

CHINA 1905–1908

# Harrison Sacket Elliott's Letters and Photographs

By Jean Elliott Johnson



Na Tung's Mother's Funeral. The amount and quality of items buried with the coffin, seen just emerging through the gate, indicated the family's status.



Elliott at a Chinese Banquet.

All of the photographs used in this article are from the family archives of Jean Elliott Johnson.

## Harrison Sacket Elliott

While a student at Ohio Wesleyan, Harrison Elliott served as secretary to President J. W. Bashford. When Bashford became the Bishop in charge of the Methodist Church's work in China, he asked twenty-two-year-old Elliott to accompany him on his inspection tours of China and serve as his stenographer. Between 1905 and 1908, Elliott helped organize the Bishop's trips, took charge of all his correspondence, and detailed their experiences in several hundred photographs taken with a bellows camera and developed on the way. Elliott also wrote detailed letters to his family. His dream of returning to China was dashed by his father's unexpected death, which left Elliott with the major responsibility for his family's well-being. He later became Professor of Religious Education at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he pioneered the discussion method for Biblical Studies. His letters from China are preserved in The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary.

Elliott reported,

*At the beginning the host said he was sorry but they hadn't anything much to eat. But when twenty-five courses were served with twenty other dishes left on the table, we realized the Chinese custom of speaking disparagingly about your own things and complimentary about your neighbors.<sup>1</sup>*  
(December 1905)

## A Time of Change

Elliott wrote often about the changes he believed were occurring in China. During his letters in 1905, he often referred to the Boxer experience and tried to reassure his family that he was safe; his later letters no longer mentioned it.

*There is no doubt but that China is coming out into modern life. The government and many of the people are groping around, attempting to know how to move . . . Those who have been in China for years say that things are distinctly different since 1900 and they do not anticipate any such general uprising. There may be local disturbances among the Chinese through the introduction of railroads and many people having to adjust themselves to new trades and being thrown temporarily out of employment. But you need not fear a general disorder.*<sup>2</sup> (December 1905)

*There are a good many Chinese soldiers in Kiukiang, and their yamen is quite close to our [the Methodist] compound. I was down watching the soldiers drill, and they do remarkably well. They follow the Japanese tactics, which are modeled after the German, and are doing really good work. It is interesting to see the signs of progress.* (December 1905)

After describing the transformations in upper class Chinese when they become Christian, Elliott concludes: "The world is going to hear about China in the next fifty years."<sup>3</sup> (November 1905) Later he returns to the same theme.

*The economy, industry, and real ability of the Chinese grow upon me. Their possibilities, if they were to adopt a Christian civilization, seem boundless. Further, the old empire seems really to be waking up, and one is surprised at the signs of speedy adoption of modern life. The boycott of American goods resulting from the US renewal of the Chinese Exclusion Act and other evidences of unrest in the empire seem from reports from America to be considered there as repetitions of Boxerism and in opposition to progress. But, on the contrary, they are manifestations, at times mad and almost revolutionary, of a new life and an awakening national spirit which are stirring the empire. The whole trend is in the way of progress, and from this crisis, it seems that a modern nation will emerge.*<sup>4</sup> (February 1906)

During his first year, in part, perhaps, to reassure his family that he was safe, Elliott speculated on crime prevention strategies.

*There is probably; indeed not probably, there is really less crime and disturbance in China in proportion to its size than in America. The punishments are very severe, and men are killed for small offenses, and sometimes terribly punished by bambooing, etc., so that there is great care to keep out of crime . . . Further, lower officials are directly under the power of higher ones, and . . . are not only likely and liable to removal from office but to the removal of their heads, and often to the punishment and even to the death of their whole family for their crime . . . By the way, foreigners are not subject to arrest or rather to punishment by the Chinese. Complaint must be made to the consul.*<sup>5</sup> (December 1905)



Chinese soldiers drilling in Kiukian (Jiujiang), Kiangsi (Jiangxi) Province.



Wheelbarrow coolie watching his rival—the train. Although the wheelbarrow, a Chinese invention, was being used as early as the third century CE, no evidence exists of the wheelbarrow in the West until the thirteenth century.



Two Chinese surveying near the Great Wall for the new Peking-Kalgan (Beijing-Zhangjiakou) railway, the first built by Chinese engineers.



The punishment for highway robbery was crucifixion or decapitation, the ultimate “loss of face.”

In 1908 Elliott witnessed Chinese justice firsthand during a brief stop while on a trip by houseboat from Chentu (Chengdu) to Chungking (Chongqing):

*Returning to the boat, we found a great crowd on the bank. Three robbers had been beheaded there during our absence; and their bodies were lying on the ground, ghastly sights. They were condemned for robbery with violence and beheaded for this crime. Candles were being burned and idol money was by one of the bodies.<sup>6</sup> (February 1908)*

### Chinese Examinations

The Chinese government ended its traditional exam system in 1905; examination halls were torn down and the bricks used for other purposes. Elliott describes the remains of one of the examination sites.



Rows of stalls for candidates taking the exams for the second degree. In this examination hall there were eighteen thousand stalls; eighteen thousand people could take the examinations at the same time with each person having an individual stall.

*[W]e stopped at the examination hall for the second degree [in Kiukiang] (in Jiujiang). These examination halls are found only in the capital cities, the capitals of provinces. We entered through a series of gates, with gay figures on the outside, and found ourselves in a large open space, with a walk running through the center. On either side were rows and rows of low sheds built of bricks . . . We went down one [passageway between them], and found that it was open on one side, the side on which we walked, and closed on the other, and divided into little stalls about the size of a voting booth, each stall separated from the one next to it by a brick wall, but open to this narrow passageway. There are one hundred and eighty stalls in each of these long sheds, and in this examination hall . . . there are eighteen thousand of these stalls, room for eighteen thousand people to take the examinations at the same time with each person having an individual stall . . . It is surely a monument to the elaborate system of literary degrees in this great empire. Of course, these halls will be of no further use, for by government decree all these time-honored examinations are abolished and further officials are to be chosen from graduates of the imperial universities.<sup>8</sup> (December 1905)*

According to Elliott, the new 1906 exam held in Nanking asked students to write an essay in English on one of the following two topics:

*“The Defects of the Educational System in China” or “The Burning necessity of having railroads throughout the Chinese Empire.” Students were also to translate passages in German, French, Latin and Greek.<sup>9</sup> (Date Unknown. Perhaps 1908)*

### The Spread of Information

The spread of information impressed Elliott. Traveling by train to the interior, he noted:

*Amid the vendors of Chinese eatables and the beggars, crying for alms, is a young Chinese . . . selling the morning paper. Here in this city in the heart of China, which before the advent of the railway was fifteen days from news of the outside world, the Peking dailies of yesterday are for sale by a Chinese brother of the American newsboy.<sup>10</sup> (April 1908)*



Newsboy selling Peking daily papers at a railway station on the Hankow-Peking Railroad.

## Mission Schools and Colleges

Elliott often wrote about missionary efforts, particularly their schools. For example, in a mission school in Hinghua (Xinghua), he reported:

*Because of the lack of any newspaper, the Principal, Mr. Deng, determined to start a newspaper. They had a mimeograph machine made by a Chinaman who had never seen one before, using one of Mr. Brewster's possessions as a model. They take the Foochow semi-weekly paper and cut out all the best news items and mimeograph them. The paper is called the Anglo-Chinese High School Newspaper. They are selling it for eighty cents a year. It is very interesting and the first college newspaper, I believe, in China.<sup>11</sup> (November 1907)*



A handmade mimeograph machine in the Anglo-Chinese High School.



Female students writing Chinese in Roman script at Hinghua Women's School.

## Chentu (Chengdu) Beggars' Reformatory

In Chentu, where a recent law had outlawed begging, Elliott visited one of the two beggar reformatories the government had established.

*These beggars were collected from the streets by the police, put into this institution, and made to work for their food and clothing and place to sleep. They were made to clean up. Their sores were doctored, their heads shaved to get rid of the scurvy and vermin. Some are set to industrial work, the product of which is sold in the store at the entrance; others are used carrying lanterns, chairs, etc., in official processions, pulling rickshaws, repairing and cleaning streets, or hired out to the citizens of the city for different kinds of day labor. When they decide they wish to give up begging, they are allowed to leave, . . . but if they are caught begging again, they are brought back and it is more difficult to get out a second time. Nine hundred beggars in one institution, cleaned up and made to work, in China, where begging is an age-old profession, and we have only commenced to handle the tramp problem in America!<sup>7</sup> (Date unknown)*



Beggars who have been cleaned up and are being taught trades.

"Nine hundred beggars in one institution, cleaned up and made to work, in China, where begging is an age-old profession, and we have only commenced to handle the tramp problem in America!"



Opium den in Shanghai, January 1906. "Out of eleven Shensi (Shaanxi) people, ten smokes."

## Opium

In January 1906, Elliott wrote:

... we walked for quite a time through interesting parts of the Chinese streets in the settlement, visiting two or three of the fashionable, from a Chinese standpoint, tea houses and opium dens combined. Some of them were quite elaborate, three-story affairs. [The opium dens] are arranged with about a half to three-quarter length couch, a double

one, with the opium outfit in the center. Here the smoker reclines, works away and gets the opium ready over a little peanut oil lamp and then smokes it . . . I believe we must have seen not far from one thousand men in the two or three places we visited, smoking the opium . . . There was no danger in visiting these places; they were open and easily accessible.<sup>12</sup> (January 1906)

The Anti-Opium Edict, issued September 20, 1906, stated that, "the growth, sale and consumption of opium should cease in the empire." Elliott reported:

The opium dens in the native city of Shanghai were

closed last Saturday . . . I made a round in the evening with a guide, but could not find a place open. You could get right into them, but the beds were dismantled, and lamps and smoking apparatus gone, and some places they were already tearing down the partition and getting ready to go back to their former business. The opium movement is really a wonderful thing and we are living right in the midst of it. A heathen nation to start vigorously on a moral reform, more vigorously than America, I fear, has started on the liquor question . . . The imperial decree calls for the gradual abolition of the traffic altogether and the reduction in the opium under cultivation until it is nil, etc. . . . The earnestness with which the Chinese are taking up the imperial edict and pursuing this anti-opium campaign is really a marvel to see.

Unfortunately, Elliott continued, efforts by the Chinese were being undermined:

. . . by the foreigners, especially the English newspapers and merchants, who control the [Shanghai] Municipal Council, [who] say, 'Well, we'll wait to close the opium dens in the settlement until we see whether it is really a success in the native city.' And so the opium dens in the foreign settlement are still open and doing a rushing business, and as the local Chinese papers say, there is no advantage in closing them in the native city if they can go right outside the wall and smoke to their heart's content.<sup>13</sup> (June 1907)



Closed opium den, June 1907.

"... we walked for quite a time through interesting parts of the Chinese streets in the settlement, visiting two or three of the fashionable, from a Chinese standpoint, tea houses and opium dens combined."

### Min River Irrigation and Flood Control

Elliott was deeply impressed with the Min River Irrigation and Flood control project, constructed during the reign of Shih Huang Di, the “First Emperor” and kept in repair ever since. Now called the Dujaingyan Dam and Irrigation Project, the Min system, which allows the Min floodwaters to flow into numerous channels, contrasts dramatically with the Three Gorges Dam that holds back the water. Elliott wrote:

*To examine these works, kept up so faithfully for two thousand years, and to think of the engineering skill it must have taken to accomplish the original work, fills one with awe . . . , and it was one of the most interesting things I have seen in China.*<sup>14</sup> (January 1908)



Long view of Min River Irrigation and Flood Control Project.

### Industry

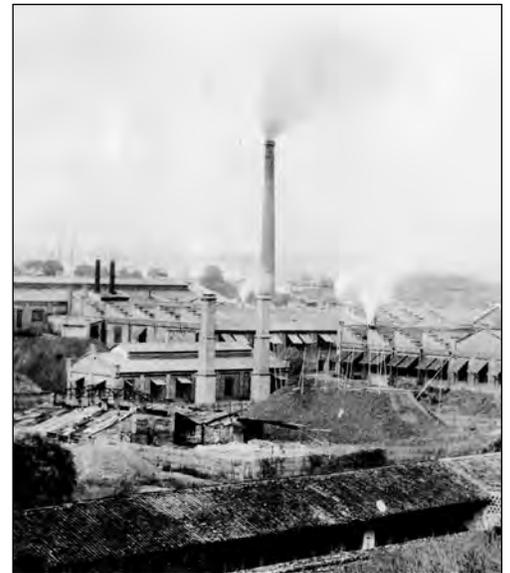
Elliott visited the triple cities of Hankow (Hankon), Wuchang, and Hanyang, which were reported to have one million inhabitants.

*The three cities form a great shipping center. [In addition,] the Peking-Hankow-Canton Railway crosses here . . . tea vessels load at Hankow for ocean ports. There is a great deal of tea packed in this place, and several big Russian firms. There is a foreign concession with modern buildings . . . and a number of factories including a Chinese steel factory employing one thousand men.*<sup>15</sup> (September 1907)

### Famine Relief Efforts

The Kiangpeh flood in 1907 devastated a vast area of China and resulted in what Chinese officials designated as a “cannibal famine”: three million were starving, and ten million were affected. Elliott wrote:

*The way the Chinese faced this crisis ought to command the admiration of the world. It is but another proof of the economy and strength of character of these yellow people. Instead of using up all their grain and money at once, and then sitting down and awaiting death, . . . the Kiangpeh peasants calmly faced the inevitable and prepared for it the best they could. Early in the fall, they commenced adding to their stores by foraging. The leaves of the trees as well as the grass by the roadside were gathered, dried, and ground into a sort of meal. The bark of elm and willow trees, roots of different weeds, the scum from stagnant ponds and other things were added to the food supply. On one island they used a sort of clay termed Goddess of Mercy flour. At first, these substances were mixed with their grain in order to make it last longer . . . . When the grain and money was all gone, the people lived on leaves and roots alone . . . .*<sup>16</sup> (May 1907)



A steel factory in Hanyang.



Refugees waiting for flour at a famine relief station.

*The remarkable thing about this famine is the little rioting and the small amount of stealing. I would have thought that the people would have grown lawless, that the people who get flour with the others around who are not enrolled and can get none, that the ones not helped would steal from those helped, etc. But there has been practically none . . . . As the flour is hauled on wheelbarrows through Tsingkiangpu streets, the refugees line the way with bowls and a few straws and sweep what they can from the outside.*<sup>17</sup> (May 1907)



A small child carefully brushes a sack of grain in hopes of collecting a little flour dust. People tried to survive on sawdust cakes of ground leaves, bark and grass.



The pilot signaling to the steerman.



Trackers pulling a houseboat upstream through the Yangtze rapids.

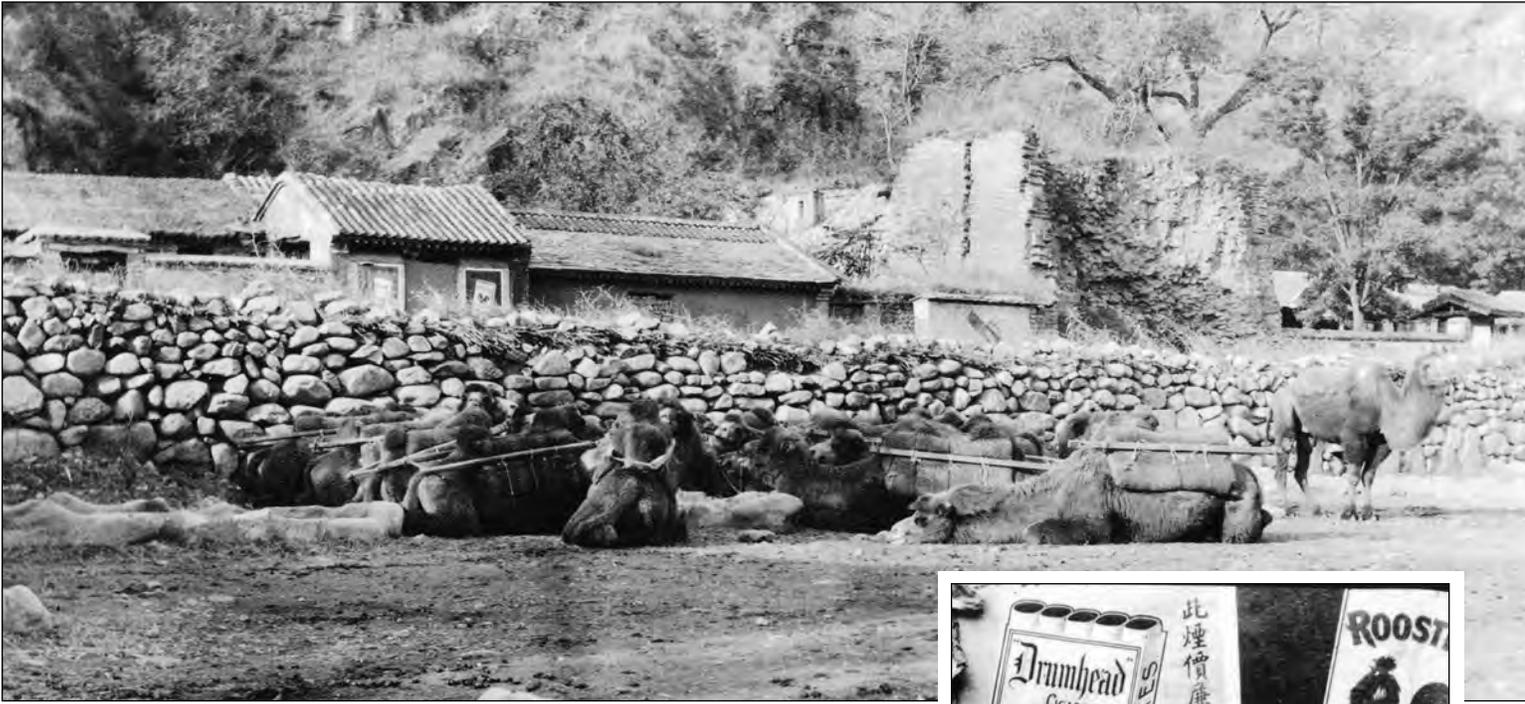
### Tracking on the Yangtze (Yangzi)

Elliott wrote in detail about his experience of traveling through the gorges of the Yangtze River.

*This tracking is hard work . . . the men at the ropes pulling for grim death, half bent to the ground, to the constant and rhythmic though hardly musical sounds, and the head man of these gangs belaboring them and hallooing and stamping and swinging his arms, and as they are going through the rapids, the man on the boat by the sail beating the drum for all he is worth to let them know that all is well and they are to pull ahead for all they are worth.*<sup>18</sup> (December 1907)

Elliott's description of his trip parallels John Hersey's novel *A Single Pebble*:

*It is as good as anything I have seen to see our pilot manage the men. He is a tanned old tar, with small pox marks on his face and a voice on him like a fog horn with a cold . . . He has twelve hours at least in charge of things and he has to be constantly on the alert . . . and so he is action from morning till night, yelling at the bow sweep men, testing the depth with his long bamboo pole, taking a turn at the oar when the place is too tight or they have their boat hooks on the rocks and they are likely to slip loose, and calculating the swing and force of the eddies and the whirlpools, bringing the boat thru.*<sup>19</sup> (December 1907)



A British-American tobacco company ad and the same ad displayed on a farmhouse wall in the interior of the country. The cigarette was one of the "gifts" the West gave to China.

### Possible Classroom Discussion Questions

1. 1898 to 1911 was a period of great flux and social change in China. Using the pictures and text, identify some of the changes that the pictures suggest were taking place in China during this period. What evidence can you cite for the continuity of established Chinese values and activities? How reliable do you think Elliott's observations are?
2. Elliott frequently mentions that progress is taking place in China and suggests that many of the reforms are being inspired by western examples and missionary efforts. Using the pictures, accompanying text, and your knowledge of China during this period, evaluate the accuracy of his interpretation. ■



### NOTES

All letters come from the *Harrison Sacket Elliott Papers* (New York City: The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary), Box 1.

1. File 4, Letter 39, December 1905.
2. Ibid.
3. File 4, Letter 38, November 1905.
4. File 6, Letter 56, February 1906.
5. File 4, Letter 39, December 1905.
6. File 12, Letter 136, February 1908.
7. File 16, Essay 151, date unknown.
8. File 4, Letter 39, December 1905.
9. File 16, Article 154, date unknown.
10. File 16, Letter 155, April 1908.
11. File 11, Letter 122, November 1907.
12. File 5, Letter 49, January 1906.
13. File 9, Letter 98, June 1907.
14. File 12, Letter 134, January 1908.
15. File 10, Letter 116, September 1907.
16. From Jean Johnson's collection of letters from her father, May 1907.
17. File 8, Letter 90, May 1907.
18. File 11, Letter 125, December 1907.
19. Ibid.

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