AN AUDIENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT OF CHINA

By ALBERT R. CARMAN

President Li Yuan Hung received me in private audience in the Winter palace within the Forbidden City of Pekin. This is a very unusual honor. I mention this feature of the affair quite freely because it was not an honor due to any merit of mine—a casual travelling journalist—but one that was conferred on me because I had a powerful friend at the Chinese Court. My friend is "Ferguson of China," easily the most influential foreigner to-day in China, a Canadian boy of whom I want sometime to tell you. He had arranged this "audience" by virtue of his personal influence with the President at a period when no Chinese official had much time to spend on strangers; for Canton was in the midst of a very mixed military melee, Peking itself was full of intrigue and the disturbing China New Year was at hand.

The night I got to Peking, Dr. Ferguson said,

"You have only one fixed engagement for tomorrow, an audience with the President in the Palace at 3 p.m."

"Does he speak English?" I enquired faintly.

"Not a word," said Dr. Ferguson. "I'll see you through." And as my friend talks Chinese like a native, I dismissed the whole business from my mind. I could see easily what would happen. It wouldn't matter what I said. Dr. Ferguson would say the right thing to the President and tell me the answer—and what to pretend to say next.

But as the Ferguson motor-car passed the saluting sentries at the great gate into the Forbidden City—because of a special insignia which only a few cars of high officials carry—my friend remarked: "No I shall not go in with you. The President has his own interpreters; and they would leave it too much to me if I were there."

So I began to think hastily—all in a minute—what I should like to ask the President of China; the official head of four hundred million human beings, by long odds the largest number in the world even nominally under one ruler. Presently the car stopped before an even more imposing gateway—these Peking gates with their soaring archways and elaborately carved and gorgeously colored triple roofs are one of the architectural wonders of the world—and be began a walk through endless corridors and across broad court-yards and around unexpected corners where no stranger could possibly find his way.

"You'd get lost in here, Bert," said John Ferguson—and, in a flash, we were boys again, finding a new path through the then familiar woods that lie between Belleville and Cannifton in Hastings Co., Ontario,—two Canadian school chums, though now adventuring in the far-off and mysterious Forbidden City of the Manchu Emperors of China.

The official interpreter was a brisk, bright-eyed man, in perfectly correct afternoon European dress; and turned out to be a graduate of Harvard. We had hardly sat down in his part of the Palace to chat till the President should be ready to receive us when they brought two cups of tea. I unwittingly broke all Chinese etiquette by promptly drinking mine; for this airy ante-chamber was cold and they had taken my overcoat away from me. I learned later that I should have waited until my host indicated that the visit was drawing to an end by drinking his.

Presently we were summoned and went out through saluting sentries and bowing officials till I saw across another, and as it proved a last, courtyard a broad inclined roadway crossing a frozen moat and lined with richly-carved marble figures, leading up to a veranda behind which a door opened into a lofty pavilion. The Winter Palace of the Manchus—so long hidden from the world—is in reality a scattered group of palaces, some long and low; and vast courts and even islanded lakes lie between them. Half way down the inclined road stood a man-bare-headed, in a welcoming attitude. Behind him were soldiers and attendants. I thought for a moment that the President had shown me the impossible courtesy of coming out to meet me. But the welcoming figure turned out to be a major-domo who presently ushered the interpreter and myself into the presidential apartments.

President Li is a quiet looking, middle-aged man with a democratic manner and a most genial smile. We all bowed and then he motioned me to a seat between himself and the interpreter, and immediately two more cups of tea were served. Fortunately I kept my hands off mine. At once I felt that I could talk to this man quite freely of anything that came into my head. So I forgot all formal compliments and plunged in medias res by asking him about the disturbed condition of China.

He said that it was due to "militarism"—which was, by the way, precisely the answer I had got to the same question from Dr. C. C. Wu, one of Sun Yat Sen's chief supporters, a few days before on the Hong-Kong-Shanghai steamer. Dr. Wu was then on his way from Canton to Shanghai presumably to persuade Sun Yat Son that the time was ripe for his return to the Southern City, where he subsequently went.

President Li defined "militarism" as the far too great and costly military activities of "the military Governors." They kept armies mobilised to attack each other and defy the central government, and these armies were at once a burden and a menace to the country. But as these military Governors fell one by one, they would be replaced by peaceful Governors who would disband these armies and turn them back to agriculture. It sounded a simple solution, but will they disband so long as veiled bandistry pays better than hard work? Some very well-informed authorities say they must because their Governors can no longer pay them; but others point to Chang Tsao Ling, the "King of Manchuria" and his rapidly growing force, insisting that it is growing precisely because he does pay.

I switched the conversation to railways, telling the President how comfortable we had found the Chinese roads after the rolling mortuary chambers they use in India; but I cannot say that he was flattered. He took all that for granted. Of course, the Chinese railways were as good as the best. He seemed more pleased at mention of the Washington Conference and the achievements of the Chinese delegation there.

By this time, we were getting on so well that I thought I would venture on the delicate subject of our Canadian restrictions on Chinese immigration. The ice was a bit thin, perhaps, but I had skated all over it in India with complete safety.

The President received the subject affably and then delivered quite a little monologue on it. I never wished so much that I understood Chinese. The interpreter was correct, no doubt, but he was much briefer than the President. What I got was practically this:

"Canada is quite right to keep out Chinese laborers. Canada does not need Chinese laborers, for she has plenty of laborers of her own. But Canada does need Chinese scholars, for she has none of her own. Thus she would be very foolish to deny herself the advantage of receiving Chinese scholars just because she does not need Chinese laborers."

If you will read that last paragraph carefully and get its full impact, you will have the key to very much of Chinese policy toward the outside world. President Li was thinking of Canada precisely as the Canadian missionary thinks of China. He was concerned for the moment solely with our side of the question—not at all with any wounded susceptibilities the Chinese might conceivably suffer from because of our restrictions. It was wholly a matter of what would be good for Canada. He was not interested in my suggestion that, of course, "China did not want to lose any of her own people—that she would want to keep them at home which would be the effect of our restrictive policy." I might just as well have suggested to a Canadian missionary that Canada wanted to keep her best people at home. The missionary would say:

"Yes but China needs missionaries more than Canada does."

So President Li said, in effect:

"Yes, but Canada needs scholars more than China does."

The only difference is that President Li feels that China would be giving out of her measures abundance, while Canada feels that she is sparing as much as possible out of her poverty.

This was not precisely the angle from which I had intended to discuss this question which seemed delicate to me, but not a bit to the President. I talked of "gentleman's agreements" and the difficulties being wholly economic and not to the smallest degree racial, etc., etc., but the President cared nothing for these phases of the question and harked back at some length to his theory that Canada needed scholars—and so she does in the Chinese sense of the term.

We often wonder how it is that a nation of four hundred millions submits so tamely to be tweaked by the nose and generally ordered about by comparatively little nations from Europe and America—and even by the Japs, whom the Chinese most heartily despise. We say it is because the Chinese cannot fight, though "Chinese" Gordon could have told us better—that they have no patriotism, no cohesion, no self-respect—though no one more highly esteems himself or his special type of civilization than a Chinese gentleman.

We never think to find the explanation in a Chinaman's serene confidence in his own unchallenged superiority. Yet that is very likely where it lies. What does the display of superior force mean to him? Only the temporary physical triumph of a ruder people who will very soon be conquered by and eagerly adopt his superior and much more cultured Chinese civilization. The Mangols came and conquered him; and then he conquered them—they became Chinese. The Manchus came, and were swallowed in the same fashion. The Japanese, he believes, got all their culture from him. So why should these outer barbarians from Europe and America be any different? They may have more physical force for the moment, but presently they will bow—as all barbarians have bowed in the past—to Chinese culture learnings, philosophy and art. China has only to wait.

But you mustn't imagine that I thought of all this while watching President Li's fine face light up from time to time with a smile as he caught the meaning of any latest question from the interpreter—I had begun to wonder rather when and how I should go. The President showed no sign of terminating the interview, as is the custom and privilege of rulers. Yet I knew that he was terribly busy with far-reaching and highly explosive problems. I felt I could not trespass any longer; but could I dismiss the President of four hundred million people?

I wished with all my might that I had thought to ask John Ferguson about this.

In the end, I took a middle course. I did not rise to go but I confined my last remark to warm thanks to the President for receiving me so kindly and talking of great questions so informingly. He acknowledged this with a smiling bow, and I rose. We all three bowed and then the President shook hands cordially. Western fashion. The interpreter and I walked half-way across the apartment, and then turned and again exchanged bows with the President. Once more at the doors, we all three bowed; and a moment later we were bowing the other way to officials awaiting in the ante-chamber the conclusion of the audience.

John Ferguson and I went home by the Southern Sea—the last of the three artificial lakes that decorate the Western side of the Forbidden City. It was frozen over; and we crossed it in a converted ice-boat as the Dowager Empress used to do in the old days when the Forbidden City lived rigidly up to its name when no foreigners penetrated its mazes or revelled in its beauties, and when the Manchu Empire had not yet fallen.

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