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ARTICLE

Laou-Seng-Urh and the imperial politics of Chinese theatre in early Anglo-Sino diplomacy

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Abstract

The founder of the Hong Kong branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, John Francis Davis, published the first translation of a Chinese play into English, *Laou-Seng-Urh, or 'An Heir in Old Age*', in 1817. While significant in both literary and scholarly terms, Davis's work is also worthy of attention for its political undercurrents. An anonymously penned introduction draws connections between Davis's translation and theatrical performances in the context of Qing diplomacy, including Macartney's embassy of 1793, while an accompanying 'Advertisement' highlights Davis's role as interpreter on Amherst's subsequent embassy of 1816. This article conclusively attributes these paratexts to the second secretary of the Admiralty, Sir John Barrow. Records from the East India House library, the John Murray Archive, and back-numbers of *The Quarterly Review* reveal how Barrow exploited Davis's translation to promote British diplomatic engagement with China and celebrate the embassy on which he had staked his own reputation as a China expert. Though *Laou-Seng-Urh* achieved few of its political objectives, it nevertheless inadvertently influenced the trajectory of nineteenth-century academic sinology in Europe.

Keywords: Anglo-Sino diplomacy; John Barrow; Chinese theatre; John Francis Davis; Laou-Seng-Urh

Introduction

On 13 November 1816, the library of the East India House at Leadenhall Street in London recorded the receipt of 'a Chinese drama (MS) translated by J. F. Davis Esq. Canton 1816'.[1] Though later celebrated as one of the most accomplished British sinologists of the nineteenth century, and decorated for his term as the second governor of Hong Kong, John Francis Davis (1795–1890) was then a humble writer at the East India Company's (EIC) factory in Canton, where he had been stationed since 1813.[2] Even in this brief period, however, the young employee had earned a reputation as a promising linguist. The factory's public address of January 1815 recorded, 'with much satisfaction the progress made by Mr. J. F. Davis in acquiring the Chinese',[3] while the factory chief, Sir George Thomas

[1] British Library, I[ndia] O[ffice] R[ecords], Mss Eur F303/2 (Library Day Book, 1814–1820), 13 November 1816.
[2] H. B. Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China 1635–1834* (Taipei, 1926), vol. iii, p. 191. A list of 'the distribution of the business of the Factory', dating from 18 January 1815, circumscribes Davis's duties to 'studying the Chinese language'. IOR/G/12/193, p. 10.
[3] IOR/G/12/270, p. 206.

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Staunton (1781–1859), himself a sinologist of no small stature,[4] wrote that same month to the president of the Select Committee, recommending the publication of 'San-Yu-Low, or the three dedicated rooms, a Tale, translated from the Chinese by J. F. Davis Esq. of this establishment'.[5] Though little more than a pedagogical exercise completed only a year into his studies, this inaugural translation of Li Yu's 李漁 (1611–1680) novella was printed together with a series of extracts from the *Peking Gazette*, translated by Robert Morrison (1782–1834), the factory's official interpreter and one of Davis's most loyal supporters.[6]

The East India House library's laconic record of Davis's manuscript, containing a translation of *Lao sheng'er* 老生兒 (An heir in old age)[7] by the Yuan Dynasty playwright Wu Hanchen 武漢臣 (fl. thirteenth century), belies the importance, therefore, with which it would have been treated—not as the idle fruit of a distant factotum's leisure hours, but as a pioneering study by one of the company's most promising young men, whose work to date had contributed diplomatically useful cultural information 'descriptive of the history, manners and customs [...] of the Chinese nation'.[8] Indeed, the manuscript did not lie unnoticed for long. The next month, it came to the attention of the second secretary of the Admiralty, Sir John Barrow (1764–1848), who having served as comptroller on George Macartney's (1737–1806) embassy to China between 1792 and 1794 continued to write in an unofficial capacity about the Far East, both in his own travelogues and in articles for the influential organ of Tory opinion, *The Quarterly Review*. Equipped with this interest, Barrow promptly requested permission to publish Davis's manuscript from the Court of Directors, which granted its approval on 3 January 1817, with the proviso 'the company being at no expense thereby'.[9] Barrow wasted no time in forwarding the manuscript to John Murray (1778–1843), publisher of the *Quarterly* and contemporary luminaries such as Lord Byron (1788–1824) and Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832).

Laou-Seng-Urh, or 'An Heir in Old Age', A Chinese Drama, Translated from the Original Chinese appeared as early as March 1817.[10] In its swift passage through the press, Davis's translation gained an anonymous introduction, entitled 'A brief view of the Chinese drama and of their theatrical exhibitions', that drew heavily from the writings of early European observers of Chinese theatre, ranging from Marco Polo (1254–1324) to members of the Dutch embassy

[4] While still a boy, Staunton famously impressed Emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (1711–1799) with his Mandarin on Macartney's embassy to China. As a senior EIC official, he published an abridged translation of *Ta Tsing Leu Lee; Being the Fundamental Laws, and a Selection from the Supplementary Statutes, of the Penal Code of China* (London, 1810). For a detailed study of Staunton's linguistic travails, see H. Harrison, *The Perils of Interpreting* (Princeton, NJ, 2021).

[5] Letter from G. Staunton to J. F. Elphinstone (1778–1854), 4 January 1815. IOR/G/12/191, p. 99. The previous month, Davis had conducted his first official piece of business for the company, a translation of a document from the official of Heungshan county 香山縣. Morse, *Chronicles*, vol. iii, p. 209.

[6] *Translations from the Original Chinese, with Notes* (Guangzhou, 1815). This inaugural volume of the Canton press was completed on 6 February 1815, with a 'rapidity and ease that induced Sir George [Staunton] to direct a larger number to be taken off than originally proposed'. IOR/G/12/193, p. 39. In a letter advocating against the provision of Chinese tutors for company recruits in England, Morrison cites the performance of his precocious protégé as evidence that the language is best and most readily acquired in situ. 'It has [...] been strongly manifested by Mr. Davis particularly, as well as several other gentlemen here, that a knowledge of the Chinese Language is to be acquired in China without any material previous study of it in England.' IOR/G/12/271, p. 435. It was through the offices of Morrison that Davis sent his MS to the Court of Directors. IOR/Mss Eur F303/2, 13 November 1816. For a detailed study of early provisions for learning Chinese in Canton, see, S. R. Stifler, 'The language students of the East India Company's Canton factory', *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 69 (1938), pp. 46–81.

[7] Davis's transliteration of this title, *Laou-Seng-Urh*, will be used only when referring to his translation.

[8] IOR/G/12/191, p. 98.

[9] IOR/B/164, p. 856.

[10] London, 1817. A copy of the publication was received by the East India House library on 28 March 1817. Mss Eur F303/2. This copy is now held at the British Library: Chin.B.45.

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of 1795. This new work was readily and widely appraised, though nowhere more comprehensively than in the *Quarterly*.[11] While disparaging of previous examples of Chinese belles-lettres presented in anthologies by 'Du Halde and Grozier',[12] the review concludes that the drama 'is a true picture of Chinese manners and Chinese feelings, and, as such, is a valuable acquisition to our stock of knowledge, as far as it regards this extraordinary nation [...] We are so much pleased with this little performance of Mr. Davis, that we hope to see more of the same kind, from the same, or some other collection of the popular dramas of China; for nothing can be better calculated to display the manners and the character of the people.'[13]

Despite this warm reception, *Laou-Seng-Urh* evaporated as quickly as it had materialised. The volume was never reprinted, even following the critical and commercial success of Davis's later scholarship, while the fate of the original manuscript remains, through clerical error or editorial indifference, unknown.[14] The stage premiere of *Laou-Seng-Urh* took place as long as a century later, and then only with an amateur troupe, under a different title and in highly bowdlerised form.[15] Scholarly interest in Davis's early work has also languished. While duly acknowledged as the second translation of a Chinese drama into a European language, and the first to be executed with any degree of fidelity,[16] *Laou-Seng-Urh* has to date been treated either as an interesting footnote in the unedifying history of early British sinology,[17] or as a technical case study in literary translation, abstracted from the

[11] *The Quarterly Review* 16.32 (January 1817), pp. 396–416. *Laou-Seng-Urh* was also reviewed in *The Critical Review* 5.4 (April 1817), pp. 403–412; *The British Critic* 7 (May 1817), pp. 526–535; *The Asiatic Journal* 25 (January 1818), pp. 33–37; *Le Journal des Savants* (January 1818), pp. 27–35; *The Monthly Review* 89 (May 1819), pp. 30–32. Extracts also appeared in *The New Annual Register* (1818), pp. 230–244.

[12] *Quarterly*, p. 398.

[13] *Ibid*, p. 407.

[14] The library daybook at the East India House records neither the loan nor the return of Davis's manuscript. The John Murray Archive at the National Library of Scotland also holds no record of it. Barrow's extant correspondence with Murray from early 1817 is notably silent on this point.

[15] *Lew Yuen Wae* was performed by the members of the Pax Robertson Salon in a disused chapel on Upper Manor Street, Chelsea, in 1923. The script, published with a private press, omits Davis's name altogether; its opening leaf instead reads 'an Adaptation from the Chinese by Miss Pax Robertson'. See P. Robertson, *Lew Yuen Wae* (London, 1923). For a comparison between Davis's translation and Robertson's adaptation, see Xu Shuangshuang 許雙雙, 'Yingguo zaoqi Zhongguo xiju guannian: yi *Lao sheng er* yingyi, pinglun yu bianyan wei zhongxin' 英國早期中國戲劇觀念—-以《老生兒》英譯, 評論與編演為中心 [Early British understanding of Chinese theatre: the English translation, reception, and performance of 'An heir in old age'], *Zhongguo bijiao wenxue* 中國比較文學 [Chinese comparative literature] 3 (2023), pp. 45–58.

[16] Joseph Henri Prémare's (1666–1736) pioneering translation of the Yuan dynasty play *Zhaoshi gu'er* 趙氏孤兒 (Le Petit Orphelin de la Maison de Tchao) was collated in Du Halde's (Jean Baptiste, 1674–1743) *Description de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise* (Paris, 1735) but omits key features of the original text, such as its arias.

[17] Peter J. Kitson examines *Laou-Seng-Urh* as an early example of Davis's attempts to 'domesticate' Chinese literature and establish himself as Britain's leading China expert. His argument suffers from the misattribution of the preface. The question of the authorship of 'A brief view' will be addressed below. See *Forging Romantic China* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 107–111. In the first article devoted exclusively to Davis's translation, A. Owen Aldridge (1915–2005) examines the contents of the preface, the accuracy of Davis's translation, and its reception by the French sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel Rémusat (1788–1832). See 'The first drama in English translation', in *Studies in Chinese-Western Comparative Literature*, (ed.) Yun-Tong Luk (Hong Kong, 1990), pp. 185–191. Xu Shuangshuang's article 'Yingguo zaoqi Zhongguo xiju guannian', cited above, traces the genesis, reception, and performance history of Davis's translation. By neglecting archival sources, however, Xu ignores the political dimension of the work, while also misattributing the preface. Lawrence Wang-chi Wong has furnished the most complete portrait of Davis's early years at the EIC but focuses on the scholar's idiosyncratic choice of texts, rather than the broader circumstances of their translation. See '"Objects of curiosity": John Francis Davis as a translator of Chinese literature', in *Sinologists as Translators in the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries*, (eds.) L. W. Wong and B. Fuehrer (Hong Kong, 2015), pp. 169–203. Cheng Yun 程芸 and Tan Jing 譚靜 have analysed contemporary reviews of *Laou-Seng-Urh* to form a general picture of the early-nineteenth-century British interest in Chinese literature. See 'Yingguo hanxue

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political currents that informed its composition.[18] Through excavating the historical, political, and biographical contexts of *Laou-Seng-Urh* and its accompanying preface, this article will by contrast show how its publication marked a unique moment in the course of early Anglo-Sino relations, when imperial ambitions on both sides were channelled through the unexpected conduit of Chinese theatre. In the eyes of its protagonists, whether on stage or in print, this encounter only partially fulfilled its early promise. Davis's neglected translation nevertheless had far-reaching implications for the development of academic sinology in Europe. To take full stock of this episode, however, we must first revisit the travels of the man who discovered Davis's manuscript.

Barrow's beginnings

John Barrow was born into a family of impoverished farmers near Ulverston in northern Lancashire in 1764. The growing prosperity of the region, recently linked via canal to Morecambe Bay, afforded access to a new grammar school, where he soon excelled in mathematics and classics. Aged 14, Barrow was employed as a clerk in an iron foundry in Liverpool, a sedentary occupation against which he promptly rebelled when he persuaded the Italian aeronaut Vincenzo Lunardi (1754–1806), then visiting northern England to procure iron bearings, to take him for an experimental balloon flight. Sadly, the envelope's lift proved too feeble to accommodate both passengers. Barrow's thirst for adventure, however, was later satisfied with the opportunity to join a whaling ship bound for Greenland. On board, he first displayed the practical talents and boldness that would define his career, learning 'how to steer, to assist [...] in reefing a sail, to take azimuths and altitudes'.[19] He narrowly escaped injury when the tail of a plunging whale sprung his harpoon boat onto the polar ice, smashing the stern. Once safely back on terra firma, Barrow hastened to London, 'the great theatre for a young man to play his part in',[20] and found employment as a mathematics tutor at a private academy in Greenwich. Through his students, he quickly made useful connections. Among them was George Leonard Staunton (1737–1801), a former plantation owner in the British West Indies and governor of Madras, whose prodigious energies were now entirely devoted to the idiosyncratic education of his only son, George Thomas. Barrow's mastery of Virgil, his fascination for applied mathematics, and his insatiable interest for every branch of learning from astronomy to natural history ideally qualified him for the post of tutor, but also for the intellectual friendship that he would establish with both father and son. When Staunton was appointed secretary to Lord Macartney's long-rumoured embassy to China in 1792, Barrow had risen high enough in his employer's estimation to earn a coveted place in the suite. On hearing this news, the young

jie "Zhongguo xiju" guannian de fasheng ji qi lishi yujing' 英國漢學界「中國戲劇」觀念的發生及其歷史語境 [The genesis and historical context of 'Chinese theatre' in British sinology], *Changjiang xueshu* 長江學術 [Yangtse scholarship] 4 (2021), pp. 59–69. Tian Yuan Tan has highlighted the importance of 'A brief view' as a lens through which to explore early European engagement with Chinese court theatre. See Tian Yuan Tan 陳靝沅, 'Ming Qing gongting de wenben shijie' 明清宮廷的文本世界 [The textual worlds of the Ming and Qing courts], *Zhengda Zhongwen xuebao* 政大中文學報 [National Cheng-chi University Chinese bulletin] 27 (June 2022), pp. 31–34.

[18] Wang Shih-Pe 汪詩珮 has scrutinised the intertextuality of the preface and performed an analysis of Davis's translation strategy. See 'Wenben quanshi yu wenhua fanyi: yuan zaju *Lao sheng er* ji qi yuwai chuanbo' 文本詮釋與文化翻譯: 元雜劇《老生兒》及其域外傳播 [Textual hermeneutics and cultural translation: the Yuan play 'An heir in old age' and its dissemination abroad], *Minsu quyi* 民俗曲藝 [Folk opera] 189 (September 2015), pp. 9–62.

[19] J. Barrow, *An Autobiographical Memoir* (London, 1847), p. 18.

[20] *Ibid*, p. 39.

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tutor could barely contain his excitement, exclaiming, 'non cuivis homini contingit adire Pekinum!'[21]

As 'Comptroller of the Household'[22] Barrow was responsible for the diplomatic gifts prepared for Emperor Qianlong. The splendour of this cargo was intended to convince the ageing sovereign to grant the British a permanent legation in Peking and an island for direct trade off the coast of Zhejiang. While chosen chiefly for their market value, the gifts also aimed to demonstrate the latest advances in Western technology.[23] This entailed the provision of a hot air balloon, a reflector telescope, a burning lens, an electrifying machine, and a pneumatic contraption.[24] One of the most expensive items in Barrow's care was a planetarium, combining clock, globe, and orrery, which was bought in London for £1,384. The Chinese interest in astronomy was well known to the British through the writings of the Jesuits, and the planetarium, 'whose motions [were] regulated', Barrow describes, 'by the most ingenious mechanism that had ever been constructed in Europe',[25] appealed to the Qing court's appetite for such innovations. But this gift also eloquently gestured towards a shared cosmology in which the British and the Chinese occupied their equal places.

In anticipation of the embassy's arrival, Emperor Qianlong also sought to evoke a common cosmic order, though by very different means; he commissioned a short song-drama entitled *Sihai shengping* 四海昇平 (Ascendant peace over the four seas). Dramatic spectacles were a time-honoured staple of Chinese diplomacy, forming a small but established subgenre of court theatre. These plays invariably trace the heroic travails of spirits, bodhisattvas, and historical figures as they travel great distances to pay obeisance to the Son of Heaven. Though often impoverished in terms of plot and literary wit, the operas succeed by virtue of their lavish productions, which make full use of the dramatic possibilities of a three-tiered stage, huge casts, and ingenious wardrobes. Theatrical performances were recorded not only by European delegations but also by Korean and Vietnamese missions, who by virtue of a shared script were able to give more detailed and accurate accounts of what they saw.[26] *Sihai shengping* differs from other plays of this genre in narrating a contemporary event, the arrival of the British, in concert with the usual profusion of supernatural and mythical characters paying homage at court. This departure was licensed by the unprecedented nature of the occasion; though informal trade with the English had for some time been tolerated in Canton, contributing handsomely to the privy purse, the arrival of an official delegation presented an opportunity to normalise relations within the hallowed framework of the tributary system. *Sihai shengping* is a literary illustration of this agenda, introducing the British to an elaborate cosmography that places the Qing emperor at the centre of the entire known world and at the moral heart of the observable universe. The bravery with which its protagonists, the Star Spirits, fight to secure a safe passage for the British reflects less the importance of the foreign guests than the eminent largesse of the

[21] 'It is the lot of few to go to Peking!' Barrow, *Memoir*, p. 45. This is a twist on a line from Horace, *Epistles*, 1: 17, 'Non cuivis homini contingit adire Corinthum', which Barrow appended as a subtitle to his *Travels in China* (London, 1804). The German sinologist Julius Klaproth (1783–1835) stole this conceit in his account of the unsuccessful Russian embassy to China in 1805, *Russische Gesandtschaft nach China im Jahre 1805* (St Petersburg, 1809).

[22] *Ibid*, p. 45.

[23] For a recent study of the role of gifts in the Macartney embassy, see H. Harrison, 'Chinese and British diplomatic gifts in the Macartney embassy of 1793', *English Historical Review* 133.560 (February 2018), pp. 65–97.

[24] W. J. Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie* (Liverpool, 1868), p. 131.

[25] Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 110.

[26] The TEXTCOURT foreign records database, cited above, contains 132 Korean and 12 Vietnamese records.

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Qing. Qianlong personally sanctioned the play's message by reviewing the manuscript and making minor stylistic corrections in his signature vermillion ink.[27]

Macartney's diary records that on the morning of 18 September 1793 the delegation was treated to a dramatic spectacle in the grounds of the emperor's summer residence at Zhehol. This performance, which consisted of a medley of operas staged as part of Qianlong's birthday celebrations, lasted no less than four hours, and culminated in an exotic production that Macartney describes as a 'grand pantomime'.[28]

> It seemed to me [...] to represent the marriage of the ocean and the earth. [...] the ocean was not behind-hand, but poured forth on the stage the wealth of his dominions, under the figures of whales and dolphins, porpoises and leviathans and other sea-monsters; besides ships, rocks, shells, sponges, and corals, all performed by concealed actors, who were quite perfect in their parts and performed their characters to admiration. These two marine and land regiments, after separately parading in a circular procession for a considerable time, at last joined together and, forming one body, came to the front of the stage, when, after a few evolutions, they opened to the right and left to give room for the whale, who seemed to be the commanding officer, to waddle forward, and who, taking his station exactly opposite to the emperor's box, spouted out of his mouth into the pit several tons of water, which quickly disappeared through the perforations of the floor. This ejaculation was received with the highest applause, and two or three of the great men at my elbow desired me to take particular notice of it, repeating at the same time, Hao, Hung-hao, charming, delightful![29]

The whale that Macartney describes here is in fact an *ao* 鰲 (sea carp), the prop for which was still languishing in the archives of the National Palace Museum in 1932 (see Figure 1).

Though duly impressed by such special effects, the ambassador's chief interest was less in the opera than in the emperor, who 'was seated on a throne opposite the stage, which projects a good deal into the pit'.[30] Macartney tried again to engage his imperial host in the subject of his embassy, but Qianlong 'seemed not disposed to enter into it, farther than by delivering me a little box of old Japan, in the bottom of which were some pieces of agate and other stones, much valued by the Chinese and Tartars; and at the top a small book written and painted by his own hand, which he desired me to present to the king my master, as a token of his friendship'.[31] Had Macartney and other members of the suite understood

[27] For my translation of this play, based on the palace repository copy annotated by Qianlong, see 'Ascendant peace over the four seas', in *Behind the Scenes in the Forbidden City: Chinese Court Drama 1600–1800*, (eds.) E. Macdonald and Tian Yuan Tan, [working title; under contract with Exeter University Press].

[28] J. Barrow, *Some Account of the Public Life of the Earl of Macartney* (London, 1807), vol. ii, p. 281.

[29] *Ibid*, vol. ii, pp. 281–282. Two other members of the embassy also recorded observations of the same performance: the Latin interpreter Johann Christian Hüttner (1766–1847) and the official chronicler of the embassy, George Leonard Staunton. Neither account, however, is as detailed as Macartney's. The ambassador's description conforms with a number of ritual plays performed in Qianlong's late reign. In a forthcoming monograph on Chinese court theatre, Tian Yuan Tan draws on blocking notes from the palace archives to conclusively show that this scene, which has long been the subject of conjecture among literary historians, refers to *Arhats Crossing the Sea* (Luohan duhai 羅漢渡海). *Ascendant Peace over the Four Seas,* which Xiaoqing Ye argues was performed directly before this finale ('Ascendant peace in the four seas: tributary drama and the Macartney mission of 1793', *Late Imperial China* 26.2 (December 2005), p. 102) was similarly lavish, featuring a cast of divine and marine creatures 158 strong; its blocking notes also demonstrate comparably impressive choreography.

[30] Barrow, *Some Account*, p. 281.

[31] *Ibid*, p. 281. The Qing palace records also note this exchange: 'The emperor ascended his throne in the theatre. After accompanying the ambassador and vice-ambassador to the foot of the stairs, we

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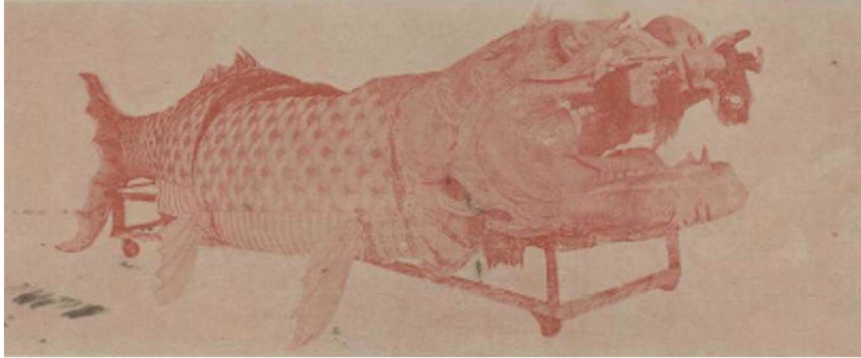

Figure 1. The *ao* prop used in imperial court productions during the late eighteenth century. *Source: Guoju huabao* 國劇畫報 [National drama pictorial] 2.9 (1932), p. 2.

the opera staged for their edification, they would soon have realised the futility of their demands. Wenchang, the Star of Literary Splendour, pronounces that 'when the delegation from England has submitted its memorial to the emperor, and the banquet is over, it will immediately be recompensed and sent back out to sea'.[32] There would be no leisure for Macartney to dally in Zhehol or Peking, much less establish a permanent mission there. But like the planetarium in Barrow's care, the closing sentiment of *Sihai shengping* alludes to a shared world in which the Chinese and British would continue to meet. Having quelled the giant *ao*, the myriad Star Spirits sing a final aria:

> 慶慶慶格慶昇平四海懽樂{韻}會會會格會共球萬國梯航途路遙{韻}。[33]

> Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice! There's ascendant peace over the four seas, and all are merry and gay! We meet, we meet, we meet! On this shared Globe, we meet. The Ten Thousand kingdoms set course at sea; they've so far to sail.

Barrow was not present for this performance, though his intrepid experience as a whaler would no doubt have led him to form novel conclusions about the anatomy of the *ao*; instead, he was instructed, together with the embassy's machinist, James Dinwiddie (1746–1815), to

ministers awaited the order to bring them into his imperial presence. Once his Imperial Majesty had bestowed jewels on their country's king, [...] we led them to the lower western loge to watch the opera' 皇上至看戲樓昇座臣等帶領該正副使至堦下祇候宣召再帶領至御前俟皇上賞該國王朝珠畢臣等將帶帶至西邊廊下觀劇. Zhongguo diyi lishiguan 中國第一歷史館 [China first historical archives] (ed.), *Yingshi Majia'erni fanghua dang'an shiliao huibian* 英使馬戛爾尼訪華檔案史料匯編 [A compilation of archival materials on the British ambassador Macartney's visit to China] (Beijing,1997), p. 147.

[32] 英咭唎國貢使等進表賜宴畢不日賞賚遣還海道。Gugong bowuyuan 故宮博物院 (ed.), *Gugong bowuyuan cang Qing gong nanfu shengping shu xiben* 故宮博物院藏清宮南府昇平署戲本 [Drama scripts from the opera bureau of the Qing court as held by the Palace Museum] (Beijing, 2015), vol. xix, p. 185. A digitised edition of this play can be found on the TEXTCOURT database. Code: Q00156_01_K, https://textcourt.ames.ox.ac.uk/database/scripts/Q00156_01_K/?tab=info (accessed 18 June 2025).

[33] *Ibid*, vol. xix, p. 192.

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assemble the planetarium and other scientific instruments in Peking.[34] During the delegation's journey across land back to Canton, however, there were other opportunities to observe theatrical performances. In his autobiography, Barrow recalls,

> We had temporary theatres erected at several of the cities at which we made any stay, but they afforded little amusement; the actors speak with a drawling, whining voice, half singing, half crying; the female parts are performed generally by boys and sometimes eunuchs: they have no change of scene, and one open stage answers for every purpose. It is on this naked wooden stage that the general brandishes his sword, strides three or four times round; and while he thus frets and struts his tour upon the stage, a horrible crash of what they call music 'Rends with tremendous sounds your ears asunder, with gongs, drums, trumpets, blunderbuss and thunder', after which he stops short and tells the audience of his conquests.[35]

This curt appraisal of Chinese theatre was shared by many in the embassy.[36] In 1804, when Barrow published his *Travels in China*, he nevertheless included a substantial section on Chinese drama, variously addressing the distinction between court and literati plays, the range of genres, techniques of verisimilitude, the taste of popular audiences, and the repertoire of travelling troupes. Extending to nine pages, Barrow's treatment of this theme was not only one of the most comprehensive to date but also the most diversely informed. Earlier European records of Chinese theatre had consisted exclusively of eyewitness accounts by observers with no cultural or linguistic knowledge.[37] Barrow's account, by contrast, not only includes his own, often acerbic, observations but also a review of pre-existing records, relevant scholarship, and word-of-mouth reports, against which he weighs his conclusions. In nearly every case, he finds his forbears wanting, but no more so than in his assessment of Prémare's translation of *Zhaoshi gu'er*:

> In this miserable composition of *Father Prémare*, for it can scarcely be called a translation, there is neither diction, nor sentiment, nor character; it is a mere tissue of unnatural, or at least very improbable events, fit only for the amusement of children,

[34] None of these instruments elicited the desired response. When the president of the tribunal of mathematics came to inspect the planetarium, Barrow sourly observed, 'it seemed that the only conception he had of it was that in the principle of its construction it was similar to one of those curious pieces of musical mechanism (only on a larger scale) which in the Canton jargon are called *sing-songs*; and that it was only necessary to wind it up, like a jack, to set it a-going when it would tell him all he wanted to know'. Barrow, *Memoir*, p. 78. The maiden Chinese balloon flight planned by Dinwiddie was cancelled due to Qianlong's lack of interest, depriving Barrow of his second opportunity to experience aerostatic flight.

[35] Barrow, *Memoir*, pp. 129–130.

[36] Macartney complains of 'wretched dramas', Dinwiddie characterises Chinese theatre as 'insipid stuff', while the Latin interpreter Johann Christian Hüttner, though impressed by the grandeur of the three-tier stage at Zhehol, drily notes, 'one will readily observe what patience was required to watch such a spectacle for three hours'. See, respectively, Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 207; Proudfoot, *Dinwiddie*, p. 37; J. C. Hüttner, *Voyage à la Chine* (Paris, 1803), p. 111.

[37] The TEXTCOURT database of Foreign Records on Chinese theatre contains extracts from thirteen European works in Latin, Italian, French, Dutch, German, and English that predate Macartney's embassy. (This figure does not include translations between European languages.) The earliest of these is a note by Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) on a play performed by masked giants in *De Christina expeditione apud Sinas* (1615) [Code: WL00001]; the latest is the Swedish explorer Olof Torén's (1717–1753) account of Chinese street theatre in *Voyage de Mons. Olof Torée* (1771) [Code: WF00024A]. See https://textcourt.ames.ox.ac.uk/database/foreignrecords/?filter_fk_region__name=Western (accessed 24 June 2025).

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> and not capable of raising one single passion, but that of contempt for the taste of those who could express an admiration of such a composition.[38]

The vehemence of this criticism must partly be understood in the context of the dawning Napoleonic wars and a corresponding disdain for all things French. Yet Barrow also concedes that Prémare's 'composition' is the only available specimen of the 'ancient drama preferred by the critics. [...] This drama with ninety-nine others, published together in one work, are considered as the classical stock-pieces of the Chinese stage.'[39] Barrow's jibe, therefore, is also an appeal for a more formal study of classical theatre, as opposed to the impromptu productions and pantomimes which members of the embassy, and even educated Chinese, found so unsatisfactory. 'Like ourselves, they complain that a depraved taste prevails for modern productions very inferior to those of ancient date.'[40]

Why did Barrow include a study of Chinese theatre in his account? None of the journals published by other members of the embassy tarry at length on this theme. Part of the answer lies in the scope of Barrow's work, which aspires to a range and depth of analysis far exceeding that of a conventional travelogue or an official diplomatic report. Barrow embarked on his manuscript shortly after returning from South Africa, where he had served as private secretary to Macartney in establishing a colony on the Cape of Good Hope.[41] Having originally planned to settle in the Cape and complete his pioneering cartography of the region, Barrow was forced to return to England when the colony was surrendered in the 'Peace of Amien' of 1802. *Travels in China,* advertised as the first study by an 'Englishman acquainted with the manners, customs and character of the Chinese nation',[42] was intended to establish Barrow's reputation as the most knowledgeable China hand in Great Britain. The inclusion of a section on drama within its ambitious survey of Chinese language, literature, religion, government, military, medicine, and science, is therefore unsurprising. But the aims of Barrow's work were also overtly political. 'Perhaps it may not be thought amiss', he ventures in the introduction, 'to correct [...] a very mistaken notion that prevailed on the return of the embassy, which was, that an unconditional compliance of Lord Macartney with all the humiliating ceremonies which the Chinese might have thought proper to exact from him, would have been productive of results more favourable to the views of the embassy.'[43] In his defence of Macartney, Barrow tirelessly compares the embassy's record against that of both earlier and later European delegations, concluding that the British have 'laid an excellent foundation for great future advantages, and done honour to the wisdom and foresight of the statesman who planned the measure and directed its execution'.[44] Dramatic performances, which were recorded by all early European missions to the Qing court, were yet another framework within which to compare the reception of successive embassies, and therefore formed a natural part of his narrative.[45]

Shortly after the publication of *Travels in China*, in 1804, Barrow was appointed second secretary to the Admiralty and now found himself in a position to shape foreign and colonial

[38] Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 221.

[39] *Ibid*.

[40] *Ibid*.

[41] He would later publish an account of this adventure in *Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa* (London, 1806).

[42] Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 3.

[43] *Ibid*, p. 7.

[44] *Ibid*, p. 622.

[45] Barrow was struck by the similarities in European accounts of court theatre. In his discussion of Joseph De Guignes's (1721–1800) journal from the Dutch embassy of 1795, he writes, 'the manuscript I quote from describes minutely all the pantomimic performances, the tricks of conjurors and jugglers, and the feats of posture-masters, but as they seem to be pretty much of the same kind as were exhibited before the British Embassy in Tartary, as described by Lord Macartney, I forbear to relate them'. Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 217.

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policy at the heart of the British establishment. One of his key objectives was the organisation of a second embassy to China—a project for which he would at length find, in Davis's manuscript, an unexpected but useful tool of propaganda. It is to the content of that work that we will now turn.

Laou-Seng-Urh

Lao sheng'er is a short comedy of errors in four main acts (*zhe* 折), preceded by an opening act (*xiezi* 楔子), about the bootless machinations of an ageing merchant and his family in the absence of a direct heir. Having long plied a ruthless trade across the empire, Liu Congshan 劉從善[46] is rich to no avail, for without a son the ancestral tomb will fall into disrepair, bringing infamy upon himself and his forbears. Happily, Liu's concubine, who he prosaically describes as a 'borrowed wine jar',[47] is now pregnant. In anticipation of a son, Liu seeks to appease his shrewish wife and rapacious son-in-law, both of whom have taken against the concubine (the former out of jealously, the latter out of greed) by expelling his nephew, a good natured though bumbling orphan who has long been a thorn in the eye of the scheming son-in-law. Liu retires to the otiums of his country estate only to be informed that his concubine has eloped with a rustic beau. Despairing of his fate, he resolves to atone for his early avarice by scattering his riches among the poor at a local temple. On Tomb Sweeping Day, Liu and his wife hobble to the ancestral plot, expecting to find their son-in-law performing the requisite sacrifices and libations. Instead, they discover the nephew tending the tomb. Liu awakens to his folly and appoints the nephew as head of the household, dethroning the son-in-law. In the final act, the concubine miraculously returns with a small son in tow. She has been hiding, it transpires, in a property belonging to Liu's daughter, who sought to shelter her father's only heir from the predations of her plotting husband. Rejoicing at this act of filial piety and the sudden advent of an heir, Liu divides his fortune equally between his nephew, his daughter, and his new son.

The chief interest of *Lao sheng'er* lies in the farce with which its characters strive to execute the duties of filial piety and ancestral worship while freely indulging their weaknesses for money, wine, and intrigue. The barbed wit of Liu's wife is balanced against the senile moping of her husband, while the frustrating helplessness of the nephew almost inspires sympathy for the subtle graft of the ambitious son-in-law. In a note preceding his translation, Davis informs readers that the play 'was selected from an old collection, named *Yuen-jin-pĕ-tchung*; from which the "Orphan of Chao", translated into French in Du Halde's compilation respecting China, was also taken'.[48] This is, of course, the same compendium to which Barrow had alluded in *Travels in China*, namely Zang Maoxun's 臧懋循 (1550–1620) *Yuanren baizhong qu* 元人百種曲 (A hundred yuan dramas), a copy of which was held in the Chinese library of the EIC factory in Canton.[49]

[46] Liu's given name, meaning 'following the good', is initially at odds with his curriculum vitae but suggests his later change in attitude.

[47] This unflattering metaphor illustrates the importance of the child relative to the concubine. 'What may Seaou-mei be compared to? When I borrow a vessel from a neighbour, in order to procure wine at home, I wait only till the wine is obtained, and then return the vessel to its owner. Seaou-mei is now pregnant. Whether she produces a boy or a girl, the same will be your [i.e. the wife's] property.' Davis, *Laou-Seng-Urh*, p. 16.

[48] *Ibid*, p. xlvii.

[49] This was not the only collection to which Davis had access. 'In a moderate collection of Chinese books belonging to the East India Company there are no less than two hundred volumes of plays, and a single work in forty volumes contains just one hundred theatrical pieces.' J. F. Davis, *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and Its Inhabitants* (London, 1836), vol. ii, p. 173. In the preface to *Sorrows of Han*, Davis provides a list of 32 'Chinese play books' that 'may be useful to students of the language'. J. F. Davis, *Han Koong Tsew, or The Sorrows of Han: A Chinese Tragedy, Translated from the Original, with Notes* (London, 1829), p. vii. For a copy of this list with the corresponding Chinese characters, see A. Wylie, *Notes on Chinese Literature* (Shanghai, 1922), p. xl.

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Davis continues that, unlike Prémare, he has endeavoured to translate the entire play, including the 'obscure'[50] arias, though he concedes that 'a few passages, and they are but few, which were either grossly indecent, or insufferably tedious, have been purposely omitted'.[51] All references to coarse bodily functions have been expunged. For example, when Liu Congshan speculates, '天那, 倘是我小梅這妮子分娩了, 你覷這早晚多早晚也, 莫不是小廝兒生得毒麼' [Heavens, I wonder if my young lass Xiao Mei has parturiated! Look how late it's getting. Could it be that my son has come to harm?][52] Davis simply relays, 'It grows now so long that I fear something unfortunate has happened.'[53] Similarly, when Liu berates his wife for driving away his concubine, she protests, '我又不曾放屁, 我怎麼臉羞?'[54] [I haven't even piped a fart; why should I be ashamed?], which Davis renders blandly as, 'I have done nothing wrong;—-what need I be ashamed of?'[55] More passages have been omitted on account of their tedium than their vulgarity. Roughly 20 per cent of the first act is missing. Davis is most inclined to apply his shears when characters repeat arguments that have already been rehearsed. His most radical interventions, however, are the result of efforts to compose felicitous English. Davis often favours paraphrases that, while not inaccurate, sidestep the precise wording of the original. For instance, at the beginning of the opening act, Liu recounts the fate of his sister-in-law, '有兄弟媳婦兒甯氏, 是蔡州人。為這妯娌兩個不和, 我那兄弟媳婦兒要領著孩兒, 到他那爺娘家裏守服去了。一來依仗著他爺娘家, 二來與人家縫破補綻, 洗衣刮裳, 覓的些東西, 來與這孩兒做學課錢。'[56] [My sister-in-law, Miss Ning, is from Caizhou. As she and my wife weren't getting on, my sister-in-law took her son to spend the period of mourning with her parents. Firstly, she could rely on her parents, and secondly, she could patch up garments and wash clothes, earning a bit to put towards her son's school fees.] Though Davis omits several pieces of information, such as his sister-in-law's name and town of origin, his translation reads more smoothly, 'My brother died very early, and left a widow. As she and my wife could not agree together, my sister-in-law wished, with her son, to spend the days of mourning in her own family. Thus she might, in the first place, depend on her parents for support; and secondly, by the labour of her hands, to [sic] procure something towards her son's education.'[57] Davis makes occasional mistakes. When one beggar reproaches another for stealing his son's share of the alms, he says, '你學我有兒麼?'[58] which Davis mistranslates as 'You know that he is my son', rather than 'Have you suddenly acquired a son [i.e. you're copying me in having a son]?'[59]

Strikingly, Davis neglects to mention why he chose to translate *Lao sheng'er* rather than another drama from this collection. There are, however, three plausible reasons for his selection. First, *Lao sheng'er* is linguistically less challenging than the more celebrated and critically esteemed *Dou E yuan* 竇娥冤 (The injustice of Dou E), or *Xi xiang ji* 西廂記 (Romance of the western chamber). Its modest length, limited cast, and relative sparsity of arias enabled Davis to approach its translation after only two years of formal study, though he concedes, 'where doubtful passages occurred, the opinion of two or more natives was asked, and that sense adopted, which appeared to be most consistent with the idiom of

[50] Davis, *Laou-Seng-Urh*, p. xlviii.
[51] *Ibid*, p. xlix.
[52] Zang Maoxun, *Yuanqu xuan* 元曲選 (Beijing, 1958), vol. i, p. 369.
[53] Davis, *Laou-Seng-Urh*, p. 25.
[54] Zang, *Yuanqu xuan*, vol. i, p. 370.
[55] Davis, *Lao-Seng-Urh*, p. 32.
[56] Zang, *Yuanqu xuan*, vol. i, p. 365.
[57] Davis, *Laou-Seng-Urh*, p. 2.
[58] Zang, *Yuanqu xuan*, i, p. 374
[59] Davis, *Laou-Seng-Urh*, p. 40.

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the language, and with the scope of the original'.[60] The second reason concerns the perceived utility of the work. In an essay introducing his *Chinese Novels*, published in 1822, Davis laments the 'singular listlessness'[61] of British sinology, and the prejudices of prevailing Jesuit scholarship, which lends a 'false colouring'[62] to its picture of China by focusing exclusively on works of moral philosophy. 'One of the most effectual means of gaining an intimate knowledge of China', Davis concludes, 'is by translations from its popular literature, consisting principally of drama and novels'.[63] *Lao sheng'er* furnishes not only a compelling account of Chinese mores but also a realistic portrayal of how those mores were put into practice, revealing the Chinese 'to be neither perfectly wise, nor perfectly virtuous'.[64] Throughout his career, Davis continued to argue that only a critical study of works of ethnographic interest could equip the British with the necessary cultural knowledge to engage fruitfully with China.[65] The final reason for his selection regards the work's projected audience. While undoubtedly an 'object of curiosity',[66] the themes of *Lao sheng'er*, which pokes fun at the social absurdities of marriage and inheritance, would have been eminently familiar to early-nineteenth-century British readers. Davis's publisher, John Murray, had printed Jane Austen's (1775–1817) *Emma* only the previous year. Indeed, the likely prospect of a receptive British audience may have emboldened Davis to send the manuscript to the Court of Directors, rather than publish it with the recently established Canton press.[67] It was necessary for the junior functionary to intermittently remind his distant paymasters not only of his existence but also of his brilliance. His manuscript, and its subsequent publication with a renowned press, eloquently accomplished both imperatives.

'A brief view'

The authorship of *Laou-Seng-Urh*'s introductory essay, 'A brief view of the Chinese drama and of their theatrical exhibitions' has been the subject of more speculation than analysis.[68] There can be no doubt, however, that it was composed by Barrow. Even if Davis had not told us much,[69] this attribution would be deducible from Barrow's bibliography, as will presently become clear. The niggling issue of authorship, however, has succeeded in obscuring two

[60] *Ibid*, p. xlix.

[61] J. F. Davis, *Chinese Novels* (London, 1822), p. 2.

[62] *Ibid*, p. 5.

[63] *Ibid*, p. 9.

[64] *Ibid*, p. 6.

[65] Reflecting on the significance of his translation, Davis later wrote, 'The 'Heir in Old Age' serves to illustrate some very important points connected with Chinese character and customs. It shows the consequence which they attach to the due performance of the oblations at the tombs of departed ancestors, as well as to the leaving male representatives, who may continue them; and at the same time describes the ceremonies at the tombs very exactly in detail. The play serves, moreover, to display the true relation of the handmaid to the legitimate wife, and proves a point on which we have before had occasion to insist, that the former is merely a domestic slave, and that both herself and offspring belong to the *wife*, properly so called, of which a man can legally have only one.' Davis, *The Chinese*, vol. ii, p. 185. For a more detailed discussion of Davis's translation choices, see Lawrence Wong's 'Objects of curiosity', cited above.

[66] Davis, *Chinese Novels*, p. 11.

[67] Davis's subsequent translation of *Hangong qiu* 漢宮秋 (The sorrows of Han), by Ma Zhiyuan 馬致遠 (1255–1321), was undoubtedly motivated by this point. In the preface to that work he writes, 'In selecting this single specimen from among so many, the translator was influenced by the consideration of its remarkable accordance with our canons of criticism.' Davis, *Han Koong Tsew*, p. vi.

[68] Kitson, Wong, Cheng Yun-Tan Jing, Xu Shuangshuang, and Wang Shih-Pe all attribute the preface to Davis. Aldridge ventures that it may have been written by another scholar. Only Tian Yuan Tan suggests Barrow as the probable author.

[69] When later quoting from 'A brief view', Davis clarifies, '[so] observes the editor of the *Heir in Old Age*'. Davis, *The Chinese*, vol. ii, p. 179. Decades later, he would recall, 'This specimen of the Chinese stage had the advantage of

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more pressing questions, namely, why is the content of 'A brief view' at such odds with the scope of Davis's translation? And why did Barrow decide to publish it anonymously?

'A brief view' follows a similar structure to Barrow's study in *Travels in China*, beginning with the social status of theatre, proceeding to performances, then turning to textual corpora, before concluding with cross-cultural comparisons. While Barrow previously drew from his own first-hand observations, his narrative now relies entirely on published sources, resulting in the most comprehensive digest of European writings on Chinese theatre to date. This review inevitably begins with the lacunae of the Jesuits. Where missionaries, such as Pierre-Martial Cibot (1727–1780), broach the subject of poetry or drama, they confine themselves to ancient models, leaving 'no time to enquire into the modern state of general literature'.[70] Barrow seeks to remedy this anachronism by drawing from contemporary examples, including Emperor Qianlong's epic poem 'Moukden', a set of verses entitled 'London' by a Chinese visitor to Great Britain, and a relevant section of Morrison's *Chinese Grammar*. Cibot's assertion that 'public theatres are put on a level with houses of prostitution and confined to the suburbs of cities'[71] is qualified with an illustration of the provisional nature of travelling theatres and by setting a statute forbidding officials from frequenting prostitutes or actresses in the broader context of the *Ta Tsing Leu Lee*, as translated by George Thomas Staunton.

Having dismissed the validity of Jesuit scholarship, Barrow enters the meat of his essay. 'If the missionaries have communicated little information respecting the actual state of theatrical representations in China, the descriptions, which occasional visitors to that country have given of the actual state of the scenic exhibitions, convey a tolerably correct notion of what they are.'[72] These 'occasional visitors' transpire to be members of successive embassies, including Ysbrandt Ides's (1757–1708) travelogue from the Russian embassy of 1692, John Bell's (1691–1780) account of the Russian embassy of 1719, Macartney's diary of the British Embassy of 1793, and De Guignes's journal from the Dutch delegation of 1795. Barrow examines the latter work, which informed his *Travels in China*, in particular detail. While he formerly omitted the French sinologist's descriptions of Chinese theatre for the sake of concision, he now quotes from them at length.

> A pantomime, intended to be an exhibition of the battle of the dragon and the moon, was represented before the full court. [...] A number of Chinese [...] placed at the distance of six feet from one another, now entered, bearing two long dragons of silk or paper, painted blue, with white scales, and stuffed with lighted lamps. These two dragons, after saluting the Emperor with due respect, moved up and down with great composure; when the moon suddenly made her appearance, upon which they began to run after her. The moon, however, fearlessly placed herself between them, and the two dragons, after surveying her for some time, and concluding, apparently, that she was too large a morsel for them to swallow, judged it prudent to retire; which they did with the same ceremony as they entered. The moon, elated with her triumph, then withdrew with prodigious gravity: a little flushed, however, with the chase which she had sustained.[73]

The similarities between Macartney's and De Guignes's accounts are striking. Both relate lengthy battles between mythical beasts, enacted with elaborate choreography, numerous

being edited, during my absence from England, by the late Sir John Barrow, of the Admiralty.' J. F. Davis, *Chinese Miscellanies: A Collection of Essays and Notes* (London, 1865), p. 68.

[70] Davis, *Laou-Seng-Urh*, p. iv.

[71] *Ibid*, p. x.

[72] *Ibid*, p. xviii.

[73] *Ibid*, pp. xxv–xxvii.

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stagehands and lavish props. Indeed, every record cited by Barrow emphasises the grand spectacle and extravagance of Chinese court theatre.[74] This colourful compilation, however, also gives rise to a critical tension. In *Travels in China*, Barrow had drawn a clear distinction between the rococo fanfare of court theatre and the modest but more esteemed genre of literati drama. 'A brief view', by contrast, makes no such division. Barrow is content to note that 'representations would appear to descend into lowness and vulgarity, in the inverse ratio of the rank and situation in life of the parties for whose amusement they are exhibited'.[75] In his discussion of Fang Chengpei's 方成培 (1731–1789) *Leifeng ta* 雷峰塔 (Thunder peak pagoda),[76] Prémare's wayward rendering of *Zhaoshi gu'er*, and Davis's more accurate translation of *Lao sheng'er*, Barrow makes no attempt to situate each work beyond the walls of the Forbidden City. The pomp and ritual of a peculiar facet of European diplomatic relations with China are therefore wedded to the presentation of a literary play that was chiefly enjoyed on the page, far from the trumpetry of court. This incongruous juxtaposition led an early reviewer to conclude that 'A brief view' and *Laou-Seng-Urh* were penned by different hands.[77] The reasons for Barrow's obfuscation are, however, intimately connected with the genesis of his contribution.

Barrow's embassy

For over a decade, Barrow's entreaties for a second embassy to China had fallen on deaf ears. When, however, the end of the Napoleonic wars and a deterioration in relations between the EIC and Hong merchants in Canton threatened to disrupt the British monopoly on the Chinese tea-trade, Barrow's insistence that the Jiaqing emperor would grant the British a permanent legation in Peking and secure their trading advantages acquired new appeal.[78] There were now also reasonable grounds to believe that a second embassy would be better equipped and better informed than its controversial predecessor. In a letter to the Earl of Buckinghamshire (Robert Hobart, 1760–1816), Barrow wrote,

> The East India Company have in their employ a Gentleman who can both speak to the Chinese and write to them in their own language, without the usual recourse to the medium of any interpreter; an advantage which can only be duly appreciated by those who have had the mortification of experiencing the intrigues and chicanery which

[74] Ides reports a 'sort of farce', acted by 'lacqueys, whose antick dress and painted faces, were as well as any I have seen in Europe'. Davis, *Laou-Seng-Urh*, p. xx. Bell describes a pugilistic 'entertainment' in which 'an angel descended from the clouds, in a flash of lightning, with a monstrous sword in his hand, and soon parted the combatants, by driving them all off the stage; which done, he ascended in the same manner he came down, in a cloud of fire and smoke'. Davis, *Laou-Seng-Urh*, p. xxi.

[75] *Ibid*, pp. xviii–xix.

[76] Barrow draws here from De Guignes's account of the '*See-hou* Pagoda', which he correctly identifies but mistranslates as '*Lui-fung-ta*, the temple of the thundering winds'. Davis, *Laou-Seng-Urh*, p. xxviii. Barring *Sihai shengping, Leifeng ta* is the only Chinese drama described by an eighteenth-century European observer that can be matched to a transmitted text. The French sinologist Stanislas Julien (1797–1873) later translated a novelisation of this play by Yushan Zhuren 玉山主人 (nom de plume [The denizen of Jade Mountain], dates unknown) but was seemingly unaware that his compatriot had witnessed a performance of the work some 40 years earlier. See Stanislas Julien, *Blanche et Bleue, ou Les Deux Couleuvres-Fées; Roman Chinois* (Paris, 1834).

[77] 'The brief view of the Chinese drama prefixed to Mr. Davis's translation of the "Laou-seng-urh" was written, we discover, by the English editor of the work. We think that he should have announced this is in his advertisement, as surprise might be created by supposing that Mr. Davis had neglected personal observations and Chinese authors, to compile from European missionaries and travellers.' Anon., 'Mr. Davis's Chinese Drama', *Asiatic Journal* 5 (1818), p. 37.

[78] For an overview of Barrow's role in organising the second embassy, see C. M. Stevenson, *Britain's Second Embassy to China: Lord Amherst's 'Special Mission' to the Jiaqing Emperor in 1816* (Canberra, 2021), ch. 4.

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> are put in practice when communications are to be held with this jealous and corrupt government through the intervention of the Catholic Missionaries. It is almost needless to add that Sir George Staunton, who is now on the spot, is the gentleman to whom I allude.[79]

Staunton had continued to keep Barrow informed on Chinese affairs since his arrival in Canton as a junior writer in 1798. While rising through the ranks of the EIC, he nurtured an ambition, first instilled in him by his father, to serve as British ambassador to the Qing court. Despite Barrow's advocacy on his behalf, this honour was instead awarded to William Pitt Amherst (1773–1857), while Staunton, originally appointed as an interpreter, managed to wrangle a promotion to the rank of second commissioner.[80] When Barrow stumbled across Davis's manuscript in late 1816, news of the embassy, which had reached Peking at the end of August, had yet to arrive. Anticipating its success, however, Barrow spotted in Davis's translation an opportunity to publicise the undertaking for which he had long laboured. For his plan to achieve maximum effect, he needed to act quickly. Having received permission to publish from the Court of Directors on 6 January,[81] *Laou-Seng-Urh* was in the press by 22 January,[82] and reviewed in the January issue of the *Quarterly*, just in time to coincide with the first news of Amherst.[83] In the advertisement preceding 'A brief view', Barrow reiterates the argument with which he had coaxed the Earl of Buckinghamshire,

> Mr. Davis is gone up with Lord Amherst to Pekin, as are also Sir George Staunton, Mr. Manning, and Mr. Morrison; all well versed in the written and spoken languages of China. With such assistance, how infinitely greater are the advantages of the present Embassy, in all its bearings, than that of the Earl of Macartney, whose intercourse and communications were committed to the timidity and ignorance of two Chinese missionaries, who had been educated in the College *De Propaganda Fide*—yet this Embassy laid the foundation of that knowledge of the singular language of China, which is now so rapidly spreading itself over various parts of the globe.[84]

In this context, the incongruities of 'A brief view' become more understandable. While, as a canonical play, *Lao sheng'er* shares little in common with Chinese court theatre, the linguistic and cultural knowledge that facilitated its translation were built upon the political efforts of the Macartney embassy, in which dramatic spectacles played a prominent role. Barrow's introduction, therefore, is less about Chinese drama than the recent development and promise of British sinology, which with the advent of Amherst's embassy was poised on the cusp of its greatest triumph yet.

The Quarterly Review

Having composed an erudite and spirited introduction, why did Barrow then choose to conceal his involvement in *Laou-Seng-Urh*? To answer this question, we must turn to yet another branch of Barrow's prodigious activities. In 1809, the former foreign secretary and future prime minister George Canning (1770–1827) visited Barrow in his office at the Admiralty

[79] Barrow to Buckinghamshire, 14 February 1815, IOR/G/12/196, p. 5.

[80] For an account of Staunton's role in this embassy, see ch. 16 of Harrison, *Perils of Interpreting*, pp. 207–220.

[81] A letter from Barrow 'acknowledging the receipt of the Secretary's Letter of the 6th Instant. with the MSS Drama in Chinese' was received by the Court of Directors the following day. IOR/B/164, p. 873.

[82] In a letter to Byron on 22 January, Murray mentions in passing, 'I have the translation of a Chinese comedy in the press.' S. Smiles, *Memoir of John Murray* (London, 1891), p. 393.

[83] This issue was published on 17 May 1817.

[84] Davis, *Laou-Seng-Urh*, pp. ii–iii.

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with a request for him to contribute to *The Quarterly Review*. Under the editorship of the eminent critic William Gifford (1756–1826), this new journal aimed to counter the nefarious influence of the popular organ of Whig opinion, the *Edinburgh Review*, whose contributors included notable intellectuals such as William Hazlitt (1778–1830) and Henry Brougham (1778–1868). Barrow initially refused, pleading that 'I should tremble in submitting my crude observations to the scrutinizing eye of such a critic as Mr. Gifford',[85] but once persuaded needed little further encouragement. Between 1811 and 1840, he contributed over 200 articles on 'discoveries in natural history and the arts; in naval improvements and other professional subjects; many as regards China, an inexhaustible subject; Africa and America the same; the British fisheries; ship-building and naval timber, dry-rot doctors, and quackery in general; history of inventions; steam-engine, canals, and railroads. [...] the geography and history of the various nations of the globe, and the present condition of their inhabitants'.[86] It was, however, for Barrow's knowledge of China that his early articles were most prized. His first submission was a review of De Guignes's *Voyages à Peking*. This was soon followed by an appraisal of Staunton's *Ta-tsing-leu-lee* and an opinion piece, '*Free Trade* with China'. In early 1810, John Murray wrote to the indefatigable Barrow, 'I am now reading again with renewed gratification your paper on '*Free Trade* with China,' in which, from Lord Napier's obstinacy down to the present crisis, everything was completely seen and foretold. Be so good as to point out any pamphlets on the opium trade or modern works on China that you would like to have sent to you.'[87] Between 1809 and the publication of *Laou-Seng-Urh* in 1817, Barrow authored a total of 12 articles on books or topics related to China, leading him to begin one review with the boast, 'Ours being the only journal that has employed a portion of its pages occasionally, and we trust not uselessly, in marking the progress of Chinese literature in Europe, we should hold ourselves inexcusable were we to pass over unnoticed these maiden productions of the Canton press.'[88] The broad reading that these reviews entailed overwhelmingly informed the scope and critical timbre of 'A brief view'.[89]

All articles in the *Quarterly* appeared anonymously. This policy, upheld at the insistence of Gifford, had two major advantages. First, it ensured that reviewers were protected from *ad hominum* attacks in the wake of critical reviews.[90] Second, it created a chamber of influence, where a given article was difficult to dismiss as the vagary of an individual but instead assumed the weight of consensus that only a consistent editorial policy could confer. Indeed, the contents of the *Quarterly* were often the result of some degree of collaboration. Gifford, a demanding editor, often made substantial revisions, or sought the

[85] Barrow, *Memoir,* p. 500.

[86] *Ibid*, pp. 504–505.

[87] *Ibid*, p. 502.

[88] 'Translations from the original Chinese: with notes', *Quarterly* (July 1815), p. 406.

[89] Of the 19 works cited in 'A brief view', Barrow cites 14 in earlier articles for the *Quarterly*. From the remaining five, two (Harris' *Voyages* and *Bell's Travels from St. Petersburg*) informed *Travels in China*. This leaves only three works unaccounted for: Malone's *Shakespeare*, Hurd's 'Discourse on poetical imitation', and the Chinese poem 'London'. Barrow had only recently discovered Davis's partial translation of the latter work, from which he quotes in the *Quarterly*'s review of *Laou-Seng-Urh*. The complete translation was published in J. F. Davis, 'On the poetry of the Chinese', *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2.1 (1829), pp. 444–449. Barrow's penchant for reciting Shakespeare is well documented. While still at grammar school, Barrow 'gained some smattering of reputation for my knowledge of Shakspeare [sic], and for the manner in which I could repeat many of the finest passages in his tragedies, and which I retained to a late period of life—some of them even till now'. Barrow, *Memoir*, p. 6. Richard Hurd (1720–1808) was a prominent literary critic of the late eighteenth century. The traceable sources of 'A brief view' demonstrate that it was indubitably Barrow's work.

[90] Gifford, for instance, shouldered the blame that followed the *Quarterly*'s scathing review of Keats's *Endymion*, of which Byron wrote, 'John Keats, who was kill'd off by one critique/Just as he really promised something great [...] T's strange the mind, that very fiery particle/Should let itself be snuff'd out by an article.' Byron, *Don Juan* (London, 1826), vol. ii, p. 191. The review was in fact written by John Wilson Croker (1780–1857).

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opinion of a second specialist. Barrow's contributions frequently benefited from his 'scrutinizing eye'. In letters to Murray, Gifford touches on the extent of revisions. 'I recd. Barrow ... I have made him read more smoothly.'[91] 'Our friend B. proves a tougher piece of work than I expected ... I find some difficulty to preserve the chain of the argument clear and unbroken.'[92] Though of an equable temperament, Barrow sometimes raised objections. 'Mr B likes his Article ... thinks I have omitted too much of his quotation.'[93] By late 1816, Barrow had become accustomed to writing in the capacious guise of the first-person plural. Anonymity permitted him to advance the political and colonial interests of the Admiralty while disguising the partiality of his military office. Though an informed reader of the *Quarterly* may well have guessed that the journal's sinological articles were composed by the author of *Travels in China*, the time and industry that has been required to identify all of Barrow's contributions show that this would have been far from apparent to most.[94]

The *Quarterly*'s review of *Laou-Seng-Urh* was also penned by Barrow,[95] who now drew an even more explicit connection between the scholarly translation at hand and the diplomatic mission in the field. As much an addendum as an appraisal, Barrow's article combines an overview of Davis's work with a fresh array of observations to complement the 'summary view of the Chinese drama, or rather, we should say, of the stage-representations, as they are exhibited for the entertainment of foreign ambassadors'.[96] The poetic series, 'London', which 'A brief view' only mentions in passing is now cited at length for its contrasting depiction of a Chinese traveller's observations of English theatre.

> 'Their play-houses,' he says, 'are always shut during the day; after dark the scenes are opened. The faces of the actors are very handsome. Their dresses are embroidered and splendid; and they sing in exact unison with the music; and dance to the drums and flutes. The exhibition is delightful in the highest degree, and all go away with laughing countenances.' And he adds, in a note—-for this Chinese poet too uses his verses as pegs to hang notes upon—-'that all descriptions of people mix together and pay a certain fixed price; that the scenes are painted to represent trees and houses, that they are frequently changed; and that the female characters are all performed by women.'[97]

When revisiting the observations of successive embassies, Barrow chooses to quote from alternative passages in Macartney's diary and an additional performance, described by Staunton, of a historical play staged outside Tianjin. Even comparative insights about the resemblance of Chinese drama to English mysteries, the role of arias relative to the chorus in ancient Greek theatre, and the possible influence of Sanskrit literature, are fleshed out

[91] H. Shine and H. C. Shine, *The Quarterly Review Under Gifford: Identification of Contributors 1809–1824* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1949), p. 16.

[92] *Ibid*, p. 29.

[93] *Ibid*, p. 25.

[94] Barrow himself confessed to writing 'rather more than around 190 articles' for the *Quarterly.* Barrow, *Memoir*, p. 502. Hill Shine and Helen Chadwick Shine, cited above, identified as many as 125 of these. Addenda have been furnished in J. Cutmore, 'Sir John Barrow's contributions to the *Quarterly Review* 1809–24', *Notes and Queries* (September 1994), pp. 326–328; J. Cameron, 'Sir John Barrow as a Quarterly Reviewer, 1809–1843', *Notes and Queries* (March 1996), pp. 34–37; and J. Cutmore, *Contributors to the Quarterly Review: A History, 1809–25* (London, 2008). I have relied on this final, most comprehensive account.

[95] Cutmore, cited above, attributes this article to Barrow based on cross-referencing with earlier articles, and the author's frequent and affectionate mention of George Staunton, Barrow's former student and friend. Cutmore, *Contributors to the Quarterly*, p. 146.

[96] *Quarterly* (January 1817), p. 398.

[97] *Quarterly* (January 1817), p. 399.

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with supporting quotations. Barrow's emphasis, however, is on the unprecedented achievement of Davis's translation, which 'puts an end to all dispute with regard to the nature of the Chinese drama [...] The 'Heir in his Old Age' [...] is wanting neither in sentiment, passion, nor character [...] Mr Davis, we think, has done wonders.'[98]

Having outlined the play's plot, and injected the conclusions of 'A brief view' with a flourish of comparative colour, Barrow then turns unannounced to news of Amherst's embassy.

> We had promised ourselves much information on the interesting subject before us, from the embassy to China, which at the present moment, occupies so large a share of the public attention. With such superior advantages to those of Lord Macartney, in having so many of our own countrymen who are well versed in the language, Sir George Staunton, Mr. Morrison, and Mr. Davis, the Editor too, had, naturally enough, anticipated the most favourable results from the mission; which however, we regret to find, from the Imperial Gazette, are not likely to be fulfilled.[99]

Political commentary peppers every sinological article that Barrow had to date written for the *Quarterly.*[100] This abrupt transition from literary analysis to political reportage was, however, entirely new, and signals not only the degree to which the flower of British sinology and the fate of the embassy were connected in his mind but also the pressing nature of the news at hand. In the absence of more direct intelligence, Barrow relies on official Chinese sources to narrate how Amherst and his suite were dismissed from Peking for the same reason that the Russian embassy of 1805 was rebuffed from Mongolia—a refusal to comply with the humiliating kow-tow ceremony. Historians have since formed a fuller picture of Amherst's dismissal, which took place amid growing economic and political instability, and the anxieties surrounding the commercial and military power of the British in Canton that set the stage for the Opium Wars of the coming decades.[101] But with these developments still in the future, Barrow can applaud that 'the ambassador [...] saved his own character and the character of the nation he represented, at the expense of foregoing the gratification of beholding the dazzling rays of the "celestial countenance"'.[102] The HMS Alceste's assault on Chinese defences in the Pearl River Delta is less charitably treated,

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[98] *Quarterly* (January 1817), pp. 401–402.

[99] *Quarterly* (January 1817), p. 407.

[100] In his first review for the journal, Barrow highlighted the demand for sinological knowledge that Britain's diplomatic engagement had created, citing, with a sly mixture of hubris and modesty, the commercial success of his own first book. 'The works regarding China, having been mostly published on the Continent, excited but little interest in England. Our connection with that country was confined to one spot, and our concern limited to one object. We cared little about China so long as it supplied us with *Bohea* and *Souchong*. At length however an event occurred which drew the attention of the English towards that country: this was the embassy of the Earl of Macartney to the Court of Pekin. The national curiosity now became so impatient to be gratified with some account of China and its inhabitants, that a publication, patched up in London from the meagre journal kept by a menial servant of the Embassador, and plentifully interlarded with extracts from Du Halde and Grozier, went through several editions, before the "Authentic Account" from the Secretary of the Embassy could make its appearance.' *Quarterly* (November 1809), pp. 258–259.

[101] It is this broader view of the Amherst embassy that Davis adopts in his own account, *Sketches of China*, published over 20 years later. Like his diplomatic forbears, Davis does not neglect to mention performances of local theatre, though he judges them less agreeable than the farce which he had only recently translated. 'The theatrical performance, unfortunately for us, was of that heroical or tragical cast which they always accompany with a hubbub of noises proceeding from gongs, drums, cymbals, and every thing else calculated to deafen the ears. This department of their theatre is infinitely less agreeable than the familiar and comic portion, which was probably deemed unsuitable to the dignity and importance of the present occasion.' J. F. Davis, *Sketches of China* (London, 1841), pp. 69–70.

[102] *Ibid*, p. 412.

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though Barrow nevertheless argues that this ‘friendly interchange of salutes’,[103] as the incident became publicly known, drove home a legitimate diplomatic goal, namely, ‘to remind these corrupt provincial authorities, by another embassy, that the gentlemen of the English factory at Canton were not a set of unprotected adventurers, as they were inclined to consider them’.[104] Barrow ends his review-come-news bulletin with the assurance that thanks to ‘the character of Lord Amherst, particularly distinguished as it is by a suavity of manners, an equal temper and a mild and conciliating disposition, joined to the able support of Sir George Staunton, who with a perfect knowledge of the language and the people, possesses that calm and steady determination which is best suited to deal with this subtle nation, we have the best pledges that the honour and the interest of the nation will not be compromised, but remain safe in their hands’.[105] Despite all setbacks, the new British sinology prevails.

The legacy of *Laou-Seng-Urh*

Court theatre played a prominent role in Qing foreign relations throughout the seventeenth and eighteen centuries. While dramatic spectacles contrived the heady mixture of entertainment and grandiloquence that oiled the wheels of Chinese diplomacy, they were also vehicles for more nuanced political messages. Qianlong’s involvement in *Sihai shengping* is one such example.[106] The difficulty with which members of Macartney’s embassy understood this play only added to the frustrations of their mission. *Laou-Seng-Urh* inherits the complex interplay between politics and literature that characterises Chinese court theatre in several ways. The motivation for Davis’s translation was inherently political, as the cultural and linguistic lessons learned from Chinese belles-lettres were intended to inform future trade and diplomacy with the Qing. Barrow’s introduction, meanwhile, not only reviews the diplomatic precedents of court theatre, as reported by Western observers, but retools this knowledge to promote the gleaming credentials of a new embassy. This agenda was ventriloquised anonymously, for maximum effect, first in ‘A brief view’, and then in the pages of the *Quarterly*. While *Sihai shengping*, therefore, was an immediate and immersive illustration of an ancient diplomatic ideal, geared to a foreign audience, Davis and Barrow’s work was a more sinuous plea for a new diplomatic paradigm, catering to a domestic readership, in which the new school of British sinology would facilitate bolder and more profitable engagement with the Chinese.

In terms of its immediate goals, *Laou-Seng-Urh* was a disappointment. The embassy that it championed faltered at the first hurdle, while the literary and cultural impact to which its authors aspired never materialised. Over 80 years previously, Prémare’s translation of *Zhaoshi gu’er* had prompted adaptations by Voltaire, Goethe, and Arthur Murphy (1727–1805) that drew large crowds across Europe.[107] Barrow had anticipated that *Lao sheng’er*, which he regarded as both a better play and a more accomplished translation than *Zhaoshi gu’er*, would be similarly successful. The eighteenth-century European admiration for Chinese ‘objects of curiosity’, however, had begun to wane. As a China hand, Barrow had contributed to this sea change, concluding one of his reviews with the damning assessment, ‘we shall soon be able to assign the proper place of this people, who have been much too highly extolled, in the scale of civilised nations. They would be found, we suspect, either

[103] Anon. ‘English embassies to China’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 89 (Edinburgh, 1861), p. 54.

[104] *Quarterly* (January 1817), p. 414.

[105] *Ibid*, p. 416.

[106] The broader role that dramatic spectacles played in Qing diplomacy will be comprehensively explored in a chapter of Tian Yuan Tan’s forthcoming monograph on late imperial court theatre.

[107] For an introduction to this much studied topic, see A. Hsia, ‘The orphan of the House Zhao in French, English, German and Hong Kong literature’, *Comparative Literature Studies* 25.4 (1988), pp. 335–351.

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immediately above, or next below the Turks.'[108] Though contemporary reviews of *Laou-Seng-Urh* were laudatory, the public response was decidedly muted. Only 728 copies of the work were sold, yielding John Murray a modest profit of 14 pounds and tenpence.[109]

Long-term, *Laou-Seng-Urh* had a more appreciable impact. The rapidity with which Davis learned Chinese under Morrison proved that an intensive study of vernacular works offered the fastest route to proficiency. *Laou-Seng-Urh*, which was the first substantial fruit of Morrison's school, opened a path for other publications of a similar nature. Davis himself went on to produce three more volumes of translations.[110] His junior colleagues, Peter Parring Thomas (1791–1855) and Robert Thoms (1807–1846), also translated works of vernacular literature.[111] Most significantly, Morrison's *Chinese Dictionary*, which was universally consulted by subsequent generations of diplomats and missionaries, included copious extracts from vernacular works.[112]

The most significant legacy of *Laou-Seng-Urh*, however, was foreseen by neither Davis nor Barrow. Their publication coincided fortuitously with the institutionalisation of academic sinology in Europe. Rémusat, who held the first chair in Chinese at the Collège de France, favourably reviewed Davis's work in the *Journal des Savants*[113] and was later inspired to turn his own hand to the translation of a vernacular novel.[114] The breadth of Rémusat's interests was inherited by his most outstanding pupils. Stanislas Julien and Bazin Ainé (1799–1862) both engaged with vernacular plays.[115] As the earliest wide-ranging survey of Chinese drama, 'A brief view' also continued to find readers, ensuring that the early link between European diplomacy and Chinese drama was not forgotten.[116] Both Davis and Barrow, therefore, occupy pride of place in a long line of sinological scholarship that continues to this day.[117]

Conclusion: 'a colonial theatre'

Barrow never confessed his involvement in *Laou-Seng-Urh*. In the autobiography written shortly before his death in 1848, he remains evasive: 'Of the literature of the Chinese, I can say nothing; but Sir John Davis [...] has entered fully on the state of their drama,

[108] *Quarterly* (July 1815), p. 418.

[109] J[ohn]/M[urray]/A[rchive], MS.42725, p. 123. Seven shillings and sixpence were spent on 'Books sent to Mr Barrow', presumably for the composition of his introduction.

[110] *Chinese Novels* (cited above); *The Fortunate Union, a Romance, Translated from the Chinese Original, with Notes and Illustrations, to Which Is Added a Chinese Tragedy* (London, 1829); and *The Sorrows of Han* (cited above).

[111] P. P. Thomas, *The Affectionate Pair, or the History of Sung Kin, a Chinese Tale* (London, 1820); R. Thom, *Wang keaou lwan pih neen chang han, or the Lasting Resentment of Miss Keaou Lwan-wang, a Chinese Tale: Founded on Fact. Translated from the Original by Sloth* (Canton, 1839).

[112] See H. Yang, 'The making of the first Chinese–English dictionary', *Historiographia Linguistica* 41.2/3 (2014), pp. 299–322.

[113] Cited above. Rémusat also included a discussion of *Laou-Seng-Urh* in *Mélanges Asiatiques* (Paris, 1923), vol. ii, 320–334. Davis's work was re-translated into French by Antoine Bruguière de Sorsum (1773–1823), *Lao-Seng-Eul, comédie chinoise, suivie de San-Iu-Leou, ou les trois étages consacrés, conte moral* (Paris, 1819).

[114] *Iu kiao li, ou les Deux Cousines* (Paris, 1826).

[115] S. Julien, *Hoei lan ki ou L'histoire du Cercle de Draie, drame en prose et en vers, traduit du Chinois et accompagné de notes* (London, 1832); B. Ainé, *Theatre Chinois ou Choix de Pièces de Théatre composées sous les empereurs Mongols traduits pour la première fois sur le texte original précédées d'une introduction et accompagnés de notes*. (Paris, 1838); B. Ainé, *Le Pi pa ki ou L'histoire du Luth drame Chinois de Kao tong kia représenté à Pékin, en 1404 avec les changements de Mao Tseu traduit sur le texte original* (Paris, 1841).

[116] Edgar Allen Poe (1809–1849) quotes from 'A brief view' in one of his 'Marginalia' pieces. See R. P. Benton, 'Poe's acquaintance with Chinese literature', *Poe Newsletter* 2.2 (April 1969), p. 34.

[117] For a full list of early-nineteenth-century translations of vernacular literature, see Wylie, *Notes on Chinese Literature*, pp. xxxiv–xxxix.

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poetry and prose fiction.'[118] The failure of the Amherst embassy doubtless made him reluctant to associate himself with a work whose prophecies had proven so glaringly false. Until 1840, Barrow persisted in writing about Chinese topics for the *Quarterly*, including three further articles defending the aims and conduct of the embassy. He also continued to read proofs and pen reviews of Davis's latest translations, though he never again condescended to write an introduction.[119] Chinese affairs were, after all, only one aspect of his manifold activities.[120] Later described as 'a host in himself',[121] Barrow's indefatigable energy and polymath learning ensured that, whether in the service of Macartney or the Admiralty, his presence was felt far beyond his official brief. The looming proportions, however, that he assumes in early Anglo-Sino diplomacy are largely due to his retrospective efforts to shape the narratives of both embassies; for as writer, editor, and reviewer, Barrow was more of an omnipresent 'host' than he could ever have hoped to be in person.

Davis abandoned the translation of vernacular Chinese literature in 1829. Though he yearned for the gentle renown that a life of letters could bring, he resented his connection with the country that was his only legitimate topic. Shortly before the publication of *Chinese Novels*, in 1822, he wrote to Murray, 'As I was a few days ago elected a fellow of the Royal Society, you may in the title page of my Book designate me an F.R.S. I had rather leave out "the East India Company Civil Service".'[122] In a later missive he writes, 'I am determined to devote myself to a quiet and literary life; and in the mean while, I have been silently collecting notes and books on almost every subject connected with this country [...] I abhor and detest business and every thing that draws me away from my books—mais que faire?—il faut vivre! [...] I have little pleasure in this country, except in the prospect of leaving it, and of again seeing my English friends.'[123] It is perhaps indicative of this cultural ambivalence, fostered by a career in which he found himself participating, despite strong misgivings, in the most divisive episode of the opium trade,[124] that prompted Davis to write in 1847,

> Some of the best specimens that could be discovered of their drama, their poetry, and their prose fictions, have long ago been translated, and the chief value of these has consisted not more in their own abstract merits than in the light which they threw on a people so long self-insulated, and shut in from the reach of foreign influence or investigation.[125]

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[118] Barrow, *Memoir*, pp. 128–129.

[119] On 26 December 1821, Davis wrote to Murray, 'I have nearly finished the MSS [of *Chinese Novels*] and shall have the pleasure to send them as soon as Sir George and Mr. Barrow have looked at them.' J/M/A, MS.40319, pp. 9–10. On 29 May 1829, he wrote again to his publisher, 'Mr Barrow has now got my Romance of the "Fortunate Union" and will give me his opinion concerning it.' J/M/A, MS.40319, p. 16.

[120] Apart from managing the daily administration of the world's most powerful navy, Barrow also organised exploratory expeditions to remote corners of the globe. Two of these enterprises notoriously ended in disaster, namely James Kingston Tuckey's (1776–1816) plagued voyage to the Congo in 1816 and John Franklin's (1786–1847) ill-fated search for the Arctic North-West Passage in 1847.

[121] G. T. Staunton, *Memoir of Sir John Barrow* (London, 1852), p. 2.

[122] J/M/A, MS.40319, p. 13.

[123] J/M/A, MS.40319, pp. 18–19.

[124] For a thoughtful article on the intellectual traffic between Davis's literary output and the Opium Wars, see P. J. Kitson, 'The dark gift: John Francis Davis, Thomas De Quincey, and the Amherst embassy to China of 1816', in *Writing China: Essays on the Amherst Embassy (1816) and Sino-British Cultural Relations*, (eds.) P. J. Kitson and R. Markley (London, 2021), pp. 56–82.

[125] J. F. Davis, 'Address to the China branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, on its inauguration at Hong Kong', in *Chinese Miscellanies*, pp. 113–114.

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These are not, as Lawrence Wong rightly points out, the words of a man who has drawn deeply from the spring of Chinese literature, nor indeed from literature in general.[126] When Davis finally earned the leisure for which he had long suffered, he turned to more trifling literary matters. His anonymously penned and privately circulated *Poems and Criticism, by Outis*,[127] makes today for revealing, though tedious, reading. A poem entitled 'Prologue for a colonial theatre' expresses the frustrations of his former profession,

> E'en here, methinks, self-exiled as we pine
> In barb'rous climes too near the burning Line,[128]
> As rolls each joyless year, and bears away
> Some frail memorial of life's younger day; [...]
> And, with each fading trace, grows rigid too
> The feeling sense, that might that trace renew–
> The Drama's power may vindicate its reign,
> And wake our torpid souls to feel again![129]

In isolation, this verse might plausibly be read as an expression of the comfort that Davis took in Chinese drama, whose translation delivered him briefly from the drudgery and moral dilemmas of his colonial post. But it is not in praise of Yuan plays that Davis waxes lyrical. The poem's closing couplet shows that the time when Chinese literature could be studied and appraised on its own terms, apart from the embattled fray of imperial politics, had yet to fully arrive: 'Spread far and wide the humanising strain/And add one wreath to SHAKSPEARE'S hallow'd fane!'[130]

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Conflicts of interest. None.

[126] Wong, 'Objects of curiosity', p. 197.
[127] I.e. Odysseus's ruse to the cyclops: Οὖτις (nobody).
[128] Davis's note: Sub curru nimium propinqui Solis [Horace, *Odes* 1:22, 'beneath the chariot of the sun where it comes too close'].
[129] Anon. [J. F. Davis], *Poems and Criticism, by Outis* (London, 1850), pp. 21–22.
[130] *Ibid*, p. 23.

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