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Interpreters in Early Imperial China

Rachel Lung
Lingnan University

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Volume 96

Interpreters in Early Imperial China
by Rachel Lung

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Preface

This monograph presents the results of three projects I conducted between 2005 and 2009, funded by Lingnan University, Hong Kong, concerning interpreters archived in early imperial China and their possible roles in the making and writing of histories about foreign peoples at the time. The ten chapters demonstrate original discussions and analyses on archived interpreters and translators, as well as on translation and historiography as reflected from the Chinese archival records. They were generated based on critical readings of primary and secondary sources, rarely utilized and analyzed in depth even in translation research published in Chinese.

Regarding language usage, I use 'translators' or 'translation' in a broad sense to make references to either translators or interpreters, and translation or interpreting, for that matter. Also, the words 'interpreters' and 'interpreting' should be taken to mean intermediaries and acts of language mediation, not translators, or translation.

For the purposes of clearer literary distinction, I use the full name of scholars from mainland China in my documentation, as there is a higher frequency of identical surnames. Chinese names in pinyin format are italicized, except for names of persons and dynasties. The Chinese archival texts cited were all translated into English by me unless otherwise stated.

Introduction

The historical study of translation did not become a prominent research topic until the turn of the twenty-first century. It was Lefevere (1993) who first identified a certain inadequacy in this area of research and held that this could, in part at least, be responsible for the discipline's stunted growth. Clearly there was as little interest at this time, in the history of the development of Translation Studies, as there had been in focused scholarly inquiry regarding the historical translation traditions of specific individual countries (Hung and Wakabayashi 2005a).

That this was indeed considered to be the case is confirmed by Snell-Hornby (2006) in her critical evaluation of the various turns in Translation Studies since the 1960's. Likewise, the realization of this can also be seen in the work of Delisle and Woodsworth (1995) whose publication documents the roles of notable interpreters in the histories of European civilizations. Above all, this defining work of the mid-1990s drew the attention of the research community to the seminal article of Bowen et al. (1995) in which interpreters' plausible roles in the making of history was examined across pre-modern and modern periods in various language cultures.

In many ways, my research interests in the history of interpreting and interpreters' roles in the writing of diplomatic histories were inspired, if not shaped, by these pioneers. However, working in the ancient Chinese tradition has given me the distinct opportunity of engaging with a specialized kind of data.

This research monograph has two focuses: first, interpreters or interpreting events documented in standard archives in early imperial China; and second, interpreters' roles in the making of written archival records about foreign countries and peoples in this time frame.[1]

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[1] The absence of any discussions on Xuanzang (602–664) warrants a note of explanation. The iconic translation achievement of this Chinese Buddhist pilgrim – who spent sixteen years (629–645) in Central Asia and India in search of authentic sutras and spent the last two decades of his life on a large-scale Chinese translation of Sanskrit sutras – is excluded because its nature is incongruent with this monograph. Xuanzang's pilgrimage was not commissioned by imperial China, and his intercultural experience outside China could not be examined the same way I did with the other interpreting archives presented here. More importantly, the impact of Xuanzang hugely transformed the political and cultural environment of both China and Asia in the first millennium, and to cram his landmark achievements into a single chapter is not only at odds with the rest of the book, but would not do him justice either.

The first focus (Chapters 1 to 4 and 9 to 10) is representative of the initial years I spent on the historical research of interpreting in ancient China during which I was more concerned about locating traces of interpreters and their activities in the archives. Interpreters were never the main players in diplomatic exchanges in China, and their imprints in archival records were quite minimal. Yet, for the sake of research as much as for my own personal curiosity, I have considered interpreters to be too important to be made textually obsolete in historiography in these cross-linguistic and cross-cultural exchanges.

The second focus (Chapters 5 to 8) demonstrates my further thoughts regarding the archived traces of interpreters. Of particular interest to me have been interpreters' roles in the making of archival records documenting China's interlingual and intercultural exchanges. More specifically, I would like to present some thoughts over the possible relationship between interpreters and the writing of archives in the documentation of such exchanges.

These two perspectives are rarely documented at length in the literature of either Translation or History Studies. Intended as a contribution to these missing pieces of knowledge in both disciplines, this book attempts to uncover the subtle presence of interpreters in China's archived diplomatic encounters, and forge the probable link between interpreters and the writing of diplomatic histories in China in antiquity. Based on a detailed examination of selective archival records of China, spanning almost a thousand years from the first through the ninth centuries, this monograph provides snapshots of translation and interpreting activities between imperial China and its neighbors in Asia at large. It displays a range of archived information about interpreters' identities, mediating and non-mediating tasks, status, accomplishments, and relations with their patrons and other people they worked with in early imperial China. It also provides a perspective in which translators and interpreters might have made an impact on how certain diplomatic events were recorded in history, hence revealing the unspoken link, so often neglected, between translators or interpreters and the subsequent recording of history.

The chapters are arranged chronologically so that the readers may better appreciate, in a more systematic way, the issues pertinent to translation and historiography throughout the first millennium in China. These issues document the identities of interpreters, the visiting envoys' use of hired interpreters, the probable use of Chinese scribes to facilitate communication with dynastic China, and interpreters' link to the historiography of foreign peoples. It seems that the provision of Chinese translators was not much of a concern for pre-Tang (618–907) imperial China, during which Asian states resorted to their own means to overcome language barriers, in writing and in speech. From the seventh through the ninth centuries, however, the employment of Sogdian translators in the government during the Tang times suggests that the system of translation official was not only better institutionalized, but also presented a very different picture from other Chinese dynasties.

These unique features in the use of translators and interpreters in diplomatic exchanges crisscrossing various dynasties in early imperial China give rise to many other questions regarding the historical development of translators and interpreters. For example, why were translators not provided in Liang China (502–557) for diplomatic exchanges in the host country? Was the use of hired translators of non-Chinese ethnicities to provide Chinese translation a mundane practice in diplomatic interpreting in those days for the foreign envoys visiting China? Who were the Sogdian translators and how did the Tang court settle within itself their loyalty issue?

Chinese evidence about interpreters in antiquity comes from more systematically collected records in standard historical sources across centuries and dynasties. However, the fortunate retention and use of these standard archives is not always a straightforward matter. China's meticulous compilation of histories from various sources in its historiography tradition, has, of course, served to provide relatively complete accounts of people and events throughout the years, starting as early as 3000 BC. The limitation of these official histories has, nevertheless, been that they were largely commissioned by the ruling dynasties and therefore could be taken to be suspect in their descriptive honesty. How much of these is a 'true' portrayal of the 'actual events' and whether the speeches of foreign envoys were 'embellished' to satisfy the egocentric mindset of imperial China in its archival record is, understandably, open to debate. Furthermore, the imperial Chinese histories were never written about or centered upon translators, considering their inferior rank in the government hierarchy. The culling of archival records about translation or translators, therefore, requires an extensive search of records and an intensive examination of records pertinent to foreign contacts. It also goes without saying that researchers must demonstrate an awareness of such potential pitfalls when working with material from historical archives. That being the case, China's voluminous written archival tradition still continues to remain unparalleled compared to its other global counterparts.

One reason that explains the relative lack of interest in the historical pursuit of translation is the general (mis)conception that the historic approach has little to do with the discipline's theoretical development. But in fact, the theoretical study of translation is best grounded in translation practice through which the nuances, features, and limitations of interlingual exchanges can be analyzed, specified, and explained. It warrants the investigation of, ideally, authentic translation practices – not just of modern times, but throughout histories, not just in the Western setting, but applied in non-Western settings as well – ever since translation started to play a part in rudimentary human interaction. The growth of Translation Studies in these directions can be testified to by the recent calls to focus scholarly inquiries on both the non-Western traditions and historical studies of translation (Hung and Wakabayashi 2005b; Tymoczko 2006).

The study of translation activities in non-Western settings, blossoming as it has in recent years, focuses precisely on the historical translation traditions of individual countries (Hung 2005a; Trivedi 2006). The obvious value of the historical approach to the theoretical pursuit of translation is the documentation and analysis of archived translation practice with authentic, rather than contrived, configurations surrounding the events. Some of these cited translation events may lend support to, or challenge, the pre-existing notions, or better still, initiate new avenues for further discussions in the discipline. Whatever form they take in stirring up debates on the nature, perceptions, and definitions of translation, the input from translation historians indisputably serves to advance and push boundaries for Translation Studies as a whole (Kothari and Wakabayashi 2009).

The most rewarding scenario, of course, would be to know that this publication had inspired its readers to undertake research into their own historical language traditions. Suffice to say, in the discussions presented in the ten chapters, I hope to offer readers a platform to start pondering these, and further subsequent questions in relation to the study of interpreters in early imperial China.

Acknowledgments

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My sincere gratitude goes to Professor Leo Tak-hung Chan, my lecturer, then my colleague, and crucially, my mentor, from Lingnan University. At the initial stages of my academic career, Professor Chan kindly offered to read my article manuscripts; he did so meticulously, line by line, and gave me close assistance with language and style for academic writing. Most importantly, he showed me what good research was like.

My heartfelt thanks go to Dr. John Wong, a learned friend who bought me a copy of Li Nanqiu's *History of Interpreting in China* in 2002. That was how I got inspired to do research on this topic. I am thankful also for years of professional assistance from and useful exchanges with Dr. Canpeng Zhao, a Chinese historian, of Jinan University, Guangzhou, China.

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Chronology

Dynasties of Early Imperial China
(from Western Han to Song China)

Dynasty		Duration
Han Dynasty (漢朝)	Western [or Former] Han (西漢)	206 BC–AD 8
	Xin Dynasty (新朝)	9–23
	Eastern [or Latter] Han (東漢)	25–220
Three Kingdoms (三國)	Wei (魏)	220–266
	Shu (蜀漢)	221–263
	Wu (吳)	229–280
Jin Dynasty (晉朝)	Western Jin (西晉)	266–316
	Eastern Jin (東晉)	317–420
Southern Dynasty (南朝)	Liu Song (劉宋)	420–479
	Southern Qi (南齊)	479–502
	Liang (梁朝)	502–557
	Chen (陳朝)	557–589
Northern Dynasty (北朝)	Northern Wei (北魏)	386–534
	Eastern Wei (東魏)	534–550
	Western Wei (西魏)	535–557
	Northern Qi (北齊)	550–577
	Northern Zhou (北周)	557–581
Sui Dynasty (隋朝)		581–618
Tang Dynasty (唐朝)		618–907
Five Dynasties (五代)	Later Liang (後梁)	907–923
	Later Tang (後唐)	923–936
	Later Jin (後晉)	936–947
	Later Han (後漢)	947–950
	Later Zhou (後周)	951–960
Song Dynasty (宋朝)	Liao (遼)	916–1125
	Northern Song (北宋)	960–1127
	Western Xia (西夏)	1038–1227
	Jin (金)	1115–1234
	Southern Song (南宋)	1127–1279

Table of contents

Preface IX
Introduction XI
Acknowledgments XV
Chronology XVII

CHAPTER 1

Perceptions of translating / interpreting in first-century China 1
Earliest records of labels for interpreters 2
Frontier stories of China: Han and non-Han Chinese 5
Southwestern barbarians in Latter Han China 6
Interpreting encounters with frontier tribes 8
Presentation of the three sung poems 11
Zhu Fu's perception of *Yi* 14
Tian Gong's perception of *Yi* 15
The emperor's perception of *Yi* 16
Implications 17

CHAPTER 2

Bridging language barriers in encounters with China in sixth-century Asia 21
Commercial interests in tribute journeys 23
The Hephthalites 25
The Tuyuhun: "Interpreters" on the Silk Road 31
Silla 34
Homogeneous translators or foreign translators? 36
Chinese learning sphere 37
Scripting of state letters for China: Stakes and strategies 38
Implications 40

CHAPTER 3
Türkish diplomatic correspondence to Sui China (581–618): Was it translated? 43
Studies on ancient diplomatic correspondence 45
The Türk and its relations with Sui China 48
The linguistic argument 51
The historical argument 52
Implications 57

CHAPTER 4
Translation officials in Tang China (618–907) 59
Foreign relations and translation officials in Tang China 60
Foreigners in Tang China 61
Central government offices dealing with foreigners 63
Duties of the Court translators 64
Duties of translators in the Secretariat 69
Distinctions between the two kinds of translation officials 70
Contingency measures 72
Implications 74

CHAPTER 5
Interpreters and archival records of foreign contacts of imperial China 77
History of interpreting from national archives 77
Pioneers in the early documentation of interpreters 79
Interpreters as historians 80
Interpreting events and their records in history 82
Implications 88

CHAPTER 6
Interpreters and the writing of histories about interlingual encounters 91
Links between interview reports and historical records 97
Implications 102

CHAPTER 7
Interpreters as consultants in historiography in eighth-century China 103
Historical dimension of Translation Studies 104
Historical interpreting: Real or fictitious 104
Ancient China's initiatives to explore exotic places 105
Ge Jiayun 107
Jia Dan 109
Implications 113

CHAPTER 8
Interpreters and the making of the *Kirghiz Memoir* and Kirghiz accounts 117
Interpreters and historiography 118
Historiography and the archives on foreign countries and peoples 121
Interpreters and the making of the *Kirghiz Memoir* 121
Interpreting traces in the archived Kirghiz accounts 124
Implications 132

CHAPTER 9
Oral translators in outbound diplomatic correspondence 135
Diplomatic interaction and interpreting 136
An envoy-cum-interpreter tradition in imperial China 137
The survey 139
Outbound correspondence 140
Identity of Shi Jiezhi 141
Identity of Liu Mian 144
The exceptions 144
Comprehension problems in reading Chinese letters 146
Implications 147

CHAPTER 10
Sogdian interpreters in Tang China: An issue of loyalty 149
Cosmopolitan mindsets of Tang China and the recruitment of Sogdian translators 151
Evidence 1: Deploying a Chinese envoy of Sogdian ethnicity 153
China's dilemma in the deployment of a Sogdian envoy 153
Evidence 2: Soliciting Türkic-speaking translators not affiliated to the Uighürs 155
Implications 156

Conclusion 159
From the archived to the non-archived 159
On interpreters 161

APPENDIX
The thirteen letters and the two exceptions 165

Bibliographies 167
Index 177

CHAPTER 1

Perceptions of translating / interpreting in first-century China

The absence of a lexical term in English to refer to both translation and interpreting has been taken to be a linguistic inadequacy in the general discussion of language mediation (Pöchhacker 2004a). Paradoxically, another problem of linguistic inadequacy is present in classical Chinese for exactly the opposite reason: the term *yi* (譯) is capable of denoting, at once, translation, interpreting, translators, and interpreters.[1] In fact, concepts of translation (written) and interpreting (oral) were not meticulously distinguished until the modern coinage of *biyi* (筆譯) (literally, pen translation) and *kouyi* (口譯) (literally, oral translation) in Modern Standard Chinese,[2] deriving from the root of *yi*. However, there was indeed a reason why concepts relating to language mediation were blended, in antiquity, into the umbrella term of *yi*. The inquiry as to how and why such a process of language change took place is beyond the scope of this chapter.[3] In fact when one goes back far enough in histories to examine language mediation, one finds interpreting somehow intertwined with translating activities. In other words, the historical study of interpreting is inseparable from the historical study of translation.

Etymologically, before the term *yi* dominated the semantic field of language mediation in classical Chinese, it was merely one of the four designations, of equal standing, used to refer to language mediators in early imperial China. Cheung

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1. Unlike the specific referents in the English lexicon for each of these corresponding concepts, *yi* is capable of referring to all or some of the four meanings in classical Chinese. Where meanings are loosely defined, *yi* is used in this chapter; where meanings are clear from contexts, specific English equivalents are used instead.

2. A program for unifying the national language, which is based on Mandarin, was launched in the early 20th century and it resulted in the development of Modern Standard Chinese. In 1956 a new system of Romanization called *Pinyin*, based on the pronunciation of the characters in the Beijing dialect, was adopted as the standard of Chinese language (Ramsey 1989).

3. An earlier version of part of this chapter first appeared in my article published in *Interpreting* 11(2): 119–136, 2009. I presented part of this chapter at a translation conference (Des Faux Amis: Tracing Translation(s) Across Disciplines) at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul, 5–8 April, 2007.

(2005), for example, analyses the meanings of these four earliest designations for interpreters or translators in China (to be discussed further below) and attempts to draw links between their epistemology and their potential relevance to translation theories. Likewise, in attempting to extrapolate Asian translation traditions, Hung and Wakabayashi (2005b) emphasize the significance of tracing the etymological definitions of translation in different Asian contexts and maintain that

> The very terminology used in relation to translational activities today can be better understood by tracing its etymology and how these terms have changed over time and accumulated an encrustation of meanings – meanings that do not always map one-to-one onto their English "equivalents"...Although we need to be aware of placing too much credence in etymological explanations, the original concepts underpinning such terms – and how they might differ from the concept underlying the term "translation" – merit consideration.
>
> (Hung and Wakabayashi 2005b: 2)

In this chapter, the same explorative motif motivated my investigation of, first, albeit briefly, names attached to interpreters or translators in antiquity in Europe and in China; and second, synchronic perceptions of *yi* in first-century China, drawing on specific interpreting and translating events recorded in its standard history.

Earliest records of labels for interpreters

Unlike the umbrella term *yi* in classical Chinese which may loosely refer to both the *act* of translating or interpreting and the *person* who translates or interprets, the European referents for translating and interpreting are often discretely defined. As Pöchhacker (2004b: 9) puts it, "the concept of interpreting is expressed by words whose etymology is largely autonomous from that of (written) translation" in many European languages. In Germanic, Scandinavian, and Slavic languages, expressions denoting a person who interprets can be traced to the term *targumanu* as far back as 1900 BC. This is also the origin of the Arabic term *tarjumān* ترجمان or the Turkish *Turcüman*. The borrowing of terms that refer to translators across different language cultures seems to be quite common in ancient languages (Behr 2004: 192), although the direction of borrowing is not always clear from existing evidence. A clear case of such borrowed words was put forward by Rezhake (1994: 9), who noticed that *tərjimə*, *kilmak*, and *tərjiman* are words borrowed from the Arabic with reference to translators in the Uighür lexicon. However, apart from the designation itself, the available records had little to say about the interpreter's personal experience, whether mundane or dramatic,

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