

“Entrance into the Family of Nations”: Translation and the First Diplomatic Missions to the West, 1860s–1870s

Lawrence Wang-chi WONG

In effect, about thirty poor Chinese, most of them middle-aged men, were commencing the study of European languages, without any previous training whatever that could possibly qualify them to understand the elementary principles of Arts and Sciences.

This was simply the *Tung-wen-kwan*, or language school, established in 1862 for the purpose of creating native interpreters.¹

I

Traditionally, there was not any school in China for the training of Western languages. As a result, China had no qualified translators or interpreters to deal with the communication problems when the Europeans started to come in the seventeenth century. The situation became extremely acute and pressing when foreign countries began to set up legations at the Chinese capital in 1861. To cope with these changes and in their endeavour for “entrance into the family of nations,”² the Qing government started to train its interpreters for Western languages with the establishment of the Tongwen Guan 同文館 (School of common languages) in Beijing in 1862.

1 Diplomatic Despatches, China, XXVI, no. 48, Browne to Secretary of State Fish, 25 June 1869. Quoted from Ralph Covell, *W. A. P. Martin: Pioneer of Progress in China* (Washington, DC: Christian University Press, 1978), p. 170.

2 Immanuel C. Y. Hsü, *China's Entrance into the Family of Nations, The Diplomatic Phase, 1858–1880* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

As the first school of Western languages in China, Tongwen Guan has attracted considerable attention from scholars in Qing history, and a good number of studies exist. Among them, Biggerstaff's chapter on the School in his book *The Earliest Modern Government Schools in China* has been widely read and quoted,³ while the monograph by Su Jing 蘇精, no doubt another solid piece of work, is not as popular because it has not been well distributed.⁴ Most of the studies focus on the language school as part of the reform movement undertaken by the Qing court in the second half of the nineteenth century, *Ziqiang yundong* 自強運動 (the Self-Strengthening Movement, more often known as *Yangwu yundong* 洋務運動, the Foreign Affairs Movement). One topic that has been discussed thoroughly is the struggle between the protagonists of the modernization movement, principally Prince Gong 恭親王 (Prince Kung, Aisin Gioro Yixin 愛新覺羅奕訢, 1833–1898), and the conservatives, which culminated in the controversy over the establishment of the Mathematics and Astronomy Schools in Tongwen Guan in 1867, described by a historian as the “fight between Chinese learning and Western learning at the highest level of the Qing Court.”⁵ Nevertheless, despite the fact that Tongwen Guan was essentially a school to train diplomatic interpreters, few people have paid attention

3 Knight Biggerstaff, *The Earliest Modern Government Schools in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1961), pp. 94–153. This is a revised version of his very popular early article, “The T'ung Wen Kuan,” *Chinese Social and Political Science Review* 18 (October 1934), pp. 307–340.

4 Su Jing 蘇精, *Qingji Tongwen guan jiqi shisheng* 清季同文館及其師生 [The Tongwen Guan in the late Qing and its instructors and students] (Taipei: s.n., 1985).

5 Ding Weizhi 丁偉志 and Chen Song 陳崧, *Zhong Xi ti yong zhijian* 中西體用之間 [Between the body and the usage of Chinese and Western learnings] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1995), p. 78. For the controversy, see Liu Kwang-ching, “Politics, Intellectual Outlook and Reform: The T'ung Wen Kuan Controversy of 1867,” in *Reform in Nineteenth Century China*, ed. Paul A. Cohen and John E. Schrecker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 87–100; Xiong Yuezhi 熊月之, *Xixuedongjian yu wan Qing shehui* 西學東漸與晚清社會 [The dissemination of Western learning and the late-Qing society] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1994), pp. 324–333.

to the interpreters themselves.⁶ The present paper will first study how China's first generation of diplomatic interpreters to the West was trained in the School. It will then proceed to examine the role played by its graduates in the first several Chinese missions sent to Europe and America in the 1860s and 1870s. Given the fact that a lot of money and effort had been spent in training these interpreters, it is a pity they were not able to perform their duties satisfactorily in the missions. For over two decades after the establishment of the Tongwen Guan, China's diplomatic interpreting still relied heavily on some Westerner translators. This has profound effect on China, as it is doubtful, and legitimately, if these Westerners would always take the best care of China's interests. In our discussion, we will pay special attention to one of Tongwen Guan's earliest graduates, Zhang Deyi 張德彝 (1874–1919, also known as Deming 德明). He is chosen because he was the only person who went to all the first four missions to the West. He provides a good case to demonstrate the role of Tongwen Guan graduates as the first generation of diplomatic interpreters to the West.

II

In the reigns of the early Qing emperors, such as Kangxi 康熙 (Aisin Gioro Xuanye 愛新覺羅玄燁, 1654–1722, r. 1662–1722) and Qianlong 乾隆 (Aisin Gioro Hongli 愛新覺羅弘曆, 1711–1799, r. 1736–1795), Western missionaries in Beijing, mainly the Jesuits, were engaged to act as interpreters when there were negotiations with Western powers, such as the conclusion of the Treaty of Nerchinsk with Russia in 1689 and the visits of Western embassies like the Macartney Mission sent by Britain in 1783. This arrangement was far from ideal because there was always the question of loyalty, that the missionaries from Europe might put the

6 Cf. Wang Hongzhi 王宏志 [Lawrence Wang-chi Wong], "Jingshi Tongwen guan yu wan Qing fanyi shiye 京師同文館與晚清翻譯事業" [The Beijing Tongwen Guan and late-Qing translation], *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiusuo xuebao* 中國文化研究所學報 [Journal of Chinese Studies] *n.s.*, no. 12 (2003), pp. 289–330.

interests of their own nations above those of China. On the other hand, in the South, in Guangzhou where foreign trade was conducted, daily communication between the Chinese and the Western traders was mainly handled by the so-called *tongshi* 通事 (linguists), who were considered by many as linguistically incompetent and ethically unreliable. Lots of complaints were made against the quality of their translations.⁷ Occasionally the *tongshi* were enlisted for diplomatic interpreting. For example, during the Amherst Mission in 1817, the second embassy sent by Britain to China, the Qing court requested to send a *tongshi* from Guangzhou to act as interpreter.⁸ Then in the First Opium War in 1840–1842, a *tongshi* from Guangdong, Bao Peng 鮑鵬, was hired for interpreting by Qi Shan 琦善 (1790–1854), the Commissioner sent by the Emperor to negotiate with the British for a peace settlement. However, the *tongshi* were never trusted but viewed with the greatest skepticism by the Chinese authorities. Because of their ability to communicate with the enemies, they were often regarded as traitors, or *hanjian* 漢奸, “Chinese

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- 7 For example, William Hunter, an American trader who had spent several years in Canton from 1825 onwards and had many experiences with the Chinese linguists, mentioned that they “knew nothing of any language but their own.” William C. Hunter, *The “Fan Kwae” at Canton Before the Treaty Days, 1825–1844* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co., 1882), p. 50. Elsewhere, he reported the trial of a Lascar seaman who was accused of entering Chinese territory unlawfully after a shipwreck. The Chief Linguist, Old Tom, who knew virtually nothing of the language, made up the questions and answers of the interrogation with the assistance of a trunk and box-maker who had managed to pick up a few foreign words. The whole situation was pathetically farcical. William C. Hunter, *Bits of Old China* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co., 1855), pp. 21–30. For discussions on the *tongshi* 通事, cf. Paul A. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700–1845* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), in particular chapter 5, pp. 77–93. He focuses mainly on the role of the *tongshi* in handling foreign trade in Canton. See also Lawrence Wang-chi Wong, “Translators or Traitors? The Tongshi in 18th and 19th Century China,” special issue, *East Journal of Translation* (May 2014), pp. 24–37.
- 8 Gugong bowuguan 故宮博物館, ed., *Qingdai waijiao shiliao, Jiaqing chao* 清代外交史料·嘉慶朝 [Historical material of Qing diplomacy, the reign of Jiaqing], vol. 5 (repr., Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1968), p. 3.

evil-doers.”⁹ Hence, *tongshi* were not able to make much contribution in diplomatic interpreting.

The lack of interpreters put the Qing government in a very disadvantageous position in its interaction with the ever encroaching Western powers. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that some far-sighted people in the Court realized the urgency of training their own diplomatic interpreters, especially when the Treaty of Tientsin was signed in 1858, the British added the clause that “All official communications addressed by the Diplomatic and Consular Agents of Her Majesty the Queen to the Chinese Authorities shall, henceforth, be written in English. They will for the present be accompanied by a Chinese version, but, it is understood that, in the event of there being any difference of meaning between the English and Chinese text, the English Government will hold the sense as expressed in the English text to be the correct sense.”¹⁰ It was against this background that Prince Gong, who was tasked to handle foreign affairs after the Second Opium War, decided to establish a Western language school. In his petition to the Emperor on the new direction to deal with the Westerners, he urged to set up the Zongli Yamen 總理衙門 to handle all foreign matters, which was generally taken as the Foreign Office of the Qing.¹¹ Under the Yamen, the Tongwen Guan was established to train

9 Cf. Wang Hongzhi, “Panni’ de yizhe: Zhongguo jindai fangyishi shang suojian tongzhizhe dui fanyi de jiaoliu ‘叛逆’的譯者：中國近代翻譯史上所見統治者對翻譯的焦慮” [The “traitorous” translators: Anxiety of the ruling class towards translators in Chinese translation history], *Fanyixue yanjiu jikan* 翻譯學研究集刊 [Journal for translation studies] 13 (November 2010), pp. 1–55.

10 “Treaty of Tientsin (1858),” in Inspector General of Customs, *Treaties, Conventions, etc., Between China and Foreign States*, vol. 1 (Shanghai: The Statistical Department of the Inspector General of Customs, 1917), p. 418.

11 For Zongli Yamen (Also spelt as Tsungli Yamen), see S. M. Meng, *The Tsungli Yamen: Its Organization and Functions* (Cambridge, MA: East Asian Research Center, Harvard University, 1962); Banno Masataka, *China and the West, 1858–1861: The Origins of the Tsungli Yamen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964); Jennifer M. Rudolph, *Negotiated Power in Late Imperial China: The Zongli Yamen and the Politics of Reform* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University East Asia Program, 2008); Wu Fuhuan 吳福環, *Qingji Zongli Yamen yanjiu* 清季總理衙門研究 [A study on Zongli Yamen of the late Qing] (Wulumuqi: Xinjiang daxue chubanshe, 1995).

translators or interpreters for diplomatic purposes.¹²

Although Prince Gong first petitioned for its establishment in 1861, it took one and a half years before Tongwen Guan could officially start its classes because they were not able to find qualified instructors. In the early stage, English, French, and Russian were taught, while German and Japanese were added in 1871 and 1895. No information on the syllabus or the way of teaching and conducting classes for the early stage is available. But it could not have been very effective or productive. Very likely, the courses were not well-organized. Take the English programme, which was supposedly the most important one, as an example. The first English instructor was John S. Burdon (1826–1907), recommended to the post by Thomas Francis Wade (1818–1895), Chinese secretary at the British Legation. He stayed on the job for less than two years, leaving little trace of achievement worthy of mentioning. He was succeeded by John Fryer (1839–1928) in 1864, who also quit within two years. Although Fryer later made good contributions to the modernization of China by teaching English and translating Western works at the Kiangnan Arsenal (Jiangnan Arsenal),¹³ his Beijing Tongwen Guan years had nothing to boast of. Late as in 1868, Fryer was still talking about his aversion for school teaching.¹⁴

12 Jia Zhen 賈楨 et al., eds., *Chouban yiwu shimo (Xianfeng chao)* 籌辦夷務始末 (咸豐朝) [The complete account of the management of the barbarian affairs (Reign of Xianfeng)]. *Chouban yiwu shimo* 籌辦夷務始末 [The complete account of the management of the barbarian affairs], *juan* 71, vol. 8, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), p. 2679. “Chouban yiwu shimo” hereinafter abbreviated as “YWSM.” The memorial was made on the 3rd day of the 12th moon of the 10th year of Xianfeng, which was 13 January 1861. As the 10th year of Xianfeng was 1860, many people have mistaken that the memorial was made in 1860.

13 For John Fryer, cf. Adrian A. Bennett, *John Fryer: The Introduction of Western Science and Technology into Nineteenth Century China* (Cambridge, MA: East Asian Research Center, Harvard University, 1967).

14 In his letter to Stewart in 1867, he said, “I am perfectly sick of teaching English.” Then on 11 July 1868, he wrote to his cousin Susy, “I always detested school teaching. My parents wished me to become a teacher and it was in obedience to their wishes that I did so. Once a schoolmaster always a schoolmaster seems to be the idea in the people’s minds. It has been difficult to get free from the toil of cramming knowledge into narrow skulls where there was no room for it.” Quoted from Jonathan D. Spence, *To Change*