From the third decade of the XIX century, Protestant missionaries, with the support of European China merchants, prepared and published magazines and books about Western civilization and knowledge, including a number of writings on economic subjects. Among the latter, some are still untraceable, as for instance the Zhiguo zhi yong dalüe 製國之用大略. Published in 1831, this short text is, in all probability, the first manual of political economy ever to be written in Chinese, as suggested by one of the earliest surveys of missionary translations in China.¹

Another work which eluded sinological studies for long is the Maoyi tongzhi 貿易通志, a considerable fragment of which was recently found in the Mohai shuguan 墨海書館 of Beijing National Library. This short “Treatise on commerce”, which was published in 1840 by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge based in Canton, attracted the attention of influential readers of the time, who actively contributed to the spread of its fame in the Qing Empire. After reconstructing the editorial history of the text, this study will focus on its contents, which are compared both to the presumed English source and to a series of articles on economics published in a monthly magazine a few years earlier. Some comments about the reception of the Maoyi tongzhi are given in the end. Though extremely interesting, no in-depth lexical analysis will be made here, except for a few occasional remarks. A separate study on this fascinating topic will hopefully follow soon.

¹ Wylie 1867, p. 61.

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1. The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge

From the arrival of Robert Morrison (1807) until the Treaty of Nanking (1842) which ended the so-called First Opium war, the presence of Westerners in China was kept within strict limits by the Qing Government: foreigners couldn’t trespass into a confined area of the coastal city of Canton and were not allowed to have any direct contact with local people or to study their language.2 Despite this, their presence increased quite steadily, showing a growing variety of visitors, targets and interests.

Together with numerous traders, Canton hosted the first small community of Protestant missionaries, whose presence put an end the long absence of Christians in China. Since proselytism was strictly forbidden, evangelization activities were conducted secretly or transferred to areas supposedly free from the control of the Manchu’s authorities, such as Macao, Singapore, Malacca and Batavia. The same happened with the missionaries’ pedagogic initiatives,3 which -especially during the first half of the XIX century- were considered as a primary means of spreading not only Western civilization, but first and foremost its unique religion into the “land of the heathen”.

Among the earliest institutions established by foreigners in mainland China with the approval, or at least without the firm opposition, of local authorities is the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, which was founded in Canton on November 29, 1834. The Society (hereafter SDUK) gathered exponents of different interests and with different purposes. Its executive committee was composed mainly of authoritative representatives of the commercial activities in the area, such as Sir James Matheson (1796-1878), partner of one of the most powerful trading companies involved in the opium traffic, who was elected the President. The administrative and operational work of the SDUK was carried out by three missionaries, namely John Robert Morrison (1814-1843), Elijah Coleman Bridgman (1801-1861) and Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff (1803-1851). The first, the son of the famous

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2 Hsü 2000, pp. 150-152.

3 It was in Malacca that the Scottish missionary William Milne founded, in 1813, one of the first Western-styled primary schools; five years later in the same island Milne with Robert Morrison inaugurated the Yinghua shuyuan 英華書院, or Anglo-Chinese College. In 1823 the Xinjiapo xueyuan 新加坡學院 or Institute of Singapore was founded, while Macao from 1835 hosted one of the first female schools ever opened in China; Wang Shuhuai 1971, pp. 365-396.