

Friends in Far Places

Foreigners and the Making of the Chinese Diplomat



Dr Thomas P. Barrett

(FAMES, University of Cambridge)

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Room LG18 (Faculty of Law, Sidgwick Site)

Abstract

The diplomacy of late Qing China is often derided as slapdash and incompetent; adjudged a failure purely by the simplistic barometer of dynastic decline. However, recent scholarship emerging from Japan, China and Taiwan has demonstrated that by the 1910s, the Qing, through its legations in Europe, America and Japan, had cultivated a competent corps of professional diplomats who could perform confidently on the international stage, and who embraced Western European diplomacy's normative prescriptions for diplomatic practice.

This paper contributes to this scholarship by interrogating how this metamorphosis was articulated in the everyday circuitry of Qing diplomatic practice, including the art of negotiation, the crafting of rhetoric, and the deployment of the press. To do this, however, this paper utilises the shifting roles of foreigners working within the Qing's legations in Europe, America and Japan as a novel methodological lens through which to perceive this qualitative transformation.

Drawing on multilingual archival sources, this talk argues that while these foreigners were first employed by the Qing in the late 1870s to handle cultural explication and interpretation, their roles were fundamentally transformed in the 1880s. After this, they came to exert a leading influence on Qing diplomacy as rhetoricians, negotiators, press officers, networkers, and strategists. I argue that this transformation was indicative of the Qing's rapid acclimatisation to Western European diplomatic culture, in that their use of foreigners in this way demonstrated a desire to persuade their diplomatic interlocutors that they were a competent diplomatic entity who ought to be taken seriously. These individuals thus provide a new lens through which to rethink the staid narrative of Qing diplomatic ineptitude.

Speaker

Thomas P. Barrett is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Faculty of Asian and Middle East Studies and a Junior Research Fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge, who specialises in the international and diplomatic history of pre-modern and modern East Asia. Prior to taking up his current post, Thomas was trained in the Japanese *Tōyōshi* 東洋史 tradition, completing his BA at Aichi University (the successor to the Shanghai-based Tōa Dōbun Shoin 東亜同文書院) and his MA at the University of Tokyo. In 2016, he began his PhD at the University of Tokyo as a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science DC Research Fellow, but completed his doctoral work at the University of Oxford in 2022 under the supervision of Professor Henrietta Harrison.

His current book project explores the development of the professional Chinese diplomat through the lens of the foreign presence who worked in Qing and Republican China's legations and consulates, with portions of the project having hitherto been published as articles in Japanese in *Shigaku Zasshi* 史学雑誌 and *Tōyō Gakuhō* 東洋学報, and also as a chapter in a French-language volume published with the École française d'Extrême-Orient. In addition to the book, further articles are also forthcoming in English and Japanese.