

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Anson Burlingame: Diplomat, Evangelist, Idea Person

Re: America Needs More Anson Burlingames

[CAF, April 2009 by George Koo]

As the article noted, Anson Burlingame, whom President Lincoln delegated as the U.S. minister to the Qing-dynasty China in 1861, was appointed by China as its roving envoy to the West and Russia in 1867 after he resigned from his minister post. Both the appointment and his acceptance were extraordinary events in China's history of modernization and in U.S.-China relations. Three issues related to Burlingame, not mentioned in the article, are revealing of the person and the times.

1. How did Burlingame become China's roving envoy?

Burlingame, in a letter to Secretary of State Seward, describing the genesis of the China Mission, explained why he accepted the appointment, "When the oldest nation in the world, containing one-third of the human race, seeks, for the first time, to come into relations with the West, and requests the youngest nation, through its representative, to act as the medium of such change, the mission is not one to be solicited or rejected."

On China's side, the court record of Emperor Tongzhi showed that Prince Gong, who headed the board of governors of *Zongli Yamen* (a bureau to manage foreign affairs), sought the emperor's approval of the Burlingame's appointment. The need for an envoy arose because the Treaty of Nanking (the treaty that concluded the Opium War), of Wangxia, of Tianjin, were up for revision,

"The date of revising the treaties is near.... [The Ministry] has

not carried out its plan to send an emissary to the treat)' countries because of the lack of suitable personnel....The American minister Anson Burlingame.. is a man of peace Last year he even helped China resolve difficulties and settle disputes [with foreign countries] when he was away in America. In the recent farewell dinner,... he said in the future he will work with all his effort to help settle disputes that are unfair to China, as if China had dispatched him as its envoy...Burlingame [seemed] intending to establish [himself a] name [in helping China]; his feelings are not false. Your minister has since visited him several times and on each occasion he spoke passionately. Your minister has considered that [in diplomacy] it is not essential [for a country] to use [its] own countryman as its representative; if [the person] is honest and trustworthy, it does not matter which region [of the world] he comes from On the twenty-third day [of this month] your minister had a candid discussion with Burlingame [on dispatching him



From knowing nothing about of China to becoming a diplomat working on behalf China may seem remarkable, but China has this effect on many Americans that spend time in the country.

While living in China, they come to appreciate Chinese culture, values and the daily lives of the people.

as China's envoy] and he accepted it with deep feelings...."

2. Was Burlingame a dedicated evangelist or an effective envoy or both?

Anson Burlingame, son of an eloquent Methodist prayer leader, was known as a "magnetic" orator in his days as a congressman from Massachusetts. Toward the end of his first major speech to convince a San Francisco audience to treat China on the basis of equality, he was no longer speaking as China's envoy, but as an American evangelist making an appeal to the evangelical spirit of his flock:

"[The China Mission] means commerce; it means peace; it means a unification of her [China's] own interests with the whole human race—I believe that this generous greeting [of yours] is a better exponent of the wishes of the West,... a generous spirit which... would exchange goods with China, would also exchange thoughts with China,...[a spirit which] does not believe that the Christian's hope shall cease to bloom where the Christian martyrs fell."

3. Burlingame and the Open Door policy. In America, through Burlingame's effort, the two countries signed the Seward-Burlingame Treaty of 1868 (the treaty was drafted



**He was a politician and
Congressman from
Massachusetts, whom
President Lincoln
appointed as his envoy
to China in 1861.
He was outspoken in
defense of the
sovereignty of China
and criticized foreign
interference in China's
internal affairs.**

by Secretary of State William Seward).

The Seward-Burlingame Treaty seemed to contain two aspects: a spirit of equality and the translation of that spirit into action. For example, Article V states that both countries recognized man's "inherent and inalienable" right of free migration and emigration. (Burlingame died of pneumonia in 1870 in St. Petersburg, Russia, as China's envoy and did not live to see the day that the treaty was denounced in America. The Qing court awarded Burlingame a posthumous civil-service title of the First Rank and a pension of \$10,000 to his family. He was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The town Burlingame near the San Francisco Airport was named after him.)

Some thirty years later, in 1900, China was facing the peril of being divided by the European powers, Russia, and Japan, in its imminent defeat by them and the United States following the siege of Beijing's diplomatic compound by the Boxers. Secretary of State John Hay proposed the Open Door policy to the Powers to respect China's neutrality and territorial integrity. (The policy was regarded a failure by American historians because Hay did not or could

not back it up with enforcing commitment.) Hay initiated the policy at the urge of William Rockhill (who in 1905 became the US. minister to China). Rockhill, in turn, had been urged by Alfred Hoppisley, an Englishman who worked in the Chinese Imperial Maritime Custom Service. But the genesis of the policy could be traced back to the Seward-Burlingame period. In 1862 Burlingame wrote to Seward,

"If the treaty powers could agree among themselves to the neutrality of China, and together secure order in the treaty ports, and give their moral support to that party in China in favor of order, the interest of humanity would be sub-served. "

In the hindsight of the two world wars that would kill hundreds of millions of people in the next century, which largely stemmed from some Powers countries to seek dominance and conquest, we can conclude that the time of Burlingame's ideas of nations providing "moral support" to the poor and weak and serving "the interest of humanity" was yet to come.

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