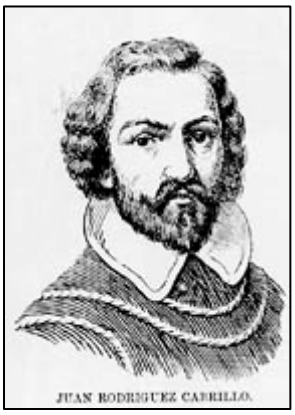
Anonyme

João Rodrigues



The Face of Translators and Interpreters

The wooden ship pitched and heaved in the storm, and João automatically lifted his cooking pot to protect it from the resulting slosh of stinking excrement around his feet. Here below deck, surrounded by the groans and smells of sick and dying men, even the daily water ration stank so badly he had to plug his nose to drink it. Bands of rats prowled the ship during the night, gnawing on the feet and faces of the sleeping men and boys. As a Jesuit novice and one of the youngest on board, João cooked for the sick and warded off rodents when he could, but he wondered how many of the one thousand men who had started the voyage in Portugal would still be alive at the end. He had heard tales of ships landing with only 200 sick souls still alive. And India could still be months away.

The year was 1574, and conditions like these would have been common for João Rodrigues, a 14-year-old orphan, on his long and arduous way to Japan to become a Jesuit missionary.

In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese Jesuits had worked out a system to locate and recruit the most promising young boys from Portugal's well-stocked orphanages. These boys like João were educated in Jesuit institutions and then sent on to one of their many mission outposts around the world.

Of all the mission societies, it was the Jesuits who most eagerly looked for ways to achieve inculturation, or culturally appropriate communication of the Christian message. A central component of this goal was the study of language. Once João had landed in Japan and regained his land legs, he channeled that

same determination that had kept him alive on his grueling three-year odyssey to Japan into learning the Japanese language.

As the Jesuits turned their focus onto Japanese culture in the late sixteenth century, it quickly became apparent that there was no one in the mission who could match João's linguistic abilities. His chief task soon became that of interpreter, working in particular as an intermediary between the Japanese court and Western merchants, sailors, and religious and governmental officials.
In fact, his skill set was so extraordinary that before long he had assumed the position of imperial confidant and interpreter to the rulers of Japan, interpreting language as well as all things cultural. Fifteen years after arriving in Japan, João attended at the deathbed of the ruler Toyotomi Hideyoshi, whom he had served as interpreter and adviser. He then remarkably maintained his highly influential status with Hideyoshi's successor and greatest rival, Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the last great Japanese shogunate.

Despite João's influence, life for missionaries in Japan was perilous during these years. João's Jesuit brothers were alternately persecuted, forced into hiding, and killed in mass executions, and João himself walked a tightrope back and forth between the halls of power and the cells of the persecuted. Though he was not able to prevent the infamous crucifixion of 26 European missionaries and Japanese followers in Nagasaki, he did receive permission to stay with them and make sure they were killed quickly. Most remarkably, he himself remained untouched, having become so indispensable to the Japanese leadership that he was able to maintain his influential position throughout all the upheaval and bloodshed. Eventually he even became the personal commercial agent of the Shogun, serving as the gatekeeper for all commercial activities between Japan and European countries.

However, when the relationship between the Japanese and Portuguese governments finally deteriorated in 1610 to a point where the Jesuit mission was given the choice of expelling Rodrigues or all its missionaries, Rodrigues left Japan, never to return. The remaining 23 years of his life he spent in a kind of exile in China. Though he tried to resume his position of authority in matters of language and culture, he could not recapture the excellence he had displayed in Japan.

What a rich life story, multi-faceted, mysterious, and melancholy all at the same time (something that novelist James Clavell recognized when he used João Rodrigues' biography to craft the character "Martin Alvito" in *Shōgun*).
An obvious and relevant aspect for us is the unusual role he played as an interpreter -- an orphan from halfway across the world who became a confidante

to kings and a policy maker for potentates. Unlike the impulse behind this year's *Face of Interpreters and Translators Photo Contest*, there is no known portrait of Rodrigues: he didn't need one, for unlike many of us, he was certainly not invisible during his time.

But the part of the story that touches me the most is the last part, beautifully and painfully described in Michael Cooper's biography (*Rodrigues the Interpreter*, Weatherhill, 1974). After his forced exit from Japan, Rodrigues assumed that he could replicate his tremendous success as a master of language and culture in China -- and pitifully failed.

I wonder whether it's fear of this same failure that is somehow ingrained in us when we look at changes in our workplaces and feel inadequate to grasp the new technologies and processes. It's essential to remember, though, that unlike Rodrigues, we aren't being forced to give up our excellence in the field of our first calling, nor do we have to become masters of technology -- we just have to be able to employ it adequately.

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