



## BOOK REVIEW

# *The Perils of Interpreting. The Extraordinary Lives of Two Translators between Qing China and the British Empire*

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Using Chinese State archives, archives of the Catholic Church, and archives of the British East India Company, and focusing on the personalities of Li Zibiao and George Thomas Staunton, who were engaged as interpreters in the George Macartney mission to Qing China (1792–1794), Henrietta Harrison brings to life this famous historical event. She more precisely shows how the personalities of Li Zibiao, a Christian convert born in 1760 in Liangzhou (present-day Wuwei in Xinjiang), and of George Thomas Staunton, born in 1781 in Salisbury, and the texts they and others produced about this mission, played an important role in shaping the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries' European view of China. As she states, the idea that it was Qing China's "ignorance of the outside world and in particular the difficulty of adjusting China's ancient tribute system to the new world of modern international relations" that was at the basis of the violent conflict that ensued between Britain and China, "has been deeply rooted since the nineteenth century" (p. 6). However, in Britain also, knowledge about China was "confined to particular groups or social classes, or simply forgotten. There were Chinese books in the British Library, but no one who could read them. Moreover, Macartney was learning about China from works written by the early Catholic missionaries a hundred years earlier: knowledge of China's recent court politics, which was crucial for diplomacy, was entirely absent" (p. 69).

Reading through the texts preserved in the above-mentioned archives, it becomes clear that an interconnection between deficient knowledge, mutual suspicion, and personal agendas of the interpreters was fundamental in how the Macartney mission developed. When, e.g., the Catholic priest and missionary Li Zibiao became Macartney's interpreter, this was "not because of a lack of other possible interpreters but because for Macartney finding someone he could trust outweighed concerns over particular linguistic abilities" (p. 85). Moreover, Macartney saw himself as acting on behalf of the British government and therefore wanted to avoid using an interpreter connected to the East India Company. Li Zibiao, on his part, had his own private agenda: knowing that interpreting for the British was officially limited to those Chinese employed in the trade and registered with the government, he agreed to becoming Macartney's interpreter because the latter promised that he would act like a papal diplomat and try to obtain advantages for the Catholic mission from the emperor (p. 88). As a result, Li indeed "began to think that acting as an interpreter for the embassy might be a task he was undertaking for the good of the church" (p. 63). That this did not give him a bad conscience can perhaps partly be explained by the fact that he, in turn, realised that Macartney too had a double agenda. As he wrote in a letter to his friend Giovanni Maria Borgia, son of the Duke of Vallemezzana: "The ultimate aim of the embassy to the Emperor of China [...] is to be able to obtain some port near Beijing where only the English will be allowed to trade, so that they will be exempted from the demands of the company of merchants in Canton, can do their business freely and increase their profits" (p. 67), an assessment that is closer to reality than the official discourse that Britain's ultimate aim was to establish diplomatic relations with China. Macartney was also suspicious of the Qianlong Emperor's (r. 1735–1796) choice of the Portuguese José Bernardo de Almeida as interpreter, convinced as he was that, as interpreter, Almeida would be hostile to the British and support the Portuguese interest in Macao (p. 109).

Historical accounts of the "kowtow" incident have given the encounter of Macartney's embassy with the Qianlong Emperor in Chengde everlasting fame. A comparison of different accounts of this "kowtow"

event shows how our knowledge and appreciation of Macartney's mission is importantly determined by the precise account we read. In the final version of his diary, which was intended for circulation to the East India Company and King George III, Macartney wrote, "As he (the Qianlong Emperor) passed we paid him our compliments by kneeling on one knee, whilst all the Chinese made their usual prostrations." The first version of the events George Thomas Staunton wrote in his diary differs from this. Here we read: "As he (the Qianlong Emperor) passed we went upon one knee and bowed our heads down to the ground." The words "down to the ground" have later been crossed out, however. Also the words "At last the Emperor got up from his throne and went away in his chair" are crossed out, and a sentence in which George Thomas Staunton describes his speaking Chinese to the emperor is added. Two days later he wrote, "We bent one knee," then an insertion "and bowed down to the ground" and "we repeated this ceremony nine times with the other mandarins except that they..." After this, he resorted to, "We made the ceremony as usual." In the version of the events as recorded by his father, George Leonard Staunton, the "kowtowing" event is omitted altogether, and the focus is on his son speaking Chinese (pp. 120-121).

It may be this incident for which the Macartney mission has become known in Europe; for Li Zibiao, however, not being employed in trade and not being registered with the government, meeting with the Qianlong Emperor was the occasion when he risked everything to serve China's Christians (p. 114). When he orally conveyed the six British requests to the Emperor, he added a seventh: "Christian laws are not at all harmful or contrary to the Chinese state, because men who know God become better and more obedient to control. So I ask your Imperial Majesty to let Christians who are scattered within your borders live peacefully, following their religion without unjust persecution." Li Zibiao may have been tempted to add this seventh request because, as was mentioned above, it had been on the understanding that Macartney would act as if he were also an ambassador from the pope that he had accepted becoming Macartney's interpreter in the first place. For Li, his participation in the Macartney embassy must therefore have been "part of a much greater divine work that encompassed the whole world" (p. 151). As is well known, however, the Jiaqing Emperor (r. 1796-1820) would endorse an anti-Christian pamphlet that not only made the link between Christianity and opium but also pointed to potential political threats from the Europeans (p. 124).

In 1799 George Thomas Staunton took up a post as a writer in the East India Company's warehouses in Canton. Finally acknowledging the value of his Chinese language skills, the Company formally appointed him as interpreter. This incited him to embark on the project of translating the Qing legal code (*Ta Tsing Leu Lee; Being the Fundamental Laws, and a Selection from the Supplementary Statutes, of the Penal Code of China*), and he used his knowledge of Chinese law to intervene in the negotiations between the East India Company and the Chinese authorities (p. 176). In the works he wrote after he had returned to England in 1817, he wanted to show that diplomacy with China was possible, and in his private writing to government officials, he offered to negotiate with the Chinese in the hope of averting war. The arguments he used were not military but legal. Britain, so he contended, should treat China in accordance with international law, just as it would a European country. The struggles between the European states of that moment, however, made him write to Robert Morrison, who had created a Chinese dictionary, that it was

“almost throwing away time to attempt to inform the public on the subject of China” (p. 238). In 1823 he was so discouraged that he donated all his Chinese books to the newly established Royal Asiatic Society.

The story of Li Zhibiao and George Thomas Staunton has a remarkable contemporary ring to it. At present also, relations between Europe and China are increasingly tense, and the willingness to understand each other better is hindered by deficient knowledge, mutual suspicions, and oftentimes conflicting agendas. *The Perils of Interpreting* therefore is not only an important analysis of historical records, but also is an appeal to contemporary negotiators and diplomats, businessmen and policy makers: a call to the empathy that forms the basis for intercultural understanding.