



**BOOK REVIEWS**

## **An American pioneer of Chinese Studies in cross-cultural perspective: Benjamin Bowen Carter as an agent of global knowledge**

**By Yeung Man Shun. xv, 447 pp. Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2021.**

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Benjamin Bowen Carter (1771–1831) will not be familiar to many readers, but this ‘scholar-linguist’ was ‘the only American engaged in the serious study of Chinese at the beginning of the nineteenth century’ (p. 297). Yeung Man Shun’s important new study establishes Carter’s place within the annals of American Sinology, while also throwing new light on other important topics, including the more active field of British Chinese Studies in the early 1800s. To this end, Yeung examines hitherto unknown and understudied primary sources from a wide range of collections (including the Royal Asiatic Society), harnessing varied material from the United States, France, Britain, and elsewhere—an especially notable achievement during pandemic conditions.

Born in Providence, Rhode Island, Carter was the son of a publisher—his father served as a printer’s apprentice to Benjamin Franklin—and he was educated at Rhode Island College (now Brown University). Proficient in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, Carter trained as a physician and operated a medical practice until, in 1798, he signed on as ship’s surgeon for a trading voyage to Canton. This was the first of what would ultimately become five journeys to the Far East (four to Canton and one to Batavia), and the modest but increasing trading privileges which Carter secured on these trips would eventually make his fortune (pp. 32–36).

Rhode Island had recently been at the heart of opposition to the British Crown during the American War of Independence, and it would now become prominent in America’s burgeoning trade with the Far East. At this time, all Western trade was conducted through the port of Canton, and it was here that Carter arrived at the end of 1798. The new environment would stimulate Carter’s curiosity about languages, a trait demonstrated during the journey to China when, after going ashore at Botany Bay, he made phonetic transcriptions of the speech of a local man known as Maroot the Elder (*circa* 1773–1817). These would later become a valuable source for the study of the history of the native languages of Australia (p. 39).

If Carter’s trips to China rewarded him financially, they also allowed him the rare opportunity to mingle with Chinese merchants, and sympathetic contacts helped kindle a fascination with the richness and complexity of Chinese culture. Carter’s fifth and final journey, taking place between 1804 and 1806, allowed him to stay in Canton for over a year, and he clearly enjoyed this long period of relative liberty to indulge his interest in Chinese language. Drawing on Carter’s little-studied manuscript and archival collections, Yeung reconstructs Carter’s Chinese language studies, which took place ‘according

to a traditional Chinese curriculum tailored to his specific interests' (p. 17). Yeung's meticulous and painstaking analysis helps frame Carter's broader career and explains his self-image as a China expert.

Crucially, Yeung shines dramatic new light on the central role of Abel Yen Pen Ming (identified in the diaries of Robert Morrison as Abel Xaverius), a Chinese Catholic who taught Carter as well as his British contemporaries—Sir George Thomas Staunton, Thomas Manning, and (briefly) Morrison himself. Yeung brings to life the teacher-student relationships between these men, helping us to appreciate the language acquisition process from both directions. This expands our understanding of how native English speakers went about trying to learn Chinese in Canton during the early 1800s, while also giving us new insights into what it was like for a Chinese tutor to teach them. The detailed analysis of original learning materials will be of particular interest to those concerned with the history of language acquisition, while Yeung's close reading of Carter's Chinese translations (pp. 109–11) should prove fascinating to a wide range of readers.

Yeung establishes Carter as an early student of Cantonese—a language that neither Manning nor Staunton attempted to study, and which Morrison would not tackle until years later. Yeung notes that where Cantonese is concerned, Carter was 'the earliest Westerner to devise a system of phonetic transcription for recording its pronunciation' (p. 122), concluding that in this respect 'his efforts and results [...] deserve high praise' (p. 126).

None of Carter's American contemporaries shared his zeal for first-hand experience of China, but one wonders whether he might have found a kindred spirit among his fellow enthusiasts from Britain. Unfortunately, Carter's Cantonese sojourn was over before either Manning or Morrison set foot on Chinese soil, and he does not appear to have known Staunton, although their time in China overlapped. Indeed, while the English and Americans shared obvious linguistic and intellectual affinities, Yeung's book reminds us that in the early 1800s, the two nations were often rivals; and relations between their representatives could be distinctly frosty, even in the Far East. Sometimes, rivalry threatened to transform into outright enmity, as in the 1805 episode which briefly propelled Carter into the sphere of international diplomacy.

In protest against the Royal Navy's removal of a British sailor from an American vessel in Canton, the American consul Edward Carrington prepared a remonstrance for the Qing authorities, which Carter was charged with translating into Chinese. Not being equal to such a challenging task, he enlisted the aid of his teacher, Abel Yen, whose own infacility in English meant Carter had first to translate Carrington's text into Latin. Carter plumed himself on the idea that the translation he secured from Yen was 'the first official paper from America ever presented to the Government of China' (p. 197). The reality was more mundane: the local Hong merchants, through whom all Western communications had to pass, decided not to forward the document (a fate shared by some British petitions around the same time).

The bathos of the situation will be readily familiar to most students of the period. Yeung's assessment of this episode is characteristically fair and even-handed, and his sympathetic engagement with the concerns of the parties involved contributes to a vividly realised treatment. He also provides an additional service by reproducing the Chinese text of Abel Yen's petition in parallel with an English translation and Carrington's original. As one might expect, these diverge in numerous respects, reflecting the different interests, expectations, and assumptions of the authors and translators.

Yeung homes in on the fact that what Carter prized most—notwithstanding the wealth he had accrued through his mercantile adventures—was the progress he made in learning Chinese, and he wanted to apply this for the real benefit of Sino-American relations. The petition episode gave Carter a taste for diplomacy and, although he was ultimately

unsuccessful in using his experiences and attainments to leverage a career in either diplomacy or academia, his reputation as an ‘Oriental scholar’ became central to his self-esteem. Besides affording intellectual satisfaction, it also led to correspondence with some pillars of early nineteenth-century Sinology. Carter’s most notable contact was with Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, with whom he corresponded about philological matters and for whom he acted as an ‘agent’ in the Anglophone world. Carter served as Abel-Rémusat’s intermediary with the British Baptist Missionary Society—Carter was a Baptist himself—to whom he forwarded the great Sinologist’s criticisms of Joshua Marshman’s Chinese translations (pp. 250–259). These connections help sustain the image of Carter, suggested in the book’s title, as ‘an agent of global knowledge’.

Among his English contemporaries, Carter most strongly—perhaps even strikingly—resembles Thomas Manning, who arrived in Canton a year after Carter had left China for good.<sup>1</sup> Yeung reveals that Carter’s interest in Chinese culture was intellectual and disinterested, but Manning’s was ‘purer’ still: unlike Carter, he did not even arrive in China as a trader, but as a scholar. Both men shared a sympathetic admiration for Chinese manners and customs; like Manning, Carter studied the Chinese language ‘as a medium for understanding and appreciating Chinese culture and thought, and not simply as a practical tool for commerce or religious conversion’ (p. 309). Both would later try (and fail) to apply what they had learned to improve diplomatic and cultural relations between China and their respective countries. Again, like Manning, Carter never published any substantial works on China, despite having amassed a great deal of specialised knowledge at significant personal cost, which he obviously believed could be of practical benefit.

If Manning’s attitude was similar to Carter’s, then clearly not all Englishmen were conditioned by Britain’s ‘imperial eyes’ and the idea that ‘all regions outside Europe had civilizations inferior in varying degrees to western civilization’ (p. 6). Manning wanted to discover whether China could serve as a model for social change within Britain, and it is refreshing to learn that Carter was similarly open-minded, with Yeung suggesting that ‘China’s regulations and systems and its cultural and economic strength were examples from which the new nation could draw lessons’ (pp. 6–7). Such parallels caution us against overdrawing any perceived contrast between a chauvinist Britain and receptive America. We might also wonder whether intellectuals who looked to China for inspiration were genuinely ‘pondering how to escape the malign influence of modern European civilization’ (p. 291) or seeking alternatives to the ‘degraded civilization of modern Europe’ (p. 297). Notwithstanding their contempt for certain facets of Europe’s political and economic arrangements, Americans in Carter’s day remained deeply and actively involved with their European (and particularly British) cultural inheritance.

Carter’s career, like that of Manning’s, suggests the motif of the ‘road not taken’, and Yeung explains that ‘this book repeatedly suggests how relations between America and China might have developed differently if the US government had seen fit to cultivate one or more “linguists” or interpreters’ (p. 341). Yeung sees Carter’s scholarly ambition of promoting Chinese Studies in America as being vindicated by the later course of historical events, and praises Carter’s enlightened vision of Sino-American relations, which is contrasted with Britain’s ‘hard line backed up by its navy’. ‘By settling disputes with reason, reconciliation, and negotiation’, America and China have largely been ‘able to avoid armed conflict to the present day’ (p. 311). In this rosy picture, Britain emerges as the villain of the piece—justifiably so, perhaps, considering (among other things) its reprehensible role prosecuting the First and Second Opium Wars. But many Americans participated with great gusto in the opium trade; and although the United States did not

<sup>1</sup> For Manning’s career, see Edward Weech, *Chinese Dreams in Romantic England: The Life and Times of Thomas Manning* (Manchester University Press, 2022).

partake in the violence of the Opium War, it did capitalise on the trading opportunities that resulted from the forced opening of more Chinese ports.<sup>2</sup>

The extensive appendices and reproductions of primary material referred to in the main text round out a volume that makes numerous important contributions to the history of global knowledge. Combining the qualities of biography, intellectual history, and the study of cross-cultural exchange, it will prove immensely valuable to scholars working in a variety of fields.

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## **The Arts and Crafts of the Hunza Valley in Pakistan. Living Traditions in the Karakoram**

**By Jürgen Wasim Frembgen. 110 pp. Karachi, Oxford University Press, 2017.**

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This volume by Jürgen Wasim Frembgen is dedicated to the material culture of Hunza and Nager, two formerly independent kingdoms that lie on opposite banks of the Hunza river, in the midst of the Karakoram mountains. Although they became part of Pakistan in 1947–1948, they survived as states within the larger Pakistani polity until 1974 and 1972 respectively. Since little literature exists on the subject, the book does an excellent job of filling a lamentable gap in the knowledge of the cultures of the Karakoram.

The traditional arts and crafts of the area are described by the author, supported by a selection of the 479 pieces of the Hunza/Nager collection of the Museum Fünf Kontinente (formerly Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde) of Munich, where Frembgen was a senior curator until his recent retirement. The great bulk of the collection was procured between 1990 and 1994 by Frembgen himself, who conducted long-term fieldwork in the area on an annual basis from 1981 to 2004.

The book opens with an introduction consisting of an ethnographic overview that gives a quite exhaustive, though forcibly synthetic, account of the human geography, the prevailing political systems, the economy, the various Islamic confessions and their expansion, the ethnic groups settled in the valley, and the different languages spoken by them. A brief account follows of the origins of the collection and of the author's fieldwork.

Frembgen then broaches the central topic of the book, which he treats in 14 chapters, each dedicated to a particular art or craft, starting from the most refined, like that of the silversmiths, the silk workers, the embroiderers, to the more ordinary, like basketry or calabash making as well as weaving, woodcarving, carpentry, leatherwork, the forging

<sup>2</sup> Yeung's reference to George Washington's early vision for American relations with foreign nations—while 'extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible' (p. 342)—serves as an interesting counterpart to the governing principles of Qing foreign policy.