

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Tales of American Diplomacy

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NARRATOR: Nixon's "jowls were wobbling in anger" when a young foreign service officer, during Nixon's historic 1972 visit to China, saved the President from embarrassment by refusing to interpret. Here is the story.

FREEMAN: I'm "Chas" Freeman. I joined the Foreign Service, and with some difficulty, got into the Chinese language course, and was designated as the interpreter for President Nixon's visit to Beijing. I found out about this, in characteristic of the Nixon White House, when somebody shoved some baggage tags through my mail slot in my front door in Cleveland Park, a section of Washington. I had been cloistered in the Operations Center for two months writing papers. I'm told that I wrote half of the President's briefing material. So here I was going on the trip, and I discovered, actually from "Time" magazine, which carried a story about me -- with all the details wrong -- that I was the interpreter. So, I got on the plane -- the backup to Air Force One -- and flew via California to Hawaii. The Secretary of State, William Rogers, was totally uninterested in this trip and didn't seem to know very much about the history of U.S. relations with the region or China for that matter.

Nobody would tell me what I was expected to do. I talked to [White House Chief of Staff Bob] Haldeman, [White House Counsel John] Ehrlichman, [White House Press Secretary Ron] Ziegler, [White House Official] Dwight Chapin, and finally Brent Scowcroft, who was running the air lift -- he was a colonel in the Air Force at the time and a skinny guy I met on the beach. So, he said, "Well, you should go talk to [Nixon Senior Adviser] Pat Buchanan." I did. Nobody knew what I was to do, but I learned something about the preparations that I didn't know. So, we got to Shanghai. I had written a briefing book for Mrs. Nixon in which I counseled her not to wear a red coat because that was the color of marriage or prostitutes. She, of course, wore a red coat. So much for my clout with the White House. But everything went well. We got into Beijing, checked into the Diaoyutai Guesthouse, and I got a message around 3:30 in the afternoon. The president wants to see you. So, I went over to his villa, expecting to be told what he wanted me to do. He came in -- he was a bit taller than I, and there was a big groove in his nose with three black hairs coming out of it, on which there were little bits of Max Factor makeup. I had practically never seen a man in makeup outside a television studio before. So, this was a little ... impressive. He just said, "I've heard great things about you; glad to meet you." And he turned around and went out. So, I still didn't know what I was to do. He then went

off to see Chairman Mao, by himself, with nobody from the State Department. About 8:30, I got called back over to his villa. Dwight Chapin, who was the appointment secretary, came out, and he said, "The President wants you to interpret his banquet toast tonight."

I said, "Fine. May I see the text?" He said, "I don't think there is a text." I said, "Well, Mr. Chapin I think, I know you're wrong about that." But he said, "No, no. The President is going to do this extemporaneously." I said, "No way. Go in, see the President, and get the text please." So, he comes out, and he says, "There is no text, and the President orders you to interpret." And I said, "Mr. Chapin, it might interest you to know that I wrote the draft of this banquet toast, and I have learned that some of Chairman Mao's poetry has been inserted into it. If you think I'm going to get up in front of the entire world and ad lib Chairman Mao's poetry from an unknown English translation back into Chinese, you're out of your [inaudible] mind! So, I won't do it."

I was 27. He reached in his pocket, took out the text, gave it to the Chinese, who read it and immediately said to me, "What is this poetry?" We researched together, and about 9:30 dinner started. It had all been delayed because of the Mao meeting. I was sitting across the table from the President, whose jowls were wobbling in anger. As he looked at me, I thought, you know, this is the end of my career, obviously. I won't even get a job in the Alaska Forest Service. The guy next to me, who later was president of China, Li Xiannian, he could see that I was condemned. So, he offered me a cigarette, and I took it. I know exactly when I started smoking, where, and why. The condemned man took the cigarette and smoked for the next 30 years.

Zhou Enlai was very kind. He talked to me across the table. Nixon had no small talk. The next morning it snowed in Beijing, and I managed to persuade the Chinese to let me go out to the biggest bookstore in Beijing to buy books. I got there, and I discovered there was nothing other than Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. The "Little Red Book" had been retired because it had an introduction by Lin Biao, who had run a coup d'état attempt the previous Fall. So, you couldn't get that. But I was looking for something called "The 24 dynastic histories," or "The 25" perhaps. Every dynasty in China has an official group of historians who do the history of the previous dynasty, which is why Chinese records are so incredibly detailed. I had been told by the CIA, incorrectly, that the 25th history, meaning that of the Republic of China, the rump state of which was on Taiwan, had now been written. I wanted to buy it. No luck.

I got back into the groove of the visit. Zhou Enlai said to me, "I understand you went to the bookstore this morning, and you were looking for the 24 histories." And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well, tell the President what they are." So, I did. He said, "Well, because you're so interested in this, I'm gonna give two sets of the 18th century edition of these histories to the United States: one to the State Department (still in the State library; You can see it), and one to the White House (that's out in the Nixon library).

We go from Beijing to Guangzhou, where the final negotiation of the Shanghai Communiqué was done. It's an informal evening. I've got two Korean War vets, major

generals, in the Chinese People's Liberation Army on either side. In Chinese culture, you'd never drink without toasting someone. So, I toasted them furiously, and they got drunk as hell. Right in the middle of this, Nixon said -- which is how you call it a dog in China, by the way. You call a person like this -- but anyway, come over. He said, "I want to apologize to you." And there were tears in his eyes. He said, "I shouldn't have done that." Of course, I know now why he did it -- why he lied about the text. He wanted to appear to be delivering it extemporaneously; he'd memorized it. He was afraid I'd stand up there with a text. I have a good enough memory. I wouldn't have needed that. Anyway, he said, "I'm really sorry; I shouldn't have done that." He said, "I want you to interpret something between me and the premier in private."

There was a Chinese interpreter there -- Nancy Tom, grew up in Brooklyn. He said, "Mr. Premiere, I want you to take note of this young man." I interpreted that. He said, "Because I think he may be our first ambassador to China." And I said, "Mr. President, I'm embarrassed, and please allow the Chinese to interpret that." And Nancy did. What went through my head was, "He's saying either you're going to have to wait 50 years 'til this guy grows up before we have an ambassador, or we're going to send you the least consequential, least qualified person we can think of to represent us in your country." That's just totally inappropriate. So, I guess I complicated my relationship with him again, although down the road we actually had many encounters, and I became very admiring of his skill as a negotiator. So that was my debut as an interpreter -- to refuse to interpret.

NARRATOR: Thanks for listening to "Tales of American Diplomacy," a Tex Harris Initiative for the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, "A Personal Life Story" produced by Poss Productions. Donate to support our work at adst.org. Because diplomacy matters now more than ever.