

Book Review

Henrietta Harrison, *The Perils of Interpreting: The Extraordinary Lives of Two Translators between Qing China and the British Empire*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp xiv + 341. \$32 (hardcover)

It is at this point a cliché for a world history textbook to feature border-crossing travelers, merchants, missionaries, intermediaries, and mapmakers, and more than a few of us have chafed at these interludes, so rarely well-integrated into the core narratives. Biographies of 'extraordinary lives,' whether for academic or popular audiences, often beg questions about why these lives are historically significant, if they are not important people or do not shed light on the lives of more numerous 'ordinary' folks. Harrison's *The Perils of Interpreting* puts obscure but notable figures at the crux of world historical events, struggling with epochal changes. Two themes run through the work, though one only becomes obvious towards the end: the immense and subtle challenges of translation; and the importance of understanding that knowledge is not only gained, but can also be lost, both incidentally and systematically. The resulting narrative is well-written, richly sourced, and engaging, and should be both fun for non-experts at the college or post-college level, as well as worthy of the attention of specialists.

The two translators of the title are Li Zibiao and George Thomas Staunton, participants in the drama of the 1793 Macartney Embassy mission to China, the latter as a linguistically precocious teen educated in cutting-edge British Enlightenment style, and the former as a Catholic priest trained in what can only be described (though Harrison doesn't use the term) as a classic Italian Renaissance seminary. Many others are presented, justifying the *dramatis personae* list in the frontmatter, though the only real potential confusion for this reader was George Thomas Staunton with his father, George Leonard Staunton; Harrison is careful to distinguish them by name, and circumstances, and introduces other figures with more than adequate context and detail to keep them straight.

Li Zibiao was born into a Chinese Catholic family and went to Europe for training in his early teens; two decades in Naples developed him into an erudite, multi-lingual, and deeply spiritual man; after the Macartney Embassy, he would go on to serve admirably as a parish priest in Shaanxi, living in secret and developing strong local communities. George Thomas Staunton was educated by his ambitious father in an idiosyncratic fashion, including a persistent belief that language must be learned conversationally, a method that was applied first to his Latin studies, and later to his Chinese skills. This resulted in great facility, but little literary exposure, something that actually distanced Staunton from his European peers, whose Latin was more poetic and who used it for fun more than communication. This story is a testament to how Latin remained a global elite language well into the nineteenth century, despite the power of vernacular publishing. It is worth noting that despite the fact that a Chinese-English dictionary did not exist at the time of Staunton's education or early career, he is credited with producing the first direct Chinese-English translation published, an abridged version of the Qing legal code. After the Macartney Embassy, and a Cambridge education, Staunton would go on to work for the East India Company in China and make a fortune arbitrating interest rates, then become embroiled in the politics of Sino-British relations as a tool of both sides, but appreciated by neither. After the Amherst Embassy fiasco, in which he played no small part, Staunton retired back to England, purchased estates and titles as well as a seat in Parliament, and spent his remaining years on the comfortable fringes of politics and society.

Li Zibiao and George Thomas Staunton shared a theory of interpretation as cultural intermediation requiring knowledge and sensitivity to both sides of a conversation. Literal translation, represented in this history by Staunton's coworker, Robert Morrison (who eventually became a close personal friend despite their methodological differences), actually creates greater distance between interlocutors because of the failure to adapt idiom and literary habit to a comprehensible equivalent. However, as both Li and Staunton learned, their mediation made them more active participants in the negotiation than was comfortable, resulting in personal hazard as well as professional failure. Morrison's approach, shaped by his Bible translation project, presented precise one-to-one equivalences, a practice particularly unsuited to Chinese, where character compounds can have dramatically different meanings and valences than individual characters, and historical and literary references are critical. But at critical junctures in the Amherst Embassy, Robert Morrison's son John was the only translator available, or at least the only one considered reliable.

Why that came to be is Harrison's second argument, a study of how knowledge is lost, even in systems of power where accurate information and communication are critical to effective policy. Here Harrison has a purpose well beyond the diplomatic failures of Macartney and Amherst: explaining the Qing dynasty's process of stumbling into the Opium War as a result of the political process which sidelined, exiled, or

executed so many of the officials with experience and understanding of international affairs that Commissioner Lin Zexu could credibly claim Chinese military superiority over British land forces on the grounds that their trousers were too tight. The British side, too, neglected to develop any real understanding of Chinese civilization in the eras between the embassies or in the run-up to the Opium Wars, despite the best efforts of Staunton, Morrison, and others to offer materials and support and expertise to policy makers and academic leaders. This left both sides negotiating the end to the first Opium War with dragooned merchant intermediaries working for the Chinese side and John Morrison as the British lead translator. Staunton's offer to help was unceremoniously rebuffed by the British Foreign Office.

Staunton and Li Zibiao were effectively sidelined by historic change, and neither man married to leave a family legacy. Victorian pseudoscientific racism, chauvinism, and imperial pride put Staunton out of step with the times, and his sensitivity to China was considered more of a foible than a strength. Li's carefully constructed and maintained local community was overwhelmed by foreign missionaries after the Treaty of Nanking, and his lifelong work to make Christianity a native Chinese faith was forgotten to the point that local histories register him as a foreign presence. Elitism and anti-merchant bias on both sides conspired with xenophobia to foreclose sources for understanding or mediation, leaving only raw power to determine relations. A frustrating tale, perhaps particularly for those of us who labor in the trenches of transnational education and scholarship, but well worth this thoughtful and vital treatment.

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