

Interpreter-Official in the Power Frameworks during the Late Qing Dynasty: A Study on the Students of the Tongwen Guan

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After the defeat of the Second Opium War, the Qing government launched the Self-Strengthening Movement and established the Tongwen Guan 同文館 to train foreign language interpreter-officials. In the turbulent political, social, and international situation, the fate of students at the Tongwen Guan, the future interpreter-officials also fluctuates. When they marched into the career in Chinese imperial bureaucracy as interpreter-officials, an outsider of the officialdom, entering the domestic power structure, and when they step onto foreign lands as Chinese diplomats, the "other" of the Western world entering the international power structure, they form unique life trajectories and played special roles in communications between China and the rest through interaction with Chinese scholar-officials and foreign representatives. Based on primary literature including the Tongwen Guan Timinglu 同文館題名錄 and Jinshen Lu 縉紳錄, this paper examines how these earliest Chinese interpreter-officials, during the late-19th and early-20th centuries, were constrained by domestic and international power, adapted and integrated into these power frameworks, and endeavored to promote their transformation.