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The Grammaticas of Empire:

How Language Captures History & Power in the Colonial Value Systems of RF Kuang's *Babel*

Introduction to *Babel* & Thesis/Exploration

The nineteenth century was a time of mounting power in the British colonial empire, and in that context, also provides the setting for RF Kuang's novel, *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution*[1]. Published in 2022, *Babel* begins in a version of 1830s London where select groups of children are extracted from their homelands in various Britain-claimed territories, and educated by British benefactors in order to contribute to the study and work of Babel[2]: a fictional institute of language and translation centered in the heart of Oxford University. Falling under the genres of historical fantasy and speculative fiction, most of Kuang's depicted history is analogous with that of our world, but with one twist: in *Babel's* world, the act of translating a word or concept from one language to another, and then inscribing the match-pair of words in silver metal to capture the meaning lost between them, creates a powerful physical effect that can be exploited for material gain—making translation an "arcane craft" and a "betrayal" (per *Babel's* cover jacket) on which the empire's

[1] For short, referred to as just *Babel.* The novel's name is a reference to the biblical story of the tower Babel.

[2] Following Kari Stein's analysis (in works cited), *Babel* in italics will refer to the novel/primary artifact, whereas Babel unitalicized will refer to the institute situated within the novel.

expansion and growth has been built. As a result, foreign languages and those who are born native speakers of them are effectively commodities, creating an additional way in which colonized bodies and cultural capital were treated as resources to be extracted, controlled, and utilized by the crown. As context for the artifact, Kuang is a fantasy and speculative fiction author, but also a formidable academic with an MPhil in Chinese Studies and an MSc in Contemporary Chinese Studies from Cambridge and Oxford respectively, and is currently a PhD candidate in East Asian Languages and Literature at Yale (summarized per her Wikipedia entry). Furthermore, *Babel* itself quickly reached critical acclaim, and received awards for best fantasy of the year from Amazon, NPR, Kirkus Reviews and the Washington Post, and won the Nebula Award, British Book Award, and the Locus Award.

The main character, a young Chinese boy who takes the name Robin, is saved at the beginning of the story from a lethal cholera epidemic that struck his home. A British professor named Richard Lovell heals Robin—alone among his family members, the rest of whom all die without Lovell's intervention—and takes him back to Britain. Robin was selected because "For someone who had never left Canton in his life, the boy's English was remarkably good" (7), but this was because Professor Lovell engineered Robin's childhood from afar to produce someone who had the native speaker's ability with Mandarin, as well as prowess with English; which he did by sending Robin parcels with English books twice a year, and hiring a woman named Miss Betty purely for the purpose of living in Robin's household, speaking to him in English, and helping him learn to read it. Upon retrieving him, Lovell tests his ability to activate a silver bar that translates between English and Mandarin, and is pleased with the results—and as a result, he offers Robin an alternative to "early, inevitable death" in Canton (10), in the form of an education in language in order to prepare him to attend the Babel institute. After several years of

brutal study and having it made clear that he must "Dedicate [himself] to excelling at [his] studies…or take the first packet home" (43), Robin is accepted to Babel and meets the rest of his cohort: Ramy, a boy from Calcutta, Victoire, a girl from Haiti, and Letty, a British admiral's daughter. The four of them are united by the reality that "without Babel, they had nowhere in this country to go. They'd been chosen for privileges they couldn't have ever imagined, funded by powerful and wealthy men whose motives they did not fully understand, and they were acutely aware these could be lost at any moment" (87). Ultimately, they begin their journey at Babel best described as "simultaneously bold and terrified" (87).

To understand the language system these characters have been recruited to participate in, there are a few key dynamics to identify with respect to how translation functions in the novel. *Babel* applies a method of translation similar to that proposed by Philip E. Lewis, who writes in his essay *The Measure of Translation Effects* that "translation, when it occurs, has to move whatever meanings it captures from the original into a framework that tends to impose a different set of discursive relations and a different construction of reality" (223). What this references is the idea that there is an "inevitable compromise" in the act of translation due to the complexity of trying to transfer meaning from one unique structure of language to another (226); and in combination with the idea that language can shape reality, this notion of assured compromise provides the basis on which translation functions as an arcane craft within the novel. One of the professors at Babel, Professor Playfair, explains to the cohort that "because translation can never be perfect, the necessary distortions — the meaning lost or warping in the journey — are caught, and then manifested by the silver" (Kuang, 156). For example, a silver bar inscribed with the English word *"invisible"* and the Mandarin word *"wúxíng"* (which means not just invisible, but without shape, form or presence; wholly intangible) can make a person or group of people

formless and invisible because of the subtleties of meaning lost in translation—but the power of forfeited meaning can only be brought to life when wielded by someone who truly knows, lives and breathes both languages involved. Furthermore, languages that are very closely related retain more meaning between them over time (meaning that there is less lost in translation to manifest), which has resulted in European languages critically dwindling in power, and Oriental languages increasingly becoming "the stuff that everyone's fighting over," on which "the functioning of an entire empire depended" (Kuang 164, 200). This has fueled the fire behind breeding and recruiting students like Robin—and this colonial fervor for extraction is further apparent in the way translation is ultimately explained. Professor Playfair tells us that "Translation means doing violence upon the original, means warping and distorting it for foreign, unintended eyes. So where does that leave us? How can we conclude, except by acknowledging that an act of translation is then necessarily always an act of betrayal?" (153). This sets up the compromise as a trade in which Britian can, and does, take an unfair advantage in order to build their empire in the novel's world.

But all of that said—what evidence from the novel's exposition reveals the systemic sources of language's value by establishing the material relationship between silver, the power of translation, and the practices and value systems assigned to material commodities? How is this specifically evident in the rhetorical construction of cities, and the dynamics of the study of languages in the fictional empire? And from there, how does that narrative in the worldbuilding of Kuang's novel parallel dynamics of language and economic value relations in the real-world empire when put in dialogue with sources about history? How can profit-driven manipulation and exploitation of native languages for an oppressor's gain still take shape when vernaculars aren't directly erased, and are given a place for development in academia? Ultimately, what

makes translation an act of betrayal as Kuang says? My argument is that while the world and systems *Babel* builds to contextualize its plot give languages great value, they nonetheless capture and emphasize with a great deal of accuracy and nuance the ways in which the British empire was willing to insulate foreign language in spaces of academia in order to extract self-serving material profit. There are few academic narrative analyses that discuss the role arcane translation played in the fictional empire of the novel, but there are readings in the field of history on how the profit-driven influence of language studies took shape as real-world imperial practices in specific colonies and territories. Examples of the scholarly conversation that relate to the history referenced in *Babel* are various papers on how the British ran education systems in colonial Ghana, as well as papers on the founding of a Malaysian Anglo-Chinese college, all of which make comparable claims as to how colonial administrations created academic spaces to study foreign languages for reasons ultimately motivated by profit. This paper aims to bridge what I perceive as a gap in discourse and put literary/rhetorical analysis and historical research in dialogue with one another, with a goal of identifying how the novel constructs the colonial value systems that shape language's role in academia and how similar influences have emerged in our history.

These questions matter because control over how language takes shape in systems of economy and education—especially in the context of colonialism—is an aspect of our world that has held far more power and nuance than may be apparent without analysis of this kind. From a lens of post-colonial criticism, it is important to understand not only systems of eradication, but also the subtleties of systems that placed conditional value on those they oppressed, and ways in which foreign languages have been exploited like resources.

How *Babel* Situates Silver and Language Within Cities, Ports & Economic Value Systems

We understand from the general premise of the novel that people who speak foreign languages have a unique value due to their ability to invoke the power of silver, but *Babel* establishes in various forms via spaces of economy that language is given the value—and subsequently, treatment—of a material resource. One of the arguments the British use in the novel is that "language is not like a commercial good…to be bought and paid for. Language is an infinite resource. And if we learn it, if we use it – who are we stealing from?" (Kuang 117). But while language itself is never bought, there is an imbalance in the way the empire pursues the aggregation of it, because language *is* a concrete part of their economic systems both directly and indirectly—and one of the first places in the novel where that begins to emerge is the physical description of the plot's setting. The first aspect in which the novel built its world was through its cities: Canton, located in China and now known as modern day Guangzhou, and London. When Professor Lovell and Robin first leave Canton to travel to London, Robin gazes at its ports, of which the text says: "the mouth from which China encounters the world, was a universe of languages" (12). Immediately, it strikes notice that the port is described foremost by the space language occupies in it. But more notable is how when Robin first sees the complimentary port in London when he arrives, it appears to him that "London was, like Canton, a city of contradictions and multitudes, as was any city that acted as a mouth to the world" (19). In these parts of the text, the novel has used similar language to characterize these cities in a way that explicitly mirrors them, and following this, the London port is then described as "colonial trade at its apex" (20). Reading the secondary description in context of that similarity between Canton and London (which links the ways they have been described), it is implied that both the 'universe of language' and the sphere of trade and commerce share the same physical space.

This claim is further reinforced by the reality that right in the middle of these narrations, Robin is being brought over to Britain from one port to another for reasons that were "less like an adoption and more like a business proposal," marking him, by virtue of being a native speaker, as a resource as well (10). Before they depart, Lovell tests Robin's ability to manifest the power of a silver bar with a translation between English and Chinese, and afterward, when Robin asks why he is wanted, Lovell replies: "Because you can do *that"* (11). This is because, as the novel eventually reveals, Chinese speakers are absolutely critical, and desperately sought after to keep Britain running—because if not for Chinese speakers at the institute who could continue feeding power into the silver powering the city (whose number was only three individuals counting Robin himself), "the whole of Oxford would stop abruptly in its tracks" (200). Robin *is* the commodity in this context, in the same way language takes up space in these physical nexuses of economy, because in the world of the novel, language and its native speakers have material value as a resource in contexts and settings of trade, and the infrastructure of the empire.

As the novel's introduction continues to unfold and Robin is acquainted with the city of London for the first time, *Babel's* world is built to illustrate further not only how that reality of interconnection between physical silver, translated language and economic value takes shape, but that this value and its spoils are present in British economy and society in ways that differ from the rest of the world. To establish the global relevance of language and the place it holds in contexts of commodity, the novel began with the previously discussed parallels of London and Canton. But to make clear the ways in which the British empire stands apart as an amassed, unequal, colonial power in those spaces, the very same paragraphs in the novel also discuss London in greater detail, and great contrast with Canton. Right after the novel refers to both

cities as places that "acted like a mouth to the world," the following sentence immediately states: "But unlike Canton, London had a mechanical heartbeat." What this describes is that silver is *everywhere:* that it "glimmered from the wheels of cabs…lay buried under the streets" and is even "displayed in shopfronts" to advertise common wares amplified by silver's magic (19). It is inextricable from British infrastructure and the British economy at every level, and whenever "anyone spoke about Britain's future at all, the word [silver] was always there," which further enunciates how *critical* to the trajectory of the empire's growth silver is (33). This poses a stark antithesis to Robin's reflection of growing up in China, where silver bars are "rare," and only present "embedded in the prows of ships, carved into the sides of palanquins, and installed over the doors of warehouses in the foreign quarter" (8). Outside of Britain, silver is only in spaces of British presence; ships incoming to the ports, palanquins that would carry diplomats and visitors, and warehouses housing outsiders' trade operations. This is revealed to be because Babel "only sells its match-pairs to a very limited customer base," which never includes foreign commoners (97).

In these ways, the text makes no secret of the reality that because "London had accumulated the lion's share of both the world's silver ore and the world's languages, and the result was a city that was bigger, heavier, faster than nature allowed," *Babel's* version of Britain has disproportionately amassed their wealth in this particular sector—and that other countries, in contrast, are not nearly as resourced as a result (19). London is described as on the cusp of having "devoured itself," if not for its mission to "cast outwards for new delicacies, labour, capital and culture on which to feed" (19, 20). And this is emphasized further into the story, when Robin has enrolled at Babel, the source of that great power. We are told in very similar terms that "Oxford in 1836 was in an era of becoming, an insatiable creature feeding on the

wealth which it bred" (59), and the continual references to hunger, devouring, feeding and insatiability make clear the immensity of Britain's vigor to grow their capital in this resource. Put simply: "They sent British waves across the world. They brought back chests of silver" (20). Furthermore, the use of the word "bred" directly acknowledges that the way in which Britain achieves that growth is a matter of propagation and extraction; the way foreign bodies are taught English languages, brought in to contribute to the institute, and used to feed the empire's ability to fuel their use of silver. This process is a "trade" that only goes one way, shown in how "the newest, most powerful bars rely on Chinese, Sanskrit, and Arabic to work, but you'll count less than a thousand bars in the countries where those languages are widely spoken" (100). All of this further emphasizes that this resource is controlled and confined to an unequal space. Babel advances the study and development of Oriental languages in order to further their research into match-pairs and silverwork, but much of that work is limited to British review and benefit, because translations out of English and into other languages are indulged "less frequently" than their counterparts, because the various departments of Babel "only [translate] works into English and not the other way around" (75, 100). This absolute restriction of resource access has ultimately turned the novel's version of Britain into a country more concentrated with its spoils than it "had a right to be" (20). The world being introduced by the text this way concretely establishes the value *Babel's* empire placed on language and situates it directly in the context of silver as a material good over which power can be held and from which power can be gained, and this directly ties the value of language and silver to the value systems of imperial trade that made Britain an unequal force in the global setting from which it draws its fuel. And the novel, ultimately, summarizes it the most concisely: "Language is a resource just like gold and silver. People have fought and died over those Grammaticas" (164).

To solidify the conclusions drawn in this reading of the novel and their importance to the realm of humanistic inquiry, it is critical to concretely establish the roles that translation plays in *Babel's* empire: that being the literal forms it takes in practice, and which forms hold value in the fictional British systems and why. Interpretation for diplomatic relations and translation of published texts are applications of translation that would reasonably, and straightforwardly, have value in either world: ours or the novel's. If that were the case, the parallels between *Babel* and real-world history would be direct, and the answer to this line of inquiry would be far simpler. But the reason that translation swaying colonial extraction practices in the novel to such a high degree is so compelling, is because the value of studying language in *Babel* is explicitly stated to have nothing to do with either of those uses for it. Translation has those roles, yes; but in the text, those aren't the roles and profits for the empire that *matter,* or motivate language being studied—and the same is true, in its own ways, of real-world history. To argue the latter, the former must be clarified.

The reality that the profit from the silver industry and linguistic research is completely tied to colonial market interests, and not diplomatic or practical uses for translation, is made clear over the course of the story. When Robin and his classmates were introduced to Babel on their first day as students, they were walked through the various departments of the institute, two of which were devoted to diplomatic interpretation and text translation. Those areas of work were described as "[not] all that glamorous, because all that really matters is that you get your basic points across without offending anyone" and "low on the prestige rung" respectively; and those departments, as not being the places where "all that living energy [of language] might be channelled into something far more powerful. I mean, of course, silver" (76). The students are told in the same introduction that "Translation agencies have always been indispensable tools

of—nay, the centres of—great civilizations" (73); but this is because the use and control of language can influence power and gain in ways far more nuanced than the surface-level benefits of colonial relations. As a bleak, undeniable proof of that, the novel reveals that the largest sources of business for Babel are "militaries" and "slave traders," while the legal department "makes pennies in comparison" (99). *Babel* tells us that it is "violent work that sustains the fantasy" (136), and in this way, the novel reflects a stark reality that is critical to examine in our own history.

British Institution of Language in Ghanaian Schools Reflective of Practices & Colonial Motives in *Babel*

Often, we associate colonial manipulation of local languages with practices of erasure, wherein a language of the oppressor is instituted in a territory instead of local languages in favor of the oppressing culture's dominance—but in reality, there are different ways of exploiting local vernaculars, several of which are apparent in various parts of real-world history. Culture columnist Anna Corradi writes in the Brown Political Review: "According to UNESCO, about 231 languages have gone extinct in the world, 37 of which originated in Sub-Saharan Africa. These indigenous languages were replaced by Western ones imposed by colonizers," which is an example of the total institutional replacement that defines erasure in this context. But in *Babel,* we see languages foreign to Britain given enough value that academic institutions like Babel are devoted in earnest to advancing their study and preservation, which raises the question of how colonizers can still claim unequal power in their control over what languages have value, even in a scenario where local languages are still being instituted and studied. If these languages are still flourishing and resourced, and students are still being educated in their native tongues, how are

they being exploited and controlled? Fundamentally, the answer comes down to the economic value systems language is a part of, and how English and colonial interests remain dominant even in these conditions.

For the purposes of this paper, I would argue that there is a similar scenario in the real world to that of *Babel* to be found in colonial Ghana*,* wherein colonizers were willing to institute and preserve the local vernacular, but primarily for motives of economic gain. The University of Ghana scholarly journal article *RETHINKING BRITISH COLONIAL POLICY IN THE GOLD COAST: THE LANGUAGE FACTOR* by Cyrelene Amoah Boampong and the journal article in *Comparative Education* written by Obed Mfum-Mensah entitled *The Impact of Colonial and Postcolonial Ghanaian Language Policies on Vernacular Use in Schools in Two Northern Ghanaian Communities* both discuss how in the late 18th and 19th century (near the time the novel begins), British colonial administration began to dictate the education of the Gold Coast Colony (now modern day Ghana) and which languages the locals were taught in. Once British influence on education in the colony was solidified, missions were the primary facilitators of education in the Ghanian area. Per Boampong, these missionaries were motivated primarily by "zeal for evangelism" and "resocialising" (6, 7), and so they "supported local language as a medium of instruction," because it facilitated their primary agenda: which, Mfum-Mensah clarifies, was to "train local people to serve as church and church-school leaders" (5). Additionally, the first official western schools were "concerned with the education of the sons of European men from African women" (Boampong 4), which, interestingly, directly parallels Robin's character origins as Lovell's half-Chinese sire. However, as colonial interests that were economic began to enter the picture as well, the language instituted in the colony became English, for the explicit purpose of "[turning] out Gold Coasters who would be useful as

government and commercial employees," because the empire "needed cheap African employees to assist and guarantee its expanding administrative and commercial activities" (Boampong 1, 8). To that end, "the schools in almost all colonies were directed to meet this need" (6). Mfum-Mensah affirms this by writing: "The colonial schools…were primarily designed to meet the objectives and needs of the colonizers rather than the colonized" (4). From this dialogue shared between the two sources, we can establish at a surface level that which language group the British imposed the use of was motivated by what kind of native the the empire wanted to produce; whether for an idealistic purpose or one of economic gain.

But colonial policy in Ghana eventually took a stark pivot toward incentivizing an expanded use of local languages in their education system, which took a form analogous to the pretenses of the Babel institute. Once the institution of English had successfully created Gold Coasters who "effectively contributed to the colonial enterprise and acquired a sense of colonial patriotism" (Boampong 10), Frederick Gordon Guggisberg, who took power as governor over the colony in 1920, suddenly reinstated use of the local vernacular and attempted to bring it back to a perceived prominence in the education of the colony's youth. The idea had been preached at levels above him in a recommendation from the Phelps-Stokes Commission (which advised on the running of the colony) was to prioritze the joy of early learning in Gold Coast children (Mfum-Mensah 5). Following that, Guggisberg's personal reasoning was that Gold Coasters had "uncritically mimicked" European culture, and language by extension, which led him to the conclusion that: "A language cannot be taught to a child by making him repeat by memory certain sounds the meaning of which he does not understand, yet this is the system which has generally prevailed and has laid the foundation of the parrot-like knowledge that is such a strong characteristics of the boys and girls turned out by our primary schools" (Boampong 14). As a

result, local languages such as Twi and Fante were included in the major curriculum, and there were examinations introduced to determine whether the application of those languages was up to standard. Guggisberg set out to foster more complex minds than the "Black Englishmen" he felt the English-only system had produced, and alleged that it was for the natives' benefit (12).

But while these changes in favor of restoring the use of local languages seemed progressive and motivated by the benefit of the local communities on the surface, these practices can ultimately be interpreted as further evidence of the same critical relationship between language education and colonial profit that is the driving force of the novel. Mfum-Mensah argues that the colony's academic sector was structured to view "instruction in the language of the former colonizer as an approach that will lead to greater proficiency in that language, representing a further step towards economic development and participation in the international global economy," and that this was a result of the reality that "policies about providing or withholding an education in English were not simple questions to do with the medium of instruction but rather were concerned with different views of how best to run a colony" (6). What this argument recalls is that the reason it was desirable for these children to be 'better educated' (which in this case took the conceit of the advantages of having intellectual foundations in a native language), was ultimately so they could more skillfully contribute to the colonial system. And as a result of that, English had greater power regardless. Like in the case of *Babel,* where in order to be a student at the institute "One had to have a certain upbringing," in order to rise above their native status and be the ideal type of student (Kuang 112), it was only "The 'fortunate few' indigenous children who enrolled in school received instruction in English" (Mfum-Mensah 6). Following these arguments, practices that have given value to local languages in the context of British colonialism are not pure, because they stand against the backdrop of the reality that

these schools were instituted for the purpose of creating educated workers who were desirable enough in the colonial eye, not just for the higher principle of knowledge. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the result of these policies was not greater cultural strength for Ghana, but rather, a legacy of regional leaders ultimately choosing to return to English, due to "the use of the English language as a tool for identity formation, dominance and power, and as a benchmark for determining literacy and academic success in the Ghanaian society" (Mfum-Mensah 5).

In conclusion, creating an academic system that preserves education in foreign languages and produces stronger minds certainly has the appearance of a progressive, empowering thing, but in a system where the strength those students cultivate feeds directly into the colonizer's working class, the benefit of the student is always the benefit of the empire—which comes full circle back to the world of *Babel* as well. Boampong assesses clearly that the colonial government's reasons for taking charge of and investing in local education systems and local vernacular "should only be analysed against the backdrop of future benefits to be derived [from] the colony" (8), and this is a direct parallel to how, in the novel, "The professors like to pretend that the tower is a refuge for pure knowledge, that it sits above the mundane concerns of business and commerce, but it does not. It's intricately tied to the business of colonialism. It *is* the business of colonialism" (Kuang 100). Kari Stein's analysis supports this reading as well, and similarly argues that in *Babel,* non-English languages "do not merit academic consideration. The only reason their languages might be studied is…to strengthen the British foothold in the colonies" (Stein 14). Simply breaking down the economic motivations at play proves the point that preservation efforts can also be unjust and profit-driven when the motive is one of exploitation[3]. And therefore, systems of this kind are ultimately still systems of oppression, even

[3] This is to say nothing of the strong rhetoric of racism that lay behind these decisions as well, but due to the limited scope of this paper and the thesis' focus on motivations of forms of colonial value defined by material & economic profit, that would be a separate analysis.

though foreign languages are receiving resources, because the merits of their use are being exploited for gain nonetheless. This was true of Ghana, and as a result of their systemic similarities, we arrive at the conclusion that the world in *Babel* reflects that truth as well.

Colonial Market Interests That Developed the Anglo-Chinese College of 19th Century Malaysia & Similarities to Forces Behind Babel Institute

After Robin's first year at Babel, the novel offhandedly mentions that he is sent to the Anglo-Chinese College in Malacca, a state in Malaysia, during the summer in order to "maintain his Mandarin" (Kuang 154) — but arguably, this was a very well-chosen reference, because the interests that drove the development of the real-life college share similarities with those behind the fictional Babel institute. Per R.L. O'Sullivan's collection of history of the college and discussion of the colonial factors that motivated its evolution in the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society,* the college opened in 1820 (only eight years before Robin is rescued by Professor Lovell in the novel), and was founded by Reverend Robert Morrison, China's "first Protestant missionary," with the sentiment that "The world still awaited a Chinese Bible," which Morrison was commissioned to produce (1). The college "aimed to include in its studies all the languages…of the eastern archipelago, for the purposes of commerce as well as christianity" (2), and due to the Chinese Bible project, translation also featured heavily in the work it was built to do. The college was originally meant to focus on the study of Chinese for evangelical purposes, and specifically, "'the language and literature of China according to the correct pronunciation of the Mandarin tongue' were to be taught, as well as 'English language and literature'" (4). But it is worth noting that as time went on and more pragmatic voices like those of Reverend William Milne began to join the expansion of leadership, missionary interests proved to be a minimal part of what supported the college monetarily, and neither did they

become one of the institution's most notable outputs. Eventually, "a Chinese student could expect to 'read and understand the Chinese classics' and 'read and write the English language,' and…In addition he would be instructed in Mathematics, History, Geography…Logic, Moral Philosophy, Theology and Astronomy" (7). What is critical, however, is that while the religious tones were never lost, "What helped most to broaden the scope of the college" from pure gospelizing to the study of languages in and of themselves "was the need for funds" (3). As Milne himself put it, "By making the Plan…literary rather than religious, we have obtained upward of nine thousand Spanish dollars, and I may venture to affirm that had it been solely... and exclusively for religious purposes, we would not have obtained five hundred" (4). The aim to study language outside the context of christianity (as well as within it) got the college funding and investment specifically from the East India Company, which was "the leading monopolist in trade with China from a factory at Canton, the port where all European trade took place," because an economic interest saw a use for such an institute. In reference to numerous donors on record similar to the East India Company, "A surviving subscription list is impressive" (2). In the novel, similarly, we are told repeatedly of Babel that "It pays well to perform what the general public thinks of as magic, doesn't it?" in the context of how the British economy feeds the institute to "touch up" city silver, which is ultimately what keeps the institute of such great importance and keeps it engaged in its work (Kuang 160). Therefore, given how much funding was readily put into this endeavor by these companies, it can be understood that there was concrete economic value to be seized upon in this kind of institute and the learning that occurs within it—enough so to shift the institution further *toward* academics in a form analogous to Babel.

However, while Babel is not an inherently religious institute, the evangelical narrative that underwrote the Anglo-Chinese College before colonial market interests became more dominant is nodded at in Babel's history, and in both the novel and the real world, the driving force of economic value is built on top of a similar, tenuous current of religiosity. Babel is named after a story from the Bible, which narrates how humans—all in perfect comprehension of another through a shared, perfect language—tried to build a tower to heaven, but were struck down for their hubris and split with the forced introduction of different languages, rendering the "Adamic language" and ineffable understanding lost forever. There is a real notion of the "Babelian curse" (termed by Boampong), which is a belief that diversity of languages is a divine punishment, and by extension is seen to be the chasm from which the burden of translation emerges; the very burden-come-power on which Babel is built. Unlike the Anglo-Chinese College, there is no theology taught or studied in the novel. But some characters in Babel's history have tried to use silver to derive power from translating the names of God, and others have attempted to focus their academic careers on divining the Adamic language in itself—although, granted, these efforts were never successful, and are remarked upon by Professor Lovell later on as being nothing more than endeavors of failure that he does not particularly believe in (114). In addition, Victoire (one of Robin's cohort-mates at the institute) was asked to translate sacred Haitian texts, because while her professor believed Kreyol to be a "degenerate language," "all he wanted to know about was Vodou"—but she was unwilling to "pilfer through [her] people's beliefs for a match-pair that might make a silver bar glow," even though it was the only reason the institute was interested in Haitian language at all (191). This speaks to a fascination with religion that seems to empower the British, through Babel, to search for even more gain to plunder and extract through the study of languages. As Professor Playfair

puts it: “We will never speak the divine language. But by amassing all the world’s languages under this roof, by collecting the full range of human expressions…we can try. We will never touch heaven from this mortal plane, but our confusion is not infinite. We can, through perfecting the arts of translation, achieve what humanity lost at Babel” (108)—and this ideology seems to provide the basis on which the British, as colonizers, feel permission to pursue their mission in this sector the way they do. Playfair even introduces Robin and his cohort to Babel at the start of the novel with a similar speech of idealisms which seems to entirely sidestep the reality of that a ferocious, material enormity is what fuels Babel near-entirely in truth (81), and Oxford in itself is described as being equal to Anglicanism and Christianity in the same way that London is in the second section of the novel. The novel even goes so far as to mention that silver was “always there” not just in the economy or the city, but in prayer books as well (34). And as such, despite the reality that Babel (like the Anglo-Chinese College) was materially propelled forth by economic gain and investment, there are ideologies of higher power still embedded in the base of those systems, giving them power in a parallel way.

Conclusion

This reading was not exhaustive, but what emerges from these historical sources and the dialogue they share with *Babel* is the reality that the British empire is and has been willing to control and insulate foreign languages in spaces of academia in order to reap concrete profit, both in the novel and the real world; and more broadly, that colonization’s manipulation of language moves beyond erasure into direct exploitation. The novel illustrates clearly that language had a great stake in their economy, and we see that in territories like the Gold Coast and Malaysia, similar interests directly drove the ways in which language was studied. This,

ultimately, is where the betrayal of translation arises from. In these ways, *Babel* captures a great deal of history, and is a bracing examination of what gain language really brings a colonizer—and what an empire will do to capitalize on it.

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