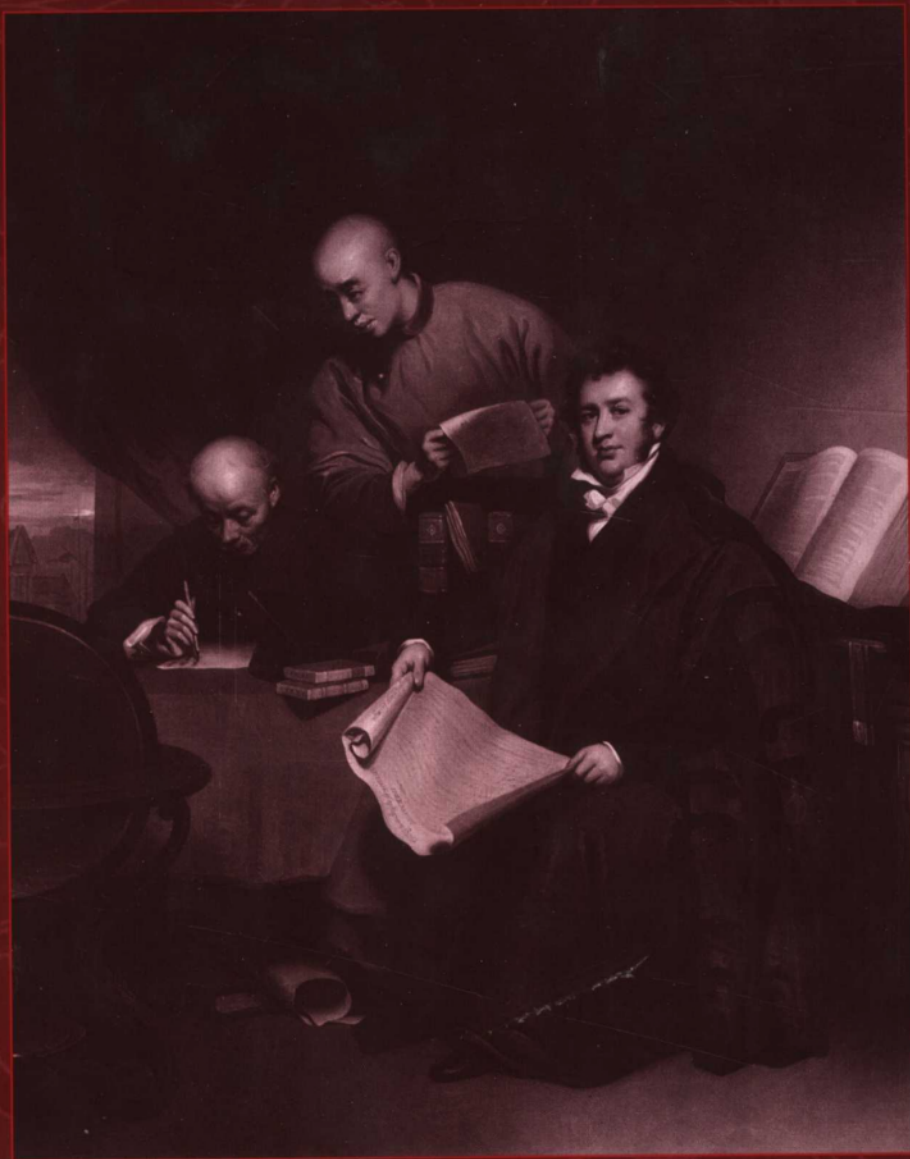


The Clash of Empires

THE INVENTION OF CHINA IN
MODERN WORLD MAKING



LYDIA H. LIU

"Extending the investigations begun in her *Translingual Practice*, Lydia Liu here scrutinizes the linguistic and semiotic perturbations that accompanied the rise of one empire and the tottering of another. Words here function as gifts, as missiles, and as mirrors—and sometimes as all three at once. In law, grammar, religion, diplomacy, media, and other domains, Lydia Liu uncovers the mutual implication of Asian modernity and a colonial ideal of sovereignty, the better to enable us to imagine a future that might be different."

—Haun Saussy, author of *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China*

"Lydia Liu's *The Clash of Empires* explores the powerful impact of 'sovereign thinking' or the 'desire of the sovereign' in colonial, semi-colonial, and postcolonial situations, focusing on late-nineteenth-century China. Her point of departure is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. Appreciative of his move to theorize the formation of nationalism in Creole contexts, she points out nonetheless that Anderson does not inquire into why nations that dream to be free dream in terms of the right to state sovereignty. Rather than take this urge as self-evident, she turns to the period of Chinese history she knows best to explore the situations in which sovereign thinking gets expressed. The author has an intriguing voice, taking the reader across many analytical landscapes and through wonderfully telling examples of sovereign thinking to show its overwhelming power on nations becoming states."

—Timothy Brook, author of *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*

"An original and brilliant contribution to history, linguistics, international relations, law, and postcolonial studies, this book changes our world by changing the way we look at ourselves. It is destined to become a classic."

—Dorothy Ko, author of *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*

Lydia H. Liu

The Clash of Empires

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INTRODUCTION

Civilizations Do Not Clash; Empires Do

Language has always been the perfect instrument of empire.

—Antonio de Nebrija, *Castilian Grammar* (1492)

I spent the summer of 1997 conducting archival research at the British Library and the Public Record Office in London. When I first arrived, the countdown clock was ticking away, as it was the eve of Hong Kong's historic handover to the People's Republic of China. Newspapers updated the public regularly about Prince Charles's preparations for the upcoming event and published opinion pieces predicting the future of Hong Kong. After glancing through the headlines each morning, I would get into an Underground train headed toward the Kew Gardens station and resume my research at the Public Record Office. There, I would spend most of my day going through the old diplomatic dispatches between the British Empire and the Qing government during the Opium Wars. It was the first of those wars that led to the British colonizing of Hong Kong in 1842.

The return of the British Crown Colony to China in the summer of 1997 refocused my attention on the issue of empire and sovereignty, one that had troubled Anglo-Chinese relations for over a century. The timing of it greatly affected the shape of my research project, as I had originally planned to work on the nineteenth-century missionary translations of the Bible. The strange experience of coming into physical contact with the official documents that had sealed Hong Kong's fate a hundred and fifty years before and then witnessing the moment of its return to China was enough to make me ponder the meaning of it all and rethink my book project. It struck me that the contemporary quibbling over the proper meanings of "handover," "takeover," and "return" with regard to the sovereignty of Britain or China seemed to echo a set of older concerns and anxieties. As I was to discover in the Reading Room of the Public Record Office, the argument over dignity,

entitlement, and the proper use of words carried just as much weight as the business of the opium trade insofar as treaty negotiations were concerned in the nineteenth century. The battle of words and translations in the official archives turned out to be central, not peripheral, to the sovereign will that had driven the Opium Wars.

Having been trained as a literary critic, I am intensely interested in archives, historical texts, artifacts, and so on because these things put me in touch with the rationale and, if I may say, the essence of the theoretical work I wish to pursue. This book is engaged with the hetero-cultural legacy of sovereign thinking in the nineteenth century, broadly defined. I emphasize the moments and forms of moral and affective investment in sovereignty that articulate effectively to the modern world of empires and nation-states. The itinerancy of signs and meanings in modern global history requires that a work like this pay close attention to the extraordinary circulation of text, object, and theory across linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and civilizational boundaries in modern times. Each chapter of the book investigates a central aspect of the problematic of sovereign thinking and makes a close examination of the texts, whether legal, diplomatic, religious, linguistic, or visual. A sustained focus on desire and sovereign thinking throughout the book enables the disparate strands of my research—on international law, semiotics, imperial gift exchange, missionary translations, grammar books, and colonial photography—to interweave in ways that I had not thought possible when I first embarked on the project.

Civilizations do not clash, but empires do. Having said this, I have the burden of proving it with this book. Chapter 1 raises the possibility of reading empire by engaging with the theory of semiotics and the notion of the sign in light of the novel military technology of telegraphic communication in the second half of the nineteenth century. I argue that reading empire entails thinking historically about the intimate connections among language, war, international law, semiotic inventions, and the idea of foreignness. The chapter provides a number of theoretical and historical grids for reading later chapters and seeks to reframe the issues of intersubjectivity, indexicality, and violence in light of the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, Michel Foucault, Georges Bataille, and other theorists.

In Chapter 2 I analyze the Anglo-Chinese Treaty of Tianjin, government archival sources, and published material to show how the translation of the written Chinese character *yi* at the time of the Opium War led to the invention of the super-sign *yi/barbarian* by the British, who believed that the use

of the character was intended to insult the foreigner and thus sought to ban the word. I raise two historical questions: Why should the character have posed a threat to law and to the emergent order of international relations? And what are the sources of the anxiety that led to the ban?

In Chapter 3 I focus on the concept of *yi* in the articulation of the mandate of Heaven and in the imperial ideology of the ruling Manchus. The Yongzheng emperor's infamous literary persecution of Zeng Jing in the eighteenth century, for example, poses the intriguing issue of why, unlike the British, the Qing emperors chose not to ban the character while punishing the Chinese dissidents who opposed their alien rule but instead gave the Confucian concept a distinctly geopolitical reading in order to promote their own imperial projects.

Chapter 4 tackles the circulation of international law, in particular, the classical Chinese translation of Henry Wheaton's *Elements of International Law* in 1864. Drawing on archival sources, public records, and published works, I bring to light the role that the American missionary W. A. P. Martin played as a translator and diplomat at the close of the second Opium War. His translation of *Elements of International Law* was a major historical event that came to shape the relationship among the Qing, the Western powers, Japan, and Korea in the nineteenth century.

Chapter 5 focuses on the long, overlapping reigns of Queen Victoria and the Empress Dowager Cixi, raising new questions about gender and empire. I attempt to develop a reading that helps us understand issues such as imperial gift exchange and the sovereignty complex, as well as the colonial condition of the nineteenth-century women's suffrage movement.

Chapter 6 centers on the sovereign subject of grammar in nineteenth-century linguistic science. My analysis of the work of the American linguist William Dwight Whitney indicates that there emerged a symbiosis of international law and the laws of language that informed comparative scholarship as well as mainstream linguistic theory. Comparative grammar provided the objective ground on which positivist arguments about race, culture, and sovereign rights could be advanced and proved on behalf of the Indo-European language family. My study of Ma Jianzhong, the first Chinese comparative grammarian, shows that when he undertook the task of composing the monumental *Ma's Universal Principles of Classical Chinese* (1898), he was trying to negotiate a sovereign position for classical Chinese vis-à-vis the Indo-European languages.

In the conclusion I reflect on the implications of this study for our under-

4 Introduction

standing of the new imperial order of the present. The chapter focuses specifically on the fetishizing of the throne chairs of the Qing emperors and the circulation of visual images of those chairs via photography and contemporary film, showing how the imperial unconscious continues to be haunted by the ghost of its past.

The Semiotic Turn of International Politics

It is not quite true, as is so often asserted, that it is the “newness” of contemporary technology that leaves us culturally unprepared. It is also the effacement of “oldness” of so many of the background assumptions and practices that lurk unexamined at the edges in these cases which contextualize the technology and frame our questions and responses.

—Paul Rabinow, *Essays on the Anthropology of Reason*

It may seem a truism that a nation-state cannot imagine itself except in sovereign terms. But what is the truism saying to—or, rather, withholding from—us? Consider the contemporary makeup and breakup of national territories and identities, where the personal continues to be haunted by the sovereign and where the imperial may well appear in the guise of the national. Consider also the familiar notion of human dignity. Indeed, what is human dignity if not somehow vested with the mystique of sovereign thinking? Conversely, does the loss of sovereignty condemn to existential abjection those who experience that loss and must recuperate their dignity in the name of sovereign right?

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon provides some extraordinary insights into the formation of what he calls the “massive psychoexistential complex” brought about by the violence of colonialism.¹ The symptoms of the inferiority complex and colonial schizophrenia he diagnosed among colonized black people in the twentieth century remain potent and fascinating to this day, but they now appear to be migrating toward a different sort of problematic from that which troubled Fanon decades ago.² Increasingly, it seems that the critique of sovereign thinking must factor into our discussion of empire and colonial abjection, so that the psychoexistential complex of colonial and postcolonial subjects may articulate meaningfully to the general problematic of sovereign rights in our rapidly changing world.

In his reflections on the condition of sovereignty in the post-cold war era, the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy points out that globalization may appear to displace the concept of war, along with all the politico-juridical concepts of sovereignty, but the return of war appears at the very heart of these displacements, even though some may claim that it does not appear at all. "Our anxiety also testifies . . . not to a regret, or to a nostalgia," writes Nancy, "but rather to a difficulty in doing without sovereign authority [*l'instance souveraine*], even down to its most terrible brilliance (seeing as it is also the most brilliant)."³ As we follow the movement of diasporic populations in our time, the conflicting ways of sovereign thinking among those who migrate from one sovereign state to another, be it for political asylum or economic reasons, tend to support rather than disprove Nancy's observation about the difficulty of doing or thinking without sovereignty. For one cannot assume without a degree of philosophical naïveté that the will to sovereignty exists only among those who struggle for independent states but becomes irrelevant for diasporic communities that fight for their rights, dignity, and political recognition within an adopted sovereign state. Is political recognition not already articulated by the theory of sovereign rights? Is the personal not vested in the sovereign as one adopts the identity of an Asian American, African American, Jewish American and so on? Finally, is the argument of hybridity and multiplicity capable of grasping the ground of its own desire for sovereignty?

Inasmuch as sovereignty continues to be contested in the international as well as national realm, national and even racial identity needs to be understood and analyzed in terms of what the international is doing within the national imaginary, not just beyond its borders. This may be one of those simple lessons that dialectical reasoning can teach us; but it is not so simple when it comes to making personal choices at particular times. The choice of personal identity or bio-political belonging, of which citizenship is but part of the game, is very much constrained by the types of questions we can or cannot ask of sovereign rights in the modern world.

Such questions matter because we are dealing with a thoroughly historical, legal, and philosophical discourse of freedom. Or as Benedict Anderson rightly points out, "nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state."⁴ Anderson's thesis is well made and seems indisputable on historical grounds. It is precisely on those grounds, however, that we need to pursue further the meaning of "freedom" beyond the established discourse of rights and to compre-

hend, rather than assume, the universal condition of any nation's dream of freedom when that dream must be figured a priori as a desire for the sovereign state. We should ask, for example, what renders the truth of *sovereign right as freedom* so self-evident, powerful, and inevitable? Insofar as sovereignty articulates a major mode of exchange between nation and empire in recent history, the truism of its truth needs to be unpacked carefully.

One of the ways in which we could begin the inquiry is to raise some new questions about desire, rights, and sovereign thinking, not exclusively in terms of legal discourse, but in light of what we can learn about colonial exchange and its production of difference, fetishism, identity, and the logic of reciprocity in translingual practices. As I try to demonstrate in this book, intellectual and material developments of this sort have had such significant bearing on sovereign thinking and the rise of international law that our study of the latter can no longer be confined to the self-explanatory evolution of legal discourse in Europe and North America. For sovereign thinking is one of those intellectual legacies of empire and nation building that must be reexamined, to borrow Edward Said's words, "according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections."⁵

Signifying Empire: A (· —) B (— · · ·)

Reading empire, which is what this book essentially does, entails thinking historically about hetero-cultural and hetero-linguistic moments of sovereign thinking. It requires that we take the interactive engagements of language, war, international law, semiotic theories, and inventions among sovereign nations and empires seriously. The history of military technology demonstrates that major innovations in naval and military telecommunication systems took off in the beginning of the nineteenth century and underwent a dramatic upsurge in the latter half of the century. What it suggests to us is that the pioneers in the studies of the sign, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), did not invent the meanings of the "code," "sign," "signal," and so on but already shared their usage with the engineers of the Royal Navy and the inventors of Morse code, Albert J. Myer's signal system, and other nineteenth-century systems of telegraphic communication.⁶ From the start, the development of modern communication systems has been linked to military requirements and has been interwoven with the communication systems for the navy and army.⁷