# Comment on Henrietta Harrison's *The Perils of Interpreting*

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Without taking anything away from Henrietta Harrison's enormously stimulating and clearly important book—and without, indeed, denying any of its obvious originality—I would like, to begin with, to offer some remarks situating this work in a longer historiographical trend. It is, in fact, the latest in a cluster of books representing a more recent turning in a development that goes back more than half a century.

It began with the emergence of social history in the post-WWII era, especially the French Annales school and also its counterpart among British and, then, American practitioners, mostly of a Marxist or at least social science bent. But it was the French—most notably Fernand Braudel—who advocated not only interdisciplinarity, but what the *Annalistes* called *histoire totale*, an approach which, especially in the hands of Braudel, began to break out of the Euro-centric and nation-state confines that had restricted even the most advanced history. Braudel's ambitious work, however—not only his magisterial study of the Mediterranean world in the Age of Philipp II but also his serial volumes on global capitalism—prompted a reaction. Or two paths of reaction. One went small—ultimately leading to the genre of micro-history. The other—less a reaction than a successor—went large, a path leading to transnational or global history and, in the hands of Immanuel Wallerstein, the study of what he called the "Modern world-system." Both micro-history and a global approach have flourished in the last generation. Indeed, I think that the success of micro-history is such that it has become something of a default method—we splice and dice historical experiences so routinely without even bothering to declare it micro-historical in nature. At the same time, transnational history has equally become virtually dominant, especially with regards to the flow and movement of people, commodities, flora and fauna, and, of course, the predatory expansion of empires.

In recent years, a few historians have combined both approaches—that is, both the micro-historical and the global. And what this has done is to bring both cultural and individual elements to a field that often, per force, effaced or could not attend to these particularities. Here let me acknowledge, along with Henrietta, the work of Amy Stanley, Linda Colley, Emma Rothschild, and others (interestingly, all women—I'm clearly forgetting many others). I think it's important to appreciate what a turning this represents, especially when we recall that the terribly influential *Annales* school, as well as more generally structuralism and then post-structuralism, deliberately eschewed the human subject as the privileged focus of concern. In the "structure" and "conjuncture" of the Annales historians, it was the fluctuating forces of geography, demography, or perhaps *mentalités* which determined historical development—not human agency. And certainly not individual human agents.

How wonderfully different a view of important, ultimately large-scale phenomena involving nothing less than the vicissitudes of imperial encounters, do we get in the pages of *The Perils of Interpreting.* Indeed, while this is a book about empires, it resolutely refuses to treat its actors as merely embodying or representing their respective empires as such. (Even though representing, as a feature of translating, is what they are formally charged to do.). The book's main actors, at least in the first few parts, are in fact kind of "outsiders." The Chinese Li Zibiao was Catholic, having spent many years living in Italy. George Thomas Staunton was the Anglo-Irish scion of a British nobleman, whose experience living in China as a boy was formative. They both had transcultural upbringings. And in Henrietta's account, their individual formations, perspectives,

attitudes and values clearly played a role in shaping the interactions between the two powers, England and China.

This is an account that largely hews to the highest levels of the politics of diplomacy, and because of that it shows us that individual actors played a determinant role. Here, their words, gestures, and personal inclinations mattered—crucially so. And their inclinations reflected more general concerns, especially those relating to the very nature of translating. What does it mean to translate? In choosing "interpreting" over "translating," Henrietta clearly wants to channel what her actors practiced: the art of massaging meanings in going from one language to the other in order to facilitate communication and understanding rather than preserving or exacerbating the potential conflictual differences that might be conveyed in more literal renderings. This was diplomacy made effective through interpreting—with generosity and even empathy.

But Henrietta's story has a denouement which shows an unfortunate turn. Moving from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth, translators took a different tack, or perhaps they simply lacked the fortuitous formation of Li and Saunton, who both benefitted from an early linguistic education. Successive translators failed to exhibit the same inclination to understand, with nuance and generosity, their interlocutors. And this coincided with a hardening of imperial attitudes and policies, one leading to a very different period of Sino-British relationships and the Opium wars. We are left wondering, then, whether this, other "Great Divergence" had as much to do with the mutual antagonisms and misunderstandings at the very summit of imperial relationships as it did with the very different ambitions and hardened attitudes of those empires themselves. Historians often ponder whether things could have been different, and here we are confronted with the tantalizing possibility that it could have been indeed.