

## **Translator status in history: a case of 19<sup>th</sup>-century diplomatic translators at the British Legation in China**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the occupational status of the British and Chinese translators and interpreters who worked in the British Legation in Beijing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It draws primarily on the official archives of the British Legation and the British Foreign Office. Five status parameters were studied and possible factors behind the observed status manifestations and perceptions were explored. While the British translator-interpreters often had exceptional visibility, recognition and influence at the Legation, they suffered from low official rank and unattractive pay. The Chinese co-translators had lower rank, salaries, visibility and influence, yet their importance and expertise were no less valued in the institution. The Legation translators' status was shaped by complex interactions between multiple macro, institutional, human and contingent factors, including the stage of Anglo-Chinese encounters, professionalisation level of diplomacy, bureaucratic tradition, material environments, personal contacts and translators' ethnicity. The findings highlight the complexity of translator status as a multi-faceted and context-dependent construct in real-life settings.

### **KEYWORDS**

Translator status, occupational status, diplomatic translators, institutional translation, translator history.

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years translation scholars, drawing on sociological approaches to occupational status, have begun to examine some long-held assumptions about translator status through empirical studies of contemporary translators' status perceptions, revealing the complexities of translator status in real life (Dam and Zethsen 2008, 2012, 2013; Katan 2009; Gentile 2015, 2018; Ruokonen and Mäkisalo 2018; Virtanen 2019; Hoyte-West 2020; Ruokonen and Svahn 2022). By contrast, in-depth research into the status of past translators in specific historical contexts is still scarce, despite numerous references to the concept of status in translation histories. This article attempts to contribute to historical studies of translator status by focusing on the institutional status of diplomatic translators at the British Legation in Beijing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Since the 1990s translation historians have looked beyond texts and “venture[d] into the world of actual translators” (Pym 2014[1998]: 11). Translator status came under the purview of historical studies which treat translators “as social beings and as people who played (an often unacknowledged) role in history” (Rundle 2022: xxi). In translator histories written over the years, whether through a biographical approach (Roland 1999; Delisle and Woodsworth 2012) or a micro-historical approach (see, for example, Federici 2014; Guo 2016; Kujamäki 2022), fascinating anecdotes and details abound about individual translator’s social standing, dignity, reputation, prestige, material rewards, power, influence, (mis)trust, and ways of being named and represented, all closely linked to their status. Some scholars also studied translator history through particular status-related prisms. For example, Torikai (2009) investigated five Japanese interpreters’ “participation status” in interpreted diplomatic interactions, highlighting the diversity of interpreters’ status perceptions. Rizzi *et al.* (2019: 33) discussed the “interpersonal, institutional, and regime-enacted types of trust” experienced by historical translators, offering insights into their status at different levels.

While these historical studies have touched on translator status, most only do so marginally or as part of a wider discussion of translators’ roles and positioning (for an exception, see Choi and Lim 2002). More problematically, they often address only one or two aspects of translator status, such as salary, visibility or social standing, without holistically studying or synthesising the different socio-economic and psychological constituents of status. Incorporating a more sophisticated understanding of status as multi-faceted and context-dependent, as recent studies on contemporary translators’ status have done, will enable translation historians to draw a less distorted picture of past translators’ status. To fill some of the lacunae, this article will adopt a multi-parameter model of translator status (Dam and Zethsen 2008) to probe the different elements of British Legation translators’ status. Yet studying translator status is more than describing the manifest marks of social position, like salary or prestige. This article will also seek possible explanations for observed status by heavily contextualising the case in its immediate and macro settings. Therefore, this case study has revealed the lived experiences of some diplomatic translators and how a past society and a diplomatic institution conceptualised and handled translation, thus enhancing our understanding of translators and translation in similar situations.

Looking beyond Translation Studies, this research could also help diplomatic historians understand how cross-linguistic diplomacy was practised, plus translators’ role and agency in diplomatic history. While Roland (1999: 7) noted that translators were a “missing link” in the chronicles of international

history, two parallel developments in the last two decades began to draw diplomatic historians' attention to translation and translators (see, for example, Berridge 2008; Harrison 2021; Rothman 2021). One concerns the "cultural turn," underscoring the relevance of different cultural perspectives, including intercultural or transcultural perspectives, for the study of all past diplomacy (Windler 2001; Rudolph 2016). The other is the New Diplomatic History, uncovering the role of intermediaries and non-state actors as diplomatic agents, like translators and merchants, drawing attention to their "actions, behaviour, and status" and "the responses they triggered" in diplomatic encounters (Hennings and Sowerby 2017: 3). Despite diplomatic historians' increasing interest in translators, their research on the subject is piecemeal. This article will foreground translators in diplomatic history and illuminate their experiences, roles and influence on diplomacy.

## 2. Translator status

Status indicates a person's societal position. It can be either *ascribed*, that is, assigned to an individual beyond his or her own control (race, gender and age), or *achieved* on the basis of merit (Linton 1936: 115, 128). Translator status is largely studied as *achieved* occupational status, with a focus on power, privilege and prestige gained by a translator from a translation job, yet it is intertwined with other *ascribed* status elements, such as gender and age (see Gentile 2018 for a study on female interpreters' perceptions of professional status).

Translator status can be examined at different levels and in varying contexts. Some studies survey the status of the translator profession in society at large (Katan 2009; Dam and Zethsen 2010; Gentile 2015; Hoyte-West 2020; Ruokonen and Svahn 2022). Some investigate specific translators' status in a source-language or target-language community (see Valdeón 2014: 49-52), or in a concrete institution like the European Union (Koskinen 2008, 2009; Dam and Zethsen 2012). Others approach the issue at a micro level, examining individual translators' status in specific communicative situations or events (Torikai 2009). Findings from these studies suggest there can be gaps between translators' perceptions of their status at different levels. For example, some surveyed translators consider their own personal status at their workplace as positive or even "unquestionably good," though they also perceive that the overall status of their profession in society is low or at best middling (Virtanen 2019: 127; Dam and Zethsen 2008; Ruokonen and Mäkisalo 2018). Therefore, it is important for a study of translator status to specify its level and context of investigation. This article takes the institutional perspective and examines how British Legation translators were perceived and positioned within the legation in which they worked.

Sociologists have explored different ways to measure occupational status. In addition to directly asking people to rate the status of a profession, they have considered multiple determinants or parameters of occupational status. The parameters widely applied in current status surveys can be divided into two categories: the socio-economic dimension and prestige (Duncan 1961; Treiman 1977; Ganzeboom *et al.* 1992). The main socio-economic parameters include income and education, which are objective indicators of material rewards and the level of expertise connected with a profession. Prestige parameters are subjective attributes that reflect how much “prestige, respect, honor and reputation” a profession enjoys (Nam and Boyd 2004: 332). Depending on researchers’ conceptualisation of occupational status and research objectives, the two sets of parameters can be used independently or together.

In Translation Studies, recent status research began to use both socio-economic and prestige parameters to gauge translator status. Dam and Zethsen (2008, 2009, 2012) examined Danish translators’ status using four parameters that determine the status of professions in a Danish context: salary, education/expertise, visibility and power/influence. Their methodology, including their parameter choice and questionnaire design, has been replicated and adapted in subsequent studies (Gentile 2015, 2018; Ruokonen and Mäkisalo 2018; Virtanen 2019; Ruokonen and Svahn 2022).

### **3. Method and materials**

To investigate the British Legation translators’ status, this article uses Dam and Zethsen’s (2008) popular model, with modifications. The four status parameters used by Dam and Zethsen (2008) are preserved, while a fifth is added: official rank. This new parameter emerged as an important determinant of British Legation translators’ status, taken from my preliminary analysis of archival and biographical materials. Arguments regarding the translators’ official rank lasted for several years within the legation in Beijing and the British government in London, as expressed by different parties, including the Legation translators. While official rank is naturally an important marker of one’s position in a bureaucratic institution (Kujamäki 2022: 401), the bearing of this parameter appears particularly strong in the present case, due to some social and institutional factors at the time (to be discussed in Section 5). In sum, the Legation translators’ status will be analysed by employing five parameters: official rank, salary, education/expertise, visibility, and power/influence.

The primary source of data for this study is the official archives related to the British Legation, stored in the British National Archives at Kew, particularly its Foreign Office (FO) series. As observed by Hermans (2022: 29), such general archives seldom have catalogues well-suited for translation research, so several categories of archived documents are used in this study, including correspondence, regulations, staff records, work reports, interview records. They provide information on institutional contexts, individual translators and status parameters. Meanwhile, the marginalisation of translation and interpreting in official historical accounts also emphasizes the importance of using unofficial sources in the study of translation history (Footitt 2022: 23). The present study also draws on many (auto)biographies, memoirs and diaries of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British diplomats and consuls in China. These unofficial materials contain additional insights.

This study uses qualitative analysis, partly due to the nature of the historical materials, which are diverse in their sources and text types, rich in narratives and complex in intertextuality. Also, qualitative research is important for explanatory endeavours.

#### **4. Historical background: British Legation and its translators**

The British Legation in China was established in Beijing in March 1861. Previously, except for a few short-term missions accepted in Beijing like the Macartney Embassy, British officials could only interact with local and provincial authorities in China, first in Canton and later in a handful of treaty ports (Hsü 1960: 13-18). The establishment of the British Legation initiated a new phase of central-government diplomacy between the two countries. Initially, the primary mission of the Legation was to promote British trade and protect British nationals in China (Hansard 156: 946, Commons Sitting, 1860/2/13). Gradually, toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, geopolitics, strategic security and territorial ambitions of the British government brought additional tasks to the British Legation.

To fulfil these functions, the British Legation engaged in regular and frequent communication with the central Chinese government, principally its foreign office, to negotiate a variety of matters, including trade disputes, anti-foreign assaults and border demarcation. In these interactions, both sides needed linguistic mediation. With few exceptions, the British ministers, attachés and secretaries of the Legation had no or at best a rudimentary knowledge of Chinese. Meanwhile, until the 1900s the Qing foreign office had almost no senior officials who knew English or other European languages (Li 2017: 81-90, 433). Therefore, both sides needed translators and interpreters to mediate their communications.

From its inception, the British Legation had a Chinese Secretary's Office (CSO) responsible for its translation and interpreting work. Before 1905, it regularly employed two British staff, namely a Chinese Secretary and an Assistant Chinese Secretary, and some Chinese members called Writers and copyists. The two Chinese Secretaries were the chief translator-cum-interpreters of the Legation, although they were not so named. The official archives of the Legation indicate that all Chinese Secretaries normally performed both translation and interpreting tasks, and they routinely rendered in both language directions between English and Chinese. They translated texts of various genres and sources, including diplomatic correspondence, gazettes, treaties, legislations, memorials and decrees. Simultaneously, they interpreted for British and Chinese officials during diplomatic interviews. Chinese Writers knew little English but they often cooperated with Chinese Secretaries in document translation and were the de-facto co-translators.

In this article, the term 'translator' will be used to refer to both Chinese Secretaries and Chinese Writers, yet it is important to bear in mind that Chinese Secretaries were generally both translators and interpreters. It is often assumed that interpreters, particularly conference interpreters, have higher status than translators. Dam and Zethsen's (2013) comparative study of the status perceptions of some EU interpreters and translators found differences, suggesting that this assumption is partially true in their case. In the present case, however, it is difficult to distinguish between Chinese Secretaries' institutional status as translators and as interpreters, since their rank, salary, visibility and influence within the Legation were inextricably linked with their dual roles. Therefore, this article investigates the institutional status of Chinese Secretaries as translator-cum-interpreters without distinguishing between these roles.

## **5. Status of Chinese Secretaries**

From 1861, when the British Legation was set up, to 1900, 27 British officers were officially designated as Chinese Secretary, Assistant Chinese Secretary, acting Chinese Secretary or acting Assistant Chinese Secretary. During the period, six officers once served officially as Chinese Secretary. All CSO members were male, as women were not appointed to formal diplomatic posts in the British national service until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (McCarthy and Southern 2017: 24).

### **5.1 Official rank**

There were two branches of the British foreign service at that time: consular and diplomatic. With two rare exceptions, the Legation translators belonged to the former, together with the officers of the British consulates in China. In contrast, the British ministers, attachés and secretaries of the Legation were members of the diplomatic service. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a gulf existed between the two branches. 'Diplomats' in the strict sense of diplomatic representatives still largely came from a small circle of elites (Southern 2020: 18-19). Consular officers, generally recruited from middle and lower middle classes, were held to be "necessarily the social and intellectual inferiors of the diplomatic officials" (Nicolson 1939: 223). This inferiority, "which undeniably existed in the *minds* both of the services and of the public, was indeed a *fact* as regards consular status and prospects" (Platt 1971: 2-3). It was manifested in the various marks of esteem, such as different uniforms, formal salutes and clubs for the two groups, plus material aspects like lower rank, pay and pensions for consuls. Additionally, there was little interchange of personnel between the two branches. While consuls were occasionally appointed ambassadors or ministers, as with Thomas Wade (to be discussed below), these appointments were "few, invidious, and far between" (Nicolson 1939: 222). All this could generally be found in the situation of the Legation translators.

That is, translators were in a decidedly inferior position at the Legation due to their consular rank, compared to their 'diplomatic' colleagues at the same site. The first Chinese Secretary, Thomas Wade, was a rare exception. As his superior, Minister Bruce, and the British Foreign Office highly appreciated his abilities and characters, he was appointed joint First Secretary and Chinese Secretary of the Legation in 1862 and was transferred from the consular branch to the diplomatic branch (FO 17/350, Bruce to Russell, 1861/3/12; FO 17/348, Russell to Bruce, 1861/1/16). Wade eventually rose to become British Minister to China. Wade's official position at the Legation regarding rank and promotion prospects was high, while also unusual.

Among the 27 (Assistant) Chinese Secretaries studied in this section, 25 held solely a consular commission. Their order of precedence at the Legation and in the diplomatic circle in Beijing was low. After Wade was promoted from Chinese Secretary to British Minister in 1871, two Second Secretaries of the Legation protested that new Chinese Secretary Mayers was still ranked ahead of them in the Foreign Office List: "We are not aware that Mr. Mayers holds any appointment in the diplomatic service; and if he is, as we suppose, a consular officer, we venture to submit that he ranks after and not before us." (FO 17/628, Sandford to Wade, 1872/3/31; FO 17/628, Grosvenor to Wade, 1872/3/31) In reply, the British Foreign Office clarified the issue once and for all: the Chinese Secretary would always rank after

the Second Secretaries, whose rank was already among the lowest in the diplomatic branch of the Legation (FO 17/634, Granville to Wade, 1872/7/15). The Assistant Chinese Secretary's rank was even lower.

After leaving the CSO, 23 of the 27 (Assistant) Chinese Secretaries worked at the British consulates in China. Throughout their careers, 22 translators were promoted entirely within the consular service, with their highest rank being Consul-general, who, regardless of their seniority in the foreign service, always ranked below the most junior secretary from the diplomatic branch.

Such inferiority in positions was discouraging to some Legation translators and future candidates for the posts, as they felt that their efforts were not duly rewarded (FO 17/679, Wade to Tenterden, 1874/1/27). For example, Assistant Chinese Secretary Hewlett, among the best British translators in China, refused the appointment of Chinese Secretary, because he preferred "remaining his own master at a Consulate" to serving under the diplomatic corps of the Legation (FO 17/785, Minute on China Consular Service, 1878/1/15).

The translators' low rank also fuelled tensions with the Legation secretaries. The former, who were official and social inferiors, nonetheless played a crucial role at the Legation (see Section 5.5). By contrast, the latter, though with a higher rank, often performed duties of less importance, such as copying and registering dispatches, due to their initial unfamiliarity with China or its language (FO 17/628, Wade to Granville, 1872/4/6). While some translators believed they were not fairly rewarded, the diplomatic secretaries were also dissatisfied at the lowly-ranked translators' prominence (FO 17/460, Wade to Hammond, 1866/7/23). As observed by First Secretary Fraser's wife, "[t]here was quite a hierarchy on that bit of British ground [the Legation]; the two Services, Diplomatic and Consular, were freely represented and fell foul of each other periodically in the inevitable way" (Fraser 1910: 131).

The translators' inferiority resulted from struggles between different stakeholders. Legation translators and secretaries expressed contradictory stances. Legation ministers also offered their suggestions. For instance, Minister Wade repeatedly advocated to the Foreign Office that Chinese Secretaries should be given a diplomatic rank to induce competent translators to stay (see, for example, FO 17/679, Wade to Tenterden, 1874/1/27; FO 17/813, Wade to Salisbury, 1879/8/7). Yet, it was the Foreign Office in London that had the final say. Despite Wade's proposals, the Foreign Office refused to transfer any Chinese Secretary to a diplomatic service. It justified this decision on two grounds. The first was a claim that



young ‘diplomats’, principally diplomatic secretaries, would be disheartened if they had a lower rank than the translators:

It seems to me important to bring up young diplomatists to take an interest in China, and I think it could be a discouragement and mortification to them when placed in an inferior position in the mission to one [Chinese Secretary] who in his original and previous service had been merely a Consular officer (FO 17/628, FO minute, 1872/7/11).

The juxtaposition between “diplomatists” and Chinese Secretaries implies that the Legation translators were not regarded by the Foreign Office officials as ‘real’ diplomats. The translators’ consular origins and backgrounds, described in a clearly derogatory tone, partly explained why the translators retained their consular identity. In a sense, the translators’ consular rank became self-perpetuating.

In addition, the Foreign Office officials also expressed a belief that the Legation translators were not fit to be high-level diplomats, like ambassadors and ministers, and thus should not be afforded the opportunities to be promoted within the diplomatic service. For example, Currie, Chief of the China Department, stated that “[h]owever valuable he [Mayers] may be in that position [Chinese Secretary], he would be a less suitable representative of the Queen than the Diplomatic member of the Legation” (FO 17/729, FO minute, 1876/7/11; see also FO 17/813, FO minute, 1879/10/2; FO 17/729, FO minute, 1876/7/11).

One factor underlying the two Foreign Office justifications involved “a guild mentality” underpinned by the persistent class prejudice of the time (Berridge 2008: 422). Diplomat Mitford’s advice to the Select Committee assessing the British foreign service was illustrative:

Certainly in dealing with them [the Chinese] I would employ men of as high breeding and birth as I could get to represent this country... without any knowledge of Chinese, than I would send a man of the class ... [Chinese Secretary], ... however good his knowledge of Chinese might be (Minutes of Evidence, *Select Committee on Diplomatic and Consular Services*, PP 1870 (382) VII, as cited in Platt 1971: 194-5).

Another factor included a then-British government policy that diplomats were expected to be “generalists” serving in different parts of the world rather than “specialists” in specific areas (Jones 1983: 198). This policy was partly due to the Foreign Office’s lack of trust in those who spent years in a foreign country, becoming familiar with its culture and language, just like the Legation translators. The belief was that such an expatriate officer would probably “lose touch with his own home opinion” and “develop

affections and prejudices which distort his evidence,” which would impair his “representative value” (Nicolson 1961: 42-43). Permanent Under-Secretary Lord Tenterden was outspoken about this when addressing the British Legation in China: “It is not, in my belief, at all a good plan to place our Eastern missions entirely in the hands of orientalist” (FO 17/679, Tenterden minute, 1874/4/16).

Furthermore, the bureaucratic tradition of the unbridgeable division between the diplomatic and consular services continued through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Worse, Foreign Office officials generally knew little about Legation translators, making it more difficult for translators to gain trust and influence in the home government for changing long-established traditions (Berridge 2008: 423; Platt 1971).

## 5.2 Salary

To illustrate Legation translators’ income levels, the salaries of the six Chinese Secretaries in the first and the last years of their terms are listed, together with those of Assistant Chinese Secretaries, contrasted with those of Legation secretaries and of British Consuls in China in the same year (Table 1). The comparisons illuminate Legation translators’ positions in the pay system of the British foreign service in China. As mentioned, Legation translators and secretaries were colleagues and sometimes rivals. Within the British consular service in China, Chinese Secretaries held the same rank as Consuls, their relative precedence in the service determined by the dates of their appointments (FO 17/634, Granville to Wade, 1872/7/15).

Date	Chinese Secretary	Chinese Secretary Salary (pounds)	First Secretary Salary (pounds)	Second Secretary Salary (pounds)	Consul salary range; average salary (pounds)	Assistant Chinese Secretary Salary (pounds)
1861	T. F. Wade	1250	800	400	800-1600; 1111	600 (Mongan, Gibson)
1.1.1871	T. F. Wade	1200*	N.A. (Wade)	400, 500	800-1600; 1045	200 (Brown)
1.1.1873	W. S. F. Mayers	800	800	400, 500	800-1600; 1036	600 (Hewlett)
1.4.1878	W. S. F. Mayers	940	800	400, 500	700-1300; 879	700 (M <sup>c</sup> Clathie)
31.10.1880	E. C. Baber	800	800	500	700-1500; 884	700 (Hillier)
1.1.1885	E. C. Baber	800	800	500	700-1100; 839	700 (Hillier)
1.1.1886	W. C. Hillier	800	N.A.	500	700-1600; 883	700 (Bristow)
1.1.1890	W. C.	800	800	500	800-1600;	700

	Hillier				911	(Jordan)
1.1.1893	J. N. Jordan	800	800	500	800-2000; 938	650 (Fulford)
1.1.1896	J. N. Jordan	800 (later to 880)	800	500	800-2000; 992	700 (Cockburn)
1.1.1897	H. Cockburn	800	N.A.	400	800-2100; 958	650 (Campbell)
1.1.1901	H. Cockburn	800	800	500	800-1600; 895	700 (Ker)

\*This was the salary for Wade as joint Chinese Secretary and First Secretary

**Table 1. Salaries of Legation translators (Chinese Secretaries) in comparison with those of Legation Secretaries and British Consuls (FO 17)**

These figures indicate that except for Wade, who held posts of Chinese Secretary and First Secretary, Chinese Secretaries' salaries generally started at 800 pounds a year, the same as First Secretaries, but much higher than those of Second Secretaries at 400 or 500 pounds, who nonetheless had higher official ranks. Some Chinese Secretaries' salaries increased over time and reached 940 or 1200 pounds by the end of their terms, higher than those of First Secretaries which remained at 800 pounds for the period under study. Even Assistant Chinese Secretaries were usually better paid than Second Secretaries. These figures suggest that while Legation secretaries had a higher official ranking, Legation translators enjoyed better pay.

The discrepancy between salary and rank at the Legation, particularly the translators' relatively high income, existed partly because Legation translators were on the payroll of the British consular service in China, which was initially intended to be a financially attractive service (for a detailed analysis, see Platt 1971: 195-200). The higher salaries were not a special reward for Legation translators but a general compensation for all British consuls in China. If we compare the Chinese Secretaries' salaries and those of British Consuls in China (who held the same official rank), Chinese Secretaries' normal salary of 800 pounds was often the minimum for the rank (except during the 1880s). Thus, they had the same pay as junior Consuls working in treaty ports that were small and not very important, while Consuls in large ports earned far more (1600-2100 pounds). By contrast, the payment system of the diplomatic service was different. Many diplomatic secretaries came from elite families and lived on their family fortunes rather than their salaries (Hamilton and Langhorne 2011: 105). This was a significant difference between diplomatic secretaries and almost all consular officers, who relied on their salaries. Many Legation attachés were not even paid. Therefore, the weighting of income might vary for Legation translators and their secretary colleagues.

Indeed, even though the British translators received relatively high remuneration within the Legation, they were not altogether satisfied. They often compared it with that of Consuls, finding their own pay unattractive, particularly considering the “greater ease and leisure at a Consulate” as contrasted with the onerous and important duties of a Chinese Secretary, which, according to Minister Macdonald, was “the hardest worked post in the entire Consular Service of China” (FO 17/1245, O’Conor to Salisbury, 1895/10/10; FO 17/1346, Macdonald to Salisbury, 1898/1/28). Thus, some qualified translators chose not to enter the CSO or depart early (FO 17/679, Wade to Tenterden, 1874/1/27). For example, Assistant Chinese Secretary Hewlett refused the appointment to Chinese Secretary because he could be more autonomous while earning more as a senior Consul (FO 17/785, Minute on China Consular Service, 1878/7/15). Chinese Secretary Jordan also protested that his post had “fallen in value rather than risen relatively to other [consular] posts”, despite its admitted importance and drudgery (FO 17/1245, Jordan to O’Conor, 1895/10/7). In response, Minister O’Conor suggested to the Foreign Office that “the Chinese Secretary ought therefore to receive pay on a level with the most remunerative Consulates” to do credit to Jordan while inducing competent translators to remain longer in this post (FO 17/1245, O’Conor to Salisbury, 1895/10/10).

### **5.3 Training and expertise**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century British Legation translators had begun to receive collective training in translation and interpreting. From 1861 the British government expected all British consuls in China to have some proficiency in Chinese. Therefore, all new entrants into the consular service had to start as Student Interpreters for two years of intensive training in Chinese language, English-Chinese translation and interpreting at the Legation in Beijing. As previously mentioned, Legation translators usually belonged to the consular service and were required to follow this rule. Among the 27 Legation translators studied, the first eight entered the British service before 1861 and acquired Chinese and translation competence largely on their own. The remainder started their careers as Student Interpreters between the ages of 18 to 24, usually with no prior knowledge of Chinese, and were trained at the Legation for approximately two years. Afterwards, they were usually appointed to the British consulates at Chinese treaty ports.

With only two exceptions, who entered the CSO immediately after finishing their training as Student Interpreters, the other translators served earlier in British consulates in China. 18 of them had at least eight years of experience before becoming Legation translators. At the consulates, they often performed multiple translational, interpretorial, clerical and

magisterial duties. As the responsibilities of the Legation were closely correlated with those of the consulates, expertise gained from their prior consular work, including translation competence, subject knowledge and cultural awareness, was highly important (FO 17/679, Wade to Tenterden, 1874/1/27).

According to some studies, many translators believe that people outside the profession do not sufficiently understand or recognise the high level of expertise required for their work (Dam and Zethsen 2008, 2010). However, regarding Legation translators, their expertise was valued by their immediate superiors, the British Ministers, who would write to the Foreign Office to explain and stress their competence and value. For instance, Minister O’Conor wrote at length:

I have not the least hesitation in saying that a great part of the success of the representations of Her Majesty’s Minister to the Tsungli Yamen is due to the force and point with which his language is conveyed to the ministers. To preserve proper efficiency in this respect alone requires unwearied attention and daily practice with a Chinese teacher, which has to be done outside the regular office hours. But if great colloquial familiarity with the language is valuable and necessary, the numerous written communications to the Chinese government are certainly equally important, and ignorant though I be of the language, I can form some idea of the study and labour required to present western arguments and thought in a manner striking and comprehensible to the Chinese intellect (FO 17/1245, O’Conor to Salisbury, 1895/10/10).

It appeared that Minister O’Conor understood that translation was not a mechanic process of meaning transfer, particularly when translations were expected to achieve certain effects. He also highlighted his translator’s potential impact on the result of his negotiations and noted the hard work involved in developing translation competence. In another letter to the Foreign Office, Minister Bruce stressed a different element of the translators’ expertise, namely, their familiarity with Chinese culture and awareness of cultural differences (FO 17/350, Bruce to Russell, 1861/3/12). Possible explanations for the translators’ recognition are discussed in Section 5.6.

#### **5.4 Visibility**

When visibility is examined as a parameter of professional status, the focus often is on translators’ physical or personal visibility rather than textual visibility, as in this section. It should be noted that as the (Assistant) Chinese Secretaries were simultaneously translators and interpreters, it is

difficult to distinguish between their visibility as translators and as interpreters, particularly regarding physical visibility.

It appeared that Legation translators were highly visible in person to other Legation members, who might be their official superiors, colleagues, source text producers or target text readers. The British staff of the Legation worked and lived together in the Palace of the Duke of Liang, the legation compound. The British Minister, Chinese Secretary and Assistant Chinese Secretary each had a building of two to three storeys, where they worked and lived. Legation secretaries shared another building. While the translators seemed separate from their colleagues, each in their own building, the entire compound was, as an insider described it, “compact,” and “those dwelling in it were one large family” (Hewlett 1943: 4). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Beijing was not a treaty port open to foreigners. Foreign diplomats in Beijing seldom had social interactions with the natives beyond official contacts, and there was “a tendency for this group to turn in upon itself” (Hoare 2013: 23). As Chinese Secretary and later British Minister Jordan (1920: 15) remarked, “foreign diplomats lived happily together in their little world of self-importance and pleasant social intercourse.”

Because of such spatial proximity and social intimacy, Legation translators and their handful of Legation colleagues could have many personal contacts in official and private life. Indeed, the memoirs and diaries of the Legation officials and their families testified to this (Rennie 1865; Mitford 1900; Lane-Poole 1901; Fraser 1910). As a result, ‘translator’ was not an abstract concept for Legation members, but a flesh-and-blood colleague or even a friend. They had ample opportunities to observe and discuss the translators’ work. An illustration of such personal visibility is the high frequency with which Legation physician Rennie (1865), in a year-long diary, referred to Legation translators, mentioning them over 150 times. Rennie, a sometimes user of their mediation services, described their various activities as translators, interpreters, cultural advisers, British Ministers’ representatives and information seekers.

Another aspect of physical visibility concerned whether translators were placed in a central or peripheral location at the Legation. The Chinese Secretary’s building was close to that of the British Minister and in a central location in the compound (FO 17/1460, 1876 Site Plan). It was one of the largest buildings in the Legation, second only to that of the British Minister (ibid.). Given the Chinese Secretaries’ low official rank at the Legation, such seemingly contradictory material arrangements probably reflected their crucial role in the institution and the recognition they enjoyed on the spot.

## **5.5 Power/Influence**

The possibility of influencing decision-makers is “a job trait that translators are often said to lack” (Dam and Zethsen 2012: 224). In the present case, however, some Legation translators stated otherwise. Translator Wade admitted that his “prominence as Chinese Secretary” often provoked “dissatisfaction” or even “disgust” from Legation secretaries (FO 17/628, Wade to Granville, 1872/4/6; FO 17/679, Wade to Tenterden, 1874/1/27). When Wade became the Minister, he stressed to the Foreign Office that it would not be “safe” for a new minister unacquainted with Chinese to perform his duties without the assistance of a competent Chinese Secretary who could ensure that “nothing would go wrong” at the Legation (FO 17/679, Wade to Tenterden, 1874/1/27). Legation translators like Wade were clearly aware of their own agency and potential influence, which they asserted. The “disheartened” diplomatic secretaries also realised this. One Legation secretary even said that “no one ever does anything here except the Chinese Secretary and his Assistant” (FO 17/460, Wade to Hammond, 1866/7/23).

Many British Ministers voluntarily devolved power to their Chinese Secretaries to perform multiple duties, which they deemed of “exceptional importance” (FO 17/1136, Walsham to Salisbury, 1892/6/14). In addition to translator-interpreters, Chinese Secretaries often played the role of cultural advisers, negotiators and information gatherers. For example, the Legation minutes of 1884 recorded 77 interviews with the Chinese government, 39 of which were only attended by the (Assistant) Chinese Secretaries on the British side (FO 233/37-38). On these occasions, the Chinese Secretaries were not simply go-betweens. As Minister Bruce described it, they would also “explain”, “offer suggestions” and “combat” (FO 17/354, Bruce to Russell, 1861/9/23).

As British Ministers’ key counsellors, (Assistant) Chinese Secretaries offered varied advice, regarding Chinese attitudes and customs, treaty interpretations and precedents from past cases (Coates 1983: 242). British ministers and diplomatic secretaries came and went, often from different backgrounds and in short tours of duty in China. By contrast, Chinese Secretaries had normally worked in China for several years and were usually most familiar with Sino-British diplomacy. Their expertise was crucial for the British diplomats. A British Consul in China even remarked that the “only wise course” for a new minister to China was to “put himself entirely in the hands of” his Chinese Secretary, the “real motive force of the Legation” instead of British ministers (Michie 1900: 363).

This comment highlights Legation translators’ substantial value, influence and power. Whether this was an exaggeration, the situation in China drew

the attention of the Foreign Office in London. Some Foreign Office officials voiced their dissatisfaction with the prominent role played by some Chinese Secretaries in Sino-British diplomacy, which suggested that the Foreign Office also believed Chinese Secretaries had much influence, or perhaps too much:

The late Mr. Mayers [Chinese Secretary] was indefatigable but the interminable length of all Chinese questions of late years was mainly owing to his having been employed to discuss everything intermediately at the Yamen [Chinese foreign office]. ... Matters went much juster in Sir F. Bruce's & Lord Elgin's time when the Chinese Secretaries acted merely as interpreters and not as controversialists (FO 17/813, Tenterden comment, 1879/10/9).

Hence, Foreign Office officials viewed translators more as a mechanic conduit — self-effacing and subordinate — than as active participants or even “controversialists” in negotiations. They expected Legation translators to only translate and interpret rather than assume multiple roles. Despite such dissension, successive British Ministers continued to delegate power to their Chinese Secretaries.

However, not all Legation translators had that much influence and power. Relevant factors included a British minister's knowledge of China and its language; his personalities and working habits; a translator's ability and seniority; and personal relationships, including the degree of trust between a minister and his translator (FO 17/1592, Satow to Villiers, 1901/10/18; Coates 1988: 164-8).

## **5.6 Discussion**

The above analyses of the five status parameters indicate that Chinese Secretaries often were highly visible physically and wielded influence at the Legation. Many had acquired special expertise through targeted training and particular working experiences. Their immediate superiors recognised the indispensability of their expertise. Conversely, their official rank within the Legation was low and their salaries unattractive when compared to their consular peers. The discordance between the different parameters of their status seemed to discourage some translators, who believed that their contributions were not materially rewarded.

Notably, the British translators seemed to enjoy exceptional visibility, recognition and influence, traits not often associated with the profession. A basic macro factor might be that Britain and China were early in their encounters. Personal, commercial and diplomatic exchanges between the two countries began in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Legation translators' high-level



bilingual proficiency, translation competence and cultural sensitivity were still rare and highly valued. British Legation diplomats relied on their translators to gather intelligence, to provide background knowledge for understanding information and making decisions, to learn how to influence the Chinese and to translate various documents. This afforded the translators opportunities to participate in and possibly influence many processes of communication and decision-making at the Legation. In this context, the translators' expertise was also difficult to ignore. Likewise, Wong (2010) and Harrison (2021) found that translators hired for the earliest British missions to China were also highly respected by their British colleagues. This seems to correspond with some translators' understanding of their status: "As a rule of thumb, the more people rely on you (both in terms of language and international exposure), the more they admire you" (Setton and Guo Liangliang 2009: 227). In this respect, the present case appears to be the opposite of what many translators are facing today when people's knowledge in English as a lingua-franca and the belief that "everybody knows English" have "sometimes led to lack of respect, unfair feedback and unfounded changes to the translators' formulations" (Virtanen 2019: 126-127; Dam and Zethsen 2010: 202).

Secondly, as diplomacy was still in a gradual process of professionalisation in the 1800s, it allowed more room for Legation translators to stand out. The management of diplomacy in Britain was not yet fully institutionalised (Hamilton and Langhorne 2011: 103). Consequently, the division and definition of roles and functions of different posts within the British Legation were not clear. At the same time, the British Ministers in Beijing still exercised extensive discretion, which they would lose to a large degree in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the acceleration in communications and the increased professionalisation of diplomacy (Jones 1983: 116). Such discretion enabled successive British Ministers to disregard Foreign Office discontent with Chinese Secretaries' prominence and continue delegating power to those translators. Much of Chinese Secretaries' recognition and influence came from multiple duties they assumed, plus translation and interpreting. This was not rare in translation history, as Delisle and Woodsworth (2012: 147-148) have observed from their studies of past translators who were also traders, advisers, secretaries, lawyers, diplomats, nobles, administrators or scholars: "translators are related to power by more than their translations," "because their multiple forms of employment sometimes allow them more social authority than is usual." Studies on *dragomans* in Constantinople (Berridge 2008) and other diplomatic interpreters throughout history (Roland 1999; Phelan 2020) also reveal similar situations. It would be instructive to study contemporary embassy translators' status to determine whether the professionalisation of diplomacy and translation exerted an identifiable impact on it.

Additionally, there were important institutional factors, including the material and social workplace conditions, combined with Legation staff size, which had an important bearing on status. The number of the British staff at the Legation was often less than ten persons. As such a small group of people worked and lived together in the same compound and interacted socially within a small circle of foreign diplomats in Beijing, there were ample opportunities for personal relationships to exist. 'Translator' was no longer an abstract concept for the other Legation officials but rather a familiar and visible colleague. Through daily observations, experiences and discussions they could gain a deeper understanding of translators' capabilities and value. This was partly why successive British Ministers usually had a greater appreciation for their translators than did the Foreign Office officials in far-away London.

Despite their high level of expertise, recognition, visibility and influence — which seemed to represent "softer" aspects of status — Legation translators were not well positioned within the service regarding the two "hard-core" status parameters: official rank and money (Dam and Zethsen 2009: 29-30). Significantly, both official rank and salary were largely controlled by the British Foreign Office, while the British Ministers in Beijing exerted more influence over the other three "softer" parameters. Consistent with this, the Foreign Office and British Ministers had radically different attitudes toward Legation translators: compared with the latter's high recognition of the translators' importance and contributions, the former seemed much less enthusiastic about them.

One explanation for this could be that there were few professional and personal contacts between Foreign Office officials and Legation translators. After recruitment, new consular officers, from whom the translators were later chosen, usually went directly to China and remained there for years. Foreign Office officials generally had no personal knowledge of the translators or opportunities to observe their service. Thus, they lacked understanding of or trust in the translators, in contrast to British Ministers. This observation is in line with conclusions of some other studies that have stressed the importance of "close links and regular interaction between translators and their customers and colleagues" or even "one-on-one" contacts for translators' perceived status (Dam and Zethsen 2009: 33; Virtanen 2019: 106, 128; Koskinen 2008).

Some structural and institutional factors also existed. The rigid distinction between the consular and diplomatic branches of the British foreign service and the inferiority of the former within the service was one of the key undermining factors regarding Legation translators' status, in rank and pay.

There were complex social, economic, historical and bureaucratic reasons behind it (see Platt 1971), such as the persistent class prejudice, bureaucratic inertia and consuls' lack of personal connection with those in power in the British government.

## **6. Status of Chinese Writers**

The Legation reports on its Chinese Writers in different periods (FO 17) indicate that it normally employed three to five Writers. The head Writer and second Writer assisted Chinese Secretaries in document translation, while others were mainly copyists. The need for Chinese Writers to be co-translators, despite their ignorance of English language, largely arose from the unique style of official Chinese documents in the Qing dynasty. The so-called documentary style or dispatch style included special vocabulary, allusions and syntax which were not even mastered by ordinary Chinese men of letters. As the Chinese Secretary and later British Minister Wade admitted, even the best British translators in the entire China Service could not compose properly in this style and were "entirely dependent upon one of the men rated as Writers" when translating documents into Chinese (FO 17/592, Wade to Granville, 1871/10/1). When rendering Chinese documents into English, Chinese Secretaries frequently consulted Chinese Writers to fully understand the Chinese originals, as there were always "combinations of characters, which none of [their] imperfect dictionaries explain[ed]" to them (FO 17/351, Wade to Bruce, 1861/3/15). Compared with Chinese Secretaries, Chinese Writers left fewer traces of themselves in Legation archives, indicating a lower level of visibility. From these limited materials, we can glimpse the status of Chinese Writers at the Legation.

Regarding rank, Chinese Writers also belonged to the consular service and were under the management of Chinese Secretaries. Yet, together with other native Chinese employees of the British Legation, they were not incorporated into the regular British government rank system and could not enjoy the same honours, benefits or promotion as did other British consuls in China. The highest rank they could reach was head Writer — if this could be deemed a rank.

Chinese Secretaries and British Ministers generally recognised that Chinese Writers were "of no ordinary importance" if the Legation did not want to receive Chinese officials' "good-natured contempt" for the Chinese documents it produced (FO 17/1245, Jordan to O'Connor, 1895/6/25). They were also aware of the expertise required for Chinese Writers. Only the small number of scribes and assistants in the Qing government or those privately employed by senior Qing officials mastered the unique documentary style. They "considered official document writing skills as their

secret of success and would seldom pass the knowledge on to people other than their own pupils" (Xu 1988: 1). Therefore, Minister Wade explained to the British Foreign Office that an "ordinary man of letters" was "in general of no use" in preparing official documents, for which the Writers had "a special training that [gave] him a special value" (FO 17/835, Wade to Granville, 1880/6/15). Minister Alcock also stressed that competent Writers were "by no means plentiful nor easily obtained at any time" (FO 17/452, Alcock to Stanley, 1866/12/20).

Due to their importance and limited availability, competent Writers were highly valued within the Legation, even though incompetent ones might be quickly dismissed. For example, T'ang Hsi-wu, who served the Legation from 1878 to 1919 and was head Writer for over 20 years, received favourable comments from successive leaders. Minister Macdonald stated T'ang was "a most able and competent man, the loss of whose services would be most severely felt in the Chinese Secretariat" (FO 17/1346, Macdonald to Salisbury, 1898/12/20). Later, Assistant Chinese Secretary Cockburn reaffirmed that "it would not be possible to find another man who could render services of equal value to the State. ... His retirement therefore would be a misfortune to the Legation" (FO 17/1677/136, Memorandum on Head Writer, 1905/3/8). Likewise, Wade wrote highly of his head Writer Liu Yu tsai: "on some occasions, I do not know what I could have done without him, and I have not been able, since his discharge in 1879, to find any one at all his equal" (FO 17/903, Wade to Granville, 1882/8/21).

On the other hand, the British government in London was only gradually awakened to the absolute necessity of employing competent Writers in the Legation, despite successive British Ministers' correspondence stressing this point. In 1869, nine years after the establishment of the Legation and over thirty years after the first Superintendent of Trade was appointed to China, the Foreign Office was still asking Minister Alcock to submit "a statement showing the exact nature of the duties performed" by Writers, of whom they were largely ignorant (FO 17/527, Clarendon to Alcock, 1869/5/5).

Lack of attention in the British government to Chinese Writers in the early years was most clearly evidenced by the insufficient salaries it sanctioned for Writers. In the 1860s, the Legation reported to the Foreign Office that the salaries allotted to Chinese Writers on annual Estimates (budgets) were too small. Chinese Secretaries had for years been subsidising Writers from their own pockets or relying on their private Chinese teachers for assistance in translation (FO 17/452, Alcock to Stanley, 1866/12/20; FO 17/592, Wade to Granville, 1871/10/1; FO 17/903/179, Memorandum on Liu yu tsai's services). In 1866, for example, when competent Writers could not be found for less than 40 to 50 dollars a month in Beijing, the British government

paid the head Writer only 25 dollars, while Chinese Secretary Wade and Brown each paid him another 10 dollars (FO 17/452/318, Memorandum on Chinese Writers).

The Foreign Office began to recognise Writers' indispensability and sanctioned higher salaries for them in the late 1860s and early 1870s, partly due to repeated reports from the Legation and partly because of similar situations faced by its diplomatic service in other eastern countries (FO 17/591, FO comment, 1871/8/3). However, Writers' rates of pay remained relatively low compared to the amount offered by the Chinese Maritime Customs Service or other foreign legations in Beijing. Numerous times the British Legation reported to the Foreign Office that a Writer had chosen to leave the Legation to "better himself elsewhere" and that it was difficult to find a successor at the rate set by the home government (FO 17/1346, Fulford and Campbell to Macdonald, 1898/12/19; FO 17/635, Wade to Granville, 1872/5/7; FO 17/835, Wade to Granville, 1880/6/15). In this respect, both Chinese Writers and Chinese Secretaries appeared to suffer from the indifference of the British Foreign Office.

Chinese Writers' paratextual and extratextual visibility was rather low. Unlike Chinese Secretaries, the translations Writers produced never included their signatures or names, rendering them largely unknown to the Chinese officials who read their translations and the British Foreign Office. With little or no knowledge of English, they seldom interacted directly with British staff of the Legation, other than Chinese Secretaries. However, it should be noted that most Chinese Writers probably did not mind their invisibility. Actually, many probably preferred it, and some even pretended not to know their British colleagues when they met on the street, since working for a foreign establishment was still generally viewed negatively by Chinese society in Beijing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Medhurst 1872: 177).

## **7. Conclusion**

This article addresses diplomatic translators' status at the British Legation in China in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by examining five status parameters. Its findings offer a glimpse of the complexity of translator status in concrete institutions and real-life settings. In this case, it is challenging to summarise the British Legation translators' status as low or high, as the five parameters or facets of their status did not always correspond. For the British translator-interpreters named as Chinese Secretaries, their official rank and salaries were relatively low, while recognition of their expertise, influence and physical visibility within the Legation were quite high. For Chinese co-translators named as Chinese Writers, their rank, salaries, visibility and influence were much lower than those of Chinese Secretaries, even though

their importance and special expertise were no less valued at the Legation. These different or even seemingly contradictory manifestations of the Legation translators' status forbid easy categorisation of their overall status. In translation studies, it is not uncommon to find general or brief evaluations of translators' status, but the findings of the present case indicate that it might be problematic to discuss translator status as an absolute concept without making explicit which status parameters or facets one is addressing. It is also risky to draw conclusions about a translator's overall status based on an analysis of only one or two status parameters. As this case suggests, high visibility, influence or recognition does not always translate into better material rewards, and low salary or visibility does not necessarily mean that most members of an institution do not recognise the value of translation and translators. To obtain a more nuanced and accurate understanding of translator status, we need more in-depth case studies approaching it as a multi-faceted social construct.

The findings of this article also suggest that behind each status parameter for the Legation translators, complex interactions of multiple macro, institutional, human and contingent factors occurred, including stage of Anglo-Chinese encounters, class distinctions in society, bureaucratic traditions, material environments, personal contacts, translators' ethnicity, their colleagues' linguistic proficiency and working habits, etc. Even within this single institution, the five status parameters were not always decided by the same people or shaped by the same influences to the same degree, leading to observed differences in the status parameters. It would be worthwhile for future studies on translator status to offer more explanatory endeavours to uncover the complex causes and mechanisms underlying translators' experienced status in different work settings.

This historical case involved an era when neither translation nor diplomacy was highly professionalised. The findings indicate that the low professionalisation level of diplomacy contributed to the Legation translators' influence, visibility and agency. Regarding the historical influence of professionalisation of translation on translator status, there are different voices, and systematic studies are lacking. While some scholars believe that one goal of professionalisation is enhanced professional status, some others propose that "the professionalisation of cultural mediation appears to have traded individuality and visibility for professionalism and invisibility" (Rizzi *et al.* 2019: 51). Considering that both diplomacy and translation became increasingly professionalised during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it would be rewarding to study whether and how these two processes of professionalisation influenced the status of diplomatic translators in different embassies and foreign offices, thus enhancing our understanding of translator status, professionalisation and diplomatic translation.

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### **Data availability statement**

The British Foreign Office archives (FO) used in this study are available under the Open Government License at the National Archives of the UK government: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>.

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