

MING-SI-LIE AND THE FISH-BAG

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Many characteristics of the Tibetans in the VIIIth to IXth centuries, as seen through the eyes of Chinese historians, are recognizable in their descendants of the present day. For example, the T'ang Annals describe how in A.D. 702 a Tibetan envoy to Chang'an explained his open delight at hearing Chinese music as due to his rustic origin in a remote border country. In recent times I found such professions of simplicity or ignorance by Tibetan officials used sometimes as a disarming gambit when they wanted to turn aside troublesome or contentious business. Neither party took such statements seriously. Nor perhaps did the Chinese in the T'ang dynasty for in 730 when the Tibetans asked for some of the Chinese classics a minister of the Imperial court warned against granting the request because it might increase the warlike abilities of the Tibetans who were not only aggressive but were endowed with energy and perseverance and were intelligent, sharp, and untiring in their love of study.

So much by way of introduction to the story of the fish-bag. In A.D. 730 there were discussions about a treaty between the Tibetans and the Chinese who had been at war almost continuously since 670. The leader of the Tibetan delegation to Chang'an was Ming-si-lie who is stated in the T'ang Annals to have known some Chinese and to have been on a mission to China before, in order to escort the princess of Kin-tcheng to Tibet. A banquet was given in his honour after which the Emperor conversed with him and gave him various presents including what Bushell translates as a "fish-bag" and Pelliot as a "bourse au poisson". Ming-si-lie accepted the other presents but politely declined the fish-bag saying that such ornaments were not used in his country and he did not dare to accept so rare a gift. In the New T'ang Annals the present which Si-lie declined is described as a golden fish.

Neither Bushell nor Pelliot throws any light on this incident but the key is to be found in that fascinating assemblage of miscellaneous exotic learning—*The Golden Peaches of Samarkand* by Professor Edward Schafer. He writes (p 26) that a fish in bronze, or rather, half such a fish was carried as a token by the envoy of each country that maintained diplomatic relations with China. On arrival, the envoy produced his half which was compared with the other half, kept at the Imperial court; and he would then be given appropriate facilities according to the pro-

tocol. The fish token was carried in a handsome purse attached to the girdle of a ceremonial robe which would also be presented by the Emperor. Accepting such a gift, even if it were got up in a specially valuable guise, would smack of the acknowledgement of "tributary" status. That was something the Tibetans would not endure. In *Le Concile de Lhasa* Professor Demieville states (p 180) that the Tibetans had precedence at the Chinese court over all other "barbarians". And it is recorded in the T'ang Annals that in 780 the Tibetan king rejected a letter from the Emperor because it was not phrased in terms of equality. The wording had to be altered to omit the offending expressions. Ming-si-lie's refusal of the "fish-bag" was, therefore, the act of an adroit diplomatist.

A rather similar Chinese manoeuvre was attempted in 1935 when General Huang Mu-sung visited Lhasa to condole on the death of the XIIIth Dalai Lama. He offered the Tibetan Government a golden seal in honour of the Dalai Lama. It is most unlikely that the Dalai Lama himself would have accepted such a gift from that source but the Chinese may have hoped to find the interim government not yet quite sure of itself. Nevertheless, the offer was at first refused because, "as the Dalai Lama was temporarily absent from the body, there could be no use for a seal". I believe that it was eventually decided to be innocuous and was accepted as a contribution to the expenses of the late Dalai Lama's tomb.

It is sad that such diplomatic skirmishes in Sino-Tibetan affairs were replaced in 1950 by the naked use of force.

References to the T'ang Annals are to the translations by S.W. Bushell in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1880, and by Paul Pelliot in *Histoire Ancienne du Tibet*, Paris 1961.