

• 科学技术史 •

机遇抑或挑战?

——基于科学帝国主义语境考察皇家亚洲文会北华分会的建立

Opportunity or Challenge? The Establishment of the NCBRAS in the Context of Scientific Imperialism

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摘要: 本文从科学帝国主义语境考察了上海文理学会(后成为皇家亚洲文会北华分会)建立的有利条件和不利因素。通过分析该学会的创始动机及其与皇家亚洲文会的关系, 本文认为可以视该学会为科学帝国主义的产物。与以往以汉学为中心的研究不同, 本文探讨了科学体制化、东方主义传统和欧洲海外扩张为该学会创造的有利环境, 同时指出该学会的建立与初期发展也面临着中外关系敌对、财力不足和文化隔阂等挑战。机遇与挑战并存的境遇在塑造该学会未来发展轨迹中起到了关键作用。科学帝国主义为理解皇家亚洲文会北华分会的建立与其在近代中外交流的作用提供了新的视角。

关键词: 皇家亚洲文会北华分会(上海文理学会) 科学帝国主义 科学制度化 汉学传统

Abstract: This paper examines the establishment of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (NCBRAS), which was initially known as the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society, focusing on its merits and drawbacks from the perspective of scientific imperialism. It analyzes the founders' motivations and their affiliation with the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (RAS), framing NCBRAS as a product of scientific imperialism. Unlike previous sinology-centric research, this study explores the benefits derived from scientific institutions, Orientalist traditions, and Europe's overseas expansion. Despite the opportunity provided by all the merits, the NCBRAS also faced challenges due to Chinese and foreign hostilities, financial inadequacies, and cultural differences. This dual situation played a pivotal role in shaping the future trajectory of the NCBRAS. This inquiry into the context and drawbacks contributes to a deeper understanding of NCBRAS and offers new perspectives on natural history research in 1850s China.

Key Words: NCBRAS (Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society); Scientific imperialism; Scientific institutionalization; Sinology tradition

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Introduction

In 1857, a group of Westerners traveling in

Shanghai established the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society, which was renamed the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (NCBRAS) the following year. This organization played a vital

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role in facilitating the exchange of Chinese natural history exploration and textual research with Western scholars. Although affiliated with the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (RAS), the NCBRAS attracted members from various countries, including England, America, France, Germany, Russia, and China.

The establishment of the NCBRAS created a platform for conducting natural history studies in China. Diplomats, missionaries, businessmen, scholars, and engineers from various countries gathered there to share their findings; it served as a center for westerners to study Chinese natural history.¹ The members of NCBRAS conducted extensive field trips across China to compile data for Chinese natural history research. Furthermore, sinologist members who possessed expertise in Chinese language and culture provided invaluable material related to Chinese natural knowledge through their research on China's literary canon. Through field trip investigations and sinology research, NCBRAS adeptly compiled a comprehensive overview of Chinese natural history. This made the NCBRAS an institution that integrated the scientific and cultural aspects of Chinese natural history.

In addition to serving as a vital communication hub for Western naturalists in China, the NCBRAS maintained meticulous correspondence with scientists and scientific institutions in Europe and America. The secretaries assumed an important role, consistently ensuring communication and reporting research findings to academics. Furthermore, alongside corresponding with scientific authorities in Europe and America on behalf of the NCBRAS, numerous members actively engaged in natural history investigations by serving as part-time collectors for botanical gardens, museums, and various institutions in Europe and America. These amateur naturalists routinely transmitted a substantial numbers of specimens acquired during expeditions in China to scientific institutions in Europe and America for identification, classification, and nomenclature. For instance, from 1880 to 1882, Kew Gardens received 570 botanical specimens from Emil Bretschneider (1833-1901), a physician at the Russian Consulate in

Beijing who used his leisure time to do the collecting work. A similar case was that of German missionary Ernst Faber (1839-1899), who collected 953 Chinese specimens for Kew between 1887 and 1891.² The French naturalist Albert-Auguste Fauvel (1851-1909) transmitted the specimens of the Yangtze alligator (*Alligator sinensis*) to the French National Museum of Natural History for identification, confirming it as a previously unknown species in Europe and America in 1878.

NCBRAS not only relied on its members to collect knowledge and specimens about Chinese natural history but also presented and circulated research through its journal. Their journal began in 1858 and lasted for nearly 90 years, publishing a large number of field studies and textual research on Chinese natural history. Remarkable examples are the research on Chinese agriculture by the French consul G. Eugène Simon (1829-1896), and Charles K. Edmunds (1876-1949), the president of Canton Christian College, who led the first geomagnetic expedition in China in 1919. There was also Bretschneider's authoritative study on Chinese plants. In total, 676 articles were published in the journal, 226 of which were related to natural science; most of them are about natural history, which demonstrates the importance of natural history research in this society. In addition to conducting authoritative research on sinology and natural history, the NCBRAS also established a library in 1871 and a museum in 1874 to collect related objects and display research results. The museum also served as an exhibition space for popularizing science. With the addition of the library, the NCBRAS became the most important platform for the promotion of science in China.

Tracing the historical roots of the NCBRAS prompts an inquiry into the reasons for its extensive pursuit of natural history research throughout its existence. It is not difficult to conclude that the Society's activities were closely related to the development of science in China and the expansion of European empires. To understand this phenomenon, it is essential to examine the early days of the NCBRAS, especially its founding period around the 1850s, which coincided with the global expansion of imperialism in

the 19th century.

In the context of modern Europe, imperialism went beyond mere economic, political and military aspects to encompass a prevailing mindset and ideology during the era of European world hegemony in the 19th century. This ideology manifested in various ways, including through knowledge, culture, and technology. Scientific imperialism emerged as one facet of this broader imperialist framework, denoting the interplay and interdependence between science and empire, with science permeating the process of colonial expansion.³ Science and Empire have been inextricably linked throughout history, reshaping each other, showing that neither could have grown without the other. The historian Andrew Goss observes that “a mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship developed between science and empire, and this spawned complex systems, institutions, and networks which were not only interwoven, but supported, nurtured, and sustained each other”.⁴ However, scientific imperialism is not easy to define and assess.⁵ Mary Louise Pratt puts forward the concept of “anti-conquest narrative” as a means of imperialist colonial expansion, distinct from traditional forms of imperialist expansion such as military conquest and slavery. The concept highlights the rationality and moderation of ethnographic discourse as a tool of imperialist expansion. In this concept, European travelers present fascinating exotic adventures to European readers through popular travel diaries. European readers thereby gain the power to understand the distant world being explored, invaded, invested in, and colonized. These narratives create a sense of curiosity, excitement, and adventure, even arousing moral enthusiasm for European expansionism.⁶ Through the use of ethnography—a gentler means of exploration, a Eurocentric global consciousness and knowledge system gradually emerged during the process of modern European colonial expansion.

The formation of the European-centered knowledge system relies on the global information circulation network spread throughout Europe. Information flows through specific organizations and institutions, starting with the Jesuit information network in its early stages. In the 17th century,

Europeans regarded the Jesuit order as an institution that assisted in observing and collecting strategic information from around the world.⁷ Subsequently, multinational trading organizations like the East India Company created a fertile matrix for geographically dispersed botanical research, relying on their global influence and complex circulation mechanisms.⁸

A theoretical framework for studying the circulation of modern scientific knowledge is Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory. In this framework, specimens and research results from distant countries flow through networks and are sent to European scientific institutions at the center of these networks. They are then recognized by experts as authoritative knowledge of the natural world. The focus of this theoretical framework is on European scientific societies, museums, collections of rare objects, and botanical gardens. These institutions serve as nodes or aggregation points for knowledge production, reinforcing the assumption that this process occurred primarily in major European cities. Trade and colonialism form a broader and denser network that connects Europe to the outside world, but with Europe as the center of activity.⁹ A network represents the pathways of information circulation and is also used to describe the various ways in which recipients of information describe their sources. Networks can be physically tangible or conceptually intangible, and the interactions between them are complex. Neither can fully determine the other, but the historical imagination of networks plays a significant role in the dissemination of material and intellectual ideas. Information networks are not static but productive, and through archives they enable the reconstruction of historical understanding from the network of knowledge circulation.¹⁰

The Royal Asiatic Societies were one of the most important of the imperial global networks established in the nineteenth century. These included the Asiatic Society of Bombay (1838), the Ceylon Branch of the RAS (1845), the Hong Kong Branch of the RAS (1847), the Asiatic Society of Japan (1875), the Malaysian Branch of the RAS (1877), and the Korean Branch of the RAS (1900), among others. NCBRAS, as a branch of RAS, can be considered

a representative institution in this sub-network that circulated and produced modern scientific knowledge. Thus, it is essential to explore its history within the context of the history of science and empire. Previous research on NCBRAS has primarily concentrated on its history, library collection, and museum.¹¹⁻¹⁵ This focus was mainly due to the detailed description of its founding history in their journal. However, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Sino-Western exchange, it is crucial to provide a deeper explanation about the founding context of the NCBRAS. Several factors played a significant role in the establishment of this society. According to Chinese scholar Wang Yi's research, the formation of this society can be explained as a result of the breakdown of the long-standing cultural and political divide that had existed between the Eastern and Western worlds, as well as a result of the need for increased communication between the two worlds.¹⁶ This is undoubtedly a valid justification for the creation of NCBRAS. However, when considering the establishment of this society in the 19th century, a period in which scientific progress supported imperialism, it's necessary to pay particular attention to the relationship between science and empire.

This paper aims to investigate the establishment of the NCBRAS, focusing on the positive aspects and challenges for this newly founded society in China within the framework of scientific imperialism. Scientific imperialism, in this context, serves as a comprehensive perspective for understanding how this society came into being. The analysis begins by examining the advantages gained from the establishment of scientific societies, drawing insights from the development of scientific institutions, the influence of Orientalist traditions, and the impact of Europe's overseas expansion. Furthermore, the paper explores of the founders' motivations and their connection with the RAS. In exploring the opportunities that arose, I also discuss the challenges that the NCBRAS inevitably faced. These challenges include factors such as Chinese and foreign hostilities, financial inadequacies, and cultural differences. Notably, the paper emphasizes the coexistence of opportunities and challenges, where opportunities and

challenges coexist, and highlights how this dynamic played a pivotal role in shaping the future trajectory of the NCBRAS. The examination of this duality provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities faced by the society during its formation and sheds light on the multifaceted nature of its historical context.

I. The Opportunity for Establishing a Scientific Society in Shanghai

1. The Scientific and Imperialist Context

To comprehend the impact of scientific imperialism on the establishment of the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society, it is essential to investigate the factors driving the development of scientific institutions. Specifically, examining the burgeoning interest in natural history research and the formalization of science in Europe and America after the discovery of the New World, extending from the early 15th century to the 17th century, sheds light on why the founding of the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society was imperative and feasible within the wider global context. The discovery of the New World led to a significant accumulation of wealth and knowledge, which fueled Europe's interest in oceanic exploration. At the same time, scientific advancements were being made in Europe, and colonial influence was expanding beyond continental borders.

The 16th century geographical discoveries led to growing interconnectivity through newly established sea routes. Empowered by the Scientific Revolution, Europeans engaged in explorations of the world outside of Europe. Oceanic voyages emerged as noteworthy endeavors with economic and scientific value. John Ross's book, *Voyage of Discovery* (1819), portrays the global exploration and encounters of the 18th century, providing an illustrative depiction of the global landscape shaped by oceanic navigation. The expeditions of Bougainville and Cook brought back a wealth of knowledge, including natural and man-made treasures, new imagery, survey records, and even people from different regions. These global voyages led to changes in Europe's knowledge systems and aesthetics, coinciding with the growth of missionaries,

military enterprises, and commercial interests.¹⁷

In this context, the development of European science and colonial expansion inspired European scholars to establish scientific societies. The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge was established in 1660 with expectations of colonial expansion.¹⁸ In April 1663, its objectives were declared in the second charter in the name of the king, not only to expand the empire but also to elevate the arts and sciences of England.¹⁹ Therefore, natural history played a significant role in capturing the Royal Society's attention.

The Royal Society's emphasis on natural history can be attributed to Sir Francis Bacon's advocacy. Bacon's ideas had a profound impact on the Society's character and pursuits, leading it to be recognized as the Baconian Society. This influence extends beyond the Society's inception and continues to shape its evolution.²⁰ Bacon considered natural history as the foundation for a new form of natural philosophy. He viewed history (*Historia*) as a descriptive form, and natural history as a broader category of history related to memory, as he wrote in his *Description of the Intellectual Globe* (1653): "History is either Natural or Civil. Natural history relates the deeds and actions of nature; civil history those of men."²¹ According to Bacon, the study of nature encompassed the study of humans. The anthropological domain should be limited to human history. This acknowledges that one of the main forms of natural history is narratives of travelers or systematic studies of the flora, fauna, and people of colonies during European colonial expansion.²² In the early days of the Royal Society, natural history was necessary to acquire knowledge and break the monopoly of interpretation held by European scholastics. The narratives of travelers were highly valuable sources of knowledge due to their close resemblance to the Baconian methods of natural history researchers. The information obtained from global travelers could not be overly compressed.²³ Natural history played a crucial role in understanding and governing colonial areas during the modern European colonial expansion.

The interaction between European and non-European countries significantly enriched natural

history research in Europe. Communication networks played a pivotal role in this enrichment. During early modern academia, manuscript communication networks were relied upon for scholarly exchange. The late 17th century saw the emergence of academic journals, including scientific ones. These publications catered to an expanding scientific audience by adopting a specialized and technical language. This was done to embody the prestige and authority of their respective academic disciplines while targeting a limited readership. In contrast, commercial journals, distinct from their scholarly counterparts, played a role in the dissemination of knowledge by featuring diverse commentaries, news articles, letters, and weather reports. Although they may not have been the primary source for announcing novel research, their objective was to furnish readers with fresh observational findings, often initially reported from distant cities. Submissions to commercial journals often included direct contributions from scholars in the form of letters to the editor. In addition, they included excerpts, translations, or reports compiled by editors or assistants. The success of a journal hinged upon the judicious amalgamation of the editor's business acumen, editorial proficiency, and academic expertise. Academic journals played a crucial role in facilitating knowledge exchange among academic communities, a model that continues to be utilized by many academic societies today. These networks of communication spanned the globe, enabling the exchange of journals between different academic communities and ensuring their availability for reference worldwide.²⁴

The 19th century witnessed significant advancements in printing technology; meanwhile scientific societies experienced further development, resulting in substantial growth in the publication of scientific journals.²⁵ These journals served as repositories of scientific knowledge, providing professionals in emerging fields with various avenues to discuss nature. Popular science magazines flourished throughout Europe, often linked to narratives of modernization and nationalism.²⁴ At the same time, the growing significance of scientific journals was closely tied to the professionalization of modern science.²⁶ The natural history research

conducted by Oriental societies in colonial territories also benefited significantly from the proliferation of European and American scientific journals. In their early stages, these developing Eastern societies aimed not only to establish academic communities for reciprocal communication but also required platforms to disseminate and showcase their scholarly achievements. The expansion of scientific journals in the 19th century served as a crucial avenue to meet these multifaceted demands. Using the example of the RAS of Bengal, the earliest Asian society established in 1784, its publication structure and content design bore similarities to the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions*. The society's journal became the most relied-upon publication for academic research and knowledge dissemination, continuing the tradition set by the *Philosophical Transactions*. The advancement of scientific societies and journals during the process of scientific institutionalization provided valuable references for the establishment of the NCBRAS within the framework of European overseas expansion. The initiation of the society's scientific journal placed it in a significant position in promoting scientific endeavors and expanding Western empires.

2. Sinological Tradition and the Opening of Shanghai as a Treaty Port

Europeans' passion for exploration in Asia and the sinological tradition have evolved alongside scientific imperialism since the Age of Discovery. Consequently, it is crucial to analyze Orientalism and the interactions between China and the Western world in the 19th century. The European fascination with the East has historical roots dating back to the time of Marco Polo. The era of colonial expansion and the scientific revolution provided conducive circumstances for European exploration in the Orient. This period also witnessed the establishment of modern scientific societies, leading to the successive emergence of specialized associations dedicated to studying countries like China and other Eastern regions.

Tracing the history of Oriental societies, it reveals the earliest society of the colonial expansion period was established in 1778 by Dutch naturalist Jacob Cornelis Matthieu Radermacher (1741-1783) in

Batavia, Dutch East Indies (now Jakarta, Indonesia). It was known as the "Bataviaasch Genootschap der Konsten en Wetenschappen" (Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences). Six years later the establishment of the Oriental Society in Batavia, Sir William Jones (1746-1794), a British Orientalist, founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal during his tenure as a judge in Calcutta. This society published two official journals, *Asiatic Researches* and *Journals of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*. Subsequently, in 1804, Sir James Mackintosh (1765-1832), a colonial administrator with a penchant for Oriental studies, established the Literary Society of Bombay in Mumbai, publishing the *Transactions of the Bombay Literary Society*. In 1826, the Literary Society of Bombay became the Bombay Branch of the RAS, a subsidiary of the RAS. Western Oriental societies proliferated rapidly during colonial times.

The oriental societies established in colonial areas served as inspiration for Western scholars to initiate comparable institutions in their respective countries. In 1822, French sinologists founded the Société asiatique in Paris.²⁷ Shortly thereafter, the Sanskrit scholar Henry Thomas Colerbrooke (1765-1837) collaborated with British colonial official Alexander Johnston (1775-1849) to establish the RAS in London. On January 8, 1823, fifteen scholars convened at Colerbrooke's residence to discuss the establishment of a society dedicated to scholarly exploration of India and other regions east of the Cape of Good Hope. The society aimed to encompass scientific, literary, and artistic pursuits. It successfully gained the patronage of King George IV of England and other prominent figures. Notably, the RAS recognizes the Asiatic Society of Bengal, founded by Sir William Jones in 1784, as its precursor, "The Parent Society".¹¹ With prolonged service under the East India Company, Henry Thomas Colerbrooke served as the president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal from 1806 to 1815. This historical involvement helps clarify Colerbrooke's pivotal role as the key initiator behind the formation of the RAS. Alexander Johnston shared a similar professional background as a colonial official in Asia.

Following the establishment of the RAS in London, several Oriental research societies were

subsequently founded in various Asian regions as listed above. These organizations were established by the British in various parts of Asia and later merged as branches of the Royal Asiatic Society. It is significant that the establishment of these local branches did not initially receive authorization from the RAS. In most instances, they were founded by scholars located overseas who subsequently sought membership at the headquarters of the RAS. Approval was subsequently granted for these branches to become part of the RAS. An example of this can be found in the NCBRAS.

To understand the founding of the NCBRAS, it is necessary to redirect attention back to China. In the early 19th century, before the First Opium War (1839-1842), the Qing government restricted foreign activities to specific regions, including natural history investigations, which were limited to certain areas. Following the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, ports were established, significantly benefiting Britain and other Western countries. This agreement, negotiated between the Qing government and Western nations, enabled the expansion of the Western sphere of influence throughout China.

The recent surge of European interest in China, driven by the opening of a vast market, led to the establishment of specialized institutions for Oriental studies to gain information about China. The NCBRAS was founded in this context. Western residents in China aimed to establish cultural institutions to enrich their experiences, rather than just exchanging information. Taking Shanghai as an illustrative case, foreigners in the city perceived a deficiency in cultural activities compared to those that flourished in Europe during the 17th-century scientific revolution. Noteworthy omissions encompassed the absence of newspapers, salons, and, perhaps most significantly, a comprehensive understanding of the local environment. "When the Founders of the Settlement, in November 1843, established themselves within the walls of the City of Shanghai," Florence Ascoug wrote in 1916 in the journal of the NCBRAS, "they must have felt strangely at a loss to understand their surroundings, and as the years slipped by they determined to remedy, through study and application, this state of affairs."²⁸

Meanwhile, Westerners in China used modern media, such as newspapers, for exchanging information. Missionaries in China had already attempted to publish newspapers for exchanging information and evangelism in the first half of the 19th century. Robert Morrison, the first Christian missionary in China, printed Chinese-language missionary materials to overcome challenges. In 1815, William Milne edited the first modern Chinese-language periodical, *Chinese Monthly Magazine* (《察世俗每月统计传》), under Morrison's leadership in Malacca. English-language newspapers such as *The Canton Register* (1827), *Chinese Courier*, *Chinese Repository*, and *The Canton Press* appeared over the next few decades. *The Canton Register*, founded by British businessman James Matheson (1796-1878), was the first modern English-language newspaper published in China. It mainly served Western businessmen in China.²⁹ According to Chinese Scholar Wu Yixiong, English-language newspapers from Canton, Macau, Hong Kong, and other locations, as well as newspapers from various Asian countries, formed an interconnected network of English-language media for communication. This network, as per Wu's perspective, played a role in "forming an English-language public opinion space in the East."³⁰ Empirical evidence supports the usefulness of newspapers in facilitating the settlement of Westerners in China, as they served as a means of exchanging information and enriching culture. Western residents in China were active participants in the growing landscape of newspaper publications. In 1853, the *Chinese Serial* (《遐迩贯珍》) was established in Hong Kong, marking a pivotal development. The publication, overseen by British missionary Walter Henry Medhurst (1796-1857), played a crucial role in disseminating Chinese articles that expounded on various aspects of Western history, geography, science, literature, politics, and religion. Unfortunately, this periodical came to an end in May 1856 with the publication of its thirty-third issue. The case of *Chinese Serial* demonstrated that newspapers not only served as channels for disseminating information about Europe, America, and China, but also provided entertainment for European immigrants living in

China.

However, European immigrants educated in Europe who sought to continue their academic pursuits and research found that relying on newspapers was inadequate. Consequently, a society was established to facilitate scholarly exchanges. Moreover, in the 19th century, missionaries perceived science as a means to advance their endeavors in China, leading them to undertake the translation of scientific works with the intention of engaging Chinese intellectuals and propagating Christianity. Illustratively, American Baptist medical missionary Daniel Jerome Macgowan (1815-1893) translated and published the *Philosophic Almanac* (1851) (《博物通书》), while British missionary Benjamin Hobson (1816-1873) authored *A New Compilation on Natural Philosophy* (1854) (《博物新编初集》). In this context, missionaries also sought a platform for scientific discourse.

The second Opium War (1856-1860) further emphasized the need for the establishment of an academic community. Following the Opium War, relations between Chinese and foreigners became increasingly tense in Canton, as it was the most important hub for Westerners in China before the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, when foreign merchants had been allowed to trade only in Canton. According to H.B. Morse (1855-1934), the war had been brewing since 1842. The Imperial government had patched up a peace that went against the feelings and interests of the people of Canton. Each year that passed in the fourteen years since then made the war more inevitable. Once a situation was reached that could not be cleared up by the exercise of wise diplomacy on both sides, and not on one side only, the war became unavoidable.³¹

In February 1856, following the killing of a French missionary, Canton posted hostile notices, further inflaming the already hostile sentiment between China and foreign countries. The “Arrow Incident” on October 8th centered around a Chinese-owned vessel named the “Arrow.” The Chinese navy arrested two Chinese pirates and ten suspected Chinese sailors hiding on the “Arrow” and detained the “Arrow.” British Consul Harry Parkes in Canon claimed that the “Arrow” had previously been registered in Hong

Kong and insisted it was a British vessel, demanding immediate release of the detainees and an apology to Britain.³² This dispute ignited jurisdictional conflicts between China and Britain and became a significant catalyst that intensified the conflict between China and Britain, ultimately leading to the commencement of the Second Opium War.³¹ The war involved military campaigns by British and French forces, supported by other Western powers, against the Qing government. The Treaty of Tientsin was signed in 1858 as a result of the war, granted expanded rights and privileges to Western powers within China and opened more ports to foreign trade.

Because Canton was the epicenter of the war, Westerners residing in China were forced to find alternative locations. Shanghai emerged as a new hub and commenced operations as a port in 1843, replacing Canton. Benjamin Hobson and other missionaries shifted from Canton to Shanghai during the second opium war. Elijah Coleman Bridgman (1801-1861) of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions also frequently appeared in Shanghai due to his Bible revision work. Westerners in China during the war had an even more urgent need for a mutually supportive academic community. The establishment of the NCBRAS was also an attempt to establish a new base. It can be said that the Second Opium War provided an opportunity for the establishment of the NCBRAS. In the first few years after its establishment, the society’s journal included a section called “Recent Events in China,” which introduced the impact of the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing between China and Britain in 1842, demonstrating the attention of NCBRAS given to social and political conditions at that time, which reflects how imperialism influenced this society.

II. From Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society to NCBRAS

1. The founders’ original motivations

To comprehend the impact of scientific imperialism on the NCBRAS, an exploration of its foundational motivation is imperative, harkening back to the tradition established with the inception

of the Oriental Society in China. Significantly, the establishment of the NCBRAS was an extension of this tradition, echoing the origins of the Oriental Society in China. In 1845, a society dedicated to the study of China was founded in Hong Kong by sinologist and diplomat John Francis Davis (1795–1890), in collaboration with Colonel Thomas Brereton (1782–1832) and other distinguished individuals. In 1847, this society formally affiliated with the RAS, assuming the role of its China branch.³³ The inaugural meeting convened on January 19, 1847, during which the society adopted a constitution, elected a committee, and presented resolutions. Following deliberation, the assembly decided to rename the society as “The Asiatic Society of China.”³³

Natural science played a significant role in the formation of this society. In his inaugural address as president in 1847, Davis emphasized the importance of studying botany, geography, and culture. He suggested seeking assistance from the colonial government to establish a botanical garden. This suggestion was implemented, but the Hong Kong Botanical Garden was not under the jurisdiction of this society.¹¹

Sir Thomas Francis Wade (1818–1895), another co-founder of the Asiatic Society of China, later joined the NCBRAS. He served as the president of the London Asiatic Society from 1887 to 1890. W.A. Harland and James Legge (1815–1897) also became members of the Asiatic Society of China before joining the NCBRAS. However, the Asiatic Society of China faced challenges in expanding its services to other regions of China due to Hong Kong’s isolated location in the southeastern corner of the country. Additionally, the society ceased its activities after the departure of Sir John Bowring (1791–1872) in 1859.

The cessation of activities by the Asiatic Society of China objectively provided impetus for the establishment of another oriental society, as there was a persistent need for a platform for communication among foreigners in China. In the early days, NCBRAS considered itself a continuation of the Hong Kong Branch. This was stated in the preface of its first publication, “Feeling assured that the tendency of this step is not detrimental to the prosperity of a

sister institution in the south, they look with some confidence for that patronage which may ensure a continuance of the project.”³⁴

The enduring relationship was underscored during the 70th-anniversary celebration of the society on October 20, 1927. Vice President Isaac Mason emphasized that, although NCBRAS had drawn inspiration from specific facets of the Hong Kong Asiatic Society’s endeavors, it remained quite distinct from the Hong Kong Asiatic Society.³⁵ Apart from addressing the gap left by the Asiatic Society of China in the domain of Oriental society, the establishment of the NCBRAS was driven by additional goals. A fundamental aim was to facilitate communication between China and the Western world. This objective is succinctly conveyed in the preface of the society’s inaugural publication in 1858:

The object aimed at is essentially to bring to light and accumulate facts, which may aid in the onward progress of Christian civilization; and it is well known that there are questions of historical interest and philosophical theories in the west, which only await the revelations which this empire, and this alone, can furnish, to supply those lacunae, which sometimes leave a doubt regarding the most plausible hypotheses. To sinologues this appeal addresses itself in a special manner, but by no means exclusively; for the man of science, and the general inquirer, as they have each the opportunity of following up their several pursuits in this portion of the globe, so have they in a corresponding degree the means of adding to the stock of facts already on hand.³⁴

They believed that by engaging in a “combined effort”³⁴ in researching China, they could make a substantial and well-received contribution to Western sinology. This conviction persisted over the years within the society. During the Society’s 45th-anniversary celebration on October 16, 1902, Thos. W. Kingsmill (1837–1901) reaffirmed this assertion. He underscored the resemblance between the Hong Kong Branch and its profound interest in studying China, a distant and unfamiliar country to Europe. Additionally, Kingsmill praised the Jesuits for their outstanding contributions on scientific explorations of China,

which including in *Mémoires concernant les Chinois* and *Lettres Edifiantes*.³⁶

The positive disposition of Western scholars towards studying China is rooted in their perception of it as a valuable reference for the advancement of Western culture. Even among foreigners residing in Shanghai, where many maintained formal occupations that may have limited their time for in-depth study of China, there persisted a belief that investing effort in researching Chinese culture was a worthwhile endeavor. This conviction stemmed from their recognition that acquiring knowledge about China contributes significantly to the progress of Western religion, science, commerce, and civilization.³⁴

Another impetus behind the establishment of the NCBRAS was to address the cultural requirements of Western residents residing in Shanghai. *The North-China Herald* observed that as public life in Shanghai experienced incremental growth, advancements in religion, charitable initiatives, and the municipal system were underway. It was necessary to create conditions that would promote the development of cultural tastes and facilitate the spread of European and American knowledge among Westerners in China. The objective of this initiative was to create a sense of cultural connection, enabling individuals to feel linked to their cultural roots.³⁷ Moncrieff, a business representative, suggested that establishing such an institution in Shanghai could benefit society as a whole. Businessmen often engage in science and literature as a hobby during their workday. However, it can be challenging to find practical applications for these pursuits, often resulting in wasted opportunities. Establishing clear objectives for a society may improve this situation, allowing more people to benefit from scientific and literary activities. It was hoped that the NCBRAS would receive support from the community. It is accurate to recognize that during Shanghai's early days as a treaty port, it was essentially a humble village. It struggled to offer an ample array of entertainment options for both the local populace and the influx of Western travelers.³⁸

Finally, Shanghai was regarded as possessing the necessary conditions to establish an academic society. Foreigners residing in Shanghai firmly

believed that among Eastern cities, Shanghai stood out due to its favorable environment for foundation and development. As *The North-China Herald* reported, "We share a strong affinity with its interests and reputation, and we are not satisfied with merely establishing a music association and a public art gallery to promote social and intellectual growth. Currently, the most urgent requirement is the establishment of a literary and scientific society."³⁷

However, the motivations stated above conceal an unspoken agenda held by its founders. This society was established to serve the interests of the Western powers in China. The organization adopted the name "the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society," but its true purpose was to align itself with imperialistic influences in China.

An examination of the research and activities conducted by NCBRAS shows that after the establishment, this society focused its efforts on researching Chinese natural history, geography, politics, and other fields, ultimately aiding Western powers in their expansion in China. This exemplifies a key principle of scientific imperialism.

Considering these factors, the subsequent events unfolded naturally. During informal conversations over tea and meals, Joseph Edkins and Alexander Wylie, both esteemed missionaries, conceived the idea of founding a society dedicated to the realms of science and literature. Recognizing the significance and potential impact of this initiative, proactive measures were taken by involving Elijah Coleman and other Western residents in Shanghai. Together, they translated this concept into a tangible reality.^{36, 39, 40}

2. To be the NCBRAS

The founding meeting of the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society took place in the reading room of the Shanghai Library on September 24, 1857, at 4:00 p.m. Sir Frederick William Erskine Nicolson, an Admiral of the British Royal Navy and the captain of HMS Pique, attended the meeting. HMS Pique was a British naval ship that played a role in the Second Opium War in the Pacific. The Shanghai Library was chosen as the meeting venue because Nicolson resided there at the time.⁴¹ The meeting was led by Nicolson and attended by a total of 18 participants. Reverend

Bridgman, Reverend Edward W. Syle, Reverend Robert Nelson, Reverend William Aitchison, Dr. T. Davies, Dr. Nelson, Frank C. Sibbald, William Lockhart, Thomas Moncreiff, Charles Spencer Compton, W. G. Howell, William Keswick, S.W. Williams, Thomas Hanbury, Franks, and Robert Reid were present.³⁷ The participants included seven missionaries, one of whom was a medical missionary, two doctors, and eight businessmen. The attendees of the meeting were primarily businessmen and missionaries.

The first resolution passed was the establishment of the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society, followed by a resolution on the membership system's structural elements. Meeting participants were invited to indicate their intention to become members by informing the secretary. Prospective members could then seek nomination through the sponsorship of two existing members, highlighting a process of sponsorship and endorsement. Additionally, the deliberative body approved the establishment of a management committee consisting of a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. These appointments were subject to an annual electoral process based on democratic governance principles. Additionally, the organization introduced an annual membership fee of five silver taels. Regular meetings were scheduled for the third Tuesday evening of each month, but the board of directors had the flexibility to adjust the schedule to their preferences. This highlighted the organization's adaptability in meeting times. The board of directors was responsible for overseeing the management of the society and fostering strategic linkages between the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society and the London RAS whenever possible.

Furthermore, the meeting appointed key office bearers, including President Bridgman, who was bestowed with the responsibility of constituting a nominating committee for the selection of managerial personnel. Moncreiff assumed the mantle of vice president, F. D. Williams was entrusted with the role of treasurer, and Syle, Ranken, and Howell were formally inducted as directors, thereby constituting the governing body.³⁷

A debate ensued regarding the prospective

affiliation with the Royal Asiatic Society. Edkins, who occupied the role of secretary at the time, articulated the preference of the local business community for the nomenclature "Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society." In contrast, Howell contended that this appellation more effectively encapsulated the institution's research interests when compared to the unwieldy alternative, "the Royal Asiatic Society North China Branch." However, it is imperative to underscore that the alignment with the RAS was propelled by the scholarly proclivities and influential stature of eminent sinologists, including William Alexander, Griffith John, William Muirhead, Daniel Jerome Macgowan, Harry Parkes, and Walter Medhurst (1822-1855).³⁶ The nomenclature disparity in the emerging society, as perceived by merchants and Sinologists, lacks a clear rationale. In exploring the historical context, Sinologists believed that aligning with the esteemed Oriental Research Society would enhance their China-focused research. Nevertheless, scholars associated with erudite societies do not consistently engage in commercial ventures; they often prioritize independence to maintain adaptability and comprehensive involvement in business affairs.

A decision was made to pursue membership in the RAS. Secretary Edkins composed a letter to the RAS to initiate the membership application process. On December 2, 1857, Edkins corresponded with Horace Hayman Wilson, the President of the Royal Asiatic Society, on behalf of the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society. In his letter, Edkins chronicles the founding of the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society and their interest in integrating with the RAS. He outlines the society's dedication to studying Chinese and neighboring countries' literature, art, antiquities, and societal dynamics through field research. Finally, he requested permission to officially name the society as "the North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society."⁴¹

Upon receiving Edkins's communication, the RAS deliberated during a convened session and formally approved the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society's membership request on May 15, 1858. Consequently, on July 20, 1858, the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society announced its affiliation with

the RAS and resolved to change its name to the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (1857-1952). This decision led to the establishment of fraternal relations with other branches of the RAS located in India, Japan, and other geographical locations.³⁶

The Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society launched a journal to showcase scholarly endeavors. The journal was initially planned for quarterly releases starting in January, but it faced delays and the inaugural edition was unveiled in June 1858 as the “Journal of the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society”. After affiliating with the RAS that year, the journal was rebranded as the “Journal of the North-China Branch of the RAS.” By 1948, it had reached an impressive milestone of 75 volumes, circulating for 91 years, making it the longest-running Western-language journal in China before 1949. Its establishment was not a mere imitation of European practices but was shaped by various factors, notably influenced by Bridgman’s prior editorial experiences. Under Bridgman’s leadership, the ownership structure of the *Chinese Repository* was mirrored, which ensured diverse financial support and editorial autonomy, resulting in enduring success. This model also inspired emulation in Yokohama, Japan.³⁶

III. Navigating Challenge Amidst Opportunity

Upon examining the founding of the NCBRAS, it becomes evident that there is a notable connection with the broader concept of scientific imperialism. This society had a close affiliation with European academia through its connection with the RAS. Given this association, and the society’s focus on facilitating investigations and political discussions about China for foreign entities, it can be interpreted as a product of imperialistic influences. It is important to avoid subjective evaluations and biased language when discussing historical events. The society’s original name intentionally incorporated the term “science” and prioritized it as a subject of investigation. The adoption of scientific methodologies for their inquiries highlights the significant role of science

in this society. Therefore, considering the historical context of how science facilitated European imperial expansion in modern times, the establishment of NCBRAS was presented with numerous opportunities. The opening of Shanghai and other treaty ports provided a significant opportunity for the Western world to engage with China. The profound traditions of Oriental societies and the institutionalization of scientific practices, such as the formation of scientific societies and periodicals, offered valuable models for NCBRAS to derive inspiration from and emulate. Therefore, the undertaking appeared highly promising.

However, upon a thorough examination of the prevailing conditions, it becomes apparent that creating such a scientific and literary society in 1850s Shanghai posed significant challenges despite its promising prospects. The foremost challenge confronting the newly settled foreigners was the enduring state of war and unrest, creating a turbulent environment that served as a substantial impediment to the establishment of a stable academic society. As previously mentioned, the Second Opium War compelled Shanghai to supersede Canton as a focal point for foreigners in China. While this conflict offered a window of opportunity for the inception of the NCBRAS, it concurrently cast a somber atmosphere over the city, marked by the presence of naval ships and Western armies.

Beyond the Second Opium War, the contemporaneous Taiping Rebellion and other factors contributing to societal unrest rendered the establishment of a scientific and literary society comparatively less urgent during that era. In addition to contending with the military forces of the Qing government, foreigners found themselves embroiled in conflicts with Taipings who opposed the government’s troops. Given that a significant portion of the rebellion unfolded in southern China, particularly in the vicinity of Shanghai and Canton, it was not uncommon for foreigners to become entangled in this conflict. The Taipings seized Soochow on June 2, 1860, making Shanghai more perilous as it became a focal point of the war. Ultimately, collaborative efforts between foreigners and the Qing government’s forces were initiated to restore order by suppressing

the Taiping rebellion. Huaer Frederick Townsend Ward (1831-1862) organized the “Ever Victorious Army,” commissioned by Qing officials to establish a foreign rifle squad to assist the Qing army in subduing the Taiping forces. The allied forces successfully repelled the Taiping attack on Shanghai on August 18, 1860. This successful repulsion led to the Taipings withdrawing from Shanghai on August 21.³¹ The unrest resulting from wars and continuous turmoil was the main reason for NCBRAS’s disruption. Additionally, the society’s influence in its early stages, limited to a small number of people, further contributed to this interruption. In 1859, the key figure, Bridgman, resigned from the position of president due to illness, and unfortunately, he passed away on November 2, 1861. Following Bridgman’s departure, Edkins went to Peking, and Alexander Wylie returned to Britain. The new president of the NCBRAS, Thomas Taylor Meadows (1815-1868), who succeeded Bridgman, along with the main figure of NCBRAS, Walter Medhurst (1822-1885), found themselves occupied with dealing with the Taiping rebels. This engagement made it challenging for the society’s activities to continue seamlessly. On October 15, 1861, after conducting a regular meeting and electing officials, the society lost track of its activities. The collective impact of internal changes, external challenges, and the focus on addressing external conflicts led to a disruption in the ongoing pursuits of the NCBRAS.

It’s evident that the lack of sufficient financial resources stood as the second most formidable obstacle for NCBRAS in its early days. The limited funding became a significant hindrance to crucial societal elements and overall development. Membership fees served as the primary revenue source for NCBRAS, and the society’s ability to function and sustain itself heavily relied on achieving a critical mass of members. So, in its early stages, NCBRAS found itself in an unstable situation exacerbated by the outbreak of war, causing members to either leave Shanghai or shift their focus to personal affairs. This resulted in a decline in NCBRAS’s membership during these tumultuous times. The subsequent loss of members led to unpaid dues, creating a financial

crunch for the society. Securing a regular meeting place remained a persistent challenge due to this financial constraint, and it was only in 1871 that the issue was addressed with the construction of the first building. In the following days, the establishment of its library, museum, and initiation of scientific activities all hinged on its financial situation. Despite exploring alternative approaches to improve its financial standing, the reliance on membership fees remained a constant throughout its existence.

The third major challenge faced was the cultural barrier. Individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds encountered significant difficulties in understanding Chinese culture, primarily due to deeply ingrained cultural nuances rooted in Chinese traditions and a rich cultural heritage. In his inaugural address, Bridgman underscored the importance and challenge of learning the Chinese language: “Now, however important it may be for us to acquire a profound and thorough knowledge of the mind and intellectual capacities of the Chinese, this can be effectually done only by means of their language, written and oral. For this end, as well as for all subsidiary aims, the study of their language, no matter how hard to be acquired, must be taken up and in a greater or less degree mastered.”⁴²

Given the formidable challenge of mastering the Chinese language, Bretschneider, who initiated his study of Chinese at the age of 15 in Beijing, humbly acknowledged the limitations of his understanding of Chinese geography and botany. Despite receiving recognition for his contributions in these fields within sinology, he chose not to categorize himself strictly as a sinologist or botanist. Bretschneider’s decision to undertake such demanding research was driven by his conviction that Chinese presents the most formidable language-learning challenge. Necessitated by the intricate nature of the language, he had to narrow the focus of his research, directing his attention to botany and geography.⁴³ Similar complaints about Chinese being hard to learn and Chinese culture being too vague to understand also arise from other sinologists. Apart from that, foreign naturalists in China found that they were not always welcome when they needed assistance from locals to conduct field research.¹⁸ The lack of cooperation from local people was another

challenging aspect of NCBRAS's work.

In conclusion, analyzing the establishment process of the NCBRAS and evaluating its advantages and disadvantages provides deeper insights into the context of natural history research in 1850s China. This scientific and oriental society gained opportunities through scientific institutions and Western imperial expansion. The opening of Shanghai as a treaty port made the ambitious plan a reality. The NCBRAS faced challenges due to unpredictable circumstances arising from both Chinese and foreign hostilities, intermittent financial inadequacies, and the cultural schism between the Western and Chinese spheres.

These challenges are also applicable to the phenomenon of scientific imperialism in China. NCBRAS shares certain characteristics with other Oriental societies in diverse regions due to scientific imperialism. However, it stands apart from them due to China's resilience in avoiding full colonization. When Western empires entered China, they found not territories and regions waiting to be colonized, but the vast and stubborn Qing Empire, which did all it could to maintain its rule in China. Apart from the Shanghai International Settlement, the rest of Shanghai was under the rule of the Qing government. Interests and authority were often intertwined both within and outside the International Settlement. Although the majority of residents in the International Settlement were Chinese, foreign residents frequently found themselves negotiating and compromising with the ruling authorities of the Chinese section. The intersection of these factors presents a complex and unresolved issue for NCBRAS, highlighting the similar challenges faced in the wider context of scientific imperialism.

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