

# The Burlingame Mission

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## How an 1867 Embassy Prefigured Chinese and American Power

*By Salvatore Babones*

In November 1867, [China](#) credentialed its first diplomatic mission to the West. Although it was only authorized to stay abroad for one year, the mission took nearly three. It visited San Francisco, New York, Washington, London, Paris, Stockholm, Copenhagen, The Hague, Berlin, St. Petersburg, Brussels, Florence, Madrid, and Suez, concluding a treaty revision with [the United States](#), receiving an official declaration of policy from the United Kingdom, and dazzling its audiences everywhere.

That the first Chinese mission to the West visited the United States before moving on to Europe was no coincidence. The man commissioned to lead the mission had been educated at the University of Michigan and

Harvard Law School. But he was not an early *haigui*, or “sea turtle”—the name given today to Chinese students who study abroad and then return to China to build their careers. He was an American.

His name was Anson Burlingame. A three-term member of the House of Representatives from Massachusetts, Burlingame lost his seat in the election of 1860 that brought Abraham Lincoln to the presidency. His consolation was an ambassadorship. Lincoln at first appointed him minister to Austria-Hungary but withdrew that commission because Vienna objected to Burlingame’s earlier support for Hungarian independence. So he was instead sent to Beijing, where he became the United States’ second permanent diplomatic representative in China.

Burlingame served almost seven years in that post. On November 21, 1867, he abruptly tendered his resignation. Two days later, he sent a short telegram to U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward:

*Chinese empire appointed me envoy to treaty powers. Accepted. Leave at once for San Francisco.*

And with that, Burlingame went from being the representative of the United States in China to being the representative of China to the world.

## AN AMERICAN IN CHINA

When Americans think about the 1860s, they tend to focus on the momentous struggle of the Civil War and the contentious politics of Reconstruction. But Washington's foreign affairs continued despite the fighting at home, and in the first half of the decade, the United States was not the only country caught in the throes of a civil conflict.

When Burlingame arrived in China in October 1861, the ruling Qing Dynasty was fighting the Taiping rebellion in a protracted civil war that lasted from 1851 until 1864. Historians widely consider the Taiping rebellion the bloodiest civil war in history, with an estimated death toll of at least 20 million. Burlingame put the U.S. government firmly on the side of the Qing government. Maintaining China's territorial integrity, the thinking in Washington ran, would maintain the "[open door](#)" for American commerce and help protect the country from [European colonialism](#).

Over the years that followed, Burlingame became close friends with the regent Prince Gong, who was in effective control of the empire. He seems to have become a confidant of

Gong, informing him about European politics and the distinctiveness of the United States as a Pacific power without territorial ambitions. In 1863, he helped Gong resolve a dispute with the United Kingdom over the Lay-Osborn Flotilla, a squadron of eight warships that China commissioned for use in the final phase of the Taiping rebellion. When it came time for China to send its first diplomatic mission abroad, Gong turned to Burlingame to lead it.

As Burlingame put it in a letter to Seward on December 14, he intended to resign his post as minister to China in 1868 to return to the United States and resume his career in domestic politics. Before he left, Gong honored him with a farewell dinner, at which the prince pressed Burlingame to help build American support for China when he returned the United States. Burlingame politely acceded to the request—upon which, according to Burlingame, a senior Chinese official at the table interjected: “Why will you not represent us officially?” Burlingame assured Seward that he took this as a joke and was only later informed that the offer was serious. He indicated his acceptance on November 18. His official commission was dated November 21: on that day, he resigned his service to the United States and entered the

service of China as a “high minister extraordinary and plenipotentiary.”

On November 22, Gong sent a letter to the U.S. legation in Beijing in which he stressed China's need to have its voice heard on the world stage and his respect for Burlingame. He enclosed a note, nominally from the emperor, empowering Burlingame “to attend to every question arising between China” and the countries of the West. Few if any Chinese officials had the experience needed to take on the job, and Gong trusted [the United States](#). With the United Kingdom ensconced in [Hong Kong](#), France seeking to conquer Vietnam, and Russia pressing on China's northern and western frontiers, the United States was the only Western state that Chinese officials believed had no territorial designs on their country. The main objective of the Burlingame Mission, from China's point of view, was to solicit assurances from Western governments that there would be no more demands for territorial concessions from China. Russia was probably the key target, and the United States was seen as a good interlocutor, having just negotiated the purchase of Alaska from Russia earlier in the year.

Accompanied by two Chinese ministers, Burlingame traveled from Beijing to Shanghai in

December and then on to Yokohama and San Francisco in the new year. After a fast 23 days' crossing, he entered San Francisco Bay on March 31, 1868.

## MISSION POSSIBLE?

Burlingame's arrival in San Francisco was highly anticipated, and people gathered at the wharf to get their first glimpse of Chinese nobility—and of the imperial yellow dragon flag, which appeared in many contemporary press reports. Burlingame's party included the three ministers, nine other staff members, and 18 servants. Also on board, according to a report in the San Francisco newspaper *Daily Alta Californian*, were 42 Americans, their children, and 738 unnamed Chinese.

The same ship had carried only 209 passengers on its journey out. California's chief import from China in the 1860s was people. Chinese labor was famously exploited in the building of the United States' first transcontinental railroad, which was under construction at the time of Burlingame's arrival in San Francisco. As many as 10,000 Chinese workers were then employed on the Central Pacific Railroad, and many more were working for businesses providing food and

supplies; more than 1,000 may have died. With the completion of the railroad still more than a year away, the Burlingame Mission traveled on by steamship via Panama to New York.

On June 6, Burlingame's group arrived at the White House. President Andrew Johnson left the diplomatic business to Seward, who was still secretary of state. Seward and Burlingame arranged a treaty of eight articles to supplement the existing 1858 commercial treaty between [the United States and China](#). The so-called Burlingame Treaty was ratified by the Senate on July 24, signed by the president on October 19, and ratified by the Chinese empire the following year.

## THE FIRST EQUAL TREATY

The Burlingame Treaty is justly famous as the first equal treaty agreed to by China in the modern era. All of China's previous international treaties (like several later agreements) had been dictated to Beijing by foreign powers at the barrel of a gun; these unequal treaties, as they are known, forced China to open its ports to foreign traders, allow the importation of opium, and most oppressively, grant extraterritorial rights to foreigners residing in China, who thus became effectively immune to prosecution for crimes

committed in the country. The legacy of the unequal treaties is still a source of tension between China and Asia's former colonial powers. But the Burlingame Treaty was negotiated freely by China during a period of peace with a country that, at least at the time, had made no claims on its wealth or territory. And it was reciprocal, giving the United States and China the same rights and responsibilities with respect to each other.

The most remarkable and controversial parts of the treaty were its two articles on [immigration](#). Article V recognized “the inherent and inalienable right of man to change his home and allegiance,” allowing free travel between the countries “for purposes of curiosity, or trade, or as permanent residents.” Article VI guaranteed immigrants in both countries most-favored-nation treatment, putting Chinese laborers in California on a par with British bankers in New York. These were not empty words. In the years that followed, U.S. courts repeatedly enforced Burlingame Treaty rights over California laws that discriminated against Chinese immigrants.

*Seward dreamed of a future for the United States as a Pacific power.*

Although today's Americans might read the Burlingame Treaty as an enlightened act ahead of its time, it was in reality directed as much against Chinese tradition as against Californian bigotry. In the nineteenth century, it was illegal for subjects of the Qing Dynasty to leave China without the emperor's permission, and Chinese emigrants who returned home with savings accumulated overseas could face confiscation, imprisonment, and (in theory) execution. Burlingame was a dreamer who had supported Hungarian freedom in 1848 and advocated against slavery in the United States. In negotiating the treaty, he was probably more interested in protecting Chinese emigrants than in representing the Qing government, which would have seen little value in the agreement's provisions on immigration. Gong accepted the treaty and had it ratified, but not without domestic opposition.

Seward's motives were even clearer: he dreamed of a future for the United States as a Pacific power. He had already negotiated the purchase of Alaska, backed the construction of the transcontinental railroad, called for the annexation of Hawaii, and suggested the building of a canal in Panama. In 1852, as a U.S.

senator, he gave a speech predicting that, over time, Europe would

*relatively sink in importance, while the Pacific Ocean, its shores, its islands, and the vast regions beyond, will become the chief theatre of events in the world's great hereafter.*

Seward saw the transcontinental railroad as the first step to Asia, and he saw China as an almost limitless source of people with which to populate California. An ardent abolitionist, he had no problem with California attracting Chinese immigrants—and he wanted the Chinese in California to be free, not to recreate the racial divisions over which the state had just fought a civil war.

Not all Americans shared Seward's vision, and Chinese immigration soon became a controversy in the American west. In 1880, the immigration articles of the treaty were renegotiated to allow the United States to temporarily suspend immigration from China. The Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882, 1892, and 1902 effectively made that suspension permanent. The government only partly reopened Chinese immigration to the United States in 1943.

## PACIFIC POWERS

The Burlingame Mission reached Europe on September 19, 1868, arriving in London just in time to see the fall of the first government of

Benjamin Disraeli and the coming to power of the liberal William Gladstone. Gladstone had been a fierce critic of the Opium Wars of 1840–1842 and 1856–1860, in which Britain forced open China's opium market, annexed Hong Kong, and (in 1860) burned down the imperial Old Summer Palace. He was happy for his foreign minister, Lord Clarendon, to make a gesture to the Chinese delegation. On December 28, just three weeks after taking office, Clarendon made an official declaration forswearing the application of “unfriendly pressure to China to induce her government to advance more rapidly in her intercourse with foreign nations” and publicly stating London’s support for the central government in Beijing against any localist or separatist movements in the provinces. This was something of a relief, given the history of creeping British colonialism in Asia. Chinese officials were aware of how, little by little, the United Kingdom had come to occupy nearly all of India. (Aside from some minor incidents along China's poorly defined border with British Burma, Clarendon's promise held until the Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1901.)

This promise in hand, the Burlingame Mission moved on to the European continent. After stops in several European capitals, the group went

to [Russia](#)—its real diplomatic target. Russia had been pressing heavily on the borders of China, Japan, and Korea for the last two decades, and China was eager to stabilize its northern frontier. Burlingame was friends with Alexander Vlangali, Russia's minister to China, and at the time, Russia was on good terms with the United States, having just sold Alaska to it. The delegation met with Tsar Alexander II on February 16 and received a friendly welcome; it seems likely that Burlingame hoped to negotiate a treaty with Russia to cement the status quo on the Russian-Chinese border. But he fell ill in the cold Russian winter, took to bed, and died a few days later, on February 23, 1870. The cause of death was pneumonia. He was 49 years old.

Like Seward, Burlingame saw a future for the United States in Asia, anticipating the day when the Pacific would replace the Atlantic as the driver of the world's prosperity. It may have taken 150 years, but that day has come.