

FEATURE

FOR THE EQUALITY OF MEN – FOR THE EQUALITY OF NATIONS

Anson Burlingame and China's First Embassy to the United States, 1868

By John Schrecker



Anson Burlingame, 1820-70, American diplomat, born in New Berlin, N.Y. He became a lawyer in Boston and later (1855-61) a Congressman. Defeated for reelection, he was made (1861) Minister to China. By his tact and understanding of Chinese opposition to the autocratic methods of foreigners in the treaty ports, he won a place as adviser to the Chinese government. In 1867, China sent him as head of a mission to visit foreign lands in order to secure information and sign treaties of amity. He visited Washington, London, and capitals on the Continent. One result was a treaty between China and the United States, supplementary to the 1858 treaty. This, usually called the Burlingame Treaty, and was signed in 1868. It was a treaty of friendship based on Western principles of international law. One clause encouraged Chinese immigration—laborers were then much in demand in the West; later the heavy influx of Chinese under its provisions caused friction on the West Coast and led to the exclusion of Chinese immigrants.

China's first embassy to Western nations visited the United States and Europe between 1868 and 1870. It arrived in San Francisco, the first stop on its journey, in March 1868 and remained in America for five months, visiting, among other places, New York, Washington, and Boston. The embassy was led by Anson Burlingame and two Chinese officials, Zhigang and Sun Jiagu. Burlingame had been serving as the American minister to China when, in 1867, the Chinese government asked him to enter its service as Envoy Extraordinary to the Western powers. Because of Burlingame's status, and because he was assigned the task of negotiating with the Western governments, the embassy has been known as the Burlingame Mission.

Anson Burlingame was born in upstate New York in 1820, raised in the Midwest, and entered politics in Boston in the late 1840s. Ardently opposed to slavery, he served three terms in Congress and became an early Republican. Burlingame was a popular figure, a renowned orator, and involved in all the famous battles over slavery of the 1850s. In 1861, President Lincoln designated him minister to China, where he served until 1867. In China, Burlingame led the way in establishing the so-called Cooperative Policy, in which the Western powers aimed at treating that country in a peaceful and diplomatic manner rather than with the force that had hitherto defined relations. It was Burlingame's role in establishing the new approach, as well as the respectful and supportive style that marked his dealings with the Chinese government, that encouraged Beijing to name him China's envoy to the West.

*The Chinese Embassy /
photographed by Brady; Harper's Weekly ,
June 13, 1868*



The bitter struggle between Republicans and Democrats over Reconstruction set the background for the mission's reception in America. In the years after the Civil War, the Republican Party, which completely dominated the federal government, proclaimed that it had saved the Union, freed the slaves, and now, through Reconstruction, was working to ensure the rights of the newly liberated Blacks. On the other side, the Democratic Party asserted its patriotism, but showed a kinship with the racist views of the defeated South and vigorously opposed Reconstruction. On the West Coast, the Burlingame mission's first stop, an additional factor roiled the political scene – the presence of the only sizable Chinese community in the United States. The community lived under an array of discriminatory laws, including unjust treatment at law, special taxes, and no right to become citizens. Overall, Republicans were generally pro-China, supportive of the Chinese community and championed the Burlingame Mission. Conversely, Democrats proved hostile. Burlingame's political connections within the Republican elite, the progressive ideals of the Lincoln era, and the drive for equality during Reconstruction, all played a major role in the success of the mission.

While in America, Burlingame used his speeches and interviews to present a favorable impression of the country he represented and to emphasize the importance of treating that nation with full respect and as a normal and equal actor in international affairs. Sometimes, he tended to exaggerate the country's strengths and to overly optimistic simplifications of the situation there, things for which some historians have criticized him. However, Burlingame's strongly positive

presentation of China follows the normal and accepted role of foreign ambassadors when speaking of the country they represent – no one expects objectivity from an ambassador – and Burlingame would never have contemplated doing less for China. At the same time, in the 1860s, China, at the height of the Tongzhi Restoration and at the beginning of the Self-strengthening Movement, was carrying out important innovations in its domestic and foreign affairs.

Even Burlingame's language sought to transmit respect for China, never using any of those common words – such as “Celestial” or “Mandarin” – that implied the country was in any way exotic. His care in this matter suggests that such terms, so common in the nineteenth century, and in some cases down to our own time, were even then considered disrespectful. Similarly, Burlingame was punctilious in matters of protocol, always working to emphasize Chinese equality in international relations.

Overall, Burlingame presented China's case in moral and practical terms. For example, he worked to connect a fair deal for China to the drive for racial equality that marked Reconstruction. Thus, in Boston, his home and former constituency, he said, “Here, I learned to denounce that pride of race which denies the brotherhood of man; here I learned to plead for four millions of human beings as I now speak for four hundred millions of human beings. I speak

today as in the old time for the equality of men – for the equality of nations.”

In addition to emphasizing the need to treat China equally and with respect, Burlingame stressed several additional themes. One was that the cultural values of China and the West were compatible. Burlingame was no cultural relativist, nor was the audience he was trying to influence. The mission, he said, was undertaken in “the broad interest of civilization” and he worked to make China comprehensible by presenting it in terms that would make it seem familiar to Americans. The concept of a common humanity had long been a theme of American radicals like Burlingame, and before the Civil War they had equated their antislavery movement with an international drive toward freedom and progress. A single ideal of civilization was also compatible with Chinese values, and the attitudes of Burlingame’s Chinese colleagues toward the United States provide striking examples of this traditional Confucian view.

Another of Burlingame’s themes was to emphasize that China had entered upon a process of fundamental change. Prior to the 1860s, he said, the West had treated China roughly, and “affairs went on upon a system of misunderstandings, resulting in mutual misfortune.” But this situation had changed with the Cooperative Policy, when the Western powers worked to “substitute for the old false system of force one of fair diplomatic action.” The new approach had, in turn, contributed to new developments in China – changes that Burlingame argued represented a turning point for China and its interactions with the West.



Anson Burlingame (1820-1870), an American diplomat standing with the "Chinese Embassy to Foreign Powers". Undated engraving from a painting by Chappel.

The innovations he mentioned ranged from new arsenals, harbor facilities, and a rise in trade, to the creation of the Zongli Yamen (China’s new “foreign office”), the translation of Wheaton’s text on Western international law, and the growth of the Imperial Maritime Customs. As America’s minister, Burlingame had not been particularly sympathetic to missionaries and the tensions they aroused in China; but now he seemed to feel that local American religious support was crucial to his cause. As a result, he also asserted that Western missionaries were doing well in China. Finally, Burlingame stressed that his embassy itself epitomized the new Chinese policies.

Burlingame’s emphasis on the growing Western influence in China might today be seen as ethnocentric. However, he always took care to stress China’s national autonomy, emphasizing that changes should never be forced on Beijing. Even more significantly, he balanced his reports on innovation in China by underscoring that the West also had much to learn from that country. In particular, he cited Chinese ideals of equality, orderly social institutions, and what today is known as the Confucian personality. He called on America for that generous spirit which is not too proud to learn, and which is not afraid to teach: that great spirit, which, while it would exchange goods with China would also exchange thoughts with China; that would inquire carefully into the cause of that sobriety and industry of which you have made mention; that would learn something of the long experience of this people; that would question those institutions which have withstood

the storms of time – as to the secret of their stability; that would ask what means that competitive system under which the lowest coolie's son may rise to the highest office in the Empire, and which makes scholarship the test of merit.

Finally, as part of his presentation of China, Burlingame sharply attacked those who hankered after the older policy of force, those who “would say to China: We wish to have no other relations with you than such as we establish in our own partial and mean and cruel interests at the cannon's mouth.” He not only attacked such views, but also described the dangers they entailed – trifling with China, he stressed, could result in violent retribution and war. His mission, Burlingame said, represented “the meeting of two civilizations which have hitherto revolved in separate spheres. It is a mighty revolution. Let us hope, sir, that it will go on without those convulsions which are too apt to make great changes in human affairs. Let us hope that it will be achieved without the shedding of one drop of human blood. We are for peace. We come not with beat of drum nor martial tread. Though representing the latent power of eighty millions of fighting men, we are the heralds of good will.”

The greatest accomplishment of the mission was a new treaty between the United States and China – the so-called Burlingame Treaty. The agreement displayed a tone of equality, reciprocity, and mutual respect not found in any treaty between China and the West since Opium War.

Burlingame's chief goal for the treaty was to achieve a more equitable position for China in international affairs. At the same time, he sought to redress the injustices faced by the Chinese community in the America. In San Francisco, community leaders had impressed their problems on the mission and urged it to correct the situation. Consequently, with the Burlingame Treaty, America's Chinese community emerged for the first time as an active

factor in relations between Beijing and Washington.

Among other things, the treaty promised China autonomy in its internal affairs, underlined the right of Chinese emigration to the U.S., banned the anti-Chinese legislation in California, and gave China the right to open consulates. It also legalized Chinese citizenship, something that existing American law did not permit. At the same time, the treaty's text went out of its way to underline China's international equality. It pointedly makes no mention of the unequal aspects of the existing relations. At the same time, the various articles take pains to place the United States and China on an equal footing by making all privileges and responsibilities symmetrical.

For example, Article Six that made the anti-Chinese legislation in California illegal, did so by granting Chinese residents most-favored-nation status equal to that of Western nationals in the U.S., including citizenship. Similarly, Article Five that guaranteed free Chinese emigration to America, also banned a coolie trade from America to China and granted Americans the right to emigrate there, neither very common – or even likely – events, but part of the treaty's strategy of treating China as an equal.

Among the responses to the agreement, was a noteworthy 6000 word article by Mark Twain – a friend and great admirer of Burlingame – and written in consultation with him. The piece has details and analysis supplied by Burlingame, and rendered with typical Twainsian panache. In the article Twain does make satiric use of the term “Chinamen/man,” and again it is worth noting that Burlingame never employed even this very common but disrespectful word. The article discusses each clause of the treaty, but pays most attention to how the Chinese community in California would benefit from the agreement. For example:

It affords me infinite satisfaction to call particular attention to this Consul clause, and think of the howl that will go up from the cooks, the railroad graders, and the cobble-stone artists

of California, when they read it. They can never beat and bang and set the dogs on the Chinamen any more. These pastimes are lost to them forever. In San Francisco, a large part of the most interesting local news in the daily papers consists of gorgeous compliments to the 'able and efficient' Officer This and That for arresting Ah Foo or Ching Wang, or Song Hi for stealing a chicken; but when some white brute breaks an unoffending Chinaman's head with a brick, the paper does not compliment an officer for arresting the assaulter, for the simple reason that the officer does not make the arrest; the shedding of Chinese blood only makes him laugh; he considers it fun of the most entertaining description. I have seen dogs almost tear helpless Chinamen to pieces in broad daylight in San Francisco, and I have seen hod-carriers who help to make Presidents stand around and enjoy the sport. I have seen troops of boys assault a Chinaman with stones when he was walking quietly along about his business and send him bruised and bleeding home. I have seen Chinamen abused and maltreated in all the mean, cowardly ways possible to the invention of a degraded nature, but I never saw a policeman interfere in the matter and I never saw a Chinaman righted in a court of justice for wrongs thus done him....California is one of the most liberal and progressive States in the Union, and the best and worthiest of her citizens will be glad to know that the days of persecuting Chinamen are over in California.

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