. Be-
fore joining the Reed mission, Williams expressed his concern in a letter that “all the Protestant miss. [sic.] now in China hardly equal what one Romish Society supports (Williams 1847–1853, Williams to Brother Frederick 28 October 1849 Canton, para. 4)”; when frustrated in the negotiations for the missionary clause, his first suspicion fell on French Catholic and Russian Orthodox priests, feeling that they were obstructing (Williams 1858–1859, 17 June 1858, para. 2); after the signing of the treaty, he noted in his journal that the Toleration Article would be a “great boon to Chinese Christians…… when Romanism becomes powerful and uses its power to oppress and reduce the people of the land who may refuse to join that form (Williams 1858–1859, 20 July 1858, para. 17)”. Thus, it is clear that Williams’ attitude towards Catholicism was not positive, so it is unlikely he would voluntarily equate Protestantism with Catholicism.

In fact, in his initial drafts of the article, only Yesujiao was mentioned, with no mention of Catholicism. The phrase “also called Catholicism” first appeared on June 16th. It was inserted with the aim of persuading Zhang Tingyue to grant the same missionary rights to America and Russia, a compromise made out of necessity. However, Zhang still emphasized the distinction between Protestant and Catholic missionaries as a reason to deny Protestant missionaries’ rights in his response on the 17th. Williams’ decision to retain the phrase “also called Catholicism” in the final Chinese clause was precisely to refute Zhang’s differential treatment and to avoid losing the clause entirely. However, he should have been aware that such phrasing was unacceptable for Protestant missionaries, as Doty’s letter to Reed had already clarified the issue of terminology. Williams’ intentional rewriting in the translation aimed to cover up his religious compromise with the Qing government. However, as the subsequent developments of the event show, his attempt was not successful.

In comparison, the missionary clauses in the Sino–British and Sino–French Treaties of Tientsin avoided these issues. The Chinese version of the Sino–British clause, though more concise, essentially followed the phrasing of Williams’ article, without explicitly stating the rights of British citizens and Chinese converts (The Maritime Customs 1917, I, p. 407). However, its English version was not altered, as was the American one (ibid.). The Sino–French clause, on the other hand, was more detailed, explicitly demanding that the Qing government allow French missionaries to enter inland and protect Chinese Catholics, as well as calling for the abolition of Chinese laws prohibiting Christianity (The Maritime Customs 1917, I, p. 821). The French mission was able to surpass Williams’ article because of the strong support from their government for the Catholic missions (Wei 1991, p. 693), which also explains why the French clause did not mention Protestantism, thus avoiding confusion between the two. The differences in these clauses reflect how the varying political and religious agendas of the nations influenced the wording of their respective clauses. They also highlight the fact that Williams had to make compromises in the wording of the Toleration article under the political pressure from the U.S. Mission and the Chinese authorities.

After signing the treaty, Reed reported to the Secretary of State, referring to the Toleration Article as an unexpected gain, and crediting Williams solely for the achievement (NARA 1946b, Reed to Cass 30 June 1858 Tientsin). However, the drafting and translation process of the article revealed Williams’ difficult situation, caught between two sides. On one hand, he had to negotiate with the Chinese without the full support of Reed, making concessions in the wording of the Chinese clause; on the other, in translation, he had to follow Reed’s instructions, rewriting the English text to align with the political goals of the legation. To Williams’ surprise, the clause he painstakingly negotiated did not satisfy American missionaries in China. After the treaty text was made public, the discrepancies between the Chinese and English versions sparked considerable controversy among the missionaries.

It is true that the Toleration Article was welcomed by the missionary community at first, with many praising Williams for his effort. While the enthusiastic praise reflected recognition of Williams, it also showed that the missionaries had overly high expectations, hoping it would bring unrestricted freedom of preaching. They were soon disappointed.
On 16 July 1858, Williams was invited to talk about the specifics of the Toleration Article at a missionary gathering organized by Bridgman in Shanghai. After the event, he wrote that “there was as much disappointment as gratification, for hopes of everyone had been raised to an undue height by what they had heard (Williams 1858–1859, 17 July 1858, para. 1)” . The missionaries’ disappointment was also evident in Bridgman’s reserved comments in a letter to his superior Rufus Anderson (1796–1880), stating that he feared the Reed Mission “may not have carried the matter of ‘toleration’ so clear and high as it ought to have been (ABCFM 1985, Bridgman to Anderson 26 July 1858 Shanghai, para. 4)” because the Chinese clause did not specify the right of American missionaries to freely enter the interior of China, as rumors had suggested.

By early 1860, when the Chinese and English texts of the Treaty of Tientsin were about to be published, American missionaries in Ningbo refused to print the Toleration Article. Meanwhile, in Canton, American missionary Andrew Happer (1818–1894) accused Williams of a “fatal error” in the translation of the clause and even appealed to Walter Lowrie (1784–1868), a senior in the Presbyterian Church, hoping the U.S. Congress would demand a renegotiation. The Congress, however, did not comply with his wishes (Paulsen 1980, p. 70). Nonetheless, this strong desire reflected the missionaries’ intense dissatisfaction with Williams’ article.

On 28 April 1860, the North China Herald published an open letter signed by “An American who is ashamed of the Chinese text of the 29th article of the new treaty”. The author, claiming to be an American missionary, severely criticized the discrepancies between the Chinese and English versions of the Toleration Article, sparking months of public debate. In the open letter, An American (1860b, p. 60) started by stating that “The official English Copy is not a correct and faithful representation of the sentiments of the Chinese Copy”. He then detailed three discrepancies between the Chinese and English texts. First, the Chinese version’s reference to “又名天主教 [also named the Religion of the Lord of Heaven]” conflates Protestantism with Catholicism, an issue obscured in the English version; second, the English text specifically mentions “citizen of the United States or Chinese convert”, but the Chinese version lacks corresponding provisions; third, the Chinese version contains terms like “矜恤保护 [compassion and protection]”, which are not translated in the English version. The author argues that the term jinxu [compassion] implies pity rather than tolerance, which is insulting to the church. The American further condemned Williams for using translation to cover up the clause’s deficiencies, suggesting it was a deception.

However, not everyone agreed with this accusation. On 26 May, an author signing as “A Christian Cosmopolite” published a letter defending Williams. He agreed with the American that there were some translation issues, but argued that these linguistic nuances were minor and did not detract from the clause’s positive impact on missionary work. The Cosmopolite translated jinxu as “respect and consideration”, believing that critics overlooked the goodwill of the Chinese (Christian Cosmopolite 1860, p. 82).

The American was clearly not fully persuaded. He continued his critique of the article on 9 June, focusing on the meaning of jinxu. He emphasized that jinxu is not respect or consideration, but a condescending expression of pity and sympathy (An American 1860c, p. 90). He cited dictionaries compiled by W. H. Medhurst and Robert Morrison as evidence. He argued that these two “repugnant Chinese characters” would only reinforce Chinese people’s prejudice against Christianity (ibid.). On 11 August, he reiterated that wording and phrasing were not trivial matters, and “strong objections exist among the missionaries at a neighboring port…… It is a useless, if not positively an injurious article (An American 1860a, p. 129)”.

Williams did not respond to the controversy at the time because he was on vacation in America. By the time he returned to China in 1861, it was too late. It was not until years later that Williams reflected on the incident, stating that some of the criticism was unfair to him, though he did not elaborate on the details (Williams 1889, p. 270). However, an analysis of the drafting and translation process of the article has already shown that the
first two textual discrepancies pointed out by the American were the result of Williams’ compromises with the Qing officials and the U.S. Legation in order to admit the clause in the treaty. Ironically, while Williams sacrificed religious positions to secure practical rights for missionaries, the beneficiaries—the missionaries themselves—were not satisfied and criticized his compromises in translation. This reflects the disconnect between Williams and the missionary community.

As for the term jinxu, it was first used by the Russians. Williams borrowed it, and it was retained in subsequent drafts proposed by both the American and Chinese sides. So, what was Williams’ understanding of the term? In the dictionary he compiled in 1856, Williams (1856, pp. 159, 483) provided diversified definitions of the term, including “to pity”, “to esteem”, “to commiserate” and “to show affection”. Thus, it is clear that Williams saw the term as having a rich connotation, not limited to “pity” as the critics suggested. Further, in a direct translation of the treaty drafts found in Williams’ journal, he translates jinxu as “be treated with kindness (Williams 1858–1859, 20 July 1858, para. 7)”, indicating that his intention in retaining the term was not to convey the sense of pity.

Another reason for Williams’ retaining the term jinxu lies in his understanding of religious tolerance and Chinese law. Religious tolerance, as we know it, originated in the Enlightenment era, involving theories such as the separation of church and state and freedom of belief (Zagorin 2003, pp. 289–312). In contrast, Williams’ understanding of the concept was rather simplistic, seeing it merely as missionaries and converts not being penalized for their faith. There are multiple pieces of evidence in his writings. In the 1848 edition of The Middle Kingdom, Williams (1848, II, p. 369) discussed the “Edict of Toleration” issued in 1844, interpreting the phrase “准许免罪 [granting exemption from punishment]” as “grant extensive tolerance to all Christian sects”. In his translation of the announcement by Qiying in 1846, he also rendered the same phrase as “the toleration thereof has already been allowed (ibid., p. 371)”. In the first round of negotiations for the Toleration Article, Williams’ initial plea for religious tolerance was also expressed as “华宪不得因此加罪 [Chinese Christians shall not be punished by Chinese law]” and “免其治罪 [shall be exempt from punishment]”. These confirm Williams’ equating tolerance with “exemption from punishment”.

It is worth noting that, in the political context of the Qing Dynasty, jinxu aligned with the meanings of mitigated punishment and exemption from penalties. Since pre-Qing times, China has followed a tradition calling for officials to judge cases with sympathy and mercy, sometimes granting leniency or exemption from punishment depending on the circumstances. This practice was known as jinxu (Xu 2019, pp. 156–66). The underlying philosophy of jinxu is rooted in Confucian concepts of benevolent governance, which were common in Qing judicial practice. The Qing Code contains many relevant provisions. For instance, criminals under the age of 15 or over the age of 70 could be granted leniency, reflecting the imperial court’s compassion for the young and elderly. Additionally, the code also specified that offenders who had elderly parents or grandparents to support were eligible for reduced penalties to honor filial piety (ibid., p. 111).

In The Middle Kingdom, Williams (1848, I, p. 512) discussed provisions in the Qing Code regarding the exemption of criminals who needed to support their aging parents, noting the standard of jinxu as contradictory to the cruel punishments in Chinese penal codes. In fact, Williams not only recognized the tradition of jinxu, but also perhaps exaggerated its effects. According to the Qing Code, most offenders “worthy of compassion” could only have their sentences reduced, with very few being completely exempt from punishment. However, Williams’ discussion seems to suggest that the principle of jinxu could lead to offenders being pardoned.

According to Williams’ interpretation, his use of the term jinxu to express religious tolerance and the exoneration of converts in the Toleration Article is reasonable. In his works, Williams (1848, I, p. 518) also stated that the concept of jinxu reflects the aspects of “universal love, mercy, and filial duty” within the harsh laws of the Qing Dynasty. This aligns with his translation of jinxu as “be treated with kindness” in his journal. In the
official English version of the Toleration Article, Williams omitted the term with no explanation, leaving us to speculate that he may have done so to avoid misunderstanding by English readers.

Undoubtedly, the translation issue of the term  Axw  does not affect the rights brought by the article. Nonetheless, the missionary community criticized Williams for this, claiming it insulted the dignity of the Church. Such criticism reflects the missionaries’ notion of “Christian supremacy” at the time, showing their unwillingness to compromise with Chinese political culture. Moreover, the missionaries’ dissatisfaction with the article also reflects the urgent evangelizing desire of 19th-century American missionaries in China. After years of suppression under the Chinese ban, they longed for direct and powerful intervention from their government to penetrate deep into China’s interior. The limited rights offered by the vague wording of the Toleration Article were far from sufficient for them.

Williams expressed his helplessness in his journal, writing that if the missionaries had lived in China for 25 years or more, they would realize that “they had not yet occupied the land which the article gives them (Williams 1858–1859, 17 July 1858, para. 1)”; they would also find that “laws and treaties cannot restrain the wicked heart man……. it will be true that ‘whosoever will live godly in Christ must suffer persecution’ (ibid.)”. Clearly, Williams’ approach to the clause was more realistic. By quoting the Bible, he suggested that the missionaries were demanding too much and would be better off recognizing reality and making the most of the expanded rights they had already gained.

In summary, the drafting, translating, and receiving of the Toleration Article reveals that Williams, as a diplomatic translator and former missionary, had to mediate the space between the Qing officials, the U.S. Legation, and the Protestant missions. As he stated before joining the Reed Mission, “no man can serve two masters (Williams 1854–1861, Williams to Mother 12 January 1856 Canton, para. 2)”. In this case, as a translator and negotiator, he not only had to shuttle between Chinese and American parties, compromising through translation to carry out his religious agendas, but also had to contend with the strong demands of the missionary community and the political considerations of the American government, being constrained on both sides and caught in the dilemma between politics and evangelism.

5. Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the inclusion of the Toleration Article in the Sino–U.S. Treaty of Tientsin was a significant event in the history of Christianity in China, bringing many changes to the religious relations between China and the United States in the latter half of the 19th century.

This paper re-examines the complete process of Williams’ diplomatic wrestling with the Qing government for the article. Lacking support from his own government, he closely collaborated with the Russians, each using the other’s strengths to negotiate with the Qing officials. Ultimately, Williams made compromises in the Chinese wording of the article, which led to the full legalization of Protestantism. In his English translation of the clause, Williams made several alterations and omissions to the Chinese version, partly to meet the political goals of the Reed Mission and partly to conceal expressions in the Chinese version that might offend religious figures. Subsequently, the translation problem sparked controversies among missionaries. Many were disappointed with the vague wording of the Chinese version, feeling that it failed to guarantee missionaries’ right to enter the hinterlands and compromised the church’s religious stance and dignity; Williams’ alterations in the English version were seen as deceitful to the English-speaking world.

In conclusion, as a missionary-turned-diplomatic translator, Williams’ actions during the negotiation reflected cooperation between religious forces and the U.S. government. However, Williams’ case also revealed that this cooperation was not always harmonious, but fraught with internal conflicts. These conflicts were evident in the differing views between Williams and the U.S. Minister regarding the Toleration Article. Like most American missionaries, Williams hoped his government’s intervention would completely lift the Qing government’s ban on Protestantism, while the U.S. government saw missionary
matters as an impediment to stable Sino–American trade and did not prioritize them in diplomatic negotiations. This disagreement placed Williams in a difficult position, leading to repeated setbacks in the negotiations and forcing him to compromise with Reed’s political considerations in the translation of the clause; additionally, the high expectations of the missionary community led to harsh criticism after the article’s publication.

Through Williams’ case, we can see more clearly the conflict between religious demands and political interests in the development of Protestantism in 19th-century China, as well as the complex position and role of missionary translators in early Sino–U.S. relations. Williams was not just mediating between China and the U.S., but navigating among the Qing court, the U.S. Legation, and the missionary community in China through his translations. While attempting to use diplomatic means to expand the scope of missionary work, he faced pressures from both the legation and the missionary community. It was Williams’ dual identity as both a missionary and a diplomatic official, along with the responsibilities and positioning of a translator, that placed him in a dilemma.

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**Notes**

1. Reed’s report to Cass reveals his “pragmatic” approach towards the missionaries and missionary matters. Although he needed the missionaries’ linguistic expertise to facilitate the negotiations, he was convinced that their cause in China was a potential threat to Sino–U.S. relations. (See: NARA 1946b, Reed to Cass 30 June 1858 Tientsin.) Reed’s dismissal of the missionary matters can also be seen in the records kept by W.A.P. Martin, Williams’ assistant and a Presbyterian missionary. According to Martin (1896, p. 184), Reed told them to their faces that he would sign the treaty regardless of whether the Toleration Article was in it.

2. The Chapdelaine Incident 马神甫事件 refers to the 1856 incident where French missionary Auguste Chapdelaine illegally entered the inland of China and was killed in Guangxi Province. This incident was one of the excuses for France to engage in the Second Opium War.

3. Williams’ manuscript shows clearly that the words “又名天主教 [also named Catholicism]” were added onto the original draft with an insertion mark (see: Williams 1858c).

4. The missionary clause in the Sino–Russian treaty hardly changed the status quo, as the Russian church did not develop its missionary work in China until 1902. In fact, by 1881, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in China was reduced to only one priest, rendering its missionary efforts in the country negligible (see: Бантиш-Каменский [1882] 1982, p. 535).

5. For example, Bridgman wrote enthusiastically to his superior Rufus Anderson on 14 June 1858 that with the Toleration Article, “Christian missionaries have full liberty to preach and propagate the religion of Jesus Christ in every and all parts of the Chinese Empire (ABCFM 1985, Bridgman to Anderson 14 June 1858 Shanghai, para. 1)”. Later, George Smith (1815–1871), the bishop of Victoria at Hong Kong, also issued a public letter praising Williams for “a renewed pledge of universal toleration for Native converts throughout the Chinese empire”, and stating that “friends of Christian missions on both sides of the Atlantic should know how much they are indebted (Smith 1858, p. 50)”.

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