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“All the aids which a beginner needs”: James Summers’ (1828-1891) research on Chinese grammar

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Summary

James Summers (1828-1891) is the first British professor who conducted systematic research on Chinese grammar. As a former missionary, he had been directly exposed to vernacular Chinese, which enabled him to teach and research it at King's College London in his later career. This dissertation provides a complete picture of his research on Chinese grammar throughout his publications. It further brings Summers to prominence in the historiography of linguistics. By tracing which and whose ideas inspired him and who he, in turn, influenced, this study identifies his position relative to other linguists.

This dissertation consists of ten chapters, excluding the Introduction and the Conclusion. The first three chapters briefly introduce Summers' life, the linguistic and general historical background of Summers' times, and his works related to China and Chinese. From the fourth to the ninth chapter, Summers' research on Chinese monosyllabism, morphology, parts of speech (including less standard categories like classifiers and particles), and syntax is discussed. Chapter 10 outlines Summers' ideas on Chinese phonology and its writing system. Three appendices dedicated to the sinological and linguistic works by Summers' predecessors and successors, respectively, and an inventory of the terms Summers employs follow.

Summers' research on Chinese grammar was heavily influenced by the works of Samuel Dyer (1804-1843), Joseph Edkins (1823-1905), Wilhelm Schott (1802-1889), and John Daniel Morell (1816-1891), and indirectly by Karl Ferdinand Becker (1775-1849) among many others. Compared to the study of his predecessors, Summers pioneered several innovative ideas, such as hinting at existential sentences, dividing words into three types according to their structure, and pointing out that noun-classifier phrases express a generic notion. His works are centered around Nanjing Mandarin, with some examples and analyses of other varieties of Chinese from different periods in time.

More importantly, Summers was able to integrate the research of his predecessors and arrange their findings and conclusions in his own clearly pedagogically oriented research, abandoning the purely theoretical conclusions to help his students learn Chinese efficiently.