CHINESE STUDENTS IN U.S. COLLEGES

The First Hundred Years

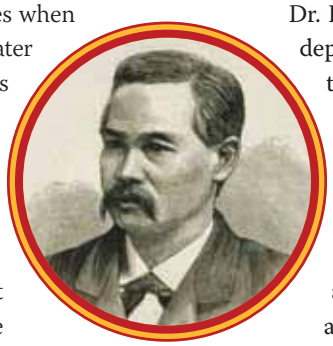
By Teresa Brawner Bevis and Christopher J. Lucas

In 1850 there was only one Chinese student enrolled in the U.S. higher education system. Today there are more than 60,000 Chinese students studying at U.S. institutions, making China second only to India in numbers of students sent to the United States. Numerous stories have been written about students who came to the United States in the decades following World War II, as the Chinese student population became substantial and significant. But the first hundred years highlights the influences and individuals that made the very early history of Chinese students in the United States both volatile and colorful.

WHAT A MONUMENTAL DECISION IT MUST HAVE BEEN for a young person raised in the strict Confucian traditions of nineteenth century Imperial China, to seek an education in the West. Those first few to make that decision were pioneers in the truest sense of the word, electing to traverse oceans and continents at a time when transportation systems, where they existed at all, were tedious, time-consuming, or even treacherous—to pursue a degree in a strange land where, upon arrival, they would find no foreign student support systems whatsoever. The legacy of these trailblazers and the situations that shaped their journey is an important piece of U.S. higher education history.

The First Chinese Student

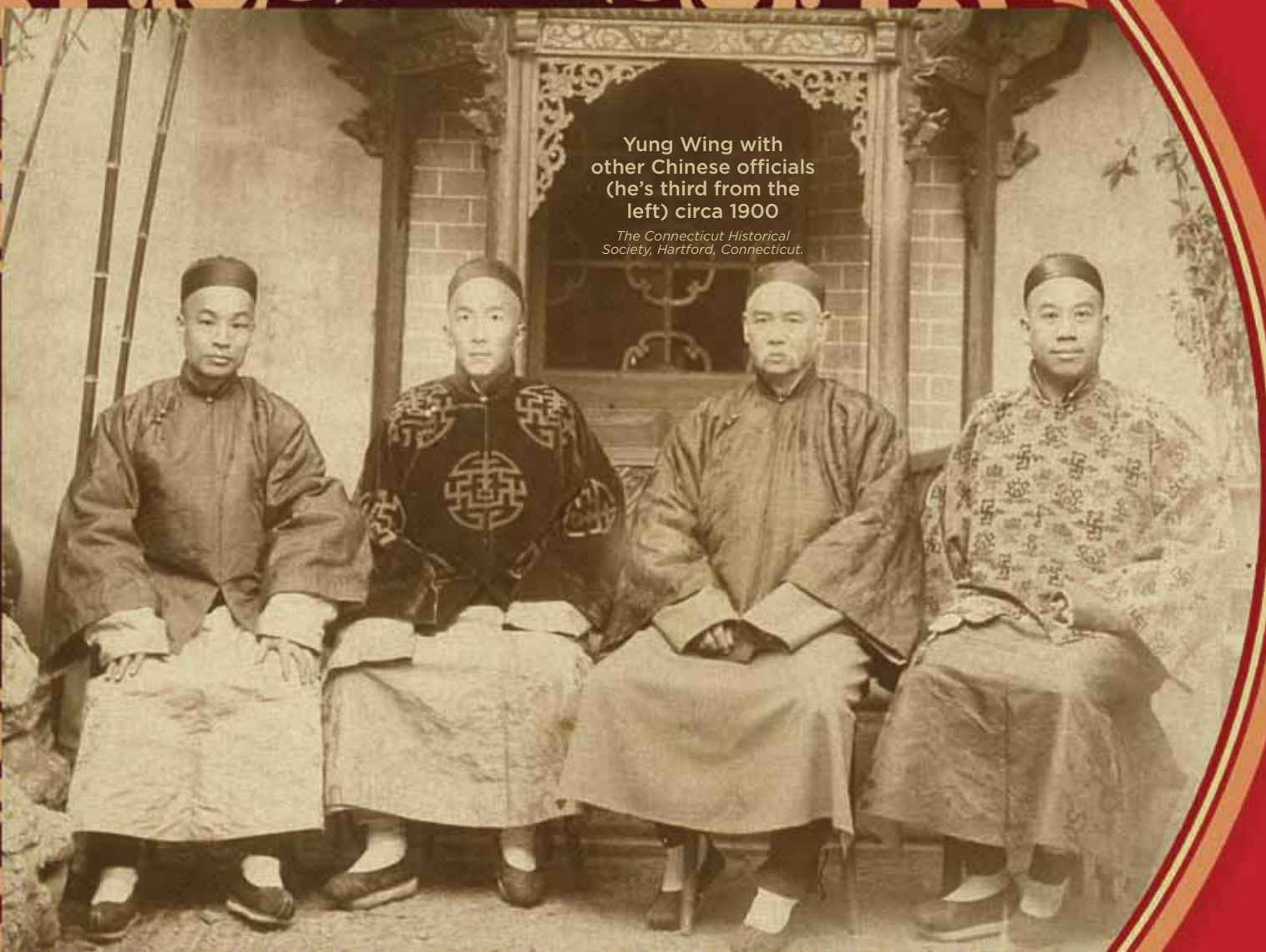
Yung Wing, Yale class of 1854, was the first Chinese ever to graduate from an American institution of higher education. He was born in Nan Ping, province of Guangdong in 1828, where fate had also placed a small Christian school run by Mrs. Gutzlaff, the large and robust wife of an English missionary. Yung Wing's parents enrolled him for classes when he was seven years old. Years later Yung Wing would document his first meeting with Mrs. Gutzlaff in his autobiography, where he recounted having "….trembled all over with fear of her imposing proportions." (Koh, 2004) He did not like the school, but it was not too long before he completed its curriculum and progressed to another, this time run by a missionary from the United States, Reverend Samual Robbins Brown, who had been educated at Yale.



Mandarin Yung Wing
The Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut.

Dr. Brown's stories and teachings inspired Yung Wing to dream of an education in the United States and also of the ominous adventure of crossing the Pacific. One of his student essays was entitled "An Imaginary Voyage to New York and Up the Hudson," where he constructed a colorful tale of sailors and sea storms. Just two years later he would actually make that voyage, accompanied by Dr. Brown and bound for Monson Academy in Massachusetts.

Dr. Brown and his young protégé departed China in the middle of the fierce winter of 1854 on a ship called *The Huntress*, and arrived at the academy 98 days later. There the Reverend Charles Hammond, also a Yale graduate, befriended the ambitious youth. With guidance and help from Drs. Brown and Hammond, and armed with a scholarship generously provided by the Ladies Association of Savannah, Georgia (Hammond's sister was a prominent resident of Savannah), Yung Wing became the first Chinese ever to enroll in a U.S. institution of higher education.



Yung Wing with other Chinese officials (he's third from the left) circa 1900

The Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut.

In 1851 Yale's freshman class consisted of 98 Americans, few of color, no women, and Yung Wing. He was regarded as somewhat of a curiosity by his classmates, as he kept his topknot, and wore a traditional Chinese tunic his entire freshman year. Yale legend tells of Yung Wing being a loner with little social interaction, although he was a common sight around campus as he worked regularly at both the dining hall and the library to help fund his tuition. He was an excellent student, although he nearly failed differential and integral calculus which according to his autobiography he "abhorred and detested" (Koh, 2004). But he compensated by winning the Yale Prize for English Composition, much to the chagrin of many of his native-English-speaking classmates.

Although he had a limited social life at Yale, Yung Wing often took long walks with classmate Carrol Cutler, who would later become president of Western Reserve College (Case Western Reserve) in Cleveland. Sharing a mutual interest in ensuring that the rising generation in China would have the opportunities for a Western education that Yung Wing had enjoyed, the two of them came up with the idea for an education mission. They drafted a plan for systematically sending small groups of young Chinese to study in the United States over a period of several years, and hoped to someday present the idea to the Chinese government.

But it would take time for their hope to be realized. Yung graduated from Yale in 1854 (two years after obtaining his U.S. citizenship) and soon after left on a 151 day trip to Hong Kong to reunite with his family and begin his career. Upon arrival, however, a Chinese-speaking pilot came aboard to give the passengers instructions, and to Yung Wing's alarm he could barely understand him. He discovered that as a result of not speaking Chinese for several years, his native language skills had dramatically slipped—a revelation that would later prompt him to encourage the addition of Chinese studies to the curriculum of those studying in the United States.

Not only had Yung Wing lost language skills, but having left China as a young man, he also found he now had few friends left. Rather than trying to fit back into traditional Confucian society, he persisted in engaging himself in various projects to promote China's modernization, which further alienated him from many of his countrymen.

Between Two Worlds

Torn between two cultures, Yung made the decision to return to the United States, now in the throes of the Civil War. Being a naturalized citizen and motivated by genuine feelings of patriotism for his adopted country, he felt moved to help and tried to volunteer as a soldier for the Union army. To his deep regret his service was declined because, in spite of his citizenship status, army officials still regarded him as Chinese and "not really American." Prompted to return once again to China, Yung entered into the service of the Ch'ing dynasty because of his English skills, and after a few years was appointed commissioner of the Chinese Educational Mission. It was 1868, and the Burlingame Treaty had just been signed by the United States and China. Article VII of the treaty stated: "Chinese subjects shall enjoy all the privileges of the public educational institutions under the control of the government of the United States" (Kao, 2003). Thus, the stage was set for China to choose the United States, bypassing England, as the country to which she would send students for Western studies.

Bolstered by the momentum of the new treaty, Yung Wing set about putting into action the plans he and Carrol Cutler had so long ago devised. He proposed the Chinese government send 120 students to the United States over the course of several years, to earn degrees in higher education and to bring new technological knowledge back to China. The imperial court agreed, and in 1872, Yung Wing again returned to the United States to set up the project.

The students would be divided into four installments of 30 each, one group to be sent out each year. Some selected for the journey were as young as 10 years old, sent early for preparatory training before college enrollment. The Chinese government allotted each student 15 years to complete his education. If the first and second installments of students proved to be successful, the plan would be continued indefinitely. Chinese teachers were to be provided along the way, to maintain the students' knowledge of Chinese language and tradition while in the United States.

The imperial court appointed Chen Lan-Pin, a conservative Confucian with absolutely no knowledge of English, to be the first Commissioner of the Chinese Educational Commission in Hartford, Connecticut, and Yung Wing was named Deputy Commissioner. Together they constituted the first permanent mission China had ever sent abroad.

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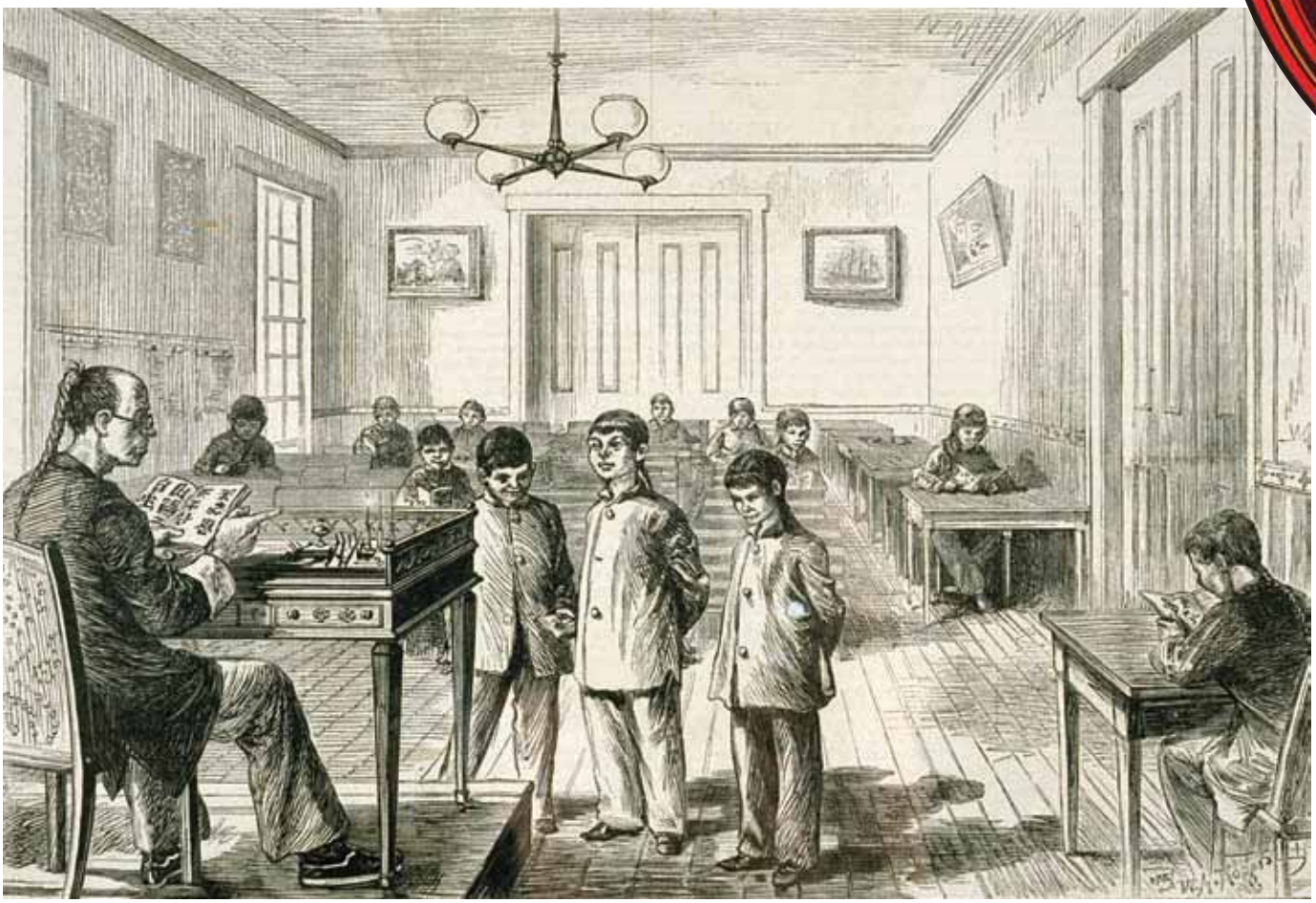
Liang Tun-Yen, "southpaw" pitcher for "the Orientals" baseball team at Yale, 1872

The Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut.



A classroom in the Chinese Education Mission building in Hartford, CT *The Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut.*

The First Class

The initial detachment of 30 Chinese students left Shanghai on August 11, 1872. Their ship docked in San Francisco on September twelfth; 10 days later the students and their sponsors had crossed the country and arrived in New England. The group was led by Commissioner Chen and included two instructors of Chinese classics and one English interpreter. Housing was provided through the generosity of local New England families, who hosted the boys in two's and four's.

The students excelled in their new environment. Their academic achievements were matched by their victories on the baseball diamond and in the ballroom, as their great "south-paw" pitcher, Liang Tun-Yen, led the "Orientals" to many victories. (He later served as the last Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Ch'ing Dynasty).

For the two consecutive years (1880 and 1881) that Yale defeated Harvard in crew races on the Thames River in Groton, Connecticut, Chinese mission student Chung Mun-Yew served as coxswain for the Yale varsity crew (DeAngelis, 2002). Several stories have been told about his crew exploits, including one published in the *Hartford Courant* in 1912:

> Famous in Yale annals as the coxswain of the Yale shell which distanced Harvard in the race of 1880, Chung was a favorite among his classmates. He was a bright student who never lost his temper and who was never known to swear, except on one occasion. That was during the race with Harvard in 1880. Toward the finish, the little coxswain broke out with 'Damn it boys, pull!' The boys did and Yale won the race (Schiff, 2004)

The students were popular in social circles and seemed to adjust to U.S. culture very quickly. Their stay in America could not have happened at a more exciting time, as it coincided with a great period of scientific and technological innovation. The Chinese students witnessed the invention of Alexander G. Bell's first telephone (1876), and Thomas Edison's phonograph (1878) and incandescent lamp (1879). They also attended the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, where samples of their homework on display in the Educational Pavilion won merit awards from the Board of Jury. The students' many accomplishments became well-known in the region and even drew the attention of President Ulysses S. Grant, who hosted a special reception in their honor and shook hands with each of them (Kao, 2003).

The Imperial government acknowledged the mission's success by appointing Chen Lan-Pin and Yung Wing China's first Minister and Associate Minister to the United States, respectively, and presented their credentials to President Rutherford B. Hayes. The two men in effect became China's first official diplomatic envoys to the United States.

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The Chinese Educational Commission erected its own building at 352 Collins Street in Hartford, to be used as a center for learning the Chinese classics. The facility provided classrooms and boarding for 75 students, who would gather at regular intervals to listen to the Chinese instructor read the Emperor's instructions. The curriculum for Chinese studies included the classics, poetry, calligraphy and composition. For the newly Americanized Chinese students, however, the Chinese studies soon became a burden, and they referred to the Chinese Education Commission's building as "Hell House." Unfortunately their comments did not go unnoticed by the Chinese officials.

Too Much Americanization

The students' growing distaste for Chinese studies was not the only indicator of problems in the eyes of the Imperial government. The boys had begun to adopt Western manners. Many had stopped wearing the traditional long Chinese gown and preferred Western suits instead. Some had cut their hair, some converted to Christianity. A few even dated American girls and danced at parties. Chen Lan-Pin in particular was shocked at the degree of Americanization among the students. He came to believe that the educational process was resulting in the alienation of young people from Chinese tradition and might create a new establishment of "westernized" scholars that could pose a threat to the Confucian elite.

Distaste for the project grew within the imperial court as well, and Yung Wing's plan was finally abandoned in 1881 as a result of steadily increasing pressure on the Chinese government. Simply put, Confucian conservatism won out over new Western ideas:

> They [the students] had been allowed to enjoy more privileges than was good for them...they imitated American students in athletics...they played more than they studied...they formed themselves into secret societies, both religious and political... the sooner this educational enterprise was broken up and all the students recalled, the better it would be for China (Kao, 2003).

Many eminent Americans, including former President Grant, President Porter of Yale University, and Samuel Clemens (better known by his pen mane, Mark Twain—he and Yung Wing had become personal friends) petitioned the Chinese government not to withdraw the students, but to no avail. At the time of the recall, only two students had graduated from the Sheffield Scientific School of Yale University; about 60 students were in other colleges, and the rest were still in preparatory high schools.

Some of the students who were already established in the United States were at first allowed to stay on. But by August of 1881 almost all were ordered home, and the Chinese Education Commission came to an abrupt end. Political relations between the two countries had also deteriorated to such an extent by then that those students who did return became virtual prisoners in Shanghai. One of those students, Yan Phou Lee, did manage to escape from China in 1883, and return to the United States. He re-enrolled at Yale as a sophomore in the class of 1887, became a distinguished student who received prizes in English composition and declamation, and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

Although the plan had been aborted it was from this initial group of students that China got its first Western-trained technicians and engineers, and many were instrumental in helping to modernize China. One of the first boys sent by the Commission, Tong Shao-yi, later became prime minister of the Chinese Republic.

Another of the students, Chan Tien-Yu, is also worthy of record. Chan was just 11 years old when he came to Connecticut with the first installment of students in 1872. He graduated from the Sheffield Scientific School of Yale University in 1881, and after returning to China dedicated the next 32 years of his life to the design, planning, and construction of China's railroads. Because of his efforts and American expertise, one of the railroads, the famous Peking-Kalgan Railway, was the first to be built solely by the talent of Chinese engineers and without any direct foreign assistance. Today, the name of Chan Tien-Yu is synonymous with the spirit of self-sufficiency on both sides of the Taiwan Straits, representing the peoples drive to modernize China.

Through the accomplishments of many of the first students sent by the mission, Yung Wing's vision had been at least partially realized, and had set important precedents that would be built upon after the turn of the century. Before he died, he made a final contribution to education exchange with the United States by donating his prized collection of Chinese books to Yale. The acquisition formed the nucleus of Yale University's Sterling East Asian book compilation, and initiated one

of the finest collections in the West. Yung Wing's portrait hangs in Yale University Center, alongside those of other famous graduates.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Opportunities for Chinese students to develop their talents in the United States had been short-lived and prospects for education exchange, at least for the near future, seemed dismal. After abandoning Yung Wing's education exchange initiative, the Chinese government enforced renewed isolationist policies in the late 1880s.

There were new blockades for education exchange on the U.S. side, too. The discovery of gold in California in 1847 had attracted fortune hunters from the world over, particularly from China. Most were poor and uneducated, with few skills. Not surprisingly the vast majority failed in their quest to "strike it rich," and also had no means of paying for passage back to China. Consequently, thousands were forced to remain in the United States and find work, often as laborers, in order to survive. American resentment grew as the so-called "yellow peril" was blamed for taking needed jobs from U.S. citizens. Partly for protection against the growing numbers of angry Americans, many of the Chinese moved together into close-knit communities in U.S. cities to form areas that would come to be known as "China Towns."

Unfortunately outbreaks of violence between Americans and Chinese persisted, and the federal government was pressured to take action. In the 1880s, the Chinese Exclusion Act went into effect, which made it exceedingly difficult for new Chinese to enter the United States. While there were exemptions for students, the general atmosphere was not welcoming, and until around 1900, few Chinese ventured into the United States for any reason.

Into the Twentieth Century

The early part of the twentieth century brought about a resurgence of Chinese students in the United States, chiefly as a result of the Boxer Rebellion. When China was defeated by Japan in 1895, European powers responded with a policy they called, "carving up the Chinese melon" which mostly had to do with the control of railway and commercial privileges in various regions. The Russians took Port Arthur; the British gained control of the New Territories around Hong Kong; and the Germans were granted a leasehold in Shantung. The U.S. government supported an "open door" policy in China through which many commercial and trade opportunities became available.

The imperial court responded by quietly giving aid to various secret societies in order to try to undermine what Chinese viewed as a form of foreign occupation. Traditionally, societies such as these had been formed in opposition to the government. However, anti-foreign sentiment became so pronounced in China that the Empress Dowager hoped the secret societies could instead serve the government by providing a covert means of removing the Europeans. In 1900 the policies prompted what became known as the Boxer Rebellion.

The Boxers, or "The Righteous and Harmonious Fists," were a Chinese religious society that had originally rebelled against the imperial government in Shantung in 1898. They practiced animistic rituals and spells that they believed made them impervious to bullets and pain. The Boxers also believed that the expulsion of "foreign devils" would magically renew Chinese society and begin a new golden age. Much of their discontent, however, had been focused on the economic hardships of the 1890s. This time they turned on the foreigners who were occupying their country.

The actual rebellion was limited to a few places, and concentrated itself in Peking. The Boxers attacked Western missionaries and merchants, as well as compounds where foreigners lived, beginning a terrifying siege which lasted eight weeks. In response 19,000 troops of the allied armies of the West captured Peking to end the attacks, and the imperial government was forced to agree to the terms of the Boxer Protocol of 1901. Under the Boxer Protocol, European powers had the right to maintain military forces in the capital, thus placing the imperial government more or less under arrest. The Protocol suspended the civil service examination, demanded a huge indemnity to be paid for the losses, and required Chinese officials to be prosecuted for their role in the rebellion.

The humiliation of the Boxer Protocol set China on a new course of political and educational reforms. In 1901 the education system was restructured to allow the admission of girls and the curriculum was changed from the study of the classics and Confucian theory to the study of Western mathematics, science, engineering, and geography. It had been 40 years since Yung Wing's efforts to bring more Chinese students to the United States had been thwarted by Confucian ideals. In 1908, however, the United States decided to forgive a significant portion of the Boxer Indemnity (which

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totaled almost 12 million dollars in gold) with the suggestion that a large portion of the money be used for the education of Chinese students in the United States. That action made it feasible once again for China to send students to the West.

The Board of Trustees of the China Foundation for the Promotion of Education and Culture, consisting of 10 Chinese members and five American members, was charged with the distribution of the proceeds of the Second Remission of the Boxer Indemnity. It was through their effort that the Chinese student recipients of the funds successfully moved through the process of getting to the United States, enrolling, and graduating. In 1899 there had been only about 80 Chinese studying in U.S. colleges, but by 1911, the count jumped to more than 800. About half were maintained by either the different regional governments of China, or by the Boxer Indemnity Fund. And in 1914, China sent its first female students to the United States.

From Students to Scholars

This new era of Chinese student enrollments in U.S. colleges and universities produced another wave of influential scholars. One was Tao Xingzhi. After studying at Teachers College at Columbia University during 1916–1917, Tao returned home to become a proponent of modern education in China, and one of the most renowned educators in Chinese history. He developed an original synthesis of Deweyan and Chinese approaches to progressive education based on a first hand study and analysis of Chinese life and society. Tao Xingzhi was instrumental in putting together a series of educational surveys in Peking, Tianjin and Shanghai, which studied literacy. Alarmed that the study reported an illiteracy rate of nearly 70 percent in some urban areas, he made the decision to devote a major portion of his career helping to correct what he perceived to be one of China's biggest problems.

Hu Shi is another example. He won a Boxer Indemnity scholarship in 1910 and enrolled at Cornell, then later studied in the Department of Philosophy at Columbia University. After his return to China in 1917, Hu Shi became a leader in the New Culture movement. He served as professor of philosophy at Peking University in the 1920s, and from 1938 to 1942 was an ambassador to the United States. He became president of Peking University in 1946.

Chen Heqin studied at Teachers College during 1917 and 1918. After graduation Chen returned to China to become the first modern Chinese theoretician of early childhood education. His work included the promotion of early childhood education opportunities, and he developed teacher training programs that emphasized child psychology, family education, and education for handicapped children.

By 1917, the influence of Chinese American-educated citizens was becoming so important that Tsing Hua College in Peking (which had been established in 1911 with Boxer Indemnity funds) published a "Who's Who of American Returned Students." It contained 215 pages of biographical records of each Chinese student who had studied in the United States, and the importance of the positions held after they returned to China. For the next two decades, until the outbreak of World War II in the 1940s, the importance of education exchange gained momentum, and the Chinese student population in the United States grew steadily.

The Road Less Traveled Brings Hope

Nearly a century had passed since Yung Wing enrolled at Yale, and was inspired to help more Chinese students come to the United States for their education. In the beginning their numbers were few, but many of these early pioneers went on to profoundly impact their homeland with their educational and technological accomplishments, setting an extraordinary example the next generation of young Chinese scholars.

The Chinese government, which had been slow to acknowledge the value of Western education in the nineteenth century, began reaping its benefits in the twentieth, and now envisioned an improved China through accelerated education exchange with the West. Confucian ideals were giving way to China's dreams of modernization. The United States, inspired to push toward global understanding after a divisive war, was now openly welcoming foreign students to its colleges and universities. Yung Wing's vision—to enable great numbers of Chinese to have the same educational advantages he had enjoyed, so that his homeland would be regenerated through the acquisition and application of western technology—was now perfectly poised for realization. **IE**

Additional Resources

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