

Thomas Francis Wade's (1818–1895) Translations of *Yi* 夷 and Sino-British Relations during the Mid-Nineteenth Century

Tengfei Ma

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Hong Kong, China

Abstract

The translation of the Chinese character *yi* (夷) as “barbarian” caused a myriad of issues between Britain and China during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When translating Chinese documents in 1861, Thomas Francis Wade (1818–1895) defended the use of the character by Qing officials and explained, “I incline to believe that the word barbarian was here introduced by mistake.” This was a unique occurrence. By comparing Wade’s various translations of *yi*, this article supplies ample examples of how the correlation between his various applications of *yi* coincided with the changing state of Sino-British relations. On the surface, his varying points of view appear contradictory. However, upon closer inspection, they are not inconsistent and were applied for the purpose of shaping Sino-British relations, as he adjusted the translation to coincide with the climate of Sino-British diplomatic relations. In addition, while being a diplomatic interpreter, he used the translations of *yi* as a bargaining chip to further political interests during negotiations. This further reflects the complexity of being a diplomat and interpreter overseeing Sino-British diplomacy.

Keywords

Thomas Francis Wade, barbarian, translations, *yi*, Sino-British relations