

### *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.

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