

Nascent Pursuits of Chinese-Language Studies in Nineteenth-Century America: Stanislas Hernisz's Practices in Language Learning and Bilingual Textbook Compilation

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Abstract: Born in a Jewish merchant family, Stanislas Hernisz combined the roles of diplomat, physician and scholar in nineteenth-century America. As a member of the American Oriental Society, he embarked on his Chinese-language studies during the diplomatic mission to China. His initial self-study of the Chinese language laid a foundation for his later research and publication. In 1854, he compiled a bilingual English-Chinese textbook for the targeted learners, the Americans who had trade relations with the Chinese, as well as the Chinese migrants, especially the gold miners in California. Retrospectively, departing from the classical and esoteric scholarly tradition, Hernisz's studies still hold a certain measure of contemporary significance despite limitations.

1. Introduction

When American envoy Caleb Cushing arrived in Macao, China, with his fleet and accompanying delegation in February 1844, the *Chinese Repository* provided a brief account of his mission to China and listed the principal members.^[1] Besides Cushing himself, the group included Fletcher Webster, the secretary of the mission; Elijah C. Bridgman, Peter Parker and Samuel W. Williams, the missionaries and interpreters assigned to translate and draft official documents; George R. West, the mission's accompanying painter; and Stanislas Hernisz, Cushing's private secretary, who stood out as a particular unique, beginning his engagement with Chinese-language studies solely through this journey to China, and later earned a membership in the American Oriental Society. In historical terms, this diplomatic mission represented a notable event in early Chinese studies in America, which not only drew wide attention across America to the remote East, but also helped foster favorable conditions for the development of this discipline.

2. A biographical sketch of Stanislas Hernisz

Stanislas Hernisz (1805–1866) was born as a son from a Jewish merchant family in Warsaw, Poland. During his youth, he served as a hussar officer in the November Uprising for national independence from 1830 to 1831. After the uprising failed, he emigrated to France, continuing to write patriotic articles and translated Polish literary works. Later, he entered the American

diplomatic service and emigrated to the United States.^[2] During his service, he studied medicine and obtained the Medicine Doctor degree.

In 1843, Hernisz traveled to China as an attache to the US-Chinese mission, actually a private secretary to Caleb Cushing, with his salary paid personally by Cushing. Possessing exceptional linguistic talent, he had already acquired some ability to read and write Chinese by the end of the mission.^[3] After returning, he opened a clinic in San Francisco, California. In 1854, he published in Boston the bilingual textbook *A Guide to Conversation in the English and Chinese Languages*. In 1866, he planned another journey to the Far East as an American representative, but died of illness in London at the age of 61.^[2]

3. Hernisz's studies of the Chinese language

Endowed with remarkable linguistic aptitude, Hernisz quickly mastered the Chinese reading and writing during the mission to China, which had laid a foundation for his subsequent studies. Strictly speaking, he was not yet a trained sinologist or linguist, as his Chinese-related intellectual resources and linguistic skills were still insufficient. Consequently, diverging from other academic researchers who prioritized classical written Chinese or phonetic transcription of Chinese dialect, Hernisz's studies turned toward the real-world contexts and focused on the practical orientation.

3.1 His autodidactic engagement with the Chinese language

In fact, Stanislas Hernisz once recommended some textbooks for Chinese-language learners, of which there were *Diccionario China-Portuguez*, *Diccionario Portuguez-China*, and *Arte China* compiled by J. A. Goncalves, *Chinese and English Dictionary* by W. H. Medhurst, *Chinese Chrestomathy* by E. C. Bridgman, and *An English and Chinese Vocabulary* by S. W. Williams. In his view, American learners had to depend on such assistance as could be afforded by the best works in their possession, since they lacked any guidance from a native Chinese “Sien Sang” (teacher).^[4] His statement indirectly corroborates that during the diplomatic mission to China, he had received assistance from Chinese instructors and benefited a lot.

After returning to the US, Hernisz wrote an article titled “On the Chinese Language” with illustrations, which was read as a correspondence paper at a meeting of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science on May 6, 1845.^[5] In 1847, he was elected as a member of the American Oriental Society, and he subsequently sent a letter to the society expressing his gratitude for the honor.^[6]

3.2 Target audience of his bilingual Chinese-English textbook

In 1854, Hernisz published in Boston *A Guide to Conversation in the English and Chinese Languages for the Use of Americans and Chinese in California and Elsewhere*, a bilingual English-Chinese instructional manual, and immediately presented it to the library of AOS. On the cover, he introduced his identities, all of which were in perfect harmony with his remarks in the introduction. He appropriately linked language learning with the far-reaching influence of the Treaty of Wanghia, the California Gold Rush, and the commercial and economic relations between China and the US in the mid-nineteenth century, with the object to supply to Americans “some knowledge of Chinese idioms”, and “to the Chinese, some elementary introduction in the English language”.^[4]

As he wrote, “The treaties between China and Western countries, the opening of five trading ports, the California Gold Rush, all led to a significant increase in trade between China and the United States, more extensive exchanges, and a closer relationship with the ‘Central Flowery People’ (China).”^[4] For those who had trade relations with China, learning Chinese was no longer

out of curiosity; for a large number of Chinese who had migrated or planned to migrate to California, English proficiency was also indispensable. From the perspective of language learning, Hernisz accurately revealed the essential demand of language as tools in early commercial and communicative activities between the Chinese and Americans.

Actually, the textbook was regarded as a new model for writing and issuing the Chinese-language textbooks during that period, since it was so simple and accessible for lay readers in the layout of both English and Chinese, which focused on the teaching of everyday vocabulary and phrases, as well as the practice of oral conversation.

3.3 Content Structure and vocabulary composition of the textbook

In the textbook with targeted audiences, the core vocabulary words are mainly narrow but highly targeted high-frequency ones for work, daily social, and commercial scenarios, such as mining terms, greetings, numbers, food and commodities. Meanwhile, grammar leaning is practice-oriented without systematic theoretical explanation.

At the beginning of the textbook, there is alphabet and spelling table containing all the vowels, diphthongs, and consonants found in “Kwan Hwa” (Mandarin Dialect), which had been prepared by S. W. Williams in *An English and Chinese Vocabulary of the Court Dialect*. Then Hernisz introduced the four principal tones called the even, the rising, the departing and the entering, which were divided into an upper and lower series. However, he considered it unnecessary to learn the tones since a knowledge of the tones was not necessary in order to be intelligible, but indispensable to a correct and elegant elocution.^[4]

The second part is English-language learning for Chinese migrants, including “Wan Tah” (Q & A) about how to learn English, the alphabetic tables and high-frequency vocabulary words, of which the pronunciations were marked with Chinese characters, especially those in the Cantonese dialect. Hernisz told Chinese learners that English language was much easier for them to learn, compared with American learners for Chinese language. This is a “novel” attempt then, since the majority of such textbooks were tailored for Western foreign language learners, while few ones targeted the learning demands of Chinese learners.

As to the vocabulary, there are 23 English words related to mining industry, such as gold, gold dust, gold leaf, mica, saline springs, and more than 170 words related to the Chinese miner’s daily life, such as tea, fruit, sugarcane, purse, lantern, cider, broker, pilfer and tutor. Besides, there are some geographical names those Chinese migrants often used, such as Benicia, Washington, San Francisco, Sacramento, and Philadelphia.

As to Chinese-language learning, Hernisz provided in the third part the “progressive Chinese and English exercises”, including the pronunciations and meanings of 214 Chinese radicals with different stroke counts from the *Kangxi Dictionary*, followed by the grammatical part, everyday vocabulary and conversation exercises.

Hernisz argues that the elements of Chinese words consisted of two characters—radicals and primitives or phonetics. The Chinese have classified all radicals under 214 groups or classes, indicating the general sense of a Chinese word, while primitives or phonetics specifies and fixes the particular and definite meaning of the word, as well as determining the pronunciation. Consequently, it is strongly suggested that the learners master all the radicals to acquire a thorough understanding of Chinese language, and they will be enabled to use with facility the Chinese related dictionaries, in which the characters are classified under their respective radicals. In addition, the orthography adopted in this textbook is the one employed in the dictionaries of Morrison and Medhurst, one further simplified in the later publications of American sinologists.^[4]

Moreover, he supplements some Chinese expressions of civility, as well as some respectful terms

for others. As he wrote, it was considered rude and vulgar for the Chinese to say “my” in speaking one’s relatives, family or residence. They often used “little” or “mean” to show humility, and “family” instead of “my”, which was “far fetched and extravagant”^[4] in his eyes.

In a sense, the vocabulary and conversations in the textbook have embodied the bidirectional adaptability and cross-culture attribute in some fields, such as the habitual intercourse manner of those Chinese migrants in daily life, which offers referential insights for the current related studies.

3.4 Major merits and identified limitations of the textbook

Compiled for the targeted learners, this textbook exhibits high pertinence to their practical learning demands. Notably, it was the only published textbook available for the particular groups during that period. Just as Moses Clark White points out in his book review, “For thorough students of the Chinese language, other and expensive books are desirable; but for those who merely wish a moderate practical knowledge of Chinese, the work of Dr. Hernisz is at once cheap and available.”^[7] Furthermore, the general teaching plan, the content structure, and the vocabulary composition were carefully adjusted to accommodate their knowledge background and cognitive characteristics. Consequently, it had occupied a certain position in the teaching and learning system for the merchants and gold miners in that era.

Despite its merits, the textbook suffers from several drawbacks. A salient problem concerns Hernisz’s statements regarding the tones of the Chinese language. According to him, there was little value in instructing language learners the tones within textbook, since such features were best acquired through face-to-face oral interaction with native speakers. Objectively, the beginning Chinese learners are usually not very sensitive to tones.^[8] However, tones are an elementary component of oral Chinese, and one of the major difficulties in Chinese-language learning,^[9] without which it is impossible to distinguish different Chinese characters and words with different meanings, especially in oral communication.

Moreover, Chinese characters are used in the textbook to mark the pronunciation of English alphabet as well as some English words, which is helpful but not sufficiently scientific from the perspective of modern language teaching. For those Chinese migrants who possessed no prior knowledge about English, it could play a guiding role in the initial learning stage. However, this kind of approach may generate numerous mispronunciations and misinterpretations, owing to the striking systematic phonological divergences between the two languages. For instance, White pointed out that Hernisz gave no intimation to his Chinese audiences, that only the consonant-sound is to be enunciated, while the final vowel in the sound of the Chinese character was to be dropped. He also pointed out that Hernisz had employed William Jones’s orthography system, but not the ordinary English system as Morrison and Medhurst as he stated in the textbook.^[7]

4. Driving forces behind Hernisz’s Chinese-language studies

Hernisz’s research motivations and objectives are deeply intertwined with his personal experiences and the milieu of his place of residence. His academic pursuits of Chinese language were mainly shaped by the prevailing social mentalities in the US, the earlier experience as a member of Cushing’s delegation, as well as the regional and social context of California, where he resided in the mid-nineteenth century. Accordingly, his Chinese language learning, teaching and translation practice cannot be adequately interpreted without reference to his life-course and contextual factors.

4.1 Official emphasis and popular demand for Chinese-language learning

In the early nineteenth century, there existed a widespread perception among American official circles and the public that they had fallen behind. On the one hand, due to the popularity of mercantilist capitalism, American government and merchants had great enthusiasm for a series of future prospects, as well as the economic and cultural expansion in overseas markets, especially in China. On the other hand, their academic research on China also lagged behind that of Europe, especially in countries such as France and Germany. As a consequence, American scholars were eager to enter the research field of ancient Eastern Civilization, including Sinology.

For Cushing's delegation, Chinese-language learning had also been attached a great importance. Even Cushing himself attempted to learn Chinese language and Manchu in preparation for the mission, since it might be helpful for the negotiations. Additionally, there is a specific clause in the Treaty of Wanghia that the Americans are allowed to employ Chinese individuals to learn the language and acquire Chinese publications. Prior to this, the Qing government had strictly prohibited foreigners from learning Chinese. It can thus be seen that Hernisz had sufficient motivations and favorable conditions to learn and practice Chinese language during the mission. Overall, together with official emphasis and popular demand for Chinese studies, the prevailing social mentality helped shape Hernisz's interests and research in the Chinese language.

4.2 The regional and social context of California

According to the advertisements in the local newspapers, Hernisz's clinic was located on Bush Street in San Francisco, standing immediately to the east of Music Hall.^[10] Next to Bush Street sat the Chinese settlement which began to take shape in the mid-nineteenth century, and was later known as the famous "Chinatown". According to historical records, 25,000 Chinese migrants came to California between 1848 and 1852.^[11] Through frequent contact with those Chinese migrants, Hernisz had gained deep insights into them, as well as their language learning expectations.

Additionally, with the economic boom of the gold rush and the expansion of overseas market in China, an increasing number of Americans were eager for the commercial exchanges and interests.

Driven by these shifts, Hernisz gave high priority to the linguistic needs of different social groups in California. It can be found that numerous advertisements for Hernisz's textbook were published in diverse newspapers, with the aim to target both Americans and the Chinese. From November 25, 1854 to March 30, 1855, Hernisz placed more than thirty advertisements in the *Daily Alta California*,^[12] the first newspaper of daily circulation in the state. He also placed advertisements in *The Oriental (or Tung-Ngai San-Luk)*, a Chinese-English bilingual publication founded by Rev. William Speer, of which the Chinese-language section was edited by Lee Kan. These advertisements revealed Hernisz's early recognition of intercultural language teaching, and the communicative practice for diverse audiences. Meanwhile, these advertisements also helped expand the textbook's circulation.

5. Conclusion

From a contemporary perspective, Hernisz's nascent pursuits of Chinese-language studies still retain practical value and scholarly significance despite its limitations, providing an early practical reference for both Chinese and English language learning. As evidenced in his studies, the dissemination of Chinese-language during this historical stage mainly stemmed from the demands of American society based on its economic and trade development. Different from the "elite sinology" based on the abstruse and intricate research in Europe, it was rooted in the "popular" practice of daily intercourse, commercial transactions, and cultural exchanges, which had served as

a partial impetus for the emergence of early Chinese studies in America.

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