

BOOK REVIEW

**Henrietta Harrison, *The Perils of Interpreting. The Extraordinary Lives of Two Interpreters between Qing China and the British Empire***

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Guido Abbattista

University of Trieste  
[gabbattista@units.it](mailto:gabbattista@units.it)

At the heart of Henrietta Harrison's book, *The Perils of Interpreting*, there is more than simply *The Extraordinary Lives of Two Interpreters*; namely, George Thomas Staunton and Li Zibiao: an Englishman from an Irish family and a Chinese subject, also known as Giacomo Li, who was a member of the Catholic minority in Liangzhou, on the north-western frontier of today's Wuwei, China. Behind the parallel lives of these two people is the story of the complex ways in which the Qing Empire and the British Empire came together in one of the most hectic periods in both Chinese and British history, and especially in the history of global trade, diplomacy, and world political order. The years between Lord George Macartney's embassy to Peking at the court of the emperor Qianlong in 1792–94 and the First Opium War (1840–42) were crucial for the fate of relations between Europe (and the United States of America) and the Far East, as well as for the lives of the two protagonists of the book. Giacomo Li and George Thomas experienced those events first-hand, in the fundamental role of interpreters and cultural mediators, but also as bearers, in their respective roles, of an original inter-cultural approach, which the difficulties inherent in Sino-Western relations rendered fraught with uncertainties, risks, and dangers.

Although the book focuses on the biographical journeys of Staunton and Li, it is roughly divided into what we could essentially distinguish as two parts: before and after the Macartney embassy. The first part, Chapters 1–5, is dedicated to reconstructing the early stages of the life and education of Staunton (born 1781) and Li (born 1760). Staunton was the son of a demanding, very strict father (with extensive experience in the Caribbean and India) who was keen to give his son a first-rate, out-of-the-box education inspired by his

radical ideas, with private teachers and Grand Tour experiences. Li was a member of a minority religious community that was constantly at risk of persecution, who was, in spite of this, able to train as a Catholic priest in Naples, at the “Collegio dei Cinesi” (Chinese College) founded by Matteo Ripa, where he resided from 1773 for about 20 years.

Naples was also the place where the two men met for the first time, in 1792, when Staunton’s father chose Li and another Chinese neophyte, Ke Zongxiao, as language instructors for his son. Both Li and Ke accompanied the two Stauntons to London and then on the transoceanic crossing to China and Peking in the retinue of Lord Macartney. These first chapters are followed by four more dealing with the Macartney embassy. A great deal has been written about the Macartney embassy, but only now do we have, thanks to this book, a meticulous reconstruction, based on a wide range of English, Chinese, and in some respects also Italian primary sources, which render it completely free from stereotypical interpretations.

Interwoven in these pages are the dual perspectives of an analysis of the embassy and the experiences of the two young men: George Thomas as a 12-year-old boy with rudiments of written Chinese attached to the diplomatic mission, and Li, of course a Chinese native speaker with good knowledge of Latin and Italian, in the difficult and controversial role of interpreter. The reasons why the roles of interpreters and translators were crucial were obvious in a context known for its rigid adherence to etiquette and bureaucratic customs, and its lack of openness to Europeans. At the time, knowledge of Chinese, particularly of spoken Chinese, was the prerogative of very few Westerners, not least because of the strong differences between the Mandarin language and everyday linguistic usages and local dialects.

The Chinese court did nothing to facilitate interlingual communication, as Portuguese and French missionaries used their language skills according to partisan interests, and merchants of various nationalities—not in Beijing, but in Macao or Canton—only knew dialectal variants of practical use hybridized from different languages. The protocol requirements of court imposed the utmost caution in the use of words, expressions, and formulas. Therefore, simultaneous interpreting required a rare mastery of the spoken language, and those who could read and write Chinese were not necessarily able to orally translate *impromptu*.

The choice between adherence to the letter and to the overall meaning—in both translation directions—is identified by Harrison as an inevitable consequence of the lexical and structural differences between English and classical Chinese, dependent not only on individual skills but also on the cultural orientations of the translators. The combination of these circumstances resulted in considerable communicative difficulties. Think of the controversial meaning of the Chinese term *yi*, which the English translated as “barbarians” and the Chinese simply as “foreigners,” or the profoundly different implications of terms such as “gift” and “tribute,” and of Staunton’s later 1849 treatise on the Chinese translation of the word “God.” Further difficulties were caused by the lack of adequate competent checks on letters and memoranda written and exchanged in preparation for or at the conclusion of official meetings

and hearings. This meant that there was a high risk of misunderstandings, misinterpretations, manipulations, diplomatic incidents, resentments, and punishments, especially in a system such as China's, where a breach of imperial trust could result in severe punishments for an official, up to and including exile. Harrison demonstrates how the unsuccessful outcome of the Macartney embassy was due neither to mere language difficulties nor simply to the protocol issue of *kowtow*, but to the clear Chinese apprehension of the danger posed by Britain's naval and military might.

Moreover, the barriers, in addition to the strictly linguistic, were, and for a long time remained, also cultural, as is evident from the second part of the book: Chapters 12–20. Both Li and Staunton, during the embassy and later in their respective careers in China (where Li, after the difficult times caused by emperor Jiaqing's 1814 anti-Christian edict, died in 1828) and in England, always pursued a goal of mediation that was, in fact, by no means simply linguistic, but rather also cultural. Both men aimed at minimizing differences, bringing people closer together, facilitating communication, and sharing experiences, values, and ideas. Staunton, in particular, in his long career as a language expert for the East India Company, sinological scholar, public man, and author, which lasted until the 1850s, always strived to advocate an attitude of moderation and the search for an understanding in relations with China (even if he ended up voting with the government in 1840 in favor of the military intervention that led to the so-called "Opium War"). One of his sinological contributions of more lasting importance (not forgetting his 1804 Chinese translation of a pamphlet promoting the use of Jenner's smallpox vaccine in China) was the translation in 1810 of the *Da Qing lü li* or Qing code of laws (later re-translated in France and Italy), which implemented a method of translation that reflected the desire to avoid strictly literal versions—a system rather typical of Anglican missionaries, such as Robert Morrison, little inclined to compromise—in favor of readability, comprehensibility, and restitution of the text's overall meaning.

Harrison's book, thanks to a profound multilingual knowledge of the sources, introduces the reader into the heart of events of extraordinary importance in the formation of early globalization in the modern world, which in the radical transformations of relations between Great Britain and China played out one of its most important chapters. And *The Perils of Interpreting* achieves this through the lens of the complex problems of translation, which for many decades between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries continued to weigh heavily and create objective relational difficulties between the two countries. Li and Staunton, whose personal stories and important contributions can be appreciated thanks to this book, tackled the difficult, delicate, and risky task of linguistic mediation, sustained by the conviction that on both sides, English and Chinese, it was indispensable to pursue a path of rapprochement, tolerance, and mutual understanding. In closing, we can observe how, despite this important contribution, a complete reconstruction of George Thomas Staunton's intellectual biography is still lacking. The in-depth study of his many works and writings of various kinds, as well as his unpublished papers and correspondences, scattered in various libraries, would help a better

understanding of a figure who was not sufficiently known, but who played a role as a cultural intermediary and an important historical and political commentator on events relating to British imperialism in the first half of the nineteenth century. In any case, this book will be highly valued by anyone interested in the history of relations between the West and the Middle Kingdom at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, more generally, in the historical subject of intercultural encounters in the modern age.