

# **Peter Perring Thoms (1790-1855), the Early Nineteenth-Century Cantonese Sphere of Letters, and Anti-Imperialist Politics**

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This paper seeks to establish the historical significance of the neglected, yet pioneering translation practices of a British artisan, the printer and translator Peter Perring Thoms against the backdrop of the escalating tensions between self-educated artisans and the aristocracy in England on the one hand and the growing corporate influence over Sino-British relations in advance of the Opium War (1839-1842) on the other. The paper examines how Thoms's translations from both vernacular and classical belles lettres then current in Guangdong positioned Guangdong literary culture as perspectives onto a China that, in his view, was vastly more similar than different from contemporary England, a minority position among the men then affiliated with the British East India Company. Moreover, in contrast to his predecessors and contemporaries, Thoms privileged the sentimental culture of romantic love in unvarnished language for English reading audiences in an effort to expand their empathetic capacity to extend to Chinese literary figures. Apart from the translations that appeared in book form during his sojourn on the South China coast (1814-1825), he pursued such a stance with great vigor in the politicized arena of the periodical press upon his return to England, particularly in the 1830s and 1850s in response to the propaganda campaigns of the opium firms and their political supporters in Parliament. Thus, Thoms recruited fiction with Cantonese dialect elements as well as Cantonese literary culture more broadly to offer a resistant, anti-imperialist perspective on Sino-British contact.