

LBRIS

We know
books

BABEL

OR
THE NECESSITY OF VIOLENCE

*An Arcane History of the Oxford
Translators' Revolution*



R.F. KUANG

with Illustrations by Nico Delort


HARPER
Voyager

LBRIS

We know
books

BOOK I



CHAPTER ONE



Que siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio; y de tal manera lo siguió, que junta mente començaron, crecieron y florecieron, y después junta fue la caída de entrambos.

Language was always the companion of empire, and as such, together they begin, grow, and flourish. And later, together, they fall.

ANTONIO DE NEBRIJA,
Gramática de la lengua castellana

By the time Professor Richard Lovell found his way through Canton's narrow alleys to the faded address in his diary, the boy was the only one in the house left alive.

The air was rank, the floors slippery. A jug of water sat full, untouched by the bed. At first the boy had been too scared of retching to drink; now he was too weak to lift the jug. He was still conscious, though he'd sunk into a drowsy, half-dreaming haze. Soon, he knew, he'd fall into a deep sleep and fail to wake up. That was what had happened to his grandparents a week ago, then his aunts a day after, and then Miss Betty, the Englishwoman, a day after that.

His mother had perished that morning. He lay beside her body, watching as the blues and purples deepened across her skin. The last thing she'd said to him was his name, two syllables mouthed without breath. Her face had then gone slack and uneven. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth. The boy tried to close her filmy eyes, but her lids kept sliding back open.

No one answered when Professor Lovell knocked. No one exclaimed in surprise when he kicked through the front door – locked, because plague thieves were stripping the houses in the neighbourhood bare, and

though there was little of value in their home, the boy and his mother had wanted a few hours of peace before the sickness took them too. The boy heard all the commotion from upstairs, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

By then he only wanted to die.

Professor Lovell made his way up the stairs, crossed the room, and stood over the boy for a long moment. He did not notice, or chose not to notice, the dead woman on the bed. The boy lay still in his shadow, wondering if this tall, pale figure in black had come to reap his soul.

'How do you feel?' Professor Lovell asked.

The boy's breathing was too laboured to answer.

Professor Lovell knelt beside the bed. He drew a slim silver bar out of his front pocket and placed it over the boy's bare chest. The boy flinched; the metal stung like ice.

'*Triacle*,' Professor Lovell said first in French. Then, in English, 'Treacle.'

The bar glowed a pale white. There came an eerie sound from nowhere; a ringing, a singing. The boy whined and curled onto his side, his tongue prodding confusedly around his mouth.

'Bear with it,' murmured Professor Lovell. 'Swallow what you taste.'

Seconds trickled by. The boy's breathing steadied. He opened his eyes. He saw Professor Lovell more clearly now, could make out the slate-grey eyes and curved nose – *yīnggōubí*, they called it, a hawk's-beak nose – that could only belong on a foreigner's face.

'How do you feel now?' asked Professor Lovell.

The boy took another deep breath. Then he said, in surprisingly good English, 'It's sweet. It tastes so sweet ...'

'Good. That means it worked.' Professor Lovell slipped the bar back into his pocket. 'Is there anyone else alive here?'

'No,' whispered the boy. 'Just me.'

'Is there anything you can't leave behind?'

The boy was silent for a moment. A fly landed on his mother's cheek and crawled across her nose. He wanted to brush it off, but he didn't have the strength to lift his hand.

'I can't take a body,' said Professor Lovell. 'Not where we're going.'

The boy stared at his mother for a long moment.

'My books,' he said at last. 'Under the bed.'

Professor Lovell bent beneath the bed and pulled out four thick

volumes. Books written in English, spines battered from use, some pages worn so thin that the print was barely still legible. The professor flipped through them, smiling despite himself, and placed them in his bag. Then he slid his arms under the boy's thin frame and lifted him out of the house.

In 1829, the plague that later became known as Asiatic Cholera made its way from Calcutta across the Bay of Bengal to the Far East – first to Siam, then Manila, then finally the shores of China on merchant ships whose dehydrated, sunken-eyed sailors dumped their waste into the Pearl River, contaminating the waters where thousands drank, laundered, swam, and bathed. It hit Canton like a tidal wave, rapidly working its way from the docks to the inland residential areas. The boy's neighbourhood had succumbed within weeks, whole families perishing helplessly in their homes. When Professor Lovell carried the boy out of Canton's alleys, everyone else on his street was already dead.

The boy learned all this when he awoke in a clean, well-lit room in the English Factory, wrapped in blankets softer and whiter than anything he'd ever touched. These only slightly reduced his discomfort. He was terribly hot, and his tongue sat in his mouth like a dense, sandy stone. He felt as though he were floating far above his body. Every time the professor spoke, sharp pangs shot through his temples, accompanied by flashes of red.

'You're very lucky,' said Professor Lovell. 'This illness kills almost everything it touches.'

The boy stared, fascinated by this foreigner's long face and pale grey eyes. If he let his gaze drift out of focus, the foreigner morphed into a giant bird. A crow. No, a raptor. Something vicious and strong.

'Can you understand what I'm saying?'

The boy wet his parched lips and uttered a response.

Professor Lovell shook his head. 'English. Use your English.'

The boy's throat burned. He coughed.

'I know you have English.' Professor Lovell's voice sounded like a warning. 'Use it.'

'My mother,' breathed the boy. 'You forgot my mother.'

Professor Lovell did not respond. Promptly he stood and brushed at his knees before he left, though the boy could scarcely see how any dust could have accumulated in the few minutes in which he'd been sitting down.

The next morning the boy was able to finish a bowl of broth without retching. The morning after that he managed to stand without much vertigo, though his knees trembled so badly from disuse he had to clutch the bedframe to keep from falling over. His fever receded; his appetite improved. When he woke again that afternoon, he found the bowl replaced with a plate with two thick slices of bread and a hunk of roast beef. He devoured these with his bare hands, famished.

He spent most of the day in dreamless sleep, which was regularly interrupted by the arrival of one Mrs Piper – a cheery, round woman who plumped his pillows, wiped his forehead with deliciously cool wet cloths, and spoke English with such a peculiar accent that the boy always had to ask her several times to repeat herself.

‘My word,’ she chuckled the first time he did this. ‘Must be you’ve never met a Scot.’

‘A . . . Scot? What is a Scot?’

‘Don’t you worry about that.’ She patted his cheek. ‘You’ll learn the lay of Great Britain soon enough.’

That evening, Mrs Piper brought him his dinner – bread and beef again – along with news that the professor wanted to see him in his office. ‘It’s just upstairs. The second door to the right. Finish your food first; he’s not going anywhere.’

The boy ate quickly and, with Mrs Piper’s help, got dressed. He didn’t know where the clothes had come from – they were Western in style, and fitted his short, skinny frame surprisingly well – but he was too tired then to inquire further.

As he made his way up the stairs he trembled, whether from fatigue or trepidation, he didn’t know. The door to the professor’s study was shut. He paused a moment to catch his breath, and then he knocked.

‘Come in,’ called the professor.

The door was very heavy. The boy had to lean hard against the wood to budge it open. Inside, he was overwhelmed by the musky, inky scent of books. There were stacks and stacks of them; some were arrayed neatly on shelves, while others were messily piled up in precarious pyramids throughout the room; some were strewn across the floor, while others teetered on the desks that seemed arranged at random within the dimly lit labyrinth.

‘Over here.’ The professor was nearly hidden behind the bookcases. The boy wound his way tentatively across the room, afraid the slightest wrong move might send the pyramids tumbling.

'Don't be shy.' The professor sat behind a grand desk covered with books, loose papers, and envelopes. He gestured for the boy to take a seat across from him. 'Did they let you read much here? English wasn't a problem?'

'I read some.' The boy sat gingerly, taking care not to tread on the volumes – Richard Hakluyt's travel notes, he noticed – amassed by his feet. 'We didn't have many books. I ended up re-reading what we had.'

For someone who had never left Canton in his life, the boy's English was remarkably good. He spoke with only a trace of an accent. This was thanks to an Englishwoman – one Miss Elizabeth Slate, whom the boy had called Miss Betty, and who had lived with his household for as long as he could remember. He never quite understood what she was doing there – his family was certainly not wealthy enough to employ any servants, especially not a foreigner – but someone must have been paying her wages because she had never left, not even when the plague hit. Her Cantonese was passably good, decent enough for her to make her way around town without trouble, but with the boy, she spoke exclusively in English. Her sole duty seemed to be taking care of him, and it was through conversation with her, and later with British sailors at the docks, that the boy had become fluent.

He could read the language better than he spoke it. Ever since the boy turned four, he had received a large parcel twice a year filled entirely with books written in English. The return address was a residence in Hampstead just outside London – a place Miss Betty seemed unfamiliar with, and which the boy of course knew nothing about. Regardless, he and Miss Betty used to sit together under candlelight, laboriously tracing their fingers over each word as they sounded them out loud. When he grew older, he spent entire afternoons poring over the worn pages on his own. But a dozen books were hardly enough to last six months; he always read each one so many times over he'd nearly memorized them by the time the next shipment came.

He realized now, without quite grasping the larger picture, that those parcels must have come from the professor.

'I do quite enjoy it,' he supplied feebly. Then, thinking he ought to say a bit more, 'And no – English was not a problem.'

'Very good.' Professor Lovell picked a volume off the shelf behind him and slid it across the table. 'I suppose you haven't seen this one before?'

The boy glanced at the title. *The Wealth of Nations*, by Adam Smith. He shook his head. 'I'm sorry, no.'

'That's fine.' The professor opened the book to a page in the middle and pointed. 'Read out loud for me. Start here.'

The boy swallowed, coughed to clear his throat, and began to read. The book was intimidatingly thick, the font very small, and the prose proved considerably more difficult than the breezy adventure novels he'd read with Miss Betty. His tongue tripped over words he didn't know, words he could only guess at and sound out.

'The par . . . particular ad-advantage which each col-o-colonizing country derives from the col . . . colonies which par . . . particularly belong to it, are of two different kinds; first, those common advantages which every empire de . . . rives?' He cleared his throat. 'Derives . . . from the provinces subject to its dom . . . dom . . .'

'That's enough.'

He had no idea what he'd just read. 'Sir, what does—'

'No, that's all right,' said the professor. 'I hardly expect you to understand international economics. You did very well.' He set the book aside, reached into his desk drawer, and pulled out a silver bar. 'Remember this?'

The boy stared, wide-eyed, too apprehensive even to touch it.

He'd seen bars like that before. They were rare in Canton, but everyone knew about them. *Yínfulù*, silver talismans. He'd seen them embedded in the prows of ships, carved into the sides of palanquins, and installed over the doors of warehouses in the foreign quarter. He'd never figured out precisely what they were, and no one in his household could explain. His grandmother called them rich men's magic spells, metal amulets carrying blessings from the gods. His mother thought they contained trapped demons who could be summoned to accomplish their masters' orders. Even Miss Betty, who made loud her disdain for indigenous Chinese superstition and constantly criticized his mother's heeding of hungry ghosts, found them unnerving.

* In Book IV, Chapter VII of *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith argues against colonialism on the grounds that the defence of colonies is a drain on resources, and that the economic gains of the monopolistic colonial trade are an illusion. He writes: 'Great Britain derives nothing but loss from the dominion which she assumes over her colonies.' This view was not widely shared at the time.

'They're witchcraft,' she'd said when he asked. 'They're devil's work is what they are.'

So the boy didn't know what to make of this *yínfúlù*, except that it was a bar just like this one that had several days ago saved his life.

'Go on.' Professor Lovell held it out towards him. 'Have a look. It won't bite.'

The boy hesitated, then received it in both hands. The bar was very smooth and cold to the touch, but otherwise it seemed quite ordinary. If there was a demon trapped inside, it hid itself well.

'Can you read what it says?'

The boy looked closer and noticed there was indeed writing, tiny words engraved neatly on either side of the bar: English letters on one side, Chinese characters on the other. 'Yes.'

'Say them out loud. Chinese first, then English. Speak very clearly.'

The boy recognized the Chinese characters, though the calligraphy looked a bit strange, as if drawn by someone who had seen them and copied them out radical by radical without knowing what they meant. They read: 囫圇吞棗.

'*Húlún tūn zǎo*,' he read slowly, taking care to enunciate every syllable. He switched to English. 'To accept without thinking.'

The bar began to hum.

Immediately his tongue swelled up, obstructing his airway. The boy grasped, choking, at his throat. The bar dropped to his lap, where it vibrated wildly, dancing as if possessed. A cloyingly sweet taste filled his mouth. *Like dates*, the boy thought faintly, black pushing in at the edges of his vision. Strong, jammy dates, so ripe they were sickening. He was drowning in them. His throat was wholly blocked, he couldn't breathe—

'Here.' Professor Lovell leaned over and pulled the bar from his lap. The choking sensation vanished. The boy slumped over the desk, gulping for air.

'Interesting,' said Professor Lovell. 'I've never known it to have such a strong effect. What does your mouth taste of?'

'*Hóngzǎo*.' Tears streamed down the boy's face. Hastily he switched to English. 'Dates.'

'That's good. That's very good.' Professor Lovell observed him for a long moment, then dropped the bar back into the drawer. 'Excellent, in fact.'

The boy wiped tears from his eyes, sniffing. Professor Lovell sat back, waiting for the boy to recover somewhat before he continued. 'In two days, Mrs Piper and I will depart this country for a city called London in a country called England. I'm sure you've heard of both.'

The boy gave an uncertain nod. London existed to him like Lilliput did: a faraway, imaginary, fantasy place where no one looked, dressed, or spoke remotely like him.

'I propose to bring you with us. You will live at my estate, and I will provide you with room and board until you've grown old enough to make your own living. In return, you will take courses in a curriculum of my design. It will be language work – Latin, Greek, and of course, Mandarin. You will enjoy an easy, comfortable life, and the best education that one can afford. All I expect in return is that you apply yourself diligently to your studies.'

Professor Lovell clasped his hands together as if in prayer. The boy found his tone confusing. It was utterly flat and dispassionate. He could not tell if Professor Lovell *wanted* him in London or not; indeed, this seemed less like an adoption and more like a business proposal.

'I urge you to strongly consider it,' Professor Lovell continued. 'Your mother and grandparents are dead, your father unknown, and you have no extended family. Stay here, and you won't have a penny to your name. All you will ever know is poverty, disease, and starvation. You'll find work on the docks if you're lucky, but you're still small yet, so you'll spend a few years begging or stealing. Assuming you reach adulthood, the best you can hope for is backbreaking labour on the ships.'

The boy found himself staring, fascinated, at Professor Lovell's face as he spoke. It was not as though he had never encountered an Englishman before. He had met plenty of sailors at the docks, had seen the entire range of white men's faces, from the broad and ruddy to the diseased and liver-spotted to the long, pale, and severe. But the professor's face presented an entirely different puzzle. His had all the components of a standard human face – eyes, lips, nose, teeth, all healthy and normal. His voice was a low, somewhat flat, but nevertheless human voice. But when he spoke, his tone and expression were entirely devoid of emotion. He was a blank slate. The boy could not guess his feelings at all. As the professor described the boy's early, inevitable death, he could have been reciting ingredients for a stew.

'Why?' asked the boy.

'Why what?'

'Why do you want me?'

The professor nodded to the drawer which contained the silver bar.

'Because you can do *that*.'

Only then did the boy realize that this had been a test.

'These are the terms of my guardianship.' Professor Lovell slid a two-page document across the desk. The boy glanced down, then gave up trying to skim it; the tight, looping penmanship looked nigh illegible.

'They're quite simple, but take care to read the entire thing before you sign it. Will you do this tonight before you go to bed?'

The boy was too shaken to do anything but nod.

'Very good,' said Professor Lovell. 'One more thing. It occurs to me you need a name.'

'I have a name,' said the boy. 'It's—'

'No, that won't do. No Englishman can pronounce that. Did Miss Slate give you a name?'

She had, in fact. When the boy turned four, she had insisted he adopt a name by which Englishmen could take him seriously, though she'd never elaborated which Englishmen those might be. They'd chosen something at random from a children's rhyming book, and the boy liked how firm and round the syllables felt on his tongue, so he harboured no complaint. But no one else in the household had ever used it, and soon Miss Betty had dropped it as well. The boy had to think hard for a moment before he remembered.

'Robin.'

Professor Lovell was quiet for a moment. His expression confused the boy – his brows were furrowed, as if in anger, but one side of his mouth curled up, as if delighted. 'How about a surname?'

'I have a surname.'

'One that will do in London. Pick anything you like.'

The boy blinked at him. 'Pick . . . a surname?'

Family names were not things to be dropped and replaced at whim, he thought. They marked lineage; they marked belonging.

'The English reinvent their names all the time,' said Professor Lovell.

'The only families who keep theirs do it because they have titles to hold

* *I killed Cock Robin.*

Who saw him die?