Barbarians at the Gate

Calling All China Nerds

With Brendan O'Kane
August 2025

Jeremiah Jenne (00:12): Hello and welcome to another edition of Barbarians at the Gate. This is Jeremiah from a in the United States, now here again in Geneva, feeling a little bit calling back to the old country. I have with me Brendan O'Kane, translator, literary scholar.

We had him on last year to do some post-election spin in the wake of the election of Donald Trump. It was an episode in which we broadly discussed, very broadly, the idea of what can the fall of the Ming dynasty and the Ming-Qing transition teach us about US politics? I'm wondering, just to start us off, Brendan, did we aim too low? I mean, in terms of civilizational dynastic collapse, are we still at the Ming Qing, everyone's gotta get a haircut [*The Qing Empire mandated that all Chinese men shave the front of their head and braid the remainder of their hair into distinctive queues*] level of fuckery. Are we now fully into the Guangxu Emperor wondering that was in the last bowl of yogurt stage of fuckery?

Brendan (01:13): So, okay, was wondering where you were going to go with the Guangxu [*The Guangxu Emperor was poisoned in 1908*] one because it could have been worse. I don't know, where did we land last time? Was it Ming Qing collapse? Or transition rather? Yeah.

Jeremiah Jenne (01:23): Yeah, I think it was, we were, were, I think we were thinking a little bit, or at least I was thinking in a time when the world is burning down around and all that you've known and all that you've cherished seems to be overrun where is the place for somebody who is a sensitive scholar like me? You know, do we retreat into our books? Do we retreat into our hermitage, or do we fight back to the last? and hope that Dorgon [*imperial regent and de-facto leader of the Manchu forces during the Ming-Qing transition*] doesn't have our number. But I kind of feel like we moved past that somewhere around Valentine's Day. And so, as I get back from the United States, and of course, you're in the restive province of South Philadelphia, you know...

Brendan: The future city-state, if you please.

Jeremiah: the future city state of Philadelphia, exactly once the once the inevitable breakup begins, you've had a front row seat to this. So just to kick us off, we got a lot to talk about today.

Jeremiah Jenne (02:14): Is Ming Qing transition still our point of reference?

Brendan (02:16): No, I think, you know, that was for all of the later propaganda, like the Ming Qing transition was, there were way worse ones, right? I mean, Tang-Song [*period of*

dynastic collapse, war, and eventual partial reunification lasting from 907-960 CE] Tang to Song sucks, right? And that, I mean, we may want to aim for that because that wipes out the—

Jeremiah Jenne (02:25): Give us an example.

Brendan (02:36): —there were these great families, right? The aristocracy in the Han and the Tang dynasty. The 博陵崔 Bólíng Cuī [*one of the most prestigious aristocratic clans during the Tang dynasty*] and all these big names that persist for like about 800 years.

Jeremiah Jenne (02:42): And then when you pick up the song dynasty that you're, when you do the lecture, you're like, and so the great families went away and there's always the kid in the front row is like, where did they go? I'm like, they went away. But the fact that that's a good testament to just how much that transition sucked that an entire social class just disappeared.

Or, you know, you've it's not exactly a dynastic transition, but I'd say it's the beginning of the end for the Qing. Like, you know, you've got the Taiping Rebellion [*civil war in China from 1850-1864*] where you have, you know, years and years of uprisings, books being wiped out, the secondary capital is captured, How many, what are the death figures on that? I think it's like 20 million.

Jeremiah Jenne (03:18): Yeah, that's always this like crazy figure that works out to be something like 10% of the population of the Qing Empire. I think whenever you do these...

Brendan (03:26): I mean, it's a lot of that is downstream of like crops failing and things like that, right. But it—

Jeremiah Jenne (03:30): There is that, also once you get, once you start rounding up to like tens of millions, is it 10 million, 20 million, 30 million? I think we can just agree that's bad. And you're right, the Taiping rebellion, I mean, this gets us into a whole other tangent, but from the perspective of Qing history, everyone talks about the Opium War (1839-1842) We just talked about the Boxer Uprising (1899-1901) but the Taiping rebellion, that was the true, at least since the Ming-Qing transition, that was the true cataclysm. I mean, that just destroyed so much. And really, I think was the death blow. Yeah, never recovered.

Brendan (03:38): Yeah. Yeah, they never recover. You know, when you read, say, early European visitors, right to the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) or the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) they're really impressed. And, you know, the Chinese are "white" for them. The Chinese do not become nonwhite until really the 19th century. And it corresponds with imperialism, but also these foreign visitors arriving after the Taiping rebellion and looking at the aftermath and concluding, wow, this is a backwards country where everything's on fire. And so, there's this sort of shift in the way people write about China, the way they conceive of it, from the clean place with indoor plumbing where everything smells less bad and

they're super rich to the place where everything is broken, backward, malarial, and Taiping Rebellion is a big part of that. It's people looking at the rubble and not knowing that there was a palace there once.

Jeremiah Jenne (04:46): I think there's also another moment like that too. You get to the early 20th century when you had so many of the, especially from the United States, that period when a lot of the missionaries were coming in the 1920s, the 1930s, kind of between the wars, you also had a lot of those journalists who were coming in at that time as well. And of course this is another time, know, the dynasty has been gone for 15, 20 years, but of course, since the end of the dynasty in the early 20th century, China is essentially a failed state. You know, what had started to shatter during the Taiping rebellion and came completely apart in the early 20th century had sort of metastasized to the point where everything was broken. And so, if most of the images, especially America, I say especially Americans, because in the 20th century, American narratives started to drive images of in a way that hadn't been the case in the 19th century.

This idea of like they're starving kids in China. All of that, I think, starts to come out of that period too. And you're right. If that's your frame of reference, you get this idea, you read it back like this is a perpetually broken country. But of course, again, at the time of the Ming Qing transition, going back to the 17th century, a lot of the people who were there from other parts of the world were like, yeah, this is a major political upheaval, but the civilization is still pretty impressive.

Brendan (06:03): I mean, long before that in Mencius (孟子 ca. 371-289 BCE) there's the, the parable of Ox Mountain, right? Which is describing more or less exactly that.

Mencius said, The trees of Ox Mountain were beautiful once, but they were felled by axes and hatchets, for the mountain was located next to a great capital. And how then could they remain beautiful? With the respite afforded by nights and the moisture provided by the rain and the dew, Ox Mountain was not without sprouts and shoots, but then cattle and sheep were pastured there and left the mountain barren, as it is today. People see the barren mountain and take it to mean that nothing ever grew there. But how could that be in the nature of the mountain? And how could there be a man without a heart capable of recognizing humanity and righteousness? Some may abandon their moral faculties. This is like what the axes and hatchets did to the trees. Can a thing chopped down every morning remain beautiful?

Jeremiah Jenne (06:52): I see, folks, this is what we do. We start with Donald Trump and the disaster of American politics, and we quickly segue into ancient Chinese philosophy and Mencius, for those of you who are unfamiliar, the philosopher who plays the Rolling Stones to Confucius's Beatles. And so, I see Brendan like,

Brendan (07:10): Okay, where in your pantheon are the Rolling Stones relative to the Beatles?

Jeremiah Jenne (07:15): This is going to take us down another road. I would say that both are both are very impressive for different reasons. I feel like the Rolling Stones would never have been would never have been successful without the Beatles breaking the Brits in as it were. But they took it in directions because they were around a little bit longer. There's a little bit more of a body left over of recordings. They took it in directions that the Beatles, at least as the foursome, never really did. I pulled that right out of my ass, but that's, I still, I feel good about it.

Jeremiah Jenne (07:48): I pulled that right out of my ass, but that's, I still, I feel good about it.

Brendan (07:52): Okay, okay. I mean, I might say in this analogy that Confucius is blind lemon and Mencius is Clapton, except not a racist junkie. Like, he's been woodshedding.

Jeremiah Jenne (08:03): I think once you add that as a caveat, the metaphor breaks down.

Brendan (08:08): Well, you know, but I feel it's important whenever the name Clapton comes up to specify whether you're talking about his racist junkie aspects or his, you know, guitar god aspects.

Jeremiah Jenne: Has Clapton a racist? I know he's anti-vax, but is...

Brendan: Yeah, no, he went, I mean, infamously supported Enoch Powell.

Jeremiah Jenne (08:19): So, I have a question for you, Brendan, because this kind of changing the subject a little bit before, you know, our producers start to pull on my chain. My parents in law are visiting us in Geneva, they're from Tianjin and they are enjoying their time in Europe. My wife has taken them, shown them places like Barcelona, ~ Paris and the local supermarket. And one of the things our parents in law have said as is not particularly uncommon with Chinese folks of a certain generation when they venture to a place like Europe, is the fact that the people that they meet while they are here, they often refer to, of course, as 外国人 (waiguoren "foreigner") And no matter how many times my wife and I make subtle digs like, and which part of Switzerland were you from again? But it does remind me that, you know, back when we were in Beijing and I suspect even now there was a lot of angst over this term 外国人 (waiguoren) and even more over the term 老外 laowai ("foreigner" colloquial) and This is something I've been waiting to get you on the podcast to ask you about because you're one of my favorite people to ask questions of translation interpretation and I have to say there's well, let me ask you there's a certain type of foreigner That gets really bothered by this

Are you that person? And if not, how would you describe that person?

Brendan (09:48): So, I mean, look, fair's fair. I will go back to the beginning and say that I don't know about you, but my first six months or so in the PRC, there was an adjustment process. Especially because I wasn't doing it in Beijing. I was up in Harbin where, you know, there were a lot fewer white guys walking around. I caused a couple of traffic accidents just walking down the street. And... To be as charitable as possible. It is really weird to be minoritized for the first time, right? To feel yourself as visibly a minority, like that messes with people. It really does. Even when you are playing the game on absolute poo-butt baby mode, right? Like if you are a white guy in the PRC circa The stereotypes about you are basically all to your benefit. You know, people will go out of their way to be nice to you, you know, and—

Jeremiah Jenne (10:38): This is not like being a refugee family from say Somalia or Cambodia and then moving to somewhere in the middle of corn-fed Iowa or something.

Brendan (10:41): It is not like being It's not like being a Black teenager at the I mean, you're not getting followed around the 7-Eleven or anything like that. But it still really messes with people. It did with me. Like I was super self-conscious and, you know, twitchy and everything else. And so that is, I think, the environment in which people who may know some Mandarin or may not are mostly hearing the word 老外 laowai come up. and they're hearing it in reference to them. And... Yeah.

Jeremiah Jenne (11:15): It's tough to know a little bit of a language, right? I mean, it's one of the dangerous things that when you start learning a language, you learn just enough to hear what people are saying about you, but not enough to have any meaningful engagement about it.

Brendan (11:28): Well, and the thing is that like I have, you you've worked with students too, and I definitely have been around people who are like, I know they're fucking talking about me you're like, no, not dude. You're not that interesting. It's really got nothing to do with that's the sort of that, you know, heightened alertness or whatever. And you know, when we were there, and I'm sure still today, every couple of months, like clockwork, there would be a blog war or forum war or Reddit war or, know, wherever it is now about whether 老外 laowai is like the N-word or like I swear I've seen people actually say that like 100% in earnest. Like Yeah.

Jeremiah Jenne (12:01): I mean That is a bold lack of self-awareness to put on display.

Brendan (12:12): Yeah, it's like, you yeah, when you can point to the history of, you know, chattel slavery of white Anglos in China, and you know, the persistence of a slur intended to evoke that memory, then sure, we can talk but otherwise, no. But you know, is 老外 laowai a slur? No, it just means white guy, you know, and it has all the intonational

possibilities of that, right. It can be look at that white guy or it can be like, look at that white guy. Same with 老外 laowai.

Jeremiah Jenne (12:36): So, I want to talk about this, because I think that's, it's an important point and it goes back to my parents-in-law too. I think sometimes we get a little hung up on the 外 wai "out" part of it. And because wai means outside, it means usually used as a note like 老外 laowai old foreigner, 外国人 waiguoren foreign person, that we take it very literally all the time without realizing that when it's used in this context, it's descriptive about a kind of person who comes, who is most often seen coming to China from the outside for many Chinese, it actually just means somebody who looks like they're not from China.

And that brings up a question of, is there a word in another language that connotes foreignness and also can have many connotations depending upon the situation, the context, the behavior of the foreigner, the level of drinks involved. Can we call it gringo?

Brendan (13:33): Yeah. I absolutely would go with gringo. And you know, the nice thing about that is that you can modify it, works pretty well. So if somebody says 傻逼老外 shabi laowai you can say pinche gringo or something like that. Like it works. Yeah, that's my go-to. The 老外 laowai slur debate is, it is never going to die. The only thing that is interesting about it to me, is I think it reveals something about us, right? Like dudes who look like us. Which is that our default assumption is that if you are a minority, people are going to be mean to you. And I think that's revealing, right? Because like people, gringos, laowai get super tense, right? Or like paranoid. There is the assumption that you're being overcharged, that people are saying nasty things about you. On some level that people wish you harm. And I don't know about you, but I had really very little basis for any of those assumptions in my time in the PRC.

Jeremiah Jenne (14:32): Right, I mean, the question, I don't get it as much anymore, but the question was, as an American in China, sometimes I get asked by people, do you ever feel threatened or anything? I think they're referencing the kind of US-China tensions. And yeah, I mean, there's assholes everywhere. I mean, people sometimes make comments that are a little bit rude. But for example, to compare it to say the... the experience of somebody from China living in the last 10 years in the United States, nobody's ever come up to me randomly and punched me in the face just because I was not from there or I'd never had that experience. I'm sure there are people in China, foreigners who have had a violent and negative experience, but I would stack up the statistics between like the attacks on non-Americans in America over last 10 years and even allowing for a different level of numbers and attacks on say white foreigners or foreigners in general. And again, it is worth noting that there are different experiences. People who are Black or who present as a different race other than Caucasian do have very different experiences in China. We

gotta acknowledge that. But again, Often the people who are complaining about the word laowai are people who look very much like us, this sort of white guy thing.

Brendan (15:51): They're mostly guys, they mostly have the accent that we do, like...

Jeremiah Jenne (15:55): Almost always guys, I don't think I've ever once heard a foreign woman do the whole lao wai is racist thing, have you?

Brendan (16:02): Uh, no. I have heard foreign women complaining of the way foreign women are treated, which is a whole other kettle of fish.

Jeremiah Jenne (16:11): That's another issue that neither but yes, that's a whole other thing.

Jeremiah Jenne (16:15): You mentioned about the idea of people kind of thinking that people are out to get them when they go to a place where they are different. I actually have noticed a kind of, I don't know if it's a corollary or a weird offshoot of this particular response. And that is the foreigner who immediately assumes that wherever they are, the so-called locals, natives, the people there immediately identify them as an honorary member of their culture, whether they speak the language or not, whether they've been there for a year or for six hours. I have seen this phenomenon traveling. It seems to be particularly true in Asia, And I not to say that some people do not have a better handle on cultural adaptation than say the guys who freak out about Lao Wai or for that matter, me. But I hear it so often that I'm thinking that the number of times that it's actually true and whether this is kind of a self-delusional way to insulate somebody from the feelings that maybe they are in fact an outsider, just like all of us. I wonder too, if sometimes some of the folks we knew back in Beijing who completely lose it over us over time. Part of that is a psychological reaction to the realization that no matter how much they speak Chinese, how many articles they edit for the state media, how many YouTube videos they go on there, you know, eating ketchup from Xinjiang that at the end of the day, they're just another foreigner like us.

Brendan (17:49): I'm trying to triangulate here to who you're thinking about, but yeah. Yeah.

Jeremiah Jenne (17:52): I'm actually not thinking of any one person,

So, think, lao wai, right? But are there other words, and I'll put you on the spot here a little bit, but that's the fun part of this. Are there other words that we also get wrong? Or let me put this, maybe it's a better way to put this. Other words that you, Brendan O'Kane, think that we're getting wrong in the same way that we always seem to get lao wai wrong?

What other words kind of fall in this category?

Brendan (18:17): Hmm. Let's see, I remember years ago, Eric Abrahamsen whom we all love, published a thing in the New York Times about, about the 管 (guǎn), right, to manage, to see, to control. This was in connection with Jackie Chan saying that...

Jeremiah Jenne (18:36): Oh yeah, the Chinese people. They need to be Guan'd...And what does that mean? Does that mean to be managed, controlled? And it was sort of made it sound like he was very much siding with the CCP at a time when they were eyeing Hong Kong. And in fact, that turned out to be the case, but eyeing Hong Kong as a kind child that needed to be brought into the fold by any means necessary.

Brendan (18:42): To be guaned, yeah. Yeah. And that, as you say, a child that needs to be brought into the fold, I think that's actually a really key aspect of 管 (guǎn) Easy to look at this and be like, oh, that is control, that is imposing control, is a sort of, Jackie Chan is calling for dictatorship. Don't get me wrong, Jackie Chan's politics are lousy, but the man has fallen directly on his head so many times that I just can't get mad at him. Eric and I disagree is on kind of the valence of 管 (guǎn). I don't think a dictator guans his subjects. A parent guans a child, a human guans a control implies to me that you have two parties who would otherwise be of more or less equal capabilities, but one is imposing control over the other. 管 (guǎn) to me, is not that. You're at a restaurant and you get up to leave the bathroom and somebody reminds you to 管好 guanhao your phone, don't leave it on the, you know, on the table. There's a mismatch of capabilities control sounds scary in English, 管 (guǎn) sounds in Chinese. It's not necessarily loving, right? There are, you know, 5,000 years of children who really do not want their parents to Guan them. But I think it hits different in Chinese. And so, I think there are these words where you can be right on the word level and really wrong on the paragraph level.

Jeremiah Jenne (20:28): More patronizing form of management than paramilitary sense of crackdown.

Brendan (20:33): Yeah, I mean, it's like, you know, it's somewhere in between look after and keep in hand, I guess, if that defines a coherent range, at least in my mental map, right? And look, I'm a second language user, don't listen to me. But my instinct is that it falls somewhere in there.

Jeremiah Jenne (20:41): Here's a word that I know bothers a lot of I have to admit sometimes, I'm not saying this is a hill I would die on, but I have also occasionally pointedly changed this when I'm writing. The term "president." when referring to somebody with the title of There are some people on Twitter or blue sky in the sort of China watchers' sphere is a hill they will die on that you should not refer to Xi Jinping as President Xi. That this normalizes a system in China in a way that it does not actually reflect his real power, his real The differences between the term zongtong 总统 zhuxi 主席, and of course zhuxi 主席

is famous as in Mao Zhuxi 毛主席/ Chairman Mao. So if Xi is Xi Zhuxi 习主席 then why don't we call him Chairman Xi? And the reason is because Xinhua to look it up exactly when, but it was a Xinhua directive, they were going to start referring to the the leader of China's president so-and-so. And this seems to have taken, unlike more recent directives where we have to stop calling it Tibet and calling it 西藏 Xizang Yeah.

Brendan (22:00): Yeah, it wasn't quite so bad when we were living in "Chinese Beijing." I remember when I was writing a newspaper column in Chinese, there was one week where I just, I was really childish. I decided to troll my editor just by inserting Zhongguo before every single place name. So, it was like, yeah, when I was in "Chinese Harbin," I visited Chinese A Cheng once.

Jeremiah Jenne (22:20): For those people who are not hardcore China nerds and have followed us as far down the rabbit hole, at least in the Olympics, you have Chinese Taipei [*to refer to Taiwan*] So go ahead, Brendan, take the zongtong 总统/ zhuxi 主席 issue.

Brendan (22:34): Chairman is more accurate, it's more accurate to the Chinese, it is notionally, I guess, more accurate to what the job is. On the other hand, Xi has made it, you know, much more unitary, you know, he's moved back away from collective rule. And so, in that sense, maybe something that doesn't connote that moving away from chairman maybe is But—

Jeremiah Jenne (22:55): I feel like we're getting into kind Daniel Bell territory that eventually there'll be the China Confucian Party and the titles will all be drawn from like the imperial period. Now that of course the revolutionary aspect of the party has kind of gone by the wayside, why not just bring back the old titles? I mean, obviously I think 皇帝 huangdi (emperor) might be out, but there could be something else you could find.

Brendan (23:01): Yes. Yeah, no, I... Look, bring on the reign of lead teacher Kong of the 84th generation. You may remember, I hated having a Chinese name. I really didn't want one and, use mine. Well, because I know there are better ones, but no, I ended up going with—

Jeremiah Jenne (23:26): Because you have the funniest Chinese name ever. And if you, it's even funnier if you mispronounce it.

Brendan (23:34): Yeah, yeah, Well, it's even funnier in Cantonese. But, but I...

Jeremiah Jenne (23:37): Share it with us. Get the tones right. Go ahead, I dare you.

Brendan (23:41): 何毖 (hébì) Yeah, it's 何 (hé) - 人可何 (rén kě hé) right, for the surname, and then 毖 (bì) - 懲前毖後的毖 (chéng qián bì hòu dé bì) but it sounds like 何毕 (Hébì) why

do I gotta? In Cantonese, it sounds quite a lot like 好屌仔 (hou2 diu2 zai2) which is "penis," which I found out much later, and I was like, okay, I gotta stick with the name But I didn't want a Chinese name, I don't like using one, and I sort of, you I... think it sucks that you have to have one right like if you're studying English you don't have to have an English name.

Jeremiah Jenne (24:12): But that's a little bit long tradition though in China. Every English teacher memoir I've ever read starts with some sort of funny story about how they named their or were amused by the names the Chinese students thought of themselves or, you know, or they play games. Like, I know there was one English teacher. I can't remember. I read this or we actually know this person who named like all their students after like the 1995 Bulls or something like that.

Brendan (24:39): I have definitely known people who had themed classes. Chicago Bulls would be fairly benign. There's I mean, I also want one never knows how seriously to take these things. But I did once know one guy who claimed to have given his students at least nicknames after bongs he had owned.

Jeremiah Jenne (24:56): This is my So yeah, you're right. I agree that Chinese names are a little bit odd. Uh, you know, when I, when I was teaching, know, we, we, we've taught in programs in China and there are foreign teachers who kind of insist on using like their Chinese name, laoshi 老师 Wu Laoshi, Wang Laoshi, it felt kind of weird to me. And The reverse also in our house is that my wife, people ask her, like, what's your name? And she's like, Yajun. And she's like, do you have an English name? She goes like, yes, yes, I do. It's when I asked her about it, she's like, yeah, it's good enough for my parents, good enough for white people. And I respect that.

Brendan (25:35): No, that's precisely my line. For a long time, I didn't have a Chinese name, or I refused to use one. My standard line on this was, in America we have this little thing called filial piety. When my parents gave me a name, I take that seriously. ~ Now in China, I understand you don't have this tradition, which is why you're asking me to come up with a different name.

Jeremiah Jenne (25:48): I can’t imagine why you thought people were out to get you. It boggles the mind.

Brendan (26:02): People have a pretty good sense of humor, mostly. But anyway, I was going to say as long as we are being forced to have Chinese names, I think that any Sinologist or at least anybody working on, you know, pre 20th century China should also have style, sobriquet, and studio names.

Jeremiah Jenne (26:04): Mostly. I think some of them did. If you go back to like the 18th, 19th century, a lot of those like old, like real old school sinologists, they had studio names

and they did that because of course they were also interacting with what they kind of thought were their peers. Although I would imagine that the Chinese counterparts were like, that's cute. You've learned to write a character. But because they're interacting with that level of scholarship, where that's, you just, that's assumed you kind of needed to have that.

Brendan (26:20): Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. The missionaries and the like, yeah. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah, I think to be fair, I think Matteo Ricci [*Jesuit missionary who lived in China from 1582-1610*] actually considering that he had no textbooks, no dictionaries, and no teachers, did okay. He met up with Li Zhi 李贽 (*Scholar and Philosopher 1527-1602*) and apparently the two of them were sort of impressed by each other. ~

Jeremiah Jenne (27:01): Well, I think also it helped that for most accounts, and again, this is really hard to prove historically, but it does sound like he possibly had like an eidetic memory or something along those lines. That's the rumor that everyone said.

Brendan (27:12): All of the Jesuits were trained. I mean, all of them.

Jeremiah Jenne (27:14): They were definitely trained, there was something about, and scholars have argued about this. Like this was sort of assuming he was naturally kind of gifted in that way. And other people would come back how do we know that? But it does seem just given his abilities.

Brendan (27:28): I mean, yeah, but both, right? He definitely had some, you know, natural gifts and the Jesuits trained the hell out of those.

Jeremiah Jenne (27:36): I just like to have this idea of having like a 16th century Jesuit version of Sheldon Cooper from Big Bang Theory showing up at the emperor's doorstep.

Brendan (27:45): Well, you know, the thing that is always funny to me is the Jesuits are, you know, they look around, decide, you know, Neo-Confucianism is for the birds, but we've got this on lock. We're going to show you how to do it right. And, you know, and then they show up and position themselves as paleo-Confucians, which they're doing partly because it is much easier to write like a Han dynasty Confucian than it is to write like a Song dynasty Confucian. ~

Jeremiah Jenne (28:09): Easier to read too.

Brendan (28:10): By far, Jesus. Yeah, I mean, the language just got worse and worse, which is why they had to reform it.

Jeremiah Jenne (28:16): I'm working on a talk that I'm going to be doing in October. And it's about the Jesuit missionaries in Beijing. And we know all about the success stories and

there are quite a few. Matteo Ricci comes to Beijing in the turn of the 17th century, becomes a fixture in there, kind of establishes this precedent of Jesuits living in Beijing. Acting as advisors, even teachers for some of the emperors, though he never meets the emperor. But there are Jesuits who arrived and try to then kind of explain to the emperor why he's wrong about Confucianism and Christianity. And they've mostly just getting deported or arrested or sent away in chains.

Brendan (28:59): Poor old Michele Ruggieri (*Jesuit missionary and scholar 1543-1607*) gets no respect.

Jeremiah Jenne (29:03): That's true. Ruggeri was kind Matteo Ricci's, it's kind of weird because we, yeah, he's the predecessor,

Brendan (29:07): He was the John the Baptist to sort of, but have you seen his poems? So weird. ~

Jeremiah Jenne (29:15): I have not, I have to admit I do not have not read. And this is, this is a nerdy episode already, but I will say I'm fully capable and fully okay saying I have not read the Chinese poems of Matteo Ricci's predecessor, Ruggeri,

Brendan (29:29): So, the reason you will enjoy doing so, or better yet, reading Albert Chan's article about Ricci wastes his first couple of years in China. And Ruggeri, it must be said, wasted his years in China, because both of them are following the directive as it applied in Japan, which is dress up like monks. Right? Behave like Buddhist monks, talk like Buddhist monks. You know, if they were Buddhists, you would call this upaya. This is their skillful means, but they're Jesuits, so you call it the Valignano directive. But Ruggeri is over just herpling about Southeastern China, dressing like a Buddhist monk, which hits very different in China than it does in Japan. Buddhist monks are not respected. He's also trying to come up with a vocabulary for Christianity from basically scavenging half understood Buddhist texts. And also trying to spread the gospel by means of short poems, which again, because he's working with a more or less Buddhist vocabulary, imagine you are a provincial or I don't know, whatever. Imagine you're a tax official in Jiaoqing or something and this weird pasty guy who talks funny comes up to you and just vomits a very poorly constructed four-line enlightenment poem about how he's got something better than Shakyamuni if you'll It turns out nobody wanted to listen to that. Absolutely nobody. And it was It was only after those wasted years and wasted effort and again, no dictionaries, no teachers. I mean, the genius it took to be wrong in that ridiculous way is something that I don't possess. But they wasted years, they made asses to themselves. And then finally, Ricci comes over and figures out, no, you got to get in good with the nerds.

Jeremiah Jenne (31:22): See, so Brendan, this has a fascinating conversation. I would like to thank the five or six other complete and total un-reconstructed China nerds who hung with us till the end of the episode. We see you; we respect you. Thank you for sticking it out with us. Brendan, it's so great to have you on. What are you working on right now in this

sweltering summer of 25? Are you just Still translating, you're trying to stay one step ahead of ICE because they know you've got that Irish passport or what's going on.

Brendan (31:54): Yeah, I've been translating Zhang Dai (張岱 *scholar and writer 1597-1684*) We're all 遺民 (yímín survivors of regime change) Been doing some volunteer stuff in the neighborhood, translating Know Your Rights posters, putting them around. There are neighborhood patrols for ICE. People will walk around looking for cars. Yeah, people doing what they can, where they can.

Jeremiah Jenne (32:11): Well, keep up the good work and thanks for taking the time to come on. Thank you for joining us. We'll be back in two weeks with another episode of Barbarians at the Gate. Cue those drums.