

LANZHOU BRIDGE CENTENNIAL



Eight descendants of Paul Spingaerd were invited to participate in the ceremonies on August 26th in the city of Lanzhou, China, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the First Steel Bridge Across the Yellow River, now known as Zhongshan Qiao. At the gala ceremony these foreign guests were conferred honorary citizenship, and regaled with gifts and banquets. It was a joyful and memorable event for which the guests are grateful not only to the officials who honored them with the invitation and citizenship them, but also to the man who links them to the bridge, Paul Spingaerd.



Paul Spingaerd (1842 – 1906) began life as an orphan in Brussels, Belgium, but over his 41 years in China he earned himself the recognition of being “the famous Belgian mandarin.” Also known by the Chinese name of Lin Fuchen (林輔臣), Paul served for 14 years as customs inspector at China’s western frontier after traveling throughout China with Ferdinand von Richthofen and a few years as a fur trader in Mongolia. Eminent Viceroy Li Hongzhang appointed Paul to the post in Gansu province, where Paul also conducted prospecting missions. Paul knew the area well, and three of his sons married ladies from Lanzhou.

Although Paul died before the bridge at Lanzhou was even begun, books and newspaper articles in both Belgium and China credit him for having proposed the construction of this bridge to his friend and benefactor, Viceroy Peng. Among the objectives of his trip back to Belgium in 1906, was the recruiting of Belgian engineering and steel companies for the construction of the bridge. Although he was able to engage scientists and engineers to develop other projects and to ship numerous goods back to Gansu, he returned from Belgium without a signed contract with any Belgian engineering firm. Unfortunately Paul died in Xian shortly after his return to China.

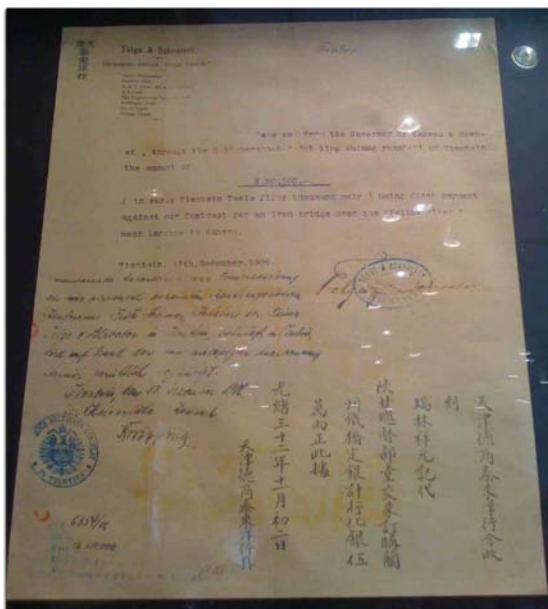
The Belgians who were recruited by him to Lanzhou to help develop the area formed the nucleus of a busy Belgian community in which his eldest son Alphonse (Chinese name was Lin Ah De, 林阿德) played an active part.



Paul's eldest son, Alphonse (a.k.a Lin Ah De) 1877 – 1943, at his wedding to Anna Colette Zhang of Lanzhou. Two of her nieces married Alphonse's younger brothers, Remy and Jean-Baptiste.

Since the Belgians in Lanzhou considered the bridge Paul's project, after his 1906 death they expected Alphonse to pick up where his father had left off. When none of the Belgians pursued the bridge project, this allowed British and German companies to approach the viceroy for the lucrative contract for the bridge. A respected German firm, Telge & Schroeter in Tianjin, prevailed, and signed a contract for the bridge within weeks of Paul's demise, and completed the project in the summer of 1909.

In planning the celebration of the 2009 Bridge Centennial, the organizing committee attempted to locate descendants of the actual builders of the bridge in order to include them in the centennial celebration as well. However, they were unsuccessful. So, how did they find the Lin descendants?



This photo of the contract with Telge & Schroeter was taken at the Gansu Regional Historical Archives and Museum

In 2005, while researching material on Paul Splingaerd for her book, *The Belgian Mandarin*, Anne Megowan was able to contact members of her grandmother's family in Lanzhou after sixty years with no communication after her immediate family left China in 1947. With the help of a friend in Tianjin, Isaac Huang, contact was made. By happy coincidence, Anne's closest Lanzhou relative, Aunt Zhang Jian Qin, is married to a professor of history at Lanzhou University. One of his associates, Mr. Deng Ming, was a historian and city archivist. When the office of the regional Archives of Gansu learned that Anne was looking for information on the Splingaerd involvement in Lanzhou and Gansu, they considerately went into their files in search of any reference to the Belgian Lins.

That year (2005) on September 29, Anne arrived in Lanzhou with two cousins, Angela Cox Elliott of Vancouver, and Frank Keet of Perth, Australia, both descendants of Paul's eldest son, Alphonse. At a meeting with the provincial archivist, Anne was given photocopies of references to "Lin Fuchen" and his son, "Lin Ah De" from archives, and all three cousins were given books in Chinese that included mention of the Lins and the bridge. Anne, in turn presented the archivist with photocopied pages of references to Lanzhou and Gansu from her own research, and Angela presented the archivists with a photograph from her mother's family album that was taken on the occasion of the inauguration of the bridge in 1909.



This picture from Philomena Splingaerd Cox' album has been added to the Gansu archives, and has been featured in news articles, and two television documentaries. (source: Angela Elliott)

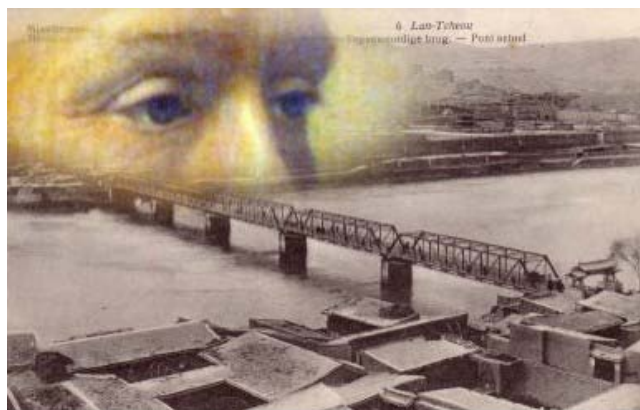
The documents from the archives indicate that Alphonse acted as Viceroy Peng's interpreter and counselor in dealings with the foreign community of Lanzhou. Alphonse's honorific name, Lin Canzan (林參贊), or Counselor Lin, appears many times in the archived documents that told of mining, textile, engineering and manufacturing enterprises involving westerners in Lanzhou.



Anne and Lanzhou archivists exchanged gifts of information at 2005. (Courtesy of A. Elliott)

On October 2, 2005, the day the 'foreign' cousins boarded the train that took us away from their re-discovered Lanzhou relatives, Ms. Zhang Hongxing, an enterprising and well-connected cousin, told the visiting relatives that in recognition of the material they had provided to the Archives, they would be invited to the celebration of the 2009 centennial.

Nearly four years later, as the centennial approached, Ms. Zhang Hongxing was able to persuade the organizers of the event to expand the number of invitations to include other descendants of Paul Spingaerd, and she prevailed. Again with Isaac's help conveying and translating messages between Hongxing and Lin descendants, a total of 8 descendants were able to attend. Anne is the granddaughter of Paul's second son, Remy. The other attendees were descendants of Alphonse.



(Graphic above courtesy of Christian Goens)

Although Paul did not live long enough to build the bridge himself, through his descendants he was present at the grand celebration of the 100th anniversary of the

historically important and now venerable bridge he dreamed of providing for the citizens of Lanzhou and those who travel through their city.



The 8 Lin descendants who received honorary Lanzhou citizenship at the Zhongshan Bridge Centennial. L-R. Gerald Keet (Thailand), Denis Keet (Malaysia), John Keet (London), Alan Keet, OBE (Singapore and Perth), Mrs. Alan Keet, Anne Splingaerd Megowan (Los Angeles), Frank Keet (Perth) and Angela Cox Elliott (Vancouver).



Left: Frank, Anne and Angela, the three who had come to Lanzhou in 2005. Right: the certificate conferred

As a fitting postscript to their visit, Splingaerd descendants traveled to Jiuquan near the end of the Great Wall to the statue in honor of Paul Splingaerd.



In center front is history teacher and author He Duan Zhong, of Jiuquan, at whose suggestion the statue was erected in 2008. Inscription carved into the plaque at the base of the statue tells of the Belgian, Splingaerd (transliterated to Si pu lin ge er de) who was appointed the first Customs inspector at Suzhou where he served for 14 years. It mentions his running the smallpox clinic, and his meritorious and honorable service for which the citizens of Suzhou presented him with numerous tribute banners.

Sites related to this article: www.splingaerd.net, www.goens-pourbaix.be, <http://www.lanzhou.cn/news/lznews/2009/826/82651.html>