

Inventing the Barbarians: The Changing Contexts of *Yi* in the Late Qing Dynasty

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This study analyzes how the meaning of *yi* (夷, barbarian) was constructed in different historical contexts at the end of the Qing dynasty, which is important for us to reconsider xenophobia and Sino-centrism both in the past and present. Our study combines contextual with intertextual reading methods. It places different materials, including missionaries' works, newspapers, and official documents, in their specific historical contexts and links them to obtain a full picture of this transformation. We argue that *yi* was invented. Various agents and actors created the connotation of *yi* to suit their interests. It was transformed by the Qing court from "barbarians" to those who follow Confucianism to justify their rule. Then it was first translated as "foreigners" and later as "barbarians" when Europeans came to China. Our study situates the meaning of *yi* to help us rethink some of the labels and misconceptions attached to *yi* and the early missionaries in China.

Keywords: *hua-yi* distinction, contexts, the late Qing dynasty, barbarian, foreigner, missionary

The Background

As China's economic status has begun to challenge the existing international order in recent years, the saying *hua-yi zhi bian* (华夷之辨 the distinction between China and *yi*) regains its power. Originally *hua* refers to the Han Chinese, while *yi* means the neighboring ethnic groups with a pejorative implication, namely "barbarians". This term implies a Sino-centric view. Based on this explanation, the growth of Chinese power is interpreted as the revival of Sino-centrism—"China and the barbarians are different" (Nordholt, 2018, p. 15). However, the meaning of *yi* changed in history, from Han Chinese to Chinese, from foreigners to barbarians, and vice versa. In general, its meaning is more likely to be transformed during the transitional periods. This research is to examine this shift in the late Qing. How and why did the meaning of *yi* change? Who did participate in this process? What kinds of roles did the missionaries play?

There are few studies specifically dealing with the translation of *yi* in the late Qing. Most scholars simply mentioned it when they talked about missionaries and correspondingly attached it with imperialism.

Liu (2000) noticed that the history of the translation of *yi* was convoluted and neglected. Still, the expressions of *yi* in newspapers and books impacted Sino-British relations, and she argued that the reason for

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the changing meaning of *yi* is to help the Western European invaders (Liu, 2000). Liu (2000) argued that Europeans' stereotypes of the late Qing dynasty stem from their holding a Eurocentric view [3]. To analyze the changing meaning of *yi* more objectively requires a relatively unbiased global perspective based on various materials.

As Wang (1987) argued, previous studies are too one-sided, and we should notice that the essential purpose of the early Protestant missionaries was to expand the Church's influence. In the process, they served to facilitate cultural exchange between China and the West (Wang, 1987). This suggests that we cannot generalize the purposes and roles of missionary activities in China but need to consider their performance in a specific historical context.

In terms of Chinese and foreign diplomatic relations at that time, Li (2013) divides the late Qing government's acceptance of foreign ministers in China into four stages, providing us a comparatively systematic account of Chinese and foreign diplomacy in different historical periods. It is worth noting that the Chinese understanding of the character *yi* was multifaceted. In the late Qing dynasty, foreigners were excluded, and their activities in China were restricted, so it was reasonable to translate *yi* as "strangers", "foreigners", and "barbarians" (Wang, 2001).

Existing research has confined itself to pointing out missionaries' attitudes towards China and consequently labeling them as cultural invaders. Our study is to reexamine these labels by including the translation of *yi* into consideration.

A variety of materials are involved in this research. First, early missionaries' newspapers, journals, dictionaries, and even logbooks are used to see their experience in China and corresponding views of China, specifically, August Gutzlaff's (1803-1851) *Eastern Western Monthly Magazine, Journal of Three Voyages along the Coast of China, in 1831, 1832, and 1833: With Notices of Siam, Corea, and the Loo-Choo Islands, The Canton Register, and The Chinese Repository*. Second, official documents, including the *Treaty of Tien-Tsin* between the Queen of Great Britain and the Emperor of China (1858), the diplomatic letter between Lin Zexu (1785-1850) and Queen Victoria (1819-1901) are used to show the governments' attitudes. Methodologically, this research combines contextualized and inter-textual reading. By situating the materials in a specific historical context, it traces the change of *yi* over time. Moreover, it links different materials together to get a full picture of this shift. And we study how China and foreign countries dealt with the problem of *yi* in the late Qing dynasty through historical facts. We would criticize some ideas regarding missionaries before the First Opium War (1840) as colonizers and think that missionaries came to China to gain opium benefits.

This research demonstrates that the meaning of *yi* was re/constructed and deconstructed in different historical periods through situated analysis. It was transformed from barbarians to Chinese who follow Confucianism by the Qing court to justify its rule. At the same time, it was translated as "foreigners" and re-translated as "barbarians" when the Europeans arrived in China. We argue that *yi* was invented. The connotation of "barbarians" can be created by different actors to cater to their interests.

The Changing Contexts of *hua-yi* (华夷)

How the Qing Dynasty Deconstructed and Reconstructed *hua-yi*

The meaning of *hua-yi* underwent a great transformation in the Qing dynasty.

After centuries of Manchu rule in the Middle Kingdom, the meaning of *hua* (华) gradually changed to refer to all ethnic groups in China. Meng (2018) proposed that the distinction between *hua* and *yi* could be both

cultural and ethnic-geographical. Its emphasis shifted with the change of dynasties (Meng, 2018). As non-Han Chinese, the first serious problem faced by the rulers was the strong anti-Manchu ideology in the society. Because *hua-yi* distinction dominated the land for a long time Han Chinese considered minorities as *yi* (barbarians). They raised the banner of “Anti-Qing sentiment” (Fan qing fu ming, 反清复明) and “restoration of Han China” (Guang fu hua xia, 光复华夏), denouncing the Manchus as unqualified rulers. Xiang (1996) argued that the rulers implemented the policy of ethnic oppression and economic development. The policy of ethnic oppression shook predominantly the Han Chinese position in the Ming dynasty’s perception of *hua-yi*, and the economic development led to greater stability for all ethnic groups. Therefore, the connotation of *hua* gradually included the Manchu ethnic groups. It is noticeable that Li noticed that the rulers of the Qing dynasty, on the one hand, emphasized the basic state policy of “Manchurian fundamentals”. It established the dominant position of Manchurians in all aspects of their political, economic, cultural, and social life and maintained their privileges. On the other hand, the political strategy of “multi-ethnicity as one” was proposed. Based on safeguarding the Manchurians’ interests, relevant policies were formulated in politics, ideology, and culture, economy, and ethno-religious relations to promote the integration of the various ethnic groups (Li, 2018). This allowed the *hua-yi* distinction to gradually become a geographical concept, without the derogatory meaning of *yi* (barbarians) and simply referring to the peoples from the areas outside the Middle Kingdom.

In addition, Li (2018) argued that the Manchu rulers attached importance to “Confucianism and indoctrination” in their ideology and culture to build up the image of an orthodox dynasty. The traditional view of *hua-yi* distinguishes *hua* and *yi* through whether or not they follow Confucian rituals. Therefore, the Manchu rulers valued Confucianism, studied it, and spread it widely among the people. Thus Manchu justified that they were not barbarians but reasonable rulers who also followed Confucian rites.

Secondly, there was also a significant change in the meaning of *yi*, which gradually evolved from ethnic minorities to foreigners. *yi* was used to refer to the ethnic groups that did not obey Confucian rituals. Due to the Chinese rites controversy between Roman Catholic missionaries and Confucianism during the Kangxi period (1661-1722), the emperor Kangxi stated that missionaries in China would not stay in China if they opposed Chinese rites. However, an ambassador published the Pope’s edict on his way back to Europe. This behaviour was seen as a challenge to the traditional Chinese rituals and laws. Thus Kangxi was angered and changed his liberal religious policy to restrict the missionary practices in the Qing dynasty (Meng & Liu, 2010). The Qing dynasty, with Sino-centrism, witnessed a different cultural philosophy from the European missionaries. They did not follow Confucian rituals and therefore did not belong to the category of *hua*. And as European countries interacted increasingly closely with the Qing dynasty, the term *yi* gradually became a synonym for foreigners.

What the Early Missionaries Experienced in China

The late Qing was a period of dramatic change in Sino-Western relations, during which Britain was most closely involved with China. As one of the representatives of unofficial diplomacy, Chen (2011) pointed out that missionaries often played multiples roles, religious, commercial, and even political. Due to their ambiguous positions, some even lost their missionary status. Robert Morrison (1782-1834), one of the earliest Protestant missionaries in mainland China, was a key figure in the early history of Sino-British relations, with his great achievements in both missionary and political affairs (Chen, 2011). Before the First Opium War, the Qing government severely restricted missionary activities. Zhang’s (2020) description of the survival of the early missionaries and their families reveals that their individual freedom of movement was greatly restricted

under the repressive policies, which even threatened their lives. Morrison had to become involved in the official Chinese and British diplomacy to seek further missionary opportunities in the specific historical period. As an early Protestant missionary, Morrison's diplomatic activities were representative, defending British interests and reconciling them with Chinese interests.

Morrison saw a pejorative sense of *yi*, but did not translate *yi* as "barbarians". Liu (2004) provided two pieces of evidence. The first translation of *yi* as "foreigners" is in the *Dictionary of the Chinese Language*, and the second one is in archives in the East India Company before 1832 (Liu, 2004). Wang (2013) argued that Morrison believes that *yi* contains the meaning of barbarism. He also cited at least two occasions when Morrison discusses the word *yi* in a very explicit way, with its negative connotation: inferior and problematic. Those who understood the negative meaning of *yi* protested this address, but the Chinese still called them *yi*. Thus these translators chose not to acknowledge and deliberately ignored the derogatory meaning of *yi*, refusing to further reinforce it (Wang, 2013). In this period, at the official level, *yi* was not equated with barbarians.

Before the First Opium War

How *yi* Was Translated as Barbarians

In the early 19th century, Chinese officials had the idea of the Celestial Empire (Tian chao shang guo, 天朝上国) ostracizing foreign cultures. Before the 1830s in the late Qing dynasty, the relations between China and foreign countries were mainly commercial, and the European merchants could only operate in Guangzhou and Macao. For China, the main reason for not establishing diplomatic relations was the argument of *hua-yi* distinction (*hua yi zhi bian*, 华夷之辨), believing that China was the center of the globe and that other countries were vassal states or foreign *yi* (Wai yi, 外夷)¹ who should pay tribute to China. The foreign *yi* did not know decency and justice. So as long as they did not threaten the central government, China did not need to communicate with them too much. They could just conciliate them or even never communicate with them. Since the Kangxi period, the Qing government had implemented a policy of banning missionary activities. After Qianlong's succession, missionary activities were strictly banned, and missionaries could only operate openly in Macao. Until the First Opium War, missionaries in Guangzhou were afraid to reveal their identity. Once the government detected their secret missionary activities, they would be strictly prohibited.

Mission was very difficult. One of the most important missionaries in the 19th century was Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff (1803-1851), who arrived in Macau in 1831. Alexander Wiley (1867) noted that "Gützlaff had commended himself to the natives, by the practice of medicine among them... while he distributed Christian books to a great extent, on every available occasion" (p. 55). Gützlaff knew China very well, and he documented how his mission was discriminated against in China. He wanted to build an ANGLO-CHINESE COLLEGE, with the purpose of "blending the culture of Chinese and European literature, and rendering its advantages subservient to the advancement of the cause of Christ in China" (Gützlaff, 2015, p. 76). But the response he got was "the extreme ignorance of even the accomplished scholar of China respecting Christian nations" (Gützlaff, 2015, p. 76). According to Gützlaff, one scholar congratulated himself in his article that he was not born in "our barbarous countries of the West" (Gützlaff, 2015, p. 75). It can be seen that not only were the missionary activities excluded in China, but the West was also seen as a "wilderness" that could not match

¹ "外夷" means Yi in foreign countries.

China, but it was not true in reality. Gützlaff's experience in China affected his understanding of *yi*. He recorded the experience that he viewed as "barbarians". Kroma-khun, the brother-in-law of the Jiaqing Emperor (1760-1820), called in Gützlaff's medical help. Gützlaff (2015) thought that Kroma-khun "greatly approved of Christian principles, but did not apply to the fountain of all virtue, Jesus Christ" (p. 28). Kroma-khun again called in his aid in consequence of an ulcer; yet his arrogant son despised the assistance of a barbarian, and Kroma-khun soon died. Therefore, when Chinese officials referred to him as *yi*, he thought that Chinese officials regarded him as a barbarian.

How Missionaries' Chinese and English Newspapers Interpreted *yi*

Gützlaff disagreed with Robert Morrison's translation of *yi* as foreigners. In 1833, he founded the first modern newspaper in mainland China in Chinese—*Eastern Western Monthly Magazine* (Dong xi yang kao mei yue tong ji zhuan, 东西洋考每月统记传) in which he understood *yi* as barbarians. Gützlaff's importance lies in the fact that "barbarian" has become the official translation of *yi* from then on (Liu, 2004).

To introduce his newspaper to foreign readers, Gützlaff wrote an article in *The Chinese Repository*, in which he clearly expressed his dissatisfaction with the Chinese idea of the Celestial Empire and their calling foreigners *yi*:

While civilization is making rapid progress over ignorance and error in almost all other portions of the global—even the bigoted Hindoos having commenced the publication of several periodicals in their languages—the Chinese alone remain stationary, as they have been for ages past. Notwithstanding our long intercourse with them, they still profess to be first among the nations of the earth and regard all others as "barbarians." This empty conceit has greatly affected the interests of foreign residents in Canton and their intercourse with Chinese. (Bridgman & Williams, 1834, p. 186)

He thought that "the name of *yi* refers to the people who are abusive" (Gützlaff, 1833, p. 23). He made an analogy with beasts to barbarians, stating that Westerners knew the etiquette, so Westerners should be human, not beasts. Gützlaff suggested using "guests from afar"², "westerners", "foreigners", and the names of their countries to refer to foreigners. Unlike *hua-yi* distinction, "guests" parallels "hosts". So there is no question of status. There is no derogatory sense. The idea of guests from afar is in line with traditional Confucianism in China. Confucius said in Xue Er ("学而") "Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distant quarters?" (You peng zi yuan fang lai, bu yi le hu, 有朋自远方来, 不亦乐乎). Compared with his article in *The Chinese Repository*, he applied a more modest and polite tone. We can see how he adjusted himself to achieve his religious mission and change the label of "barbarians" at that time. The *Eastern Western Monthly Magazine* is exactly a combination of Confucianism and Protestantism.

From other newspapers, it can also be seen how the meaning of *yi* as barbarians was constructed. For example, on May 17, 1828, *The Canton Register*³ published a Barbarians letter from an English reader. The reader said, "For as the pagan Greeks and Romans, excluding themselves, called the rest of the world barbarians, so the modern Christians of Europe call all the rest of the world 'uncivilized' which is equivalent, I fancy, to barbarian...I think it is very likely the Chinese mean by their native term something like... the ancient term barbarian"⁴. In the eyes of the British, barbarian means uncivilized. The equalization of *yi* and barbarians meant that *yi* was given the meaning of "uncivilized".

² which is "远客 (Yuanke)" in Chinese.

³ *The Canton Register*, an English-language newspaper founded by Westerners in China in the early 19th century. The paper was founded by James Matheson, a British businessman and was published in Guangzhou on 8th November, 1827.

⁴ "Barbarians," *The Canton Register*, 17 May 1828.

To sum up, the idea of the Celestial Empire in China and Gützlaff's experience had influenced his translation of the Chinese character *yi* as barbarians.

How the *hua-yi* Distinction Became a Distinction Between Chinese and Foreigners

Although Gützlaff understood *yi* as barbarians, the word “barbarians” did not become a diplomatic issue until the end of the Second Opium War (1856-1860). Lin Zexu (1785-1850), the imperial commissioner of China, and his translator Shaow-Tih (Yuan Dehui, 袁德辉) did not use “barbarians” when communicating with other countries as representatives of the Chinese government but used “foreigners” to call foreigners. In July 1839, *The Chinese Repository* published an article called “The First Document Which Ever Came from the Chinese in the English Language” (Bridgman & Williams, 1840, p. 186), written by Lin. The editor of *The Chinese Repository* said, “It is evidently the work of the commissioner’s senior interpreter, who has for many years been in the employment of the government, at Peking. Its idioms are perfectly Chinese; and like all the documents in their own language, it is without punctuation” (Bridgman & Williams, 1840, p. 186). In this document, Lin welcomed British businessmen to trade, but underlined that Britain could not sell opium to China, noting that “never will treat you, foreigners, by two manners of ways”.

Also, in the letter that Lin wrote to the Queen Victoria of England, published in February 1840, Lin’s translator did not use the word “barbarians”, but “foreigners”. However, he expressed deep dissatisfaction and anger at Britain’s export of large quantities of opium to China. For example, he said,

Every native of the Inner Land who sells opium, as also all who smoke it, are alike sentenced to death. Were we then to go back and take up the crimes of the foreigners, who, by selling it for many years have induced dreadful calamity and robbed us of enormous wealth, and punish them with equal severity, our laws could not but award to them absolute annihilation! But, considering that these said foreigners did yet repent of their crime, and with a sincere heart beg for mercy; that they took 20,283 chests of opium piled up in their store-ships, and through Elliot, the superintendent of the trade of your said country, petitioned that they might be delivered up to us when the same were all utterly destroyed. (McNeil & Iriye, 1840, pp. 497-503)

The original text in Chinese was “若追究夷 (yi)人历年贩卖之罪，则其贻害深而攫利重，本为法所当诛。惟念众夷 (yi) 尚知悔罪乞诚，将趸船鸦片二万二百八十三箱，由领事官义律，稟请缴收，全行毁灭。” Compared with the English version, *yi* was translated as foreigners by Shaow-Tih. He once worked as an interpreter for Lin to help with the anti-smoking campaign in 1839. Hunter recorded that, “An English translation of a communication addressed by His Excellency... to Her Majesty of Queen of England, on the subject of the opium trade, was brought to me at the Consoo House to be translated into Chinese, as a test of the proper reading of the original, which turned out to have been made by my old classmate Shaow-Tih” (Hunter, 1885, pp. 262-263). It can be seen that Lin took a cautious attitude towards translation, and Shaow-Tih’s translation of *yi* as foreigners was approved by Lin Zexu.

But after two opium wars, *yi* and barbarians seemed to be equivalent. After the First Opium War, Henry Pottinger (1789-1856), who signed the *Treaty of Nanking* (1842), clearly put forward, “*yi* is not good, and I hope not to use it again” (Xi Zhang, 1969, p. 69). The Second Opium War was caused by the desire of Britain and France to amend the treaty. They required more freedom and opportunities for trade, the presence of the Permanent Minister of Beijing to facilitate trade and negotiations, and more importantly, the realization of “equality” like between China and Britain. Britain believed that the exchange of ministers in respective capital was a general rule of exchanges between equal sovereign states. Otherwise, China would be contemptuous and

arrogant. Therefore, the British negotiator James Bruce in the requirements of the covenant, put forward, “In accordance with the rule among Western states, the officials of one country can arbitrarily enter another.” (Zhao tai xi zhu da bang xiang lai heng su jiao yi cheng gui, ge tu da li de yi ren yi jin yi shi, 照泰西诸大邦向来恒素交谊成规, 各土大吏得以任意进诣师) (the Chinese Book Bureau, n.d., p. 654). Although at last ministers were allowed to live in Beijing, they had to bow down to the Chinese emperor. How could Britain and France accept it? So the Article III of Peace Treaty between the Queen of Great Britain and the Emperor of China (1858) was,

His Majesty the Emperor of China hereby agrees that the ambassador, minister, or other diplomatic agents, ... may reside, with his family and establishment, permanently at the capital, or may visit it occasionally, at the option of the British Government. He shall not be called upon to perform any ceremony derogatory to him as representing the Sovereign of an independent nation on a footing of equality with that of China.⁵

The treaty addresses a number of political, cultural, and economic requirements, in which equality was emphasized. British demand for equality raised the issue of *yi* to the table of negotiation. The Article LI of the treaty was “it is agreed, that henceforward the character ‘夷’ (‘barbarian’)⁶ shall not be applied to the Government or subjects of Her Britannic Majesty, in any Chinese official document issued by the Chinese authorities, either in the capital or in the provinces”⁷. The article shows that *hua-yi* distinction has become a diplomatic issue between China and Britain, indicating that *yi* was formally translated as barbarians and remained in history.

Conclusion

Our argument is that “barbarian” was invented. Different people changed the connotation of *yi* to suit their interests. It was first transformed by the Qing court from “barbarians” to those following Confucianism to justify its rule, and it was translated as “foreigners” when Europeans came to China and retranslated as “barbarians” afterward. By situating these transformations in their contexts, our study explains some of the labels and misconceptions involved. On this basis, the shift in the meaning of *yi* in other historical periods can be further explored. They will help us better understand how xenophobia and racism were and are constructed.

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⁵ Treaty of Tien-Tsin between the Queen of Great Britain and the Emperor of China (1858). The article in Chinese is “大英钦差各等大员及各眷属可在京师, 或长行居住, 或能随时往来, 总候奉本国旨旨遵行; 英国自主之邦与中国平等, 大英钦差大臣作为代国秉权大员, 觐大清皇上时, 遇有碍于国体之礼, 是不可行。惟大英君主每有派员前往泰西各与国拜国主之礼, 亦拜大清皇上, 以昭划一肃敬。”

⁶ “夷” is called *Yi* in Chinese Pinyin, and in order not to be confused with the English subject I, *yi* is used to refer to “夷”.

⁷ Treaty of Tien-Tsin between the Queen of Great Britain and the Emperor of China (1858). The article in Chinese is “第五十一款 嗣後各式公文, 無論京外, 內敘大英國官民, 自不得提書夷字。”

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