"Brief Account of the English Character" / "大英國人事掠說"

Conditions of translation determined the course of Sino-British history in the nineteenth century and continue to determine the direction of historical scholarship on Britain and China today. As scholars increasingly make cross-archival connections and draw upon materials in both languages, the divergences of meaning imposed by the conditions of translation become more clear. This is especially the case when considering descriptions of national identity and national difference. Often it is only by considering both the Chinese and English versions of historical documents that we can discover the provocative translingual implications of these primary materials in the translational divide.

Such is the case for this text, drafted in English by President of the East India Company's Canton branch Charles Marjoribanks, translated into Chinese by the missionary Robert Morrison, and distributed along the coast of China by British EIC supercargo Hugh Hamilton Lindsay and missionary Karl Gützlaff from the *Lord Amherst* in 1832. Previously available only in its Chinese translation, Ting Man Tsao's presentation of the original English version of the tract gives valuable context to our understanding of the many semantic intricacies at the heart of the Sino-British encounter.

In particular, Marjoribanks's tract helps give a prehistory to the famous Article 51 of the Anglo-Chinese Treaty of Tianjin (1858) which states "It is agreed that, henceforward, the character "I" 夷 [barbarian], shall not be applied to the Government or subjects of Her Britannic Majesty in any Chinese official document issued by the Chinese Authorities either in the Capital or in the Provinces" (Mayers 19). The matter of the specific translation of the character now romanized as *yi* was no small concern for the British government. Indeed, Lydia Liu makes the claim in her definitive reading of the crisis that the term must be understood as a super-sign, for "Never has a lone word among the myriad languages of humanity made so much history as the Chinese character *yi* 夷. By history I mean world history" (Liu 31). As British writers first fixed the translation of *yi* as "barbarian," to the exclusion of other previous meanings including "foreigner" and "stranger," and then banned the use of this fixed translation, they established a linguistic focal point around which the tense negotiations of mid-century Sino-British exchange could be established; not merely during the so-called Second Opium War, which this Treaty sought to conclude, but during the far longer and more complex process of China's integration into Euro-American modernity. In Arif Dirlik's explanation of Liu's formulation, *yi* "represented not merely reconceptualizations of older terms but a new geopolitical order: the homogenization through the one word *yi* of a complex set of differentiated relations in Eastern Asia that had preceded the encounter…Whatever the gloss Qing officials may have placed upon the international law in translation, the assimilation of the law unavoidably represented also the assimilation of the Qing to a new international order the terms of which had been set elsewhere" (Dirlik 360).

The 1832 Lindsay/Gützlaff voyage, as Liu has argued, sets a crucial precedent for the 1858 Treaty language and so marks an important turning point in Sino-British relations. Previously, Robert Morrison had been able to translate *yi* in his *Dictionary of the Chinese Language* (1815) as a "respectable" term for "foreigner" (Morrison 61); in the voyages along the China coast, however, Gutzlaff records in his journal that he argued sharply against the use of "the epithet E [*yi*], 'barbarians,'" claiming "It was highly necessary to object to this epithet, and to shew from its use in Chinese writings that the term conveyed reproach." (Gützlaff and Ellis

246). From then onward, largely as a result of the translation work of Gützlaff and Morrison (who came to contradict his own earlier *Dictionary*), the contest over the word's neutrality grew ever more charged, and finally culminated in the article of the Treaty described above.

By publishing Charles Marjoribanks's draft text of his tract as well as Tsao's historical context, the *VIJ* gives important nuance to this dense history of translation. Marjoribank's tract balances the contest over signification that took place at the highest level of Qing and British imperial governance via the terms of international law. Intended for wide distribution, the "Brief Account" provides substantive rhetorical content meant to flesh out the contours of English character for ordinary Chinese subjects. The comparative lack of attention paid to Marjoribanks's tract has tended to de-emphasize British efforts to define themselves in Chinese linguistic terms. Rereading both the Chinese and English versions of the tract allows us to recognize how much more complicated the terms of linguistic self-definition must be.

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