

## Chapter 7

### Customs Mandarin in Suzhou

Marco Polo called the ancient city Succiu when he lived there for a couple of years in the late thirteenth century. In Paul's days, the city at the western end of the Great Wall was known as Suzhou (*Sue-Joe*), and today it is on the maps as Jiuquan (*Jiou-Chwan*) (39°45'0" N 98°30'36" E), and is known today as China's space center.

Jiuquan means "wine spring," a name that dates back to the Western Han (202 BC-AD 23) dynasty, when the twenty-year-old general Huo Qubing was sent wine from his emperor (and uncle) Wudi to celebrate his victory over the Xioungnus (possibly Huns). Huo had the wine poured into the clear spring so his soldiers could also partake.

Once an important stop on the fabled silk trade route between China and Europe, it was a three-month horse or carriage journey from China's eastern coast, and it is about as far from any ocean as one can get. Polo's writings tell of finding rhubarb, jade, asbestos, and Nestorian Christians in the area.

Five centuries after Marco Polo was there, in 1881, the rhubarb, jade, and asbestos can still be found in the area, but in place of the young Italian Christian merchant, Polo, working for the most powerful man in China, the Great Khan Khubilai, we find a thirty-nine-year-old Belgian working for one of the richest and most powerful officials in China, Li Hongzhang. The foreigner, is of course, Paul, who now goes by the honorific Chinese name of "Lin Darin," or Great Man Lin. This title came with his appointment as Customs Inspector for China's western gate.



Fig. 31—Fountain Sculpture at Jiuquan Park depicts the event that gave the city its name



Fig. 32—Three of Paul's great-grandchildren and Bobby Tan with Gansu officials at the fort at the western end of the Ming Great Wall, close to where Paul ran the customs office. The inscription on the tower reads: "First Pass Under Heaven."

### *Treaty of St. Petersburg*

Viceroy Li Hongzhang appointed Paul to the post in 1881 in fulfillment of a provision in the Treaty of St. Petersburg<sup>46</sup>. Here is some background on that treaty signed on February 12, 1881, by Nicolas de Giers, Eugene Butzow for Russia, and Tseng Chi-tse for China.

China's far western territory, known as Chinese Turkestan, was being invaded by Muslims under Yakub Beg since 1865. Russian troops under General Kaufmann came into the region to put down the Muslim rebellions in 1871, and Russia took control of the territory. When the Chinese asked Russia to withdraw her troops in 1879 by sending a high-ranking official named Chong-How to St. Petersburg, he returned to Beijing saying Russia would restore the territory in exchange for 5 million rubles. The displeased Empress Dowager Cixi sentenced him to death.

Cixi subsequently sent Tseng to St. Petersburg to negotiate new terms. This resulted in the treaty by which Russia returned Ili, but demanded payment of nine million rubles "to cover the expense of the occupation of the country of Ili by the Russian troops and to satisfy divers pecuniary claims of Russian subjects." This was another of the "unequal" treaties signed between China and the Western powers that heightened the resentment of the Chinese against the western powers and foreigners in general.

Terms of the treaty required a Chinese commissioner to be stationed at the frontier to regulate commercial and other transactions between Russia and China. Li Hongzhang appointed Paul to this post.

Li had met Paul when he accompanied Richthofen on their visit to the foreign ministry prior to their extensive geological explorations throughout China. Li was aware of the mineral riches of this vast territory, and felt it would be advantageous to fill the post with a man who had some experience with geology and mining. The former assistant to the famous German geologist and geographer seemed a good choice. Li's German advisor, Gustav Detring, and the German minister in Beijing concurred that Paul would be well suited to this post. Both men knew Paul from his days at the German legation following his departure from the Scheut mission at Xiwanzi.

Paul's new position as Customs Mandarin entitled him to a large office/residence known as a yamen. His mansion-like new home located on a tree-lined road near the north gate to the city served as a mandatory stop for any European missionary, explorer or geographer passing through. Many

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<sup>46</sup> The complete text translated from French can be found in Mayers, 271.

guests chez Paul wrote about their stays at mandarin Lin's home. Writings of some of these visitors provide glimpses into the life of the Lin family in China's far west.



Fig. 33—Viceroy Li Hongzhang (1823-1901)

### *American Cyclists Meet Mysterious “Ling Darin”*

In 1892 two young Americans who had just graduated from college decided to complete their education by bicycling their way across Asia from Constantinople to Beijing. These men, Thomas Allen and William Sachtleben, had just reached China's far west.

After seeing the western end of the Great Wall at Jiayuguan, by the Gobi desert, they headed for Suzhou. When they came to the Edzin River, they had to get off their bikes and wade across with their vehicles on their shoulders. While midstream, they looked ahead and saw a Chinese mandarin on horseback riding towards them, followed by a servant leading two richly caparisoned horses. The mandarin waved his hat to them in greeting. As they reached the shore, he got off his horse, and startled the men by greeting them in clear English: “Well, gentlemen, you have arrived at last!”

Equally startling was the fact that this man in Chinese mandarin robes was light-complexioned, with blue eyes and an auburn queue. He grasped

them warmly by the hand as they came dripping out of the water, and beaming with joy, said, "I am glad to see you, gentlemen. I just got word that you had left Jiayuguan, and came out immediately with these two horses to bring you across the river, which I feared would be too swift and deep for you. Mount your ponies and we will ride into the city together."

The Americans overcame their awe to realize this was the mysterious "Ling Darin", whose name they had heard "spoken of almost with veneration" ever since leaving Urumqi. It became apparent that it was on Ling Darin's instruction that they were met outside the town of Dyou-min-shan, to be escorted into the town, and now they were meeting the person who had been keeping tabs on their progress.

On their ride into town, Paul answered their questions about who he was, and how he came to be stationed in Suzhou.

We were so absorbed in this romantic history that we scarcely noticed the crowds that lined the streets leading to the Ling Darin's palace, until the boom of a cannon recalled us to our situation. From the smile on the jolly face beside us, we knew at once whom we could hold responsible for this reception. The palace gates were now thrown open by a host of servants, and in our rags and tatters we rolled at once from the hardships of the inhospitable desert into the lap of luxury.

Inside the palace, the description continues of their meal:

The Ling Darin's table, which, for the exceptional occasion, was set in the foreign fashion with knives and forks, fairly teeming with abundance and variety. There was even butter, made from the milk of the Tibetan yak, and condensed milk for our coffee, the first we had tasted since leaving Turkey, more than a year before. The Ling Darin informed us that a can of this milk, which he once presented to Chinese friends, had been mistaken for a face cosmetic, and was so used by the ladies of the family. The lack of butter has led many of the missionaries in China to substitute lard, while the Chinese fry their fat cakes in various oils. The Ling Darin's wife we found an excellent and even artistic cook, while his buxom twin daughters could read and write their own language—a rare accomplishment for a Chinese woman. Being unaccustomed to foreign manners, they would never eat at the same table with us, but would come in during the evening with their mother, to join the family circle and read aloud to us some of their father's official dispatches. They would do this with remarkable fluency and intelligence.



As guests of our highly respected and even venerated host, we were visited by nearly all the magistrates of the city . . . The people, too, besieged the palace gates, and clamored for an exhibition [of bicycle riding]. Although our own clothes had been sent away to be boiled, we could not plead this as an excuse. The flowing Chinese garments which had been provided from the private wardrobe of the Ling Darin fluttered wildly in the breeze, as we rode out through the city at the appointed hour.<sup>47</sup>

The young American cyclists were just one instance of western travelers who encountered the hospitable European mandarin in the middle of the Asian continent, and wrote about him. A.D. Carey and William Woodville Rockhill, both of the Royal Geographical Society, wrote of meeting him in 1885 and 1893 respectively. Count de Lesdain's *From Peking to Sikkim through the Ordos, the Gobi Desert, and Tibet* also has a few paragraphs about meeting Paul in Lanzhou in 1905.

### *Vladimir Obrouchev Visit*

About a year after the visit by the American cyclists, Russian geologist Vladimir Afanasévitch Obrouchev (Владимир Афанасьевич Обручев, 1863-1956) stayed with Paul for three weeks. It was 1893, and the scientist was preparing for his map-making exploration of the Nanshan mountain range to the south of Jiuquan. His account of his stay at Lin Darin's home contributes to the picture of the Spingaerd family's days in Jiuquan.

Obrouchev arrived in Jiuquan with a camera and cartloads of mapmaking equipment. With the help of his translator, he and his equipment found their way to the yamen compound near the north gate of the city. His translator asked for directions to the yamen of the foreign customs inspector and found the compound convenient to the traders entering the country from Xinjiang.

British correspondent for the London Times, George Morrison, passed through Gansu on his return to Europe in 1910, and took a picture of Paul's yamen.

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<sup>47</sup> Allen, Jr., Thomas and Sachtleben, William, *Across Asia on a Bicycle*, (edited by Michael Perry). Seattle: Inkling Books, 2003 page 130.