

PANEL

Journey of Chinese American Engineers: Education and Technology

The Life Story of Yung Wing (Part 1)

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There has been a recent renewal of scholarship about Yung Wing and what his Chinese Educational Mission meant to China and the United States. It has been a wonderful journey of discovery and, in the meanwhile, has filled in yet another puzzle piece in our modern world history.

In the United States the early 1870's represented an era of industrialization, of the beginning of the buildup of wealth, and of the arrival of increasing numbers of immigrants. Following the Civil War there developed a rather brief period of progressive leadership and the Chinese Educational Mission seems to have fit appropriately into this period, seen by the West as an opportunity to spread Western culture, to perform Christian duty toward the non-Christian East, and as a chance to satisfy a new thirst for spreading out and making contact with other peoples of the world.

Likewise, for the Chinese there had at the same time occurred a brief period of reaction against the conservative Qing dynasty, awakened by defeats in the war with a more technically advanced Japan, and by steadily increasing incursions of countries from the West. The 1870's began a somewhat tenuous, and quite expensive new experiment, promoted by Yung Wing and the Marquis Tseng Kuo-fan, Viceroy of China, in which China sought to defend its ancient culture against the aggression of the West by sending students out from within its own borders to bring

home needed technology; For both China and America, this venture took place following experiences of isolationism and devastating war. Today, as a steadily increasing number of students are being sent to be educated in the West, China has begun to reevaluate the Mission's historical significance as the point at which this flow began. At the same time, however, the Chinese are still trying to find ways to reconcile the competitiveness and individualism of Western education with ancient Confucian values which stress selflessness and commitment to the family.

As the twenty-first century is about to begin, the United States is beginning to understand the Chinese Educational Mission as a hitherto undervalued part of its great immigrant experience, in a new global cultural context.

This first tenuous contact with people of a culture so totally different from that of Calvinist New England came at the beginning of a period of exploration of a new sense of freedom from classical order and structure that would become evident in new ways of looking at things by writers and artists, which would eventually make itself felt across the ocean as purely American.

An evaluation of the Chinese Educational Mission should include its relevance to the efforts of Yung Wing, to the Commissioners and those to whom they were responsible, and lastly to the students themselves.

Yung Wing

Yung Wing was an innovator and might even be called an adventurer of sons. Much of his life from his youth was spent in pursuit of new opportunities and new roles. From the time, at age thirteen, when he leapt at the opportunity' to go to the New World, where few in China had gone before him, his choices in life were those of a man who did not fear change. He decided to remain in this country for college rather than keep his promise to return home to China. When he did return to his homeland after so many years away at school, it was to a society where he was known by few people and was regarded with suspicion because he had become so Westernized and had lost facility with his native tongue.

He made dangerous trips into the Chinese hinterland to bring out impounded tea. He proved the value of his Western education and connections by traveling to the United States to purchase machinery with which to build an arsenal, and later a companion training school, in Shanghai. And then he approached high government officials with a daring new educational plan for an elite corps of Chinese youth to acquire technical education in the West. When the plan was accepted, he took the responsibility for over one hundred young Chinese boys" being placed with foreign families, and watched over them for ten years. He would have resigned this post as commissioner in order to pursue an ambassadorial career had not events suddenly dictated that he remain. He volunteered to serve in the Civil War in the United States, and even married a New England Yankee.

In his later years he joined the revolution against the Manchu government. At different times his U.S. citizenship was revoked and there was a price on his head in China. After his early boundless enthusiasm for all things American, he endured with grace the escalating anti-Chinese rhetoric of his adopted country. He died in Hartford, an old and lonely man, at a time too early to see the results of his educational efforts on behalf of China.

These efforts by Yung were part of a struggle to influence two great forces at work in China and the United States. In China, resistance to and hatred of foreigners had come from the scholar class. It was the scholars who saw in the advances from the West a competitive challenge to their power which would ultimately bring about change. They had traditionally owed their rise through the ranks of the literati to the support of villagers who had sacrificed to sponsor their education and to whom they now owed support. This synergistic relationship of literati and peasants could not quickly absorb the economic development being pressed on it by the West. It was not until the grip of the literati on power could be changed by more widespread technical education that China would be able to achieve its goal of military self-sufficiency. Yung Wing aspired to begin meeting that challenge with his plan for technical education in America for one hundred and twenty Chinese students.

Yung's challenge in the United States came from a sudden decline in the labor market on the West coast which resulted in a revolt against imported Chinese laborers by American workers who vied with them for jobs. A series of ever-more restrictive immigration laws for Asians was symptomatic of the reversal of the post-Civil War movement toward racial liberality, and only reinforced the deepening strain of racism in the country. Yung Wing, acting virtually alone as China's co-ambassador to Washington, lodged many official complaints against the treatment of the Chinese workers but was unable to achieve any positive results.

From the beginning Yung Wing's training was Western, and he had been exposed at several stages of his life to new, particularly American educational thinking. While the British had come to China prepared to teach the trades, the United States arrived with more modern educational objectives.

In China, under the tutelage of Samuel Brown at the Morrison Educational Society School, Yung was educated under the newly

developing American philosophy of training the entire man, physically, intellectually and morally. A new note of physical health and well-being also differentiated American education from the British system, which stressed athletics alone. In the Morrison School three to four hours of daily exercise in the open air probably prepared Yung to be receptive to B.G. Northrop's prescription for the value of the outdoors and country living and the importance of family life for school children in Connecticut. Likewise, Samuel Brown's encouragement of the study of the natural sciences for their beneficial effect on character was a precursor of Northrop's ideas in Connecticut.

Samuel Brown and his interlocking network of family and friends in Massachusetts and Connecticut served Yung Wing well once he had come with Brown to the United States as a youth. They became a great resource for much of his later work when he returned in 1872 with his students.

During the twenty year period that Yung spent back in China after he had received his American education, changes and the liberalization of thinking in the American educational system continued to evolve. There was a move away from rote teaching and an attempt to broaden the focus of studies. Attempts were also being made to professionalize the educational system. Education was increasingly mandated for previously exempt groups such as farm children, who had been hostage to the demands of the growing year on the farm, young mill and factory workers, and the deaf. These efforts toward inclusiveness in all likelihood supported a more hospitable climate for Yung's Chinese students when they entered community schools.

It is interesting that the two educators consulted by Yung before he began to settle his Mission students into place in this country seemed to be at opposite poles in their thinking. Noah Porter, then president of Yale College, stood for a firm adherence to classicism and the

rigorous demands of the traditional studies of philosophy, Greek and Latin. To his mind, intellectual pursuits and religious training were one. He believed in "in loco parentis," that the teacher must take the place of the parent in furnishing the continual guidance of a model Christian gentleman until adulthood is reached. He had a deep interest in secondary school education. His was closer to the British elitist model of education and to the traditional Chinese educational philosophy itself, with its emphasis on the study of the classics.

B.G. Northrop, Connecticut Commissioner of Education and Yung's other consultant, believed that small-town America was the true source of health and strength for the people. He believed in the study of nature and the physical world and in the common-sense value of studying useful subjects. He strongly recommended the value of home and patriotism in fostering good citizens. Northrop's model of education was destined to grow in influence. He had traveled widely and acted as an educational consultant for many cultural groups, but did so with the idea of 'elevating' them to the American ideal.

Both Porter and Northrop placed much value on the home and family, so it is not surprising that they would have been influential in Yung's decision to place his students by two's and three's in family homes in the quiet Connecticut River valley. Here they could grow comfortable in the Western world, tutored under the kindly but firm directives of American Calvinist family life, and supported with at-home training until they were ready to enter the school system.

When he first brought his students to this country; Yung must have discovered many changes in the schools since he himself had been a student in Connecticut. As was his lifelong habit, he embraced the changes. He supported the students as they followed their own interests, whether it was raising chickens, hunting in the meadows west of Hartford, joining in team

sports, participating in social events with American girls, or wearing the latest fashionable clothing.

It is interesting to note, however, that at the very time that the Educational Mission had gotten well under way, Yung was given a number of other assignments by the Chinese government. This leaves one wondering how closely he was able to stay in touch, day-to-day, with the students. Although there were few; if any, citizens whom the Chinese government could call upon, who had enough experience and facility with the English language to interface with the West, it has also been suggested that the government arranged for him to be away purposely, in order to keep control of the school in the hands of the more conservative Ch'en and those who followed him as administrators.

A brief review of Yung's tasks elsewhere shows that from the very beginning his attention had to be much divided. In 1873, only one year after the first group of students had arrived in this country', Yung returned to China with a shipment of the new Gatling guns, which he had purchased on behalf of the Chinese government. That same year he was sent to Peru to investigate the treatment of Chinese laborers there. In 1875, the year in which he was married, Yung was made an associate minister, with Ch'en Lan Pin. in the first formal Chinese diplomatic mission to Washington Shortly after this. Yung and Ch'en Lan Pin were appointed ministers to the United States. Peru and Spain, and Yung was already scheduled to leave for Spain when he was recalled to the Educational Mission when its new director was summoned to China at the death of his father.

The Commissioners and Staff

There were other problems at the Mission in addition to those brought about by a division of attention. Change was a daily fact of life for everyone associated with the Chinese Educational Mission. The shifting administration and staff at the Mission must have required continual adjustment from its members, its

students, and the families with whom they lived. As has been documented, students changed schools and host families, and sometimes changed to different towns.

Every few years there was a change in the teaching staff of the Chinese school and in the Commissioner and the translator/interpreter of the Mission. The Mission headquarters itself as well as the administrators' residence were changed in this nine-year period, Hartford itself was undergoing a ferment of building and business activity, which on occasion might have made interaction with city officials a problem. This bewildering scene probably made it very difficult for the Chinese to have a clear assessment of the work of the Mission.

Other factors marshalled difficulties for the project. Some sympathy is due to the officials who were sent by the Chinese government to oversee the Chinese Educational Mission. They had considered it a humiliation to have been asked to leave China and a heavy burden to be away from their families for so long. They found themselves in the very heartland of aggressive Western culture, with all that it meant.

As if being subject to the vagaries of New England weather was not enough, the staff had to deal with families who took their Christian religion very seriously, whose diet was repugnant and even resulted in a personal odor offensive to the Chinese, whose dress and homes were strange, and who learned Greek and Latin in addition to English in their schools. It would not appear that there was much common ground for communication with their Yankee hosts. It also appears that the New Englanders of the time were much more interested in communicating their own culture to the Chinese than in reciprocating by exploring the customs of China.

In truth, however, the complexities of Chinese culture and philosophy might have been difficult to share, and the translation of the deep layers of nuance in Chinese languages would have been impossible. Contrary to charges that they refused to open themselves to the

community, and despite many drawbacks such as those just mentioned, there were quite a few instances which show that efforts were indeed made by the commissioners and the staff to reach out to their hosts in Hartford. The commissioners' gracious attitude toward neighborhood children was described by Clara Capron, who told of frequent visits as a child to their residence for candy and nuts. There was also apparently friendship with neighbors, as was shown by the support and comfort offered by the community on the death of one of the students, and in another instance at the death of the Mission's interpreter's wife. The series of munificent open houses to celebrate the Chinese New Year was the most obvious evidence of how the Chinese extended themselves, serving refreshments that appear to have been entirely to Western taste to hundreds of guests from society and government in the city and the state.

In addition it appears that representatives did go out into the community, for Twichell (the minister at the Asylum Hill Congregational Church, of which Yung Wing was a member) records in his diary that several representatives from the Mission had traveled in a snowstorm over Talcott Mountain to Avon to attend the wedding of Yung Wing and Mar>- Louise Kellogg in 1875. Another group traveled to Niantic, Connecticut on the coast, to review the Connecticut Troops camped there. Even the use of a Hartford newspaper to communicate with families who housed students showed that the Chinese did not keep entirely to themselves.

As the balance of power in China shifted away from its liberal sponsor, Li Hung-chang, who had been the champion of Yung Wing's proposal to the government to establish this

school, and as the Mission seemed to take on a life of its own that could not be completely controlled, the commissioners and teachers must have struggled over what their own reception would be when they eventually returned to China. Although they continually pressed to shift blame for any inadequacies away from themselves, the leaders must have feared being held ultimately responsible for what they saw as the failure of the students to retain the pure Chinese culture with which they had come. This culture was prized by the Chinese above virtually every other thing.

The westernized students, returning to their homeland, their focus on bringing back scientific and technological knowledge blurred by newfound pleasures, interests, and a hitherto unknown sense of freedom, would be a source of ultimate disgrace for the Commissioners. Compounding the problem would be the fact that the insular Chinese government would have no understanding of the difficulties raised in undertaking to educate young Chinese boys within a foreign culture.

There seems to be little information available as to how the Commissioners were eventually received when they returned to China, but the students themselves were given humiliating treatment. Most of them were locked away in a building resembling a warehouse for up to two months, and were not given a chance to be reunited with their families until they could be interviewed and the disposition of their futures decided upon. They were then scattered about in rather menial jobs in the disciplines for which they had trained, but it took many years for them to work their way up to positions of trust and achievement.

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