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A Visit to the Tsungli Yamen

EDITED BY WARREN B. WALSH

DURING Anson Burlingame's ministry to China, the Chinese scholar, Sen-ki-yu, wrote an extremely laudatory account of George Washington. Burlingame reported the matter to Secretary of State Seward, and the latter decided to take official notice of the honor paid to Washington. Accordingly, Seward had prepared a copy of Stuart's portrait of Washington as a gift to Sen. The painting was sent to Burlingame with instructions to make a formal presentation. On October 21, 1867, Mr. Burlingame made an official call upon the Tsungli Yamen for the purpose of presenting the portrait to Sen.¹

The minister was accompanied by Dr. W. A. P. Martin, a missionary who often served as Burlingame's interpreter; Dr. S. Wells Williams, for many years an American consular and diplomatic official in China;² and Walter Anson Burlingame, his second son and writer of the following letter. The "Dear Grandpa" to whom the letter was written was the Hon. Isaac Livermore of Boston.

The form, spelling, and grammar of the letter have not been changed. The document is unsigned because Walter attached it to a subsequent letter. No relevant material has been omitted.

WARREN B. WALSH

Syracuse, New York

Peking Oct. 23rd [1867]

Dear Grandpa

This is probably the last time that I shall write you from Peking. We leave here for Shanghai in about ten days, as Mother has probably told you³. . .

Day before yesterday was a very important one in my life. On that day I visited the Ya-mun [Tsungli Yamen] or Foreign Office, and saw the men who control a quarter of the population of the World.⁴ I will begin at the beginning and tell you all about my visit.

We left the Legation at 2½ o'clock, Father riding in a chair and Dr. Williams and

¹ Burlingame's report of the incident is to be found in the *House Executive Documents, Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs*. Exec. Doc. #1, 40th Cong., 2nd sess. (1867-1868) Vol. I, No. 1, Pt. 1, pp. 452 ff. and 512 ff.

² Dr. Williams afterwards became Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at Yale. He was the author of the famous *Middle Kingdom*. His son, Frederick W., author of the standard work on the Burlingame Mission, was a playmate of the Burlingame children, as were also Dr. Martin's two sons.

³ This statement places Anson Burlingame's decision to resign his post much earlier than do the standard accounts of his mission. Cf. W. B. Walsh, "The Beginnings of the Burlingame Mission," *Far Eastern Quarterly*, IV, No. 3 (May, 1945), 274-277. The material which I have omitted deals with family matters.

⁴ The Tsungli Yamen was established in 1861 to handle relations with foreigners. It soon outgrew that limitation, however, and became a sort of cabinet.

I riding on horseback. We were preceded by four men on horseback who cleared the way for us. The purpose of this visit was to present to [Sen-ki-yu] the Chinese Geographer, a splendid picture of Washington which had been sent to him by the Government on account of his praise of Washington in his description of the prominent men of foreign countries. The picture is a splendid one and is a copy of Stuart's painting of Washington.

We soon reached the Ya-mun, where we were received very cordially by the officials. They were very glad to see me and shook hands with me, inquired how old I was, and upon being told that I was 15, one of the men exclaimed, "Why! the little minister will be as big as his father pretty soon" and then laughed tremendously.

We were then conducted into a little room, about 30 ft. square, very plainly furnished, where we were seated. The first thing I noticed was the extreme simplicity with which everything was done. Here were the men who controlled [*sic*] China, sitting in a small, badly furnished room. They were dressed as simply as the common Chinamen and not nearly as well as the boys who wait on our table. First, on the left of Father, was old [Sen]. He was about 75 or 80 years old, and looked as if he had not many more years to live. He was a large, stout man with very white hair and a long white beard. Next to him was the great Wunseang [Wensiang, leader of the progressive group] who stands next to Prince Kung in rank. He was a fine looking fellow, about 45 years old, with a sharp, intelligent look about him which is not often seen in a Chinaman. Next was Tung Chik [Tung Hsün ?], a fat, jolly individual who took great delight in drinking every one's health. Then came Han [probably, Tan Ting-siang], who is a little man with a small black beard. He seldom spoke, but when he did, he always spoke with good sense. He is one of the smartest of them all and is exceedingly quiet. Next to Han is Chung-lung [?], a very nice, pleasant old gentleman. Then I came next, and then Dr. Martin and then Dr. Williams and Father. Dr. Martin interpreted. We sat around a little table . . . Father, after having presented the picture, began to talk business with them. In the meantime, all kinds of delicious dainties and sweetmeats had been put upon the table in little bits of dishes, until there was not a vacant place an inch square on the table. There were cakes, candies, fruits, and other Chinese delicacies to eat, and very strong Chinese wine, heated, to drink. We were expected to eat while the business was discussed. They heaped up my plate with all kinds of delicacies. Old Chung-lung, who sat next to me would take his chop-sticks and convey choice bits from his own plate to mine. We were provided with forks and spoons and chop sticks. I am afraid if you had seen me dip into the "grub" you would have been alarmed for the safety of my digestive organs. I ate, and ate, and ate until I felt awfully full. But the more I ate, the more old Chung-lung piled on my plate. Oh, you can't imagine how much I ate! I felt that I could not hold out much longer, so I gave Chung-lung a gentle hint (through Dr. Martin) that I had had enough. But the old chap didn't take the hint in the right way, and thinking that I said I had had enough out of mere politeness, he piled on the dainties faster than ever. I secretly wished old Chung-lung at the bottom of the sea, but of course I had to go on eating. He gave me a specimen of everything on the table, among which were lemon seeds, orange seeds, watermelon seeds, and many other varieties of seeds. He also gave me an immense variety of sea weed, which the Chinese esteem as a special luxury.

We stayed several hours, during which time Father discussed everything con-

nected with China. I was not very sorry when the time came to go home. The officials went with us to the gate, which they are not accustomed to do unless their visitor is of high rank and stands on good terms with them. Old Chung-lung admired my pony immensely. He said he would like to have one for his boy.

So ended my first and probably last visit to the rulers of China. I would not have missed it for a great deal, neither would I care about going again. Upon the whole (although they did cram me with food) it improved my strong regard for the Chinese. It must be admitted [*sic*] that they are the New Englanders of the East.