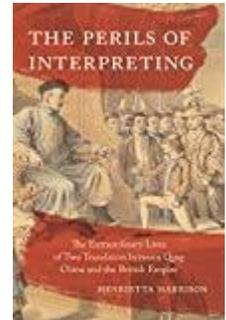


Henrietta Harrison. *The Perils of Interpreting: The Extraordinary Lives of Two Translators between Qing China and the British Empire.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. 312 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-22545-6.



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Published on H-Socialisms (May, 2022)

Commissioned by Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

Interpretation and Imperialism

In *The Perils of Interpreting: The Extraordinary Lives of Two Translators between Qing China and the British Empire*, Henrietta Harrison reviews the history of Sino-British relations in mid-Qing China through the careers of two figures who were much neglected by historians. The two translators were from very different family backgrounds. In the first part of the book, the author outlines their early years. Li Zibiao (1760–1828) was from a Chinese Catholic family. At the age of thirteen, he began his studies of Latin, philosophy, and theology at the College of the Holy Family of Jesus Christ in Naples, Italy. He became a priest in 1784 and stayed in Italy for twenty years. Twenty-one years younger than Li, George Thomas Staunton (1781–1859) was the son of a British baronet. He had excelled in learning different languages such as Latin, Greek, and especially Mandarin Chinese since his childhood. These backgrounds drew a Chinese Catholic and heir of a British noble together on one occasion, during Bri-

tain's Macartney embassy (or mission) to Beijing in 1793.

After introducing the backgrounds of Li and Staunton, Harrison examines their roles in the Macartney embassy in the second part of the book. Having been away from his home country for twenty years, Li was selected to be the major interpreter for the Macartney embassy. Harrison traces Li's experiences with the embassy, particularly the importance of his contribution during the meeting between George Macartney and the Qianlong emperor (1711–99). Since Macartney did not know Mandarin and Qianlong did not know any European languages, Li became an important liaison between them. Techniques of translation always affect one's understanding of the other. Harrison praises Li for doing an excellent job in avoiding the use of offensive expressions when conveying Chinese views to the British. Hence, Li was helpful in mediating potential conflicts between the Chinese and the British when they met.

Staunton, whose father was a secretary in the Macartney embassy, also surprised Qianlong with his good command of the Chinese language, for which he was rewarded monetarily.

The book's focus shifts to the career of Staunton in the third part. Staunton worked for the East India Company's factory in Canton (Guangzhou) as a writer and translator. After the death of the Qianlong emperor in 1799, the next emperor, the Jiaqing emperor (1760–1820), did not have favorable opinions of Westerners and Christianity. At the same time, with the expansion of the British Empire, the British aimed to acquire a base off the coast in South China, and they seized Macau from the Portuguese. This alarmed the Qing government, and the governor general of Guangdong and Guangxi threatened to suspend British trade, forcing the British to retreat from Macau.

The deterioration of Sino-British relations during the reigns of the Jiaqing emperor (1796–1820) and the Daoguang emperor (1820–50) also put the lives of Chinese translators and Christians at risk. Several colleagues and friends of Staunton in Canton were sentenced to exile in Xinjiang because they showed interest in European languages or worked as interpreters for the British. Christianity was treated as an evil cult. This prompted Li, who chose to remain in China after the Macartney embassy, to go into hiding to evade persecution by the Qing government. With the exception of those located near the foreign factories outside the city of Canton, foreign missionaries also departed from China.

In her commentary Harrison notes a translation change that took place during the first half of the nineteenth century. Staunton and Li, each of whom learned either Mandarin or Latin during their teenage years, softened Chinese expressions about Westerners when translating into European languages. Translators who acquired the language as adults, however, tended to literally translate Chinese into European languages, without any

softening of expression. Robert Morrison (1782–1834), a Protestant missionary and a friend of Staunton's, was a prime example, someone who learned Chinese as an adult in order to proselytize in China. He did not understand the need to soften language in order to avoid misinterpretation. Unlike Staunton, Morrison's overly literal translations deepened the mistrust that already existed between Qing officials and British merchants and politicians.

The conflicts between Britain and China intensified when the former attempted to open additional trading routes. In 1816, twenty-three years after the Macartney embassy, Britain sent the Amherst embassy to Beijing, for which Staunton served as the interpreter. The Jiaqing emperor insisted that the ambassador, William Amherst (1773–1857), perform the kowtow ceremony, in which people had to kneel on both knees three times and bow their heads to the ground nine times in front of the emperor. This ceremony showed one's complete submission to the emperor. Hoping to maintain proper decorum for the British, Staunton suggested that Amherst refuse. Consequently, the embassy returned to Britain without any achievements. Staunton retreated from his interest in China and became a British parliamentarian.

In the final part of the book, Harrison traces the later life of Li and Staunton. After the Macartney embassy, Li stayed in China to preach Christianity in the province of Shanxi. This changed after Jiaqing came to power in the first decade of the nineteenth century and Christianity was banned. Until his death in 1828, Li hid from official attention but continued to update the Vatican with news about Chinese policies toward Christianity. Staunton, who returned to Britain after the Amherst embassy and became a parliamentarian, became a commentator during the Opium War of 1839 because of his experience in China. He opposed the opium trade and advocated that China be treated as an equal. The information he con-

veyed about China, however, was manipulated by pro-war politicians to strengthen their own views. In the conclusion of the book, Harrison regrets that Li and Staunton have been overlooked by historians, since they played key roles in the diplomatic relationship between China and Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century.

By making use of these two figures, Harrison illustrates the significance of interpreters in shaping Sino-British relations. Translation skills were crucial in minimizing potential misunderstandings between China and the West. Li was able to maintain a harmonious meeting between the Macartney embassy and the Qianlong emperor, while Staunton's fluency in Mandarin facilitated his liaison with Chinese merchants during his service in the Canton factory of the East India Company. The anti-Western policies pursued after the death of Qianlong, however, were unfavorable to translators who worked in areas outside Canton and for the Chinese who desired to learn European languages.

In addition to Li and Staunton, to whom the subtitle of the book refers, Morrison plays a role in this book. By including Morrison in her discussion, Harrison skillfully portrays the differences in translations made by translators who learned Chinese at different moments in the life cycle—the teenage years as opposed to adulthood. While young language learners like Staunton were able to minimize the cultural differences between China and Britain, adult ones like Morrison were unable to do so. The results were disastrous. By translating Chinese expressions into English literally, Morrison presented to his compatriots the true Chinese perception of the British. This seriously affected their attitude toward China and contributed partly to the outbreak of the Opium War.

In addition to providing new perspectives on Sino-British relations, Harrison's discussion of the contrast between Li and Staunton suggests new ways of viewing the history of intellectuals. Histor-

ians of China tend to focus on well-known intellectuals such as Heshen (1750–99) and Lin Zexu (1785–1850). In Harrison's study, the notable intellectual is represented by Staunton, who was famous for his translation of the Great Qing Legal Code. The study of Staunton's life and career fits in with the conventional approach to look at widely known intellectuals in history. By comparing Li with Staunton, Harrison attempts to look at Chinese intellectuals who were significant in history but forgotten by historians. Li was rarely mentioned in Chinese historical records. Taking her cue from his study of Latin and theology in Naples, she utilized archives in Rome and Naples to reconstruct Li's life and show how Li was representative among the many Chinese children who were sent to study in Catholic institutions in Italy. This novel approach to the study of Chinese intellectuals is quite pioneering.

There are certainly other Chinese students from pre-1800 Europe whose stories need to be told. While Li played an important role as an interpreter, other Chinese students in eighteenth-century Europe also contributed in one way or another to Sino-Western relationships. Having read Harrison's book, I would like to pose additional penetrating questions: How far did their experiences in Europe shape their understanding of China and the West? In what aspects did they contribute to the development of Sino-European relations? How did the European Catholic clergy respond to the Chinese theology students?

Henrietta Harrison has broadened our understanding of an underexplored area of which few scholars have been aware. Her selection of Li and Staunton demonstrates that Sino-British relations in the mid-Qing period were shaped by seemingly minor officials such as interpreters, a lesson that should not be overlooked when studying international politics. In sum, *The Perils of Interpreting* should be read by every historian of China and specialist in East Asian international relations.

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Citation: Kenneth Kai-chung Yung. Review of Harrison, Henrietta. *The Perils of Interpreting: The Extraordinary Lives of Two Translators between Qing China and the British Empire*. H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews. May, 2022.

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