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

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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. One 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.
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