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Alberta native stands at crux of dialogue between China and the West

By Andy Hoffman
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Andrew Dawrant is widely considered the top Chinese-English language interpreter working in China today

Shuffling down a Shanghai street, he is as inconspicuous as any *laowai* (foreigner) might hope to be. Fair-skinned, balding, bespectacled and slightly paunchy, he wears an unremarkable dark suit and carries a weathered, brown, leather satchel. It's what's inside the bag that's extraordinary. It is frequently stuffed with secret, sensitive documents, the thoughts and words of presidents, prime ministers, Fortune 500 CEOs and Nobel Prize winners.

Andrew Dawrant is not a spy. At 40, he is widely considered the top Chinese-English language interpreter working in China today, a position he has held for nearly a decade, and therefore probably the most important interpreter in the world. It has been a most unlikely journey for the Alberta native, a personal rise in tandem with China's meteoric ascent to become the world's second-largest economy, at a time when it has never been so important that the ideas of the Middle Kingdom are properly communicated to the West and that China correctly comprehends the responses of the English-speaking world. Mr. Dawrant stands at the crux of that dialogue.

High-level conference interpreting, as it is known, is one of the most stressful jobs in the world, like an aircraft controller's. A good interpreter doesn't simply regurgitate words in a different tongue; he constructs a linguistic narrative to re-express ideas, all in a matter of seconds. When Mr. Dawrant is interpreting for the American president on a Chinese visit, he must be up to speed on major issues and tensions in the two nations' relations, not to mention any number of treaties, economic agreements, trade disputes or legal cases as well as important people and places that could be mentioned.

And the interpreter must be just as cognizant of what is not being discussed. "The tone between the lines is just as important," Mr. Dawrant explains. "How will you know what is unspoken and what was expected to be said that was not said unless you went in fully informed and knowing the expectancies that preexisted around the meeting?"

And just as if he were a spy, a top interpreter must never share the intimate details of his encounters with world leaders, dignitaries and celebrities. If Mr. Dawrant were to reveal what Barack Obama was focusing on or concerned about before meeting with his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao in Beijing in 2009, he would never work again.

Consider his assignment in February of 2002, when then-U.S. President George W. Bush spoke at Tsingua University on the outskirts of Beijing, being broadcast to hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens on the state network

CCTV. It marked only the second time that a U.S. president had given a live speech on Chinese television. The last time, when Bill Clinton did it in 1998, interpreting issues (caused by Mr. Clinton's habit of veering from his prepared remarks), it provoked a news anchor to suggest that "if U.S.-China relations are going to improve, it will have to start with having better interpreters."

As Mr. Bush began reading from the teleprompter in his characteristic halting drawl, Mr. Dawrant set to work, listening to the president talk in English, while at the same time relaying his message in Chinese in a smooth baritone.

"That was definitely the most nerve-wracking thing I have ever done." he says. "You have to project total calm and peace through the microphone but inside you are in an incredibly nervous and anxious state."

Had he failed, he concedes, his career would have been "pretty much over." But he was note-perfect. The next day, however, there were no congratulatory e-mails or phone calls from a grateful White House.

That's the lot of an interpreter: "If you do a brilliant job in something like that, the fact is, people won't really notice."

But Mr. Dawrant's clients hasten to disagree. Michael Ducker, COO of FedEx Express, has been doing business in China since 1992 and calls on Mr. Dawrant each time he goes. "He is in a class by himself as far as I'm concerned," Mr. Ducker says.

Former British Columbia premier Gordon Campbell worked with Dawrant on the majority of his visits to China and calls him "the best in the business."

"He makes sure that if you are trying to say something humorous, people will find the humour in it. He will take something that has a North America slant ... and make it work in the Chinese context," Mr. Campbell says.

On a rainy spring morning in Pudong in 2010, for example, Mr. Campbell, with a large delegation in tow, was trying to convince a group of municipal officials to increase the purchase of B.C. lumber for construction. As Mr. Campbell spoke, the Chinese officials in matching dark suits and coal-black dyed hair sat stone-faced, looking unimpressed. Yet when Mr. Dawrant started talking in forceful, direct Mandarin, gesticulating for emphasis, their eyes instantly widened and they began smiling and nodding their heads in recognition.

It's the kind of scene Mr. Dawrant has orchestrated hundreds of times.

"I've always been fascinated with the idea of being able to speak with 'others,' or 'the other,' to somehow transcend that barrier that divides us," he says. "There is a very powerful idea, that people who speak English and other languages well are not necessarily the people who will have the best ideas. Somebody has to be there, who is very good at expressing ideas, to explain the best ideas on behalf of those people who don't speak English or don't speak other languages."

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Throughout history, humans have relied on bilingual liaisons to communicate with other cultures. Translators often joke that theirs is the world's "second-oldest profession." Yet modern interpreting is a relatively recent phenomenon.

The turning point came in 1919 with the diplomatic meetings regarding the Treaty of Versailles and the founding of the League of Nations, facilitated by the first modern interpreters - a group of aristocrats, intellectuals and eccentrics such as the Kaminker brothers, Andre and George, as well as Jean Herbert, a Frenchman who later became the first Chief Interpreter of the United Nations.

What they practised was consecutive interpreting - allowing the speaker to deliver their full address and, after he or she finishes, delivering it in another language. It requires not only language skills and a working knowledge of the topic, but a formidable memory: Andre Kaminker reportedly could take an hour-and-a-half speech delivered in Spanish and then immediately reproduce every significant phrase, dramatic pause, tone and gesture in French, all without taking notes.

Simultaneous interpreting, however, rose to prominence in 1945 with the founding of the United Nations and the Nuremberg trials prosecuting Nazi war criminals. This comparatively time-saving approach, widely in use today (including in Canada's parliament), became possible because of technology: A simultaneous interpreter listens to the speech in one language in headphones and, usually with just a one- or two-second delay, relays it in another language into a microphone, which conveys it to the delegates' own headphones. In essence, it requires the brain to perform two tasks at once, speaking and listening in two different languages.

Simultaneous interpreting between English and Chinese is particularly trying, says Zhou Yuqiang, the chief Interpreter at the United Nations office in Vienna: "Chinese is a monosyllabic language. It is a lot faster and shorter than English. With a fast speaker you can easily be left behind. You cannot keep up with their language. Of course, the grammatical structure makes Chinese-to-English extremely difficult. You've got to invert the whole thing before you know what you are saying. This causes a very bad feeling unless you really are on top of it."

Mr. Dawrant's mastery of interpreting Chinese into English makes him a "phenomenon," Mr. Zhou says. While there are many highly skilled interpreters from China, nearly all struggle with some elements of English, whether it be accent or certain minor grammatical issues. "He has very few or none of these. At the same time, he is accurate. This is very rare," says Mr. Zhou.

Mr. Dawrant is the only native English speaker ever to be accepted as a Chinese language interpreter at the United Nations. Indeed, when he interpreted Mr. Bush's speech it is unlikely any Chinese people watching and listening on television would have detected that it was a *laowai*'s voice they were hearing.

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Born 40 years ago in Calgary to an unwed teenage mother, Mr. Dawrant was adopted within weeks by an immigrant couple, a doctor from Britain and his Spanish-speaking wife from Argentina, who moved the boy to Edmonton.

While many in the West were paying attention to Japanese culture due to its post-war economic rise, Mr. Dawrant was curiously drawn to all things Chinese from an early age. He was, he says, "obsessed" with Bruce Lee, the Chinese-American martial-arts star. At 8, Mr. Dawrant began learning Chinese characters, and as an adolescent, he saved money from his paper route to subscribe to a Chinese-language cable-TV channel.

The first Chinese dialect he learned was Cantonese, with its nine distinct tones as opposed to Mandarin's four. It was the language spoken by most of the Chinese people he met growing up in Edmonton in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly immigrants from Hong Kong. Mr Dawrant immersed himself in the community, befriending the elderly and exchanging English lessons for help with his Cantonese.

At 15 he travelled to Hong Kong. A few weeks' visit turned into three months of crashing on couches and in spare rooms with families who ranged from carvers of ivory tourist souvenirs to CEOs of corporations. He completed a degree in East Asian Studies at the University of Alberta. Although he had no idea he wanted to be an interpreter at the time, the multi-disciplinary program was an ideal training ground. In addition to Chinese language and history, he studied sciences, music and sociology, among other subjects.

(Today, in casual conversation, Dawrant's intelligence shines as the subject drifts from history to global affairs to literature to music. Not surprisingly, considering his ear for languages, he is an accomplished musician. He plays piano and sings strongly in both English and Chinese.)

Outside of academia, he spent much of his university years at a dim-sum restaurant. He first had to push the cart of a "dim-sum girl" around the sprawling restaurant hawking *siu mai* and *har gao* dumplings. He soon graduated to busboy and eventually to a full-fledged waiter. He became a minor celebrity in Edmonton's Chinese community for his ability to converse in Cantonese with customers.

"My entire social life in university was based around the dim-sum restaurant," he says.

Nearing the end of his studies, Mr. Dawrant had two encounters that would forever change his life. His birth mother

contacted him after tracking him down with the help of a private investigator; he was inducted into a whole new family that eventually merged with his adopted kin - today, he says, his mother and adoptive mother are "best friends."

Around the same time, Mr. Dawrant met the man who would help determine his career. Jean Duval was Canada's top Chinese-language interpreter in the 1980s and 1990s. A large man with a handlebar mustache and a booming voice, he was born in France but was employed by the government of Canada. Some say this intellectual and gregarious character did as much to strengthen Canada's ties with China as any diplomat - when he visited the country with Jean Chrétien, he would receive just as warm a personal welcome from Chinese president Jiang Zemin as the prime minister did.

Mr. Dawrant met Mr. Duval on a plane headed to China in 1989. The interpreter was reading a book in a language Mr. Dawrant couldn't recognize (it was Uighur - Mr. Duval was compiling a dictionary). They spoke Mandarin to each other and Mr. Dawrant then switched to Cantonese. Mr. Duval couldn't converse as well in that language so he retaliated with Shanghainese. They called it a draw, and Mr. Duval talked about his career as an interpreter.

"It was absolutely fascinating to me. It was something I had never really thought about before. I'd been learning Chinese very seriously, but with no end game," Mr. Dawrant says.

The next stop was a brutal interpreting school in Taiwan where, like a U.S. Marine, Dawrant was physically and mentally dismantled to be built back up as an interpreter.

"It was class, practice and then more class and more practice. We never went anywhere. It was like special forces training for two years," he says. "They completely reconfigured the way your brain works - the way you deal with language and memory. Constructing a discourse model. Getting inside the speakers head and becoming very flexible with all your languages. It is kind of like torture, basically."

The newly rewired Mr. Dawrant took a job with the Canadian government in 1996. Though based in Toronto, the position involved constant travel to China, interpreting for ministers, diplomats and civil servants. He travelled not only to the major cities but to Chinese rural villages and communities that had never seen a *laowai* before.

"I was lucky to be there during a golden period for the Canada-China relationship. Prime Minister Chrétien ... did the 'Team Canada' trips and I was on all of them, doing simultaneous interpreting for the prime minister. Canada was very big in China. We had a lot of 'face,' " he says, using a term that doesn't translate well - simply put it means "respect," but the concept is much more complicated than that.

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For an interpreter, each language has its own challenges, but few are more difficult than Chinese. It is a language rife with homonyms, homographs, homophones and words whose meaning changes dramatically depending on the use of tone. There are also hundreds of words and phrases that simply don't translate into English. This is where the interpreter truly earns his keep by finding an appropriate substitute, a complex decision that must be made in a matter of seconds.

Worse are the many classical Chinese literary allusions and idioms favoured by many Chinese politicians and executives. Classical Chinese is a different language entirely from modern speech in China, and if the interpreter has never heard and been explained the gist of a classical phrase before, he's unlikely to have any idea of its meaning. The Chinese interpreter's greatest nightmare, Mr. Dawrant says, is hearing a client say, "This reminds me of a poem ... "

And yet, incredibly, major mistakes by professional interpreters are exceedingly rare. But when they do occur, the consequences can be extraordinary.

In October of 2007, a delegate from Syria was speaking at the United Nations in New York regarding a recent air strike on a Syrian target by Israeli war planes. There had been reports that Israel bombed the target because it believed it was a nuclear facility. Syria denied this and, speaking in Arabic at the UN, the delegate described the

action as an unwarranted "military aggression."

To interpret every speech into the UN's six official languages - Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), English, French, Russian and Spanish - a system called "relay" interpreting is employed: A speech is interpreted from one language, in this case Arabic, into another, in this case French, and then translated from there to the next language and the next.

The interpreting problem occurred going from French into English: The French interpreter picked up the Syrian delegate's description "military aggression" and used the word "militaire." The English interpreter, however, whether through a lapse of concentration or a slip in auditory processing, heard the word "nucléaires."

The implication was that Syria had admitted the planes had bombed a "nuclear facility." Chaos ensued. Almost immediately news outlets in the Middle East began reporting the stunning, yet wholly false, admission. Only hours later did the UN publish a statement saying the Syrian delegate had been "misquoted" and that the interpreter, whom the UN refused to identify, had been "reprimanded."

Mr. Dawrant himself admits once making a major mistake as a UN interpreter. In Bangkok, a Chinese delegate was pledging money to support UN activities. He said China would give 675,000 renminbi (RMB) "*he*" $100,000 U.S. dollars."

The Chinese word *he* (pronounced huh-ah) can be interpreted in two ways. It can mean "and" or "which is equivalent to." Doing a quick calculation in his head, Mr. Dawrant figured that at the time, 675,000 RMB was roughly equivalent to $100,000 U.S.. So Mr. Dawrant said China was offering 675,000 RMB to the UN.

Several minutes later, China requested the floor again and Mr. Dawrant immediately knew he had made a serious error. China was pledging 675,000 in RMB as well as a separate $100,000.

"So the Chinese delegate is talking, saying, 'Madame chair, we're sorry but the interpreter must have gotten this wrong,' " he recalls, still cringing. He was forced to relay into English the delegate pointing out his own embarrassing mistake.

Far more often, however, interpreters improve the communication skills of their subjects. They can smooth over verbal missteps or cultural gaffes, tone down insults even make a speaker seem more engaging.

In Beijing, a reporter once witnessed Mr. Dawrant interpret for Ed Stelmach, the charismatically challenged and soon-to-be-former premier of Alberta. With the help of Mr. Dawrant's voice, Mr. Stelmach came off much more interesting in Chinese.

There are two schools of thought on how much of a presence a professional interpreter should have. Under the U.N. model, interpreters speak dispassionately, with little emphasis or feeling. Mr. Dawrant, on the other hand, lowers and raises his voice in intensity and pitch as he stresses important points. He uses hand gestures and facial expressions. He is difficult to ignore as an element in the conversation. He says it is critical, however, that he never outshines his client.

"I really believe that good interpreting is like acting," he says. "It's not just our job to convey the words and the ideas. It is really our job to get across the energy and the passion of the speaker ... but without overshadowing or overtaking the speaker. To an extent that is appropriate, you have to convey the passion and the excitement and the tone of the speaker. If the tone is mocking, ironic or even insulting, I think it is our job to try and convey that," he says.

Some interpreters underplay a client's insults during a meeting or speech, believing that interpreting may amplify the affront. For the most part, Mr. Dawrant disagrees.

"It is not our job to question the speakers we are working for," he says. "These are very smart people and they know what they are doing. Frankly, if they screw up it is on them, not us. It's not on us, anyway. We're just saying what they said."

Indeed, as Mr. Dawrant sees it, despite his proximity to the action, he is likely destined to be little more than an interesting side note when the history of China's Western relations during the early 21st century is written.

"Interpreters don't have a lasting legacy, my friend. Translators do. You translate *War and Peace* and if it is the best translation ever, people will read that for posterity.

"We leave no legacy," he says. "Our work is ephemeral. It is words in the air."