

MASTER'S THESIS

A bilingual British "barbarian": a study of John Robert Morrison (1814-1843) as the translator and interpreter for the British plenipotentiaries in China between 1839 and 1843

Leung, Chung Yan

Date of Award:
2001

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

A Bilingual British "Barbarian"—A Study of John Robert Morrison
(1814-1843) as the Translator and Interpreter for the
British Plenipotentiaries in China between 1839 and 1843

LEUNG Chung Yan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy

May 2001

Hong Kong Baptist University

ABSTRACT

John Robert Morrison (1814-1843) was the Chinese Secretary and Interpreter of the British Plenipotentiaries during the First Opium War (1839-1842). He was one of the best Chinese translators, interpreters and sinologists in the late 1830s and early 1840s. His role during the First Opium War was important, but has been overlooked. In the eyes of the British, he had extra-ordinary experience and abilities. He was born in China and he spent the greatest part of his life in this remote country. He had profound knowledge about China and her language. He was not only a competent, reliable and faithful translator and interpreter, but also the prime representative, negotiator and advisor of the British Plenipotentiaries in China affair. He was the "close associate" of Charles Elliot and the "right-hand man" of Henry Pottinger. In the eyes of the Chinese people, Morrison was also a prominent "British Barbarian Eye" (英夷目) who spoke and wrote fluent Chinese language.

The causes and effects of the First Opium War have captured the attention of historians. From a study of John Robert Morrison, we can see the history of the First Opium War from a very different angle; from the point of view and the history of a young man who had experienced and witnessed the lives of foreigners in China during the 1830s, the early years of the conflict between China and Britain, and the First Opium War. John Robert Morrison did not fight in the wars, but his presence

contributed to the victories of Britain. On the one hand, he removed the language barrier between the Chinese people and the British as he translated written materials and the peace treaty and interpreted Chinese language, cultures and history to the British Plenipotentiaries. On the other hand, he dealt with Chinese collaborators, gathered information, reconnoitered waterways to targeted cities, and provided war plans and useful suggestions. He enabled the British to understand the enemy better and thereby gained advantages for them. Because of his professional abilities, his role also was transformed from translator and interpreter to colonial official in Hong Kong, but he did not live to attain a higher post because he died in his late twenties in 1843.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION. i
ABSTRACT. ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS. vi
LIST OF TABLES. viii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS. ix
LIST OF MAPS. x
LIST OF APPENDICES. xi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS. xii

CHAPTER ONE
 INTRODUCTION. 1

CHAPTER TWO
 THE BIRTH AND THE MAKING OF THE TRANSLATOR AND
 INTERPRETER. 13

CHAPTER THREE
 THE DEATH OF THE "PATRON" AND THE ROAD TO
 INDEPENDENCE. 54

CHAPTER FOUR
 THE "CLOSE ASSOCIATE" OF CHARLES ELLIOT. 97

CHAPTER FIVE
 THE RIGHT-HAND MAN OF "SIR HENRY". 166

CHAPTER SIX
 THE LAST BUT UNFINISHED MISSION. 222

CHAPTER SEVEN
 CONCLUSION. 255

APPENDICES.	272
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	306
GLOSSARY.	322
CURRICULUM VITAE.	327