Benjamins Translation Library
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Introduction

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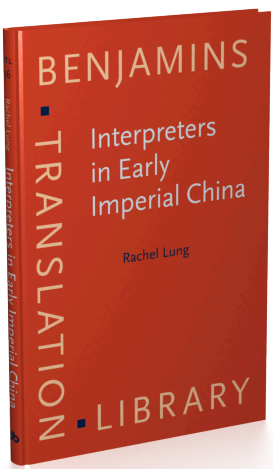

Pages xi–xiv of
Interpreters in Early Imperial China
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Introduction

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.