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Introduction

EARLY ONE MORNING in the late summer of 1793, George Macartney Earl of Lissanoure, Britain's first ambassador to China, dressed in the robes of the Order of the Bath with ostrich plumes nodding over his head, knelt before the Qianlong emperor, and held up in both hands above his head a gold box set with diamonds containing a letter from George III.[1] Qianlong was the descendant of Manchu warriors who had conquered China in the seventeenth century. He spoke Chinese and Manchu and was proud of the fact that he could speak enough Mongol, Tibetan, and Uyghur to receive envoys from those areas without the need for an interpreter, but on this occasion an interpreter was essential.[2]

Macartney, who had made a grand tour of Europe in his youth, spoke in Italian. His words were expressed in Chinese by a younger man kneeling behind him, who had given his name as Plum and was dressed in a British uniform and a powdered wig but was in fact Li Zibiao a Catholic from China's far northwest.[3] Li had been educated in Naples and he spoke Chinese simply, rather than in the formal language of the court, but with deep respect for the emperor and a certain attractive sincerity that was characteristic to him. When he turned to Macartney he conveyed the emperor's remarks in elegant formal Italian. The emperor listened to a brief speech, asked a few polite questions, and presented Macartney with a jade sceptre.

When Macartney withdrew, his place was taken by his deputy George Leonard Staunton, a Jesuit-educated Irishman who was

an enthusiast for the scientific discoveries of the age, a follower of Rousseau, a slave owner, a supporter of the recent French Revolution, and Macartney's long-standing friend, secretary, and henchman. The great project of Staunton's life was the education of his son, twelve-year-old George Thomas, who now knelt beside him. Li still interpreted, this time into Latin, but George Thomas could understand both sides of the brief conversation: his father had been speaking in Latin to him since he was three, and since his first meeting with Li the previous year George Thomas had also been studying Chinese. When the emperor asked if any of the British could speak Chinese, his chief minister Heshen, who had met Staunton earlier and had a gift for knowing what might amuse the elderly emperor, told him that the boy could speak a little and called him forward. George Thomas was shy, but when the emperor took a yellow silk purse that was hanging at his waist as a gift, he managed to get out a few words of thanks in Chinese.[4]

From beside the throne three of the most powerful men in the land looked on: the prince who would soon come to the throne as the Jiaqing emperor, Fukang'an, the emperor's favourite general who had recently returned from a successful campaign against the Gurkhas in Tibet, as well as Heshen, who controlled the empire's finances. There was also Songyun, a Mongol who had originally trained as a Manchu-Mongol interpreter and had just arrived back from the northern frontier where he had been renegotiating the Second Commercial Treaty of Khiakta with the Russians. After the audience and the banquet that followed, Qianlong ordered Fukang'an, Heshen, and Songyun to give Macartney a tour of the gardens, and while Macartney found Heshen evasive and Fukang'an arrogant, he had served in Russia himself and enjoyed Songyun's enthusiastic questions about Russian politics and government.

This is one of the most famous moments in the history of China's encounter with the West, and the Qianlong emperor in history, as in life, has always dominated the scene. He was in his eighties at this time, simply dressed in dark robes, sitting cross-legged on his throne, but he had been the autocratic ruler of a vast empire for nearly fifty years. Even Heshen and Fukang'an knelt down when they spoke to him, and he liked to be complimented on the fact that his was one of the most glorious reigns in Chinese history: with

rapid population growth after the century of warfare that had surrounded the fall of the previous dynasty, agriculture and trade were flourishing, the Qing empire had reached its greatest size with the completion of the campaigns against the Mongols and Zunghars in the northwest, and the arts and scholarship were flourishing under his patronage. Far away on the south coast of China, Europeans had been drawn in by their desire for China's manufactures: fine silk and porcelain that could still not be replicated in Europe. More recently the trade with the British had boomed as Europeans and Americans acquired a taste for tea, a crop grown only in China.

After the audience Qianlong decisively refused the British requests for a resident ambassador in Beijing and an island off the coast as a trading base. Soon people in Europe were saying that he had done so out of anger that Macartney had merely knelt on one knee, rather than bowing his head to the ground nine times in the full court ritual of the kowtow.[5] Ever since, Qianlong has been blamed for the failure of the embassy: as the Son of Heaven, who claimed to be ruler of the civilised world and knew nothing of rising British power, he had failed to realise that Macartney was anything more than an envoy sent by a distant king to bring him tribute.

However, if we turn our gaze away from Qianlong and look instead at the other people who were present, the embassy is transformed. This is a book about the interpreters: Li Zibiao, who interpreted for Lord Macartney, and little George Thomas Staunton, who got a lot of the credit because his father wrote the official English account of the embassy. They are fascinating figures because they were impressive linguists who became extremely knowledgeable and well informed about the other's cultures and also came to have a real affection for them. Both first travelled in childhood and as a result came to understand the other's culture with a particular fluency. This was intensified because they were isolated from their natural peer group during crucial periods: Li because he was much younger than the other Chinese students at his Catholic seminary in Naples, and Staunton because when he was sent to work in the East India Company's establishment in Canton the young Englishmen there resented the appointment of someone from outside their social circle. This isolation encouraged both Li and Staunton to form unusually strong cross-cultural

friendships as teenagers and young adults, which then shaped the way they saw the world later in life. Both were often homesick, and neither ever thought of himself as other than a foreigner in the other's continent, but after they returned home they were not quite like other people there either.

The stories of Li in his powdered wig and little George Thomas Staunton kneeling before the emperor show us how the encounter between China and Britain was not a clash of civilisations coming into contact for the first time but the result of the increasing global interconnections of the early modern world. The trade in tea that brought the British to China had its origins in the voyages of sixteenth-century Portuguese and Dutch mariners trading spices from Southeast Asia to Europe. In many places this trade had expanded into territorial rule, with the Dutch controlling much of Java and, for a while, a fort on Taiwan, while the Portuguese had trading outposts in Goa, Malacca, and also Macao on the south China coast. The Portuguese had also brought with them the first Catholic missionaries, whose successors were still working as artists, technicians, and astronomers at the Qing court. For nearly two centuries missionaries had been scattered across China: Li Zibiao was descended from a family of early Christian converts and had travelled to Europe through the global institutions of the Catholic Church.

Meanwhile Britain had built up settler colonies in the Americas but lost a large part in the wars of the American Revolution. By the time of the embassy the focus of British expansion had shifted to India, where small trading posts were being transformed into a colonial empire. George Leonard Staunton and Macartney had first met on the island of Grenada in the Caribbean, where Macartney was the newly appointed governor. When Grenada was captured by the French, Macartney found a new position as governor of Madras on the east coast of India, with Staunton as his aide. However, Madras was under constant threat from the expansive military power of Mysore; Macartney and Staunton returned home convinced that the new British Empire in India might fall as the first empire in the Americas had done. Now they had arrived in China on an embassy motivated by the British government's desire to expand the China trade to support and fund expansion in India.

George Thomas Staunton was born in 1781, the year his father set off for Madras, and as he grew up this interconnected world was reshaped by the expansion and consolidation of British power in India. Fukang'an, who had been campaigning against the expansive Gurkha state on the southern frontier of Tibet at the time of the Macartney embassy, had heard of the British as an Indian power, but they were not at that point a significant military issue for him. In the years that followed, however, what had been a string of small, and often threatened, British coastal possessions in India was transformed into a vast colonial state. The same process also brought the great warships of the British navy to hover threateningly off the south China coast in their wars against the French and Americans.

The early lives of Li Zibiao and George Thomas Staunton illustrate the extent to which by the time of the Macartney embassy China and Britain, Europe, and the Americas were already deeply interconnected through trade, religion, and finance. And from Li's point of view the Macartney embassy was a success: there were meaningful negotiations, even if the British did not achieve their original goals, and when the embassy departed both the British and the Qing officials were satisfied with the results and optimistic for the future. However, by the early years of the nineteenth century the position of people with the skills needed to interpret became increasingly dangerous. Staunton became a famous translator of Chinese and a banker for the British trade with China, but after the British naval occupation of Macao in 1808 two of his close Chinese friends were sent into exile, and he himself had to flee when the Jiaqing emperor, Qianlong's successor, began to threaten him personally. Jiaqing also cracked down hard on Catholicism as a foreign religion, driving Li into hiding and expelling the last of the European missionaries who had worked for the court since the arrival of the Jesuits in the sixteenth century. When in 1838 Lin Zexu, who was both intelligent and keen to discover more about the British, arrived to take charge in Canton with a policy on opium that was based largely on available written Chinese sources, he sometimes seemed to know even less than the Qianlong emperor had done. As a result he precipitated a war that many Chinese who had lived overseas or worked with the foreigners in the city must have known could not be won.

This book focuses on Li and Staunton as interpreters and thus on foreign affairs, but set against the backdrop of China's interconnections with the early modern world and its transformation into a world of imperialism and violent conflict. Those conflicts have long been explained by Qing China's ignorance of the outside world and in particular the difficulty of adjusting China's ancient tribute system to the new world of modern international relations. This idea has been deeply rooted since the nineteenth century, when British imperialists first saw it as an excuse for war. Later Chinese nationalists used it to attack the Qing dynasty and justify their own revolution, embedding it deep in the history of the modern Chinese state.[6]

The ideal of the Chinese state as the centre of civilisation to which outsiders would naturally come bringing gifts as a sign of homage was indeed both ancient and powerful. Indeed it has recently been revived by scholars of international relations in China who use it to explain and justify China's current aspirations to exert increasing influence in Southeast Asia and beyond.[7] However, for the Qing dynasty this was often a powerful ideal rather than a representation of the world as it was, at least from the point of view of the emperor. The dynasty was founded by Manchu warriors who conquered China in the seventeenth century, and the institutions they built to run their empire contained elements of their own heritage, which was significantly different from classical Chinese tradition.[8] Well into the nineteenth century decisions on relations with foreign states remained a prerogative of the emperor and his closest courtiers, many of whom were Manchu. As we have learned more of the details of their policy making it has become increasingly obvious that decisions were also driven by the practical politics of the day. The dynasty's changing relations with Korea, long seen as the model tributary, are one example of this, but so is the value of tribute items as a source of revenue to the state.[9]

We have also long been aware of the importance of contacts with Europe and later America: the Jesuit mission to China that began in the sixteenth century and the huge expansion of trade in the eighteenth century. The years after the Macartney embassy marked a crucial turning point in these contacts. Britain's empire, which had seemed near collapse with the loss of the American

colonies, had shifted east and moved into a second phase with the consolidation of control in India. Mentally justifying colonial rule in India dramatically changed British ideas about non-Europeans and had a major effect on how they saw China and the Chinese. At the same time diplomatic relations between European states were also being transformed as the result of the French Revolution. For centuries European diplomacy had been negotiated between princes and emperors whose social status was a matter of formal hierarchy, but around the start of the nineteenth century the modern ideal of diplomacy between equal sovereign states was beginning to take hold.[10]

In China too this period marked a turning point, with the death of Qianlong revealing a financial crisis that was to dominate policy making throughout the nineteenth century. While Britain fought against France and accustomed itself to the new technology of a national debt that enabled it to build the massive warships that came to threaten the south China coast, the Qing struggled to raise sufficient finances for its everyday administration and was in no position to make major investments in the military.[11] This crisis drove Qing officials to policies controlling foreign contacts that deeply affected the lives of Li and Staunton. I argue that these policies were part of a wider reshaping of how Chinese saw the world as officials reinvigorated elements of classical thinking, including the rituals of the tribute system, as part of their political response to the British naval threat.

The lives of Li Zibiao and George Thomas Staunton help us to understand these changes because as interpreters they allow us to focus on exactly how contacts between states worked. Lawrence Wong, who sees translation problems as a key to understanding China's early relations with Britain, has written extensively on the interpreters of the period. Although in this book I argue that the threat of British naval power was the driving force behind Qing official ignorance of the West, I share Wong's argument that interpreting is crucial to diplomacy because translation between two languages as different as Chinese and English can never be a simple or transparent process.[12] Diplomatic interpreting is a powerful role, especially in a context with relatively few other people with the necessary language skills. During the Macartney embassy Li

translated both into and out of Chinese, and most of the time no one else could understand what he was saying. Even today, when professional interpreters are often women imagined as invisible voices, diplomatic interpreting carries with it power: top leaders may have personal interpreters, and high-ranking diplomats may be called in to interpret for important negotiations.[13]

The power of the interpreter arises from the nature of translation. Today we often talk about flows of information from one place to another, but all information is shaped as it is presented. The translator begins by selecting what is to be made available and must then choose whether to stick closely to the original, in which case the translation is likely to sound exotic, or whether to write the text as if it had originally been written in the reader's language. When the information is being presented to political decision makers, these decisions are often crucial. The most famous example is the term *yi*, which was often used by the Chinese to refer to the British. Both Li and Staunton understood it to mean foreigners, but in the 1830s British writers in favour of war insisted on translating it as barbarian, a term that was widely picked up by British members of Parliament. Staunton complained vociferously that this translation was morally wrong because it "tends to widen the breach between us and the Chinese."[14]

The spoken interpreter must make all the same choices as a written translator but at speed and must also operate in a social context where cultural attitudes may be quite different between the two parties. Even the most accurate and professional interpreter today can convey only part of what is said, unless given a document to prepare in advance. Simultaneous interpreting, where the interpreter listens and speaks at the same time, is a twentieth-century invention. Previously all interpreting was consecutive: the interpreter listened to what was said and then expressed it in the other language.[15] In this context the interpreter's choices and decisions become even more important.

Spoken interpreting is a difficult subject for the historian because in an age before recording, the spoken word vanished instantaneously. We can only guess how Staunton and Li worked as interpreters from their written translations, complicated in Li's case by the fact that these are hard to identify and only fragments

survive. As far as we know Li did not take notes, and it is unlikely that he could have remembered what Macartney had said word for word, so as he listened he had to decide what main points he needed to get across. He also had to choose the right tone and manner, which fitted with what Macartney wanted to convey and would be acceptable to the Qianlong emperor. What the emperor and his officials heard and how they responded would inevitably be shaped by Li's choices as interpreter as well as what Macartney had said.

Successful interpreting was far more than a matter of linguistic competence. Like many interpreters of this period, Li Zibiao often acted more as a negotiator than as a translator. Although there was an ideal of the interpreter as someone who simply translated spoken words from one language into another, that was not the normal expectation in the eighteenth century.[16] Interpreting for Macartney and Qing officials in Beijing, Li quite often shuttled between the two sides, who might not even be in the same room. He described this as explaining "the mind of the ambassador" to Qing officials.[17] This gave him a great deal of discretion, most notably to introduce an item of his own into the negotiations.

It was this power that made interpreting so dangerous. The interpreter's language skills were inevitably the result of deep immersion in the other side's culture, and national identity was obviously an issue that caused distrust. However, so were social class, institutional interests, and factional politics: Li was acting on behalf of Catholics rather than from loyalty to either Macartney or China when he added his own item to the British requests. For similar reasons both the British and Chinese governments were extremely nervous about allowing the vested interests in the Canton trade to influence negotiations between the two states. Macartney chose Li Zibiao as an interpreter in large part because he saw himself as acting on behalf of the British government and therefore wanted to avoid an interpreter connected to the East India Company. Much later, during the Opium War, Qing negotiators chose to accept British interpreters they loathed rather than use the Chinese merchants and their employees who could speak English.

The story of the interpreters teaches us the crucial importance of foreign language skills to dealing with another culture, the many problems of trust that this poses, and the dangers faced by

interpreters when political tensions between states harden. In early nineteenth-century China that happened as a result of the expansion of British power in India. The argument of this book is that there were quite a few people in China who knew a great deal about Europe, but the British threat made that knowledge so dangerous that it came to be hidden.

The Macartney embassy has fascinated generations of historians in part because it is a puzzle. Macartney's diary is full of complaints that he could not understand why the Chinese officials he met behaved as they did. Today we know much more about Qianlong's official decision making from the Qing archives, but much remains unknown: Why was Macartney asked about wars that were taking place on the frontier of Britain's Indian empire in the Himalayas? What was the role of the dynasty's experts on its north-western frontiers in decision making about the British? How much did they know about the European powers? And how much did Qianlong himself know? We can discover only what was written down and preserved, but in the dangerous world of Qing court politics the closer men came to the centre the fewer private records they kept. Thinking about interpreting is valuable in part because it puts the informal meeting and the spoken word back at the heart of political decision making, and this reminds us how much there is that we cannot know. We remember that knowledge itself is a powerful political tool, and this puts the problem of knowledge back at the centre of our interpretation of China's relations with the West.

In addition, it is important to recognise that deception has always been part of diplomatic negotiations, and even genuine ignorance can be strategic for political decision makers.[18] Both the Chinese and the British wrote that the other side was naturally deceitful. This was not in fact always the case: the trade at Canton was successful because both sides were scrupulously honest in their dealings, and large deals relied entirely on the honour and credit of the merchants involved. However, there is no question that during the course of their diplomatic interactions both sides did at times deceive each other: on the famous question of whether or not Macartney fell to his knees and bowed his head to the ground before Qianlong the Chinese and English, evidence is contradictory: it is clear that some deception must have occurred. Even when

we have written records of the negotiations we may not always be right to believe them.

This leads us into another puzzle: why was the Chinese state so badly informed about Britain in 1839 that its senior officials precipitated a war that they had no hope of winning? On the eve of the Opium War Lin Zexu, the imperial commissioner who had been sent to Canton to put down the British-dominated opium trade, wrote to the emperor that a war against the British was likely to succeed because their tightly wrapped legs made it hard for them to bend and stretch so they would be unlikely to fight well on land.[19] This implausible claim was made as part of a crucial decision-making process and after two centuries of intensive contact with Europeans. Part of the explanation is no doubt that, as has long been argued, Chinese elites placed a huge value on their own culture and looked down on the culture of others. It is also true that in China as in Europe elite adult men usually wanted to acquire their learning from books and not from common people like servants and seamen or even interpreters, who might in fact have a wider knowledge of the world.

Looking at Li and Staunton and the worlds in which they lived, we cannot simply say that Chinese people were ignorant of the West in this period. Ultimately readers of this book may still conclude that China in 1839 was isolated and ignorant of the West, but I hope you will be convinced that we need to think harder about who was ignorant and why. What knowledge of Europe existed in China in the early nineteenth century? And why did that knowledge not reach top decision makers? These are questions that are impossible to answer, but thinking about them is no less important for that reason.

Li Zibiao and George Thomas Staunton were asked to interpret because their language and cultural skills made them able to do so. They were not professional interpreters: Li was a Catholic priest and missionary, while Staunton's career in China was in trade as an employee of the British East India Company. However, unlike the professional linguists of the China trade whom we will also meet in this story, they interpreted for major diplomatic occasions, and it is possible to find out a great deal about them. Li wrote about his activities during the Macartney embassy to the Naples College

and to church superiors in Rome. In later life he continued to write annual reports for them and also wrote extensively to the younger Chinese students in the Naples College. Staunton was a prolific author wealthy enough to publish seventeen books, mostly at his own expense, which present the versions of his life that he hoped would be handed down to posterity. He cautiously burned almost all his correspondence, but he did preserve his childhood diary of the embassy, and his mother kept his letters from China. These sources lead to others: records of Li Zibiao's brother's career in the Qing military, the letters of Staunton's friend Li Yao written from prison in Canton, and many more.

To put these stories in context, this study uses the archives of the three great institutions that dominated China's relations with the West in this period: the Chinese state, the Catholic Church, and the British East India Company. The lives of Li Zibiao and George Thomas Staunton were shaped by these institutions and have mostly been studied through them. Michele Fatica, who was the first to write about Li Zibiao and his role in the Macartney embassy, did so as an expert on the history of the college in Naples where Chinese were being trained for the Catholic priesthood from the mid-eighteenth century.[20] And Li Chen, who has written extensively on the impact of Staunton's ideas on Western understandings of Chinese law, sets his study in Canton's hybrid legal world in which commercial and criminal cases were constantly being negotiated between the two sides with their different legal traditions.[21]

The vast size and complexity of each of the great archives has meant that scholars have given lifetimes to studying each of them separately. Now the increasing number of archive publications and the availability of digital search engines make it possible to bring these archives together transforming our understanding of China's relations with the West in this period. Studies on the Jesuit mission to China have shown us Qianlong's grandfather Kangxi using his knowledge of Western mathematics to impress his courtiers and the personal networks that linked European and Chinese scholars in Beijing.[22] The vast archives of the Canton trade, which stretch far beyond those of the British East India Company, are also being explored to reveal a world in which hundreds of Chinese came in and out of the foreign warehouses every day, wealthy English

merchants dined on turtle soup with their Chinese counterparts, and even elite Chinese spoke English and invested in America.[23] Scholars are now also beginning to uncover the ways in which the scale and value of this trade linked it to high politics in both Britain and China, not only through regular taxation but also through the Qianlong emperor's personal finances and the political influence of private British investors.[24]

In these archives Staunton and Li have a wealth of names that reflect the complexity of naming practices at the time combined with the cross-cultural histories that are at the centre of the this book. Staunton's mother had him christened Thomas, and this was the name he used as a child, but when George Leonard Staunton returned from India he wanted his boy called George like himself. So after his father's death he was usually addressed as Sir George and published as Sir George Staunton. In Chinese he was usually known as Sidangdong. To avoid confusing the reader I use his full formal name, George Thomas Staunton, and call his father George Leonard Staunton. Li Zibiao too I call by his formal name even though he probably never used it: as a child in China he would have been known by a nickname, and his surviving letters are signed Jacobus Ly or Giacomo Li and later in life, after he changed his surname, Jacobus May. The English called him Mr Plum (a translation of Li) but addressed him as Padre (Father) or Domine (Master). He is remembered in the Chinese village where he worked as Father Mie, which may have come from a translation of the English word "plum" back into another Chinese equivalent *mei*, but which also means Father Who (or Mr Nobody) in Cantonese.

The same complications apply to many of the other characters in this book, especially those based in Guangdong, where pidgin English was common. While the book is a biography of Li Zibiao and George Thomas Staunton, it also tells the stories of many others who lived between two cultures. There were young men known by nicknames that became their English names, like A Hiue, who came to England, and another friend of Staunton's, Wu Yacheng, who was known as Assing. Pan Youdu, the senior merchant who was Staunton's patron, is best known as Puankhequa, a business name that he inherited from his father and would pass on to his son, but Pan Youdu was also a Chinese scholar with relatives

who were officials in the Qing court. Wherever possible I have used the modern transliteration of their Chinese names, even though these are often not the names by which they are best known. Giving the Anglicised names has the effect of smoothing over the very real differences between Chinese and Europeans and can also have the unfortunate result of implying that Chinese Catholics or people involved in the trade with Britain were somehow not quite Chinese. This is one of the mechanisms that has long excluded these people who lived in between cultures from national histories. I hope that this book will convince the reader that, on the contrary, they are an important part of those national histories.

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