

# Abstract

Until two decades ago, Interpreting Studies focused primarily on the cognitive process and the neuro-linguistics facet of the interpreting activity. The social and cultural aspects had been largely neglected by researchers in this field. However, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a growing number of research projects exploring the social and cultural elements of interpreting started emerging, especially regarding context-specific challenges faced by legal, medical and community interpreters. Political or diplomatic interpreting, however, while playing a significant role in international relations and communication, remains unexplored in Interpreting Studies. Today, the global political climate is becoming increasingly volatile as conflicts related to sovereignty and economics arise. As a result, political interpreters and their tasks are attracting more public attention than ever. In high-stakes settings where serious consequences may occur, political interpreters must consider social, cultural and political risks to achieve the most optimal communication effect. This study aims to explore how various risks may affect the decisions and behaviours of political interpreters by examining the cases of government interpreters during the First Opium War between Britain and China from 1839 to 1842.

The activity of interpreting has been practised since ancient times. However, due to the evanescence of the spoken word, few traces of interpreters can be found in history. The First Opium War is one of the most significant events in China's early modern history. It signified the first large-scale war between China and the Western world and ended in China's failure and the signing of the *Treaty of Nanking*. Some of the effects of the Treaty are still felt in China today, including political issues related to Hong Kong. However, even though interpreters played an essential role during the war, their names are rarely mentioned in

historical studies of this event. Therefore, the first objective of this study is to fill this void by exploring the lives and experiences of these interpreters to understand their roles during the First Opium War. The backgrounds of the political interpreters are examined in detail, including their motivations and how they were selected as government-affiliated interpreters. Building on this knowledge, the author then investigates the relationship between the social, cultural and political risks and the interpreters' behaviours in the context of bilateral relations. This study uses a mixed-method approach to achieve the research objectives. As the venue of the interpreting activity is an event that took place in the nineteenth century, a significant part of the analysis relies on historical and archival research. In addition, the methods of case study and textual analysis are also used to gain more insight into the interpreters' risk management behaviours.

One of the key findings of this study is the identification of the various risks faced by political interpreters during the First Opium War. For example, there were different types of risks associated with personal safety, the trust of the client, and the possibility of being punished as "traitors". In addition, the interpreters encountered linguistic risks related to ambiguity, the demonstration of national prestige and the complication of legal concepts. Although some of the risks were shared by all interpreters, the Chinese and English governments treated their affiliated interpreters differently, suggesting that risks in political interpreting also depend on the social and cultural environment where the interpreters find themselves. Essentially, in an environment where the interpreters are fully trusted and respected, they may assume a more "autonomous" role in the communication process, resulting in risks of varying degrees. Depending on the situation, the interpreters may try to avoid or mitigate the risk or decide to take the risk for potential rewards.

In high-level political settings, the task of the political interpreters is not limited to the literal translation of words but also involves complex decision-making processes related to side-switching, stance-taking and cultural and ideological mediation. The analysis of such psychological processes is particularly challenging for researchers. As one of the first projects in the field of Interpreting Studies to adopt the risk analysis framework, this study offers a new perspective through which the activity of interpreting could be examined. In order to build a comprehensive understanding of the risks that may affect the interpreters' decisions, a mixed-approach method is used in this study, which could also offer a reference for future research on similar topics.