

War of Translation, Treaty of Nanking, and Diplomatic Deception: Sir George Staunton and the Birth of Two Early Chinese Programs at the University of London

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Abstract

The British Empire was a latecomer in establishing Chinese studies. British Sinologists made strenuous efforts to establish the first program at the University College London in the mid-1830s. The empire did not contribute to the making of it. University College London, the institution where the program was set up, was apathetic about the whole establishment. When the first term ended, University College London was unwilling to continue the program despite the clamor for learning Chinese in the society. The program was finally revived in 1846, only this time at another college at the University of London. Relying on an extensive amount of private and public archival records centering on Sir George Thomas Staunton, this paper demonstrates that it was under his patronage that the Chinese program was reinstitutionalized in London. Known to be an unassuming political figure, Sir George Staunton was determined to rekindle the program. Not soon after the Treaty of Nanking was signed did a scandal of translation break out: an article in the peace treaty was missing in the translated version. The interpreter for the British Empire was accused of being bribed by the Chinese to betray the British Empire. Was it true? Or was this simply a political intrigue to humiliate the British? In fact, during the war, Staunton, being an old Chinese hand and an expert of Chinese translation, had already warned about the vulnerability of the government in view of the chronic lack of

competent interpreters. However, as party politics prevailed, his good intentions were ignored. Even worse, he was sidelined. After seeing that the scandal had hijacked Britain's war glory, he was resolute in fixing the problem. This time he used his own might to set the tone for British Sinology for years to come.

Keywords

Sir George Staunton, Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff, University of London, military interpreter, Treaty of Nanking

War as such is increasingly defined as a translation war: its formal strategy determined by the ability to translate intelligence, its stated objectives increasingly subject to mistranslation, and its diplomatic duperie as a Great Game ever more crucial to the probability of global extinction or the prospect of global peace.

—Apter (2006, 22)

1. Introduction: Staunton as Sinosphere Communicator

Sir George Thomas Staunton (1781–1859) is known to the Sinosphere as a renowned Chinese expert. He facilitated the East-West interaction through his capacities as an envoy in the Macartney Mission in 1793, as an interpreter (St. André 2004, 1–32) and cultural advisor to the East India Company (EIC) (Ong 2010, 141–165), and as an influential Sinologist in Europe and England (Cranmer-Byng 1967, 251–260). These multifaceted roles led to copious studies of him. Previous studies have provided a rather satisfactory account of his historical significance in the Sino-British relations from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth. But rarely mentioned was his unswerving commitment and groundbreaking contribution to the establishment of the Chinese programs in England, the first one at University College London (UCL) and the second at King's College London (KCL).

In fact, it was he who almost single-handedly and against all odds made these Chinese studies programs possible by using his powerful network and his erudite knowledge of Chinese. But his efforts in setting up the Chinese program are not recognized in any accounts of British Sinology, nor is he acknowledged in the history of the University of