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Early Modern Eurasian Histories 2

The Role of Interpreters in Shaping Early Nineteenth Century Sino-British Relations

Workshop with Prof. Henrietta Harrison (University of Oxford)

March 28, 2025, 9.15-13.00

Department of History, Hirschgässlein 21, 4051 Basel, Seminar Room 3

This workshop will look at the pressures and dangers placed on early modern diplomatic interpreters, focussing on George Staunton who was one of the interpreters for Lord Amherst's embassy to China in 1816. Unlike the relative success of previous embassy led by Lord Macartney, Lord Amherst was ultimately not received by the Jiaqing emperor. We will examine the reasons for this and the role and perception of interpreters. To do this we will look at two very different accounts of the negotiations: that of Staunton himself, that of Henry Ellis who was present but did not understand Chinese, and compare these with a translation of a document from the Qing dynasty's official historical record. We will then discuss the broader implications of this analysis for our understanding

The workshop is aimed at advanced BA students and at MA and PhD students. Preparatory readings will be shared on ADAM. Participation is rewarded with 1 ECTS.

Organisation: Prof. Dr. Nadine Amsler. For more information, please contact: n.amsler@unibas.ch