

Europeans Learning Chinese: the Missionary Bilingual Primers

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The birth of bilingual primer genre is an important innovation in the XIXth century studies on the Chinese language. The development of this field was promoted by the increasing number of foreigners eager to learn Chinese. In the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries missionaries as well as businessmen and officials needed to get some basic knowledge of Chinese in their homeland or in China.

Western missionaries wrote some of the first bilingual primers and played a pivotal role in development of this field.

Furthermore, the birth of sinological studies in Europe and the institution of university chairs in France, Germany and Italy promoted the production of language textbooks.

The genre of bilingual primers (textbooks of the Chinese language written in English, Latin, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian) involved adapting the linguistic theories and methodologies elaborated for Western languages to Chinese, often adopting a contrastive approach to elucidate the features of the Chinese language.

These methodologies and approaches had already been adopted in the grammars of Chinese written in XVIIIth and XIXth centuries. Moreover, there was often an overlap of the genres of grammars and language textbooks.

This genre merits research, as these models of language textbooks were then adopted by Western and Chinese scholars in their studies on European languages (first of all Latin, but also English and French) written in Chinese.

Our intervention aims to retrace the history of development of Chinese language primers, analyzing the works of P. Perny, J. Gonçalvez, C. Imbault-Huart, C.W. Mateer, their link with nascent grammatical studies of the Chinese language (J. Marshman, R. Morrison, S. Julien, P. Perny) and their link with European language textbooks written in Chinese (J.A. Gonçalvez, R. Morrison, L. Tsang).