

The Perils of Interpreting: The Extraordinary Lives of Two Translators between Qing China and the British Empire

By Henrietta Harrison. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. 341 pp. \$29.95 / £25.00 (cloth).

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doi:10.1017/jch.2022.9

The Macartney (1792–94) and Amherst (1816–17) embassies to the Qing have often been studied as a clash of institutions or imperial cultures, or the competing interests of two empires. Henrietta Harrison's new book peers into these encounters through a side door—the lives of the translators who played vital, yet often invisible roles in mediating between two cultures. She focuses not on the official performance of the embassies, but rather on the behind-the-scenes negotiations by linguists employed by both sides—sometimes over a drink, but often under the imminent danger of political threat. The prose is pictorial and vivacious, effortlessly carrying the reader into a new domain of empathy and historical awareness. The unique and intimate stories of translators offer an antidote to simplistic accounts of the missions presupposing rigid boundaries between China and the West. The result is a book that thoroughly transforms what we know about Sino-British encounters leading up to the Opium War.

The book tells the stories of the encounters between the Qing and England by tracing the parallel lives of two translators. One is Li Zibiao, a Catholic priest who spent years training as a missionary in Naples and served as the official translator of the Macartney Embassy. The other is George Thomas Staunton, a boy of twelve when his father brought him on board the embassy's warship, HMS *Lion*. Staunton acquired fluency in Chinese during the mission and went on to play an enormous role in the Canton trade and Opium-war era diplomacy. The twenty chapters, arranged in four parts, follow a chronological order to reconstruct the main stages of the two men's lives: the eclectic cultural currents shaping their transcultural upbringing (Chapters 1–4); how Li Zibiao served as the mediator between the Qing court and the Macartney Embassy (Chapters 5–11); George Thomas Staunton's interpretations and writing about China during the last decades of the Canton trade (Chapters 12–16); and finally, how the positive memories of the Macartney Embassy were erased and replaced with hardened attitudes between the two powers (Chapters 17–20).

Major attractions of the book include the complexity of identities it reveals in each historical figure and an expansion of interpretive possibilities when it comes to their fraught encounters. Instead of seeing Li and Staunton as representatives of “the Chinese” and “the British,” respectively, Harrison carefully constructs their childhoods and educational backgrounds to show that both were outsiders to the dominant culture at home, far more at ease mediating between cultures than inhabiting their own. Li, a model student in Naples, was more passionate about Christian spirituality and missionary work than he was about the interests of the Qing, and he quoted Roman authors in his Latin poems. In contrast, Staunton often relaxed in the company of the *hong*

merchants and Confucian gentry, but never truly fit into the life of a British parliamentarian, and, to his own chagrin, never learned to compose Latin poetry. And yet the two men shared a common belief in the interconnectedness of and common ground between China and England. Each interpreted the other culture by minimizing difference and emphasizing shared humanity. This approach enables Harrison to make the argument that, contrary to the standard characterization of the Macartney mission as a failure, the interpreters saw it as a success, because it achieved “an outcome acceptable to both sides” (270).

The research is both exhaustive and extensive, drawing from multiple archives in Latin, Chinese, and English, and no detail was too small to escape the author’s attention. This enables Harrison to not only reconstruct the oral conversations, but also to draw attention to the divergence of recollections (even by the same person at different times), which were shaped by self-censorship and the malleability of memory. Her research into the manuscripts and letters shows that both the Qing court and members of the Macartney Embassy edited their accounts of the audience in order to present a satisfying narrative to their domestic readers. Harrison underscores just how much later events, including historians’ preoccupation with the kowtow controversy, shaped studies of the mission. There was certainly difficulty regarding the kowtow, but we learn that Macartney was far more anxious about how his action would be received by the British public upon his return than about performing the act in the first place. Both sides understood what the other *needed* for its own image and made necessary accommodations. The Amherst embassy found the ritual much more controversial, for little of the goodwill and mutual rapport that the Macartney mission had enjoyed with local officials remained—partly due to the saber-rattling of the British navy near Macau.

Harrison’s exploration into the inner worlds of Li and Staunton shows the tremendous influence of translators in diplomacy and trade between two empires, and more broadly, how shifting linguistic policies of empires shaped cross-cultural encounters. It also reminds us just how much things can change over a few decades, both on a personal and institutional level. Knowledge about the other could be gained, but also forgotten or lost. The sympathetic British interpreter who defended China in the eyes of his haughty colleagues could also cast the decisive vote in favor of war, when that served his interest.

The book will be welcome to many readers and scholars who might have different interests and questions in mind. Its approach to linguistics and power relations echoes the postcolonial scholarship of Lydia Liu and Li Chen, but the analysis is not grounded in theory, resting entirely in the realm of storytelling. The book also provides a friendly rejoinder to the recent works of the New Qing history, which have paid attention to the Qing’s preoccupation with intelligence from Inner Asia and its growing interest in the expanding British empire. Harrison’s crisp prose, short chapters, and attention to global interconnectedness all make the book an attractive read for a wide range of readers.

Good books inspire further questions, and a few come to mind. The book suggests that the shift from eighteenth-century global interconnectedness to the nineteenth century of imperialism saw a decline in the Li–Staunton type of interpreters, who believed in the compatibility of the two cultures. The rise of machine interpreting and professionalization of the field, as the conclusion reminds us, is likely to obscure the difficult role played by interpreters to historians. But I wonder whether the Li–Staunton approach to interpretation was unique to the eighteenth century, or whether the

precision-driven methodology of Robert Morrison dominated the later era. It seems likely that both philosophies (and other schools) had their followers at all times but were more or less favored under different circumstances. Far from sentiments of a bygone age, we can see echoes of the Li and Staunton in the post-1860 era of diplomatic and cultural exchanges, from the diaries of diplomats and travelers telling the same kinds of heroic and complex tales, even in the eras of imperialism and nationalism. It would be interesting to know under which circumstances different approaches to translation prevailed, and how they interacted historically.

The Making of Song Dynasty History: Sources and Narratives, 960–1279 CE

By Charles Hartman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 400 pp. \$120.00 (cloth).

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doi:10.1017/jch.2022.15

In *The Making of Song Dynasty History: Sources and Narratives, 960–1279 CE*, Charles Hartman offers an erudite, probing study of “the major sources that survive as vestiges of official dynastic historiography” (xiii). These major sources are the *Recovered Draft of the Song State Compendium* (*Song huiyao jigao*) put together by Xu Song (1781–1848), the *Long Draft Continuation of the Comprehensive Mirror That Aids Administration* (*Xu zizhi tongjian changbian*) by Li Tao (1115–1184), the *Chronological Record of Important Events since 1127* (*Jianyan yilai xinian yaolu*) by Li Xinchuan (1167–1244), and the *Song History* (*Song shi*) supervised by Toghto (1314–1355). Hartman explains that these four surviving major sources were the products of an ideological contest between literati and the court: “In essence, history for the monarchy was a vehicle to exert its legitimacy and strengthen political control. For the literati, history was a source of rhetorical precedent for use in political dialogue, and much of that dialogue was directed against imperial expressions of absolute authority” (8). More specifically, Hartman argues, the extant works promote Confucian literati governance (or: Confucian institutionalist governance), in which the court shared authority with its officials, and they oppose the court’s tendency toward technocratic governance, in which the court asserted strict vertical control by means of ad hoc appointments of technical specialists. The surviving remnants of Song official dynastic history, therefore, all share a distinct ideological inflection, as they all use the past to demonstrate the superior legitimacy, the superior efficacy, and the superior morality of Confucian literati governance.

The chapters of *The Making of Song History* trace the development of this ideological inflection from collections of precedents to historical narratives, and from an implicitly moral, documentary approach to an explicitly moral, pedagogic approach. Chapter 1,