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7. Joseph Edkins and the Introduction of Western Physiology in China through the *Shenli qimeng*

Viola De Monte

7.1. China and the dissemination of Western science in 19th century: introductory remarks

The 19th century in China was characterized by a dissemination of Western scientific knowledge. This trend was driven by several progressive Chinese and Manchu officials who showed an increasing interest in Western science, particularly in areas related to warfare. Their curiosity also had a bearing on the interest manifested by the literati class towards other Western subjects considered highly useful, such as geography, medicine, and international law, as well as in the customs and practices of foreign nations.

It must be pointed out that, while it is true that a few members of the literati elite showed openness to Western sciences, the Qing elite's general attitude remained largely entrenched in a conservative — and at times rigidly traditional — mindset. Many Chinese officials and literati found it difficult to implement substantial changes to the established order¹.

Although it is commonly accepted that the primary reaction of the literati to Westerners and their science was one of deep caution, if not outright rejection, a more nuanced perspective is offered by Natascha Vittinghoff (2004: 75). She notes that genuine interest in Western scientific knowledge had already taken root in China at the beginning of the

¹ Teng and Fairbank (1963) provide an extensive analysis of the interaction between China and the Western powers during the late Qing period, with particular attention to the perspectives of Chinese intellectuals and officials.

19th century, and that this intellectual curiosity was not necessarily hindered by Confucian orthodoxy. She maintains that, on the contrary, scientific pursuits were often meaningfully assimilated into the broader intellectual landscape of the late Qing elite.

A similar claim can also be found in Wright (2000: 13), who, in discussing the epistemological endemism of the Qing intellectual landscape that enabled a certain degree of reception and acceptance of Western sciences by the literati, observes:

The literary tradition itself was not necessarily hostile to science: the *kaozheng* 考證 (Evidential Research) movement of the Qing dynasty was actually an important positive factor in the translation of Western science to China².

Within the limits of this study, it is not possible to examine in depth whether a new epistemological awareness shaped China's engagement with modernity³. This preliminary contribution will therefore deliberately concentrate on a circumscribed aspect of the issue, focusing on the translation of the *Shenli qimeng* 身理啟蒙 (A Primer in Physiology⁴), a scholarly manual introducing the basic elements of physiology in China, taken here as a case study. The textbook was translated from English into Chinese by the British missionary and translator Joseph Edkins, whose biography is briefly outlined further on this paper. Alexander Wylie's (1867) *Memorials of Protestant Missionaries to the Chinese* and Donald MacGillivray's (1907) *A Century of Protestant Missions in China* were the major source of information, supplemented by a more recent and updated overview found in Wang

² For a detailed account of the reception of Western science by the Qing scholars, refer to Elman (1984). For a comprehensive treatment of the role of protestant missionaries in the dissemination of scientific knowledge in XIX century China, see Latourette (1929).

³ Schaffer *et al.* (2009) provide a general discussion of the circulation of knowledge between East and West, whereas a more recent and thorough contribution focusing on China and the West, with particular attention to texts and translations, has been made by Amelung *et al.* (2025).

⁴ All translations from Chinese to English, including work titles, are by the present author.

(2004)⁵.

As Peake (1934: 183) emphasizes in his analysis of the dissemination of Western science in China:

Of prime importance in introducing Western science to the Chinese, other than the employment of Westerners as instructors in the various newly established schools and at the arsenals, where courses in science were given, was the translation into Chinese of Western scientific books⁶.

While extensive studies have been conducted on the use of translated science textbooks to promote the dissemination of Western scientific knowledge⁷ it is worth noting that, at present, a scholarship on *Shenli qimeng* is still lacking, leaving ample room for future research. Furthermore, although a brief overview of the content of *Shenli qimeng* was provided by scholar Cao Yu in 1992, the text's uniqueness indeed justifies a more detailed analysis.

⁵ For completing sources of information about Joseph Edkins' life and works, refer also to Bushell (1906) and Anderson (1998).

⁶ The opening of the ports following China's defeat in the Opium Wars, together with the need for clear and effective communication with foreigners, led to the establishment of new educational institutions. These schools aimed at training promising Chinese students in foreign languages and, subsequently, in Western scientific subjects, in order to prepare them to become experts in foreign affairs. The first of such schools was the *Tongwenguan* 同文館 (School of Combined Learning), inaugurated in Peking on August 20, 1862. Similar enterprises were later established in Southern China. Chinese officials advocated for the creation of a section of the *Tongwenguan* in Shanghai, which was eventually incorporated into what would become known as the *Jiangnan jiqi zhizao ju* 江南機器製造局 (Jiangnan Office for the Construction of Machinery), an institution that would come to be referred to as the Shanghai Arsenal. For a detailed account of the history of education in late Qing China, see Biggerstaff (1961). For further studies on the subject, see also: Martin (1896); Masini (1993); Li (2006) and Xiong (1994).

⁷ This subject is addressed in the studies of Lackner (2004), Elman (2005), and Li (2006). In addition, Bai's (2019) extensive research focuses on the translation of scientific textbooks and primers as a means of achieving what she defines as the "eastward dissemination of Western learning." Her work examines a series of textbooks written by Chinese Christians, offering insight into how converted Chinese contributed to the emergence of a modern educational system. Shi and Liu (2022) provide another important contribution, focusing on the role of translated scientific textbooks in presenting Western knowledge to the Chinese, which informs part of the present analysis.

In this context, this paper aims to provide an introductory analysis of the role of the *Shenli qimeng* in the circulation of scientific knowledge in late Qing China, with particular attention to the introduction of modern physiology. The study is guided by three research questions: to what extent did the *Shenli qimeng* contribute to the dissemination of modern physiology, in what ways its specific features shaped its role within the Protestant missionary enterprise, and how the work was received in the Chinese intellectual context of the time.

7.2. Joseph Edkins, Robert Hart, and the editorial framework of the *Primers for the Study of Science*

In order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of Joseph Edkins' work in the late Qing context, we need to first focus on his educational background and professional activities.

Joseph Edkins was born on 19 December 1823 in the English county of Gloucestershire. His father, a Congregationalist, ran a private school, which allowed Edkins to receive both a religious and secular education. It was indeed thanks to his father that Edkins came into possession of a Chinese copy of the Gospel of Matthew, which sparked his initial interest in the language (Wang 2004: 74).

In 1847, he was ordained in London and, after a brief period of preaching in England, he decided to become a missionary and applied for admission to the London Missionary Society. According to Alexander Wylie's *Memorials of Protestant Missionaries to the Chinese* (1867: 187), Edkins set sail for Hong Kong on 2 July 1848 and arrived at his destination, Shanghai, later that September. Wylie's account, which ends in 1867, reports that Edkins took up residence in Peking in 1863. Further information provided by Donald MacGillivray (1907: 661) in *A Century of Protestant Missions in China* reveals that, due to methodological disagreements with his colleagues, Edkins resigned from the London Missionary Society in 1880, and accepted the position of translator for the Imperial Maritime Customs Service of China⁸.

⁸ For insights on the reasons that led Edkins to leave the London Missionary Society, see Lo and Stanley-Baker (2022: 178).

At this point, Robert Hart (1835–1911)⁹, then Inspector-General of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, entrusted Edkins with the task of translating a series of introductory textbooks on Western science and technology. These works were intended as preparatory material for Chinese students enrolled in the aforementioned new scholarly institutions, which aimed to address the country's lack of modern scientific and technical knowledge in late Qing China.

It was precisely Hart's initiative that set the course along which the editorial history of *Shenli qimeng* unfolded. Hart's purpose was, in fact, to provide a continuation and modernisation of an earlier translation project initiated by John Fryer (1839–1928)¹⁰ and his staff of the Jiangnan Arsenal. The series, titled *Gezhi qimeng* 格致啟蒙 (Primers for the Study of Science), was completed in 1875 with the collaboration of the American missionary Young John Allen (1836–1907) and the Chinese scholar Zheng Changyan (?–ca. 1902)¹¹. The primers were printed at the Jiangnan Arsenal between 1879 and 1880 and comprised four volumes, each dedicated to a specific branch of scientific knowledge: chemistry, physics, astronomy, and geography.

The sources used to compile the first version of the series were collected by John Fryer during a journey to England prior to his return to Shanghai in 1873. They consisted of science textbooks by Henry Roscoe (1833–1915), that formed the foundation of scientific education in Great Britain at that time. Roscoe's Science Primers were published by Macmillan and Company in 1872, but by the 1880s they were already considered somewhat outdated and limited, as they covered only the previously mentioned four branches of knowledge, namely chemistry, physics, astronomy, and geography.

During his stay in England, Inspector-General Robert Hart discovered a more comprehensive and up-to-date edition of the manuals. These expanded versions, published in 1880 by Macmillan and

⁹ Detailed information about Robert Hart's life and his activities in China can be found in Drew (1913). For a more thorough analysis of his role as Inspector General of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, see Vynckier, Chang (2014).

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of John Fryer's life, work, and his efforts in translating Western science into Chinese, see Tola (2021).

¹¹ Bennet (1983) provides a comprehensive biographical account of Allen's life and work in China. On the other hand, the biographical background of Zheng Changyan remains largely unexplored.

Company in London and by Appleton in New York, not only included the four original volumes on chemistry, physics, astronomy, and geography, but also additional texts on a variety related domains such as botany, physiology, and logic. It was precisely this set of texts that made up the new collectanea translated by Edkins, known as *Xixue qimeng shiliu zhong: gezhi zhixue qimeng* 西學啟蒙十六種：格致質學啟蒙 (Sixteen Primers of Western Studies). It was published in 1886 by the Imperial Maritime Customs Office in Beijing. The project received the active support of Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), then North Superintendent of Trade, who also contributed with an enthusiastic preface to the collection. In fact, Elman (2005: 324) notes that the translation of the Sixteen Primers undertaken by Edkins, with the encouragement of Li Hongzhang, reflects a significant step forward in the promotion of scientific knowledge in late Qing China, emphasising the importance of a joint effort from both these social actors.

7.3. An analysis of the unique features of Edkins' *Shenli qimeng*

Within the *Sixteen Primers* and, more broadly, among contemporary texts with a similar purpose, the *Shenli qimeng* appears to stand out as a distinct case, whose peculiar features will now be briefly examined in an attempt to account for its reception.

Cao Yu (1992) has drawn attention to the specific traits of the *Shenli qimeng* that set it apart from other coeval texts, making it particularly deserving of analysis. Most notably, whereas earlier textbooks tended to treat physiology as a subordinate topic and considered it subsidiary to the study of anatomy, *Shenli qimeng* is the first to single out physiology as an independent field of inquiry. With his translation, Edkins drew a clear distinction between the investigation of the functions of the body and its parts, which falls under the domain of physiology, and the study of the body's structural composition, which properly pertains to anatomy.

The source of Edkins' translation was Michael Foster's *Textbook of Physiology* (1877), a work that soon came to be regarded as a standard reference book in the field. Foster held the Chair of physiology at both University College London and Trinity College, Cambridge, and was

a central figure in the institutionalization of physiology as a modern scientific discipline in Britain.

A wealth of information about the *Shenli qimeng* can be gained through paratextual analysis, particularly by examining the book's preface. As Shi and Liu (2022: 110) point out, in the earlier *Gezhi qimeng* series the prefaces were typically written independently by Young John Allen and Zheng Changyan. In contrast, Edkins composed the prefaces to his translations himself, drawing inspiration from what was written by the original authors. In the preface to *Shenli qimeng*, Edkins clarifies the nature of the discipline he is about to introduce to Chinese readers: «What is registered in this book may appear to be pertinent to a medical text, but in fact it is not» (Edkins 1886a: preface). This statement underscores once again the distinctive scientific status of physiology in the 19th century, and its independence from anatomy. As Cao Yu (1992: 95) argues, *Shenli qimeng* is not devoid of anatomical references or discussion; however, it notably inverts the traditional hierarchy by placing anatomical description in a subordinate role. Anatomical knowledge is employed only insofar as it serves to elucidate the mechanisms and functions of the human body, which are the true focus of physiological inquiry.

Shenli qimeng is structured as a single-volume work, comprising ten chapters and 56 sections, amounting to approximately 60,000 Chinese characters and supplemented by 18 illustrations. One of the main features of the text lies in its approach. Notably, the book is rich in the presentation of practical experiments, whose aim is to provide evidence for the main arguments of the book. This pedagogical strategy greatly enhances the clarity and didactic effectiveness of the explanations, and the examples significantly contributed to making the subject matter more comprehensible and engaging. For instance, to illustrate the digestive process, Edkins points out that saliva «can convert starch into sugar» (Cao 1992: 93) and supports this claim with a simple, replicable experiment.

Additionally, in order to render complex scientific concepts more accessible, the author frequently employs vivid metaphors, for example, likening small and large blood vessels to alleys and main roads, thereby facilitating intuitive understanding for his audience (Cao 1992).

Even in describing the morphology of the organs, the author goes

beyond mere exposition, providing a vivid account of a hare's dissection as a practical reference. The reader is guided step by step, enabling him to reproduce the procedure and verify the claims directly:

At the back of the head [of the hare] there is a round opening; if you insert a needle into it, you can see that it leads upward into the posterior cavity of the cranial interior (Edkins 1886a: 17).

From a translational standpoint, further considerations are needed. Although MacGillivray (1907: 661) praises Joseph Edkins as possessing «an extraordinary gift for languages and a profound knowledge of Chinese literature», which made him one of the foremost sinologists of his time, the linguistic register adopted in his translations often appears verbose. According to the series preface, Edkins prepared the translations principally by himself, and this endeavour occupied him for approximately five years, from 1880 to 1885. While Benjamin Elman (2005: 326) acknowledges that Edkins' written Chinese was likely the most refined among the missionary scholars of his generation, he also notes that it remained grammatically idiosyncratic. Similarly, the influential reformer Liang Qichao (1873–1929) described *Shenli qimeng* as a flawed translation, even though he acknowledged its importance for grasping the essentials of modern science. Moreover, as Elman (2005: 326) again notes, Edkins made extensive use of terminology that had not yet gained wide circulation or acceptance within Chinese scholarly discourse, making the reading somehow abstruse. This may be ascribed to the stylistic choices that Edkins adopted in his translations. In the *Xixue lüeshu* 西學略述 (Brief Introduction to Western Learning), which opens the *Sixteen Primers* serving as their introduction, Edkins discusses his translation techniques. He observes that differences between languages can render a text obscure, and therefore the translator must strive for clarity and fidelity. He also argues that translating word for word and sentence by sentence, without additions or omissions, is the best way to preserve coherence and avoid confusing the reader (Edkins 1886b: 29). Notwithstanding Edkins's intentions, it may have been precisely this literal approach that led to the use of terms inconsistent with the translational practices of his contemporaries.

7.4. Reception and conclusions

Despite the specific features of the text just outlined, unfortunately, *Shenli qimeng* failed to gain significant traction among the Chinese students enrolled in the previously mentioned schools of foreign languages, and its influence remained rather limited. As Cao Yu's (1992: 96) research indicates, there is currently no evidence to suggest that the manual was adopted in any educational institutions of the time. In fact, although the Primer Series was reissued in a revised edition under John Fryer's supervision in 1896, *Shenli qimeng* was notably excluded from Fryer's reprint. The reasons for this marginalisation are manifold and cannot be all explained within the space limits of this paper. Therefore, I will only indicate the more significant ones.

One of the main reasons for this limited impact may lie in what Benjamin Elman (2005: 329) refers to as the «revised natural theology» that underpinned Edkins' translation. For example, Elman observes that:

Although he detailed Foster's version of the complex process of chemical oxidation that sustained life through food consumption, Edkins ultimately attributed the physiological processes that an organism used for digestion to the heat the Creator had intended for the human body to survive.

Elman argues that, in so doing, Edkins's spiritual perspective prevailed over Foster's biological and chemical interpretation of the body. This theological framing may have clashed with the increasingly secular orientation of scientific education in late Qing China, thereby contributing to the greater appeal of the alternative version produced by the Jiangnan Arsenal in 1896.

Other factors contributed to the limited acceptance of the text among contemporary Chinese scholars, factors that are intrinsically tied to the very nature of the discipline of physiology. A particularly evident example lies in the fact that, as previously noted, physiology did not hold the same prestige or perceived utility as medicine and may have been regarded as lacking immediate practical relevance within the goals of the new educational system. Moreover, the epistemological approach adopted in *Shenli qimeng*, which strongly

emphasised the use of experiments to elucidate theoretical concepts, may have been at odds with prevailing modes of learning. In fact, as Michael Lackner (2004: xiii) highlights, even though Chinese scholars began shifting from textual study to the investigation of natural phenomena, written texts remained the dominant medium. In this context, then, studying what had been written by Chinese and Western authors about the natural world often took precedence over direct empirical observation, which typically informed the use of experiments for didactic purposes.

In conclusion, although it attributed a pioneering autonomy to physiology distinct from anatomy, the text's reception among contemporary literati and educational institutions remained marginal.

Nevertheless, precisely because of its distinctive features, the *Shenli qimeng* raises important research issues concerning its potential impact if rendered in less abstruse Chinese, its marginalisation in relation to its empirical approach as opposed to traditional modes of knowledge transmission, and the interplay between its empirical view of physiology and the theological principles invoked by Edkins in explaining physiological problems.

All these questions warrant further analysis and open the way for future research, both from a scientific standpoint and regarding its linguistic and translational features.

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Abstracts

Joseph Edkins and the Introduction of Western Physiology in China through the *Shenli qimeng*

Viola De Monte

This paper offers an introductory analysis of the *Shenli qimeng* 身理啟蒙 (A Primer in Physiology), one of the earliest monographs devoted to the introduction and teaching of modern physiological science in China. Notably, the text presents the subject as an autonomous discipline, distinguishing it from its earlier marginal treatment as subordinate to anatomy. After outlining the historical background of secular missionary activity in Late Imperial China and providing a brief biographical account of its author, the British missionary and translator Joseph Edkins (1823–1905), the paper examines the editorial framework, main contents, and stylistic strategies of the *Shenli qimeng* in light of Edkins' pedagogical aims. Building on these elements, the study investigates how the text's distinctive features shaped its reception and whether it played a significant role in the dissemination of modern physiological knowledge within the Chinese intellectual context of the Late Qing period.

Autori

VIOLA DE MONTE, dottoranda di ricerca, *curriculum* Asia Orientale, 40° ciclo - titolo da conseguire nel 2028, con discussione della tesi *Lexicological and Philological Perspectives of the Introduction of Psychiatry in Late Imperial China and the Contribution of Protestant Missionaries*; Supervisore Federico Masini (Università di Roma Sapienza), Co-supervisore Gabriele Tola (Università di Perugia). Rappresentante dei Dottorandi all'interno del Collegio dei docenti del Dottorato in Civiltà dell'Asia e dell'Africa. Da marzo a luglio 2026, *Visiting Ph.D. Student* presso l'Università Sun Yat-sen di Canton (RPC), nell'ambito del programma di formazione e ricerca *Xin hanxue jihua*.