

Hellenic Shadows on the China Coast: Greek Terms for “Foreigner” and “Religion” in Early Anglophone Missionary Sinology

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Abstract

The arrival of educated Protestant diplomats and missionaries in China in the early nineteenth century did not only bring new modern languages into contact with Chinese. The mistranslation “Barbarian Eye” may reflect a knowledge of a similar term in the Ancient Greek of Aristophanes, while the Bible was translated not from Latin or English but from the original languages, including New Testament Greek. The English word “religion” in the Authorized Version New Testament was therefore translated variously into Chinese by successive English speakers from Robert Morrison onward not in its modern English meaning, but in the meaning of the underlying Greek. But such difficult choices concerning key words in religious discourse were not being made for the first time: translators from Prakrit to Greek and from Prakrit to Chinese had long before confronted similar issues. Nor were they made in isolation from other translation challenges, such as deciding on the rendering of the word “superstition.”

Keywords

“Barbarian Eye,” Bible translation, Greek to Chinese translation, religion

1. A Peep into the Mental Attic

Karen Blixen, in her 1937 memoir *Out of Africa*, relates a story from an elderly Danish ship owner acquaintance, evidently too striking not to include with her own reminiscences. As a lad of sixteen he had visited a