

Some Themes from *The Perils of Interpreting*

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Having been trained as a historian of China I really am immensely honoured to have won this prize for a ten year excursion into the global history of the eighteenth century that I hugely enjoyed, but never really felt that I knew enough about, especially for such experts as the judges of this prize. Their appreciation of *The Perils of Interpreting* means a lot, and I am also very grateful to Jonathan Schlesinger for his kind words and to Jesse Molesworth for organising the symposium.

Jesse suggested that I use the ‘page 99 test’ developed by Ford Madox Ford, so I am going to start by reading you what is in effect a random paragraph of the book and talking about the themes that arise from it. The book is centred round the first British embassy to China led by Lord Macartney in 1793. At this point, after a long and dangerous voyage, the embassy has just arrived off the coast of China and its members are about to disembark.

When George Leonard first listed the people who would go on to Beijing, Silva was listed among the servants as the interpreter, while Li was included alongside Maxwell and Winder as “Andrew Plumb 3rd Secretary.” But Macartney, now suspecting that Silva was spying for the Portuguese, decided to send him off with Captain Gower as interpreter for the *Lion*. Antonio was not a problem because after the incident requesting pilots he had lost his nerve and did not want to continue. And thus it was that Li Zibiao alone continued with the embassy to Beijing.

The choice of interpreters suggests one of the main themes of the book: the richness of the links between China and the outside world that already existed at the time of the Macartney embassy, which has often been conceived as marking the failed start of a closed China’s painful process of opening up to the West. Here we see three possible interpreters for the embassy. Li Zibiao is one of the book’s two central characters, along with George Thomas Staunton, whose father George Leonard is writing the list. Li was born into a Chinese Catholic family in one of the Silkroad towns of northwest China, and was sent to Naples at the age of twelve to be educated for the priesthood. Now an adult, he could speak Chinese, Latin and Italian, as well as having studied Greek and Hebrew. George Leonard had recruited him as an interpreter from the college where he and other Chinese were studying in Naples and he had travelled with the embassy from London. However, there are also two other possible interpreters. Lorenzo da Silva was from Macao where he worked for the French Catholic missionaries who had offered his services to the embassy. He spoke Chinese, Portuguese, Latin and French which suggests that he was of Chinese heritage and part of the culturally mixed world of Macao and its hinterland. Antonio, the interpreter who had lost his nerve, was also Chinese but had lived in the Philippines. He could speak Spanish and the north China dialect of the court. He was the son of one of the professional ‘linguists’ who worked in the Canton trade and had been sent by the British East India Company merchants in Canton. Here we see the Macartney embassy not as a clash between two civilisations that had not met before, but rather the product of many years of close interactions between Chinese and Europeans.

Another central theme of the book is the importance of interpreters and the dangers of the position. In this paragraph Macartney and his secretary George Leonard Staunton are deciding who will interpret for the embassy in Beijing. On the course of the voyage north along the China coast Li Zibiao, Lorenzo da Silva and Antonio had all interpreted on different occasions when the embassy interacted with Chinese officials. (In fact, identifying

who was interpreting on each occasion was one of the trickier parts of the research since it required me to combine the Chinese archival records and the British narratives of the embassy which use different names and dating systems as well as languages.) It is easy to assume that this is about who had the best language skills, but in this case all three men were clearly linguistically competent, with Lorenzo da Silva, who was rejected, apparently the most capable. His linguistic competence is unsurprising since Macao, which combined Chinese and Portuguese governance, had an extensive interpreting infrastructure, which I have learned much more about since I finished the book from Jacob Fordham's work on the seventeenth-century interpreters which uses the Portuguese as well as Chinese and English sources. So, what we see here is that linguistic competence is not the grounds on which Macartney chooses his interpreter. Instead, he realises that the interpreter will be a player in the negotiations. He does not want to take Lorenzo da Silva because, as someone who comes from Macao, he thinks that he is likely to spy for the Portuguese.

More surprisingly, perhaps, we learn earlier in the chapter that Macartney chooses not to take Antonio because he thinks that as someone whose family works in the existing trade Antonio will act in the interests of that trade, in other words he will act in the interests of the East India Company rather than the British government. Another key point that we see throughout this book is that both the British and Chinese were dealing with many conflicting internal interests and these mattered greatly in the negotiations. In this case the British Protestant Macartney decides that the Catholic priest Li Zibiao, whose interests he knows are with the papacy and thus likely to be hostile to Portuguese control in Asia, will be a safer interpreter.

As a matter of fact, we see here that Antonio himself did not want to go on to Beijing, and this brings up the dangers of interpreting, another key theme. When the British put in to port earlier in their voyage up the Chinese coast, Qing officials had told the British not to sail north, with Antonio acting as interpreter. The British, however, did precisely that, so when they then put in at the next port the officials there held Antonio as interpreter personally responsible and threatened him. Now he refused to be measured for Macartney's livery, which he would need if he were to accompany the embassy onwards as interpreter. At the start of the next chapter we see Li Zibiao's response to taking over as the formal interpreter, rather than as he had expected someone who could stand in the background and listen, when he describes himself in his letters back to Italy as like an animal flushed out of hiding by hunters.

The latter half of the book, which is focussed on George Thomas Staunton who learned to speak Chinese as a child during the embassy and went back as a young man to Canton to work for the East India Company, argues that these risks made it increasingly dangerous to interpret between Britain and China during the early nineteenth century. Using the example of the 1816 Amherst embassy, whose members were far more hostile to the Chinese than Macartney and George Leonard Staunton had been in 1793, I suggest that increasing British imperial power in India was transforming attitudes to the Chinese as well. During the Napoleonic wars British warships conducted engagements off the coast of China and in 1808 they occupied Macao. It was this increase in the British threat that ultimately made it almost impossible to interpret because of the personal danger to the interpreters and created a situation in which decision makers in Beijing had extremely inadequate knowledge of British power. The story ends with one of the most important events in China's relations with the West when Lin Zexu in 1838 used that ignorance at court to precipitate a major war, the First Opium War, that the Chinese had no chance of winning.