

First Chinese American College Graduate Yung Wing 1828-1912



Yung Wing (容闳 Róng Hóng) was born in 1828 and began his education at the age of seven in a missionary school in 1835 in the Portuguese colony of Macau, geographically close to his home village of Nam Ping (about four miles away in Guangdong Province) but impossibly far for a child. He attempted to run away once with a group of girl students but they were caught and humiliated in front of the other students. He dropped out of school at the age of twelve in 1840 after his father died in order to help support his mother and four siblings. At first he made a living by selling candy, then gleaned rice after reapers had finished threshing, and then worked in a Roman Catholic printing office since he could make out the Western letters and numbers.

After a year of work a sympathetic missionary doctor helped him to get a place at the Morrison School which moved from Macao to Hong Kong in 1842. Yung Wing was then given the rare opportunity to study abroad when his the principal, Reverend S.R. Brown, a graduate of Yale, became ill and returned to America in 1847. At his final speech to the school he invited whichever boys wanted to go with him to complete their education in the United States to stand up. Three boys stood, including Yung Wing. The three were placed in the custody of Reverend Brown's mother in Monson, Massachusetts and educated at the Monson Academy, a college preparatory school. The missionaries undertook to pay their education for two years and to help out their families financially while they were gone. One soon returned to China in ill health and the other left America after completing his school studies and became a doctor at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland at missionary expense before returning to China.

Yung Wing was also offered full tuition by the missionaries but only if he promised to become a missionary in China after he graduated. Although a convert to Christianity, Yung Wing refused the offer saying, "The calling of a missionary is not the only sphere in life where one can do the most good in China or elsewhere." He later wrote, "...a pledge of that character would prevent me from taking advantage of any circumstance or event that might arise in the life of a nation like China, to do her a great service." He then added, "To be sure, I was poor, but I would not allow my poverty to gain the upper hand and compel me to barter away my inward convictions of duty for a temporary mess of pottage."

Yung Wing faced formidable challenges when he entered Yale University in 1850. In the 19th Century a high class Western education was a childhood filled with classroom lessons in Greek, Latin, and mathematics. Yung had only studied Latin for fifteen months, Greek for twelve months, and mathematics for ten months, and was woefully

underprepared when compared to his fellow Yale students. He also had to pay his own tuition and support himself through college with some help from interested donors. He worked at marketing and waiting on tables for a boarding club and as an assistant librarian for a debating society where he made friends and connection from all the Yale classes. Instead of participating in the social life of the college he studied hard to catch up and worked to survive but still managed to join the college fraternity of Delta Kappa Epsilon (DKE.) He won prizes for his English composition but had an "utter aversion to mathematics, especially to differential and integral calculus, which I abhorred and detested" which he nearly failed. During this time he became a naturalized American citizen in 1852.

When he graduated from Yale University with a degree in Literature in 1854, he became the first Chinese to graduate from an American university. He left university with a high goal, "I was determined that the rising generation of China should enjoy the same educational advantages that I had enjoyed; that through western education China might be regenerated, become enlightened and powerful. To accomplish that object became the guiding star of my ambition." A lifelong supporter of reform in China, Yung would be an integral part of the modernization efforts of China in the 19th century but it took him many long years to get any action from the imperial government on his student plan. Despite losing two major wars and territory to the Westerners, conservative imperial officials remained convinced that China's intellectual and moral superiority more than outweighed advanced Western technology such as steam engines, artillery, and rifles. China might deign to buy some weapons from the West but it would maintain its cultural superiority by not allowing the Western ideas that had created the machines and weapons to contaminate China. These decisions would cause long-term disaster for China.

After obtaining his degree, Yung returned to China but after ten years in America found that he couldn't remember how to speak Chinese and had to relearn how to read and write as well. He accomplished this within six months but never attained complete fluency in reading and writing since he'd had only four years of formal Chinese language instruction as a child. He then drifted from job to job utilizing his bilingual skills in business and government, once working in the Imperial Customs Translating Department in Shanghai but resigning after just four months because he wanted to avoid being tainted by the corruption he found there and found it unfair that only whites were allowed to be promoted to commissioners of custom in China (Westerners controlled Chinese customs as a result of previous wars that had created foreign-controlled treaty ports like Shanghai.)

In 1860, Yung Wing visited the Taiping capital in Nanking in the course of the tea trade he was involved in and out of curiosity and met with Hong Rengan (洪仁玕), cousin of the leader of the Taiping movement, then trying to overthrow the Qing Dynasty. Yung proposed a series of reforms, the same ones that he wanted to present to the Qing government but didn't have the contacts or influence to yet, including the creation of a professional army and navy and military academies, the formation of a banking system, and public education with the Bible being an integral part of the instruction. He was

offered the fourth highest official rank below prince in the Taiping system, 義 which means "Righteousness," but declined the offer as he seriously doubted the ability of Hong to implement the reforms against more insular looking Taiping leaders and of the prospects for victory of the movement. Yung's doubts were well justified as the rebels were finally crushed in 1864 at the cost of anywhere from 20 to 30 million lives lost in the fourteen year civil war.

In 1863, Yung was invited by the Viceroy of Liangjiang, Zeng Guofan, to join the imperial service as he'd heard of Yung's Western education and was impressed by the \$20,000 he'd managed to raise in 1857 from the foreign community in Shanghai for famine refugee relief.¹ Yung's idea that he presented to Viceroy Zeng was to go abroad to buy a machine shop that would manufacture the parts needed for other machine shops. This idea was adopted and Yung was granted temporary military rank, a budget, and the authority to buy such machinery wherever he decided. The machinery he bought from Massachusetts became part of the Kiangnan Arsenal (now Jiangnan Shipyard) in Shanghai, China's first modern arsenal. As the machinery would take six months to prepare for shipment to China, Yung took it upon himself as a naturalized citizen to go to Washington DC to volunteer to fight for six months in the Union Army then in the midst of the Civil War. The general in charge of volunteers remembered him as they'd met at Yale where the general's son had been a student. Hearing about his duty to China though the general refused Yung's services and told him, "I thank you very much for your offer, but since you are charged with a responsible trust to execute for the Chinese government, you had better return [to Massachusetts] to attend to it."

Upon Yung's return to China in 1865 Viceroy Zeng was so impressed with his services that he sent a special memorial to the imperial government commending Yung Wing and asking that his temporary rank be confirmed as permanent. This was granted and Yung became a mandarin of the fifth rank with the right to wear the ceremonial peacock feather in his official hat. In 1867, during a tour of the Kiangnan Arsenal where he saw the machines operating for the first time, the Viceroy gave permission for a school to be established at the arsenal where boys could be taught the new technology, the first step in Yung Wing's education plans. However, he was frustrated in going any further for the next three years.

In June 1870, the Tientsin Massacre occurred in what is now the city of Tianjin. The French Roman Catholics had established an orphanage there and paid Chinese to procure orphans to be raised as Christians. An outbreak of disease in the orphanage had killed several of the children and lent weight to the rumor that the Christians were buying children in order to gouge out their eyes, heart, and other body parts for magic rituals. Much as the same charges had historically led to hysterical Christian mobs killing Jews across Europe a hysterical mob of Chinese had turned against the Christians, burning down French, British, and American churches and killing French

¹ Zeng Guofan was one of the most powerful men in China at the time as he'd been invested with immense powers and wealth to crush the Taiping Rebellion which he accomplished when he conquered Nanking in 1864 and decapitated most of the remaining senior Taiping leaders.

priests and nuns, Chinese Christians, and four Russian traders after mistaking them for French. In total about sixty people were killed.

This serious breach of public order had potentially disastrous consequences for China. Undoubtedly France would have found cause to seize more Chinese territory by military force in response except the Franco-Prussian War broke out the very next month in July 1870. Nevertheless an imperial commission was immediately appointed to investigate the incident and present recommendations for how it was to be handled. The importance of this to the Qing government was shown when out of the five members appointed to the commission three of them were the most powerful senior generals honored by the Qing for crushing the Taiping Rebellion including Viceroy Zeng. Yung was ordered to present himself as an interpreter for the proceedings but was unable to arrive in time except to witness the finale when it was decided to pay an indemnity to the families of the dead, rebuild the destroyed churches, and send a high ranking official to deliver an official apology to France for the incident. While the commissioners were gathered Yung Wing took the opportunity to present several modernization proposals.

1. The first proposal contemplated the organization of a Steamship Company on a joint stock basis. No foreigner was to be allowed to be a stockholder in the company. It was to be a purely Chinese company, managed and worked by Chinese exclusively.
2. The second proposition was for the government to send picked Chinese youths abroad to be thoroughly educated for the public service. The scheme contemplated the education of one hundred and twenty students as an experiment. These one hundred and twenty students were to be divided into four installments of thirty students each, one installment to be sent out each year. They were to have fifteen years to finish their education. Their average age was to be from twelve to fourteen years. If the first and second installments proved to be a success, the scheme was to be continued indefinitely. Chinese teachers were to be provided to keep up their knowledge of Chinese while in the United States. Over the whole enterprise two commissioners were to be appointed, and the government was to appropriate a certain percentage of the Shanghai customs to maintain the mission.
3. The third proposition was to induce the government to open the mineral resources of the country and thus in an indirect way lead to the necessity of introducing railroads to transport the mineral products from the interior to the ports.
4. The fourth proposal was to prohibit missionaries of any religious sect or denomination from exercising any kind of jurisdiction over their converts, in either civil or criminal cases.

It had become increasingly obvious to more liberal minded officials that China was falling further and further behind the Western powers both militarily and technologically and was having to rely more and more on foreign experts to catch up. Not only were these foreigners expensive to hire but their first loyalties were not to China. China would have to modernize by sending their own people to be educated in Western ways to survive as a nation. The commissioners saw merit in Yung's proposals and jointly signed their names to a memorial to the imperial government recommending their adoption. Yung Wing finally got permission to organize the Chinese Educational Mission to enable thirty students to be sent annually to study at East Coast US schools in 1871. The aim was to educate them sufficiently enough to put as many of them as possible into West Point and the Naval Academy at Annapolis to learn the Western ways of war and practical skills like mechanical and civil engineering. Yung Wing had no easy time filling the quota. Already the horror stories of how Chinese were being treated in

America with murder and abuse by uncivilized white barbarians with their bizarre religious practices and outlandish beliefs and habits had spread to even the most humble parts of China. Yung Wing had to personally visit and persuade many reluctant parents to take up the government offer to send their sons overseas and have their education paid at government expense. Students first had to go through a grueling year of preparatory rote learning in China where they studied not only the traditional Confucian classics required of the Chinese bureaucracy but also English. Those that succeeded in their final English examinations would then be awarded a gilt button and rank as a cadet and celebrated as if they'd achieved passage in the government examination system that selected government officials. The first contingent of thirty students that made the cut were sent to the United States beginning in 1872.

Volunteer families in the United States enthusiastically stepped up to take in two or three boys at a time and act as their guardians. At first the boys and their adopted families didn't quite know what to make of each other and there was much culture shock on both sides compounded by the limited English the boys had. Dressed in their silk robes and with their long queues the Chinese looked very out of place around the New England states where the program operated. They quickly changed to Western dress, wrapping their queues around their heads or tucking them under their jackets.² A year later some of them astounded imperial officials by how fluently they spoke English and interacted with the Americans.

Unfortunately, relations between the United States and China deteriorated as anti-Chinese feelings grew. Chinese workers competed with the many unemployed whites for jobs during the Long Depression that lasted from 1873 to 1879. In 1879, the US State Department decided not to allow Chinese students to attend the American military academies with the rude note attached to their application, "There is no room provided for Chinese students." This was in direct contravention of the Burlingame Treaty of 1868 that had promised the same most favored nation status that other countries enjoyed with the United States. Meanwhile more conservative imperial officials in China, the diplomatic legation in Washington DC, and Yung's own fellow education minister in the mission were conducting a whisper campaign to undermine Yung and the program. The students were losing their Chinese identity and language, converting to Christianity, and joining secret religious and revolutionary societies they said. That Yung Wing was a naturalized American citizen and had married a white American wife in 1876 didn't help matters. With growing American hostility towards the Chinese and such alarming secret reports about the students the government decided to terminate the program in 1881 without first consulting Yung Wing and bring the remaining 112 students back to China (1 student having died and 7 having already been sent home for various reasons) just as the first of them graduated from American colleges. This recall

² The queue was a hairstyle imposed by the Qing Dynasty on all Chinese from 1645 to 1911 to show their loyalty to their Manchurian rulers. To cut off the queue was a death penalty offense in China as it was considered a revolutionary act against the government. This was why American ordinances against queues and mobs of unruly whites cutting off queues to harass the Chinese were considered particularly outrageous by the Chinese American community as such a man without a queue faced severe penalties or death if they tried to go back to China. Nevertheless from existing photographs and statements about why some boys were sent back to China early it appears some of the boys did cut their queues which must have severely alarmed the Qing government.

came in spite of organized protests from American guardians, friends, teachers, and fellow students.

As they waited for their ship to leave from San Francisco, California, the Chinese boys were challenged to a game of baseball across the San Francisco Bay in Oakland. Since most white Americans had never seen Chinese play baseball before and were confident of their racial superiority there was no question that the Americans would easily win. The Chinese team, many of who had been star baseball players at their preparatory schools and in college, resoundingly beat the American team in the last baseball game any of them would play. Upon their return to China they were marched off under heavy guard to undergo intense interrogations and treated with intense suspicion by the imperial authorities. Despite this bad treatment and the discrimination they faced from conservatives, many of the 120 students went on to become leaders and make significant contributions in engineering, civil services, and the sciences in China. One became the first premier of the Republic of China, Táng Shào'yí, and another became the foreign minister, Tsai Ting Kan. Another distinguished student was Jeme Tien Yow, who built the first railway in China built without foreign assistance in 1905. The Imperial Peking–Kalgan Railway (now the Jingzhang Railway) was built two years ahead of schedule and under budget. It took the Chinese government nearly twenty five years to resume such official educational exchanges, implicitly admitting they had made a mistake by calling them off in the first place.

Yung Wing was also called upon to undertake other missions for the Chinese government while in the United States. In 1873 he was tasked with procuring Gatling guns, the first modern machine guns, for the Chinese government. Nobody at the Gatling factory had any idea who he was or if Yung had any business experience at all but he managed to convince a dubious Dr. Richard Gatling to grant him license to take orders for the company in China. The very first of several orders he sent them was for \$100,000 (about \$25,000,000 in 2012 dollars). This was enough for the company to sit up and pay much more attention to him in future. While in China taking orders for the Gatlings Yung was tasked to look into the coolie trade with Peru. The Peruvian government was then trying to sign a treaty with China to encourage more Chinese laborers to come. After a visit to Peru, Yung Wing advised against it as the trade had become internationally famous for exploitation and cruelty that rivaled anything ever committed against African slaves. As evidence he submitted twenty four photographs taken in secret of the backs of whipped Chinese. Similar horrors in the coolie trade with Cuba led to an immigration ban being imposed on both Peru and Cuba.

Yung always worked to promote cultural understanding and connections between China and the United States, and often spoke out against the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that banned Chinese laborers from coming to the United States. In 1877, he proposed to establish a professorship for Chinese Language and Literature and to also create a collection of Chinese books at Yale. He donated his unique 1,237-volume Chinese book collection, which formed the basis for Yale's East Asian Collection, one of the finest book collections of its kind in the world. In 1878, Yung was appointed as Associate Minister to the United States to conduct diplomacy with the Americans.

In 1894, the First Sino-Japanese War broke out. Yung Wing proposed to lease the island of Formosa (now Taiwan) to a foreign power for \$400,000,000 to finance the war. He also proposed to raise \$15,000,000 to build four ironclad ships and hire 5,000 Western mercenaries to attack the Japanese and distract them from attacking Chinese territory. The second proposal was approved and Yung successfully negotiated a loan of \$15,000,000 from London bankers on behalf of the Chinese government to support the war effort but the Imperial government then refused to sign it because of a disagreement on war policy within the government. One faction wanted to fight the war while the other argued that the Chinese customs revenue promised as collateral wasn't enough to cover the loan and the war indemnity Japan demanded as a condition for ending the war. After the Chinese surrender, Yung was recalled back to China where he advocated a program of modernization based upon Western education and practices but was ignored. He was also unsuccessful in creating a National Bank of China because of court corruption. A Chinese central bank everyone agreed should be created but only on terms that benefitted corrupt court officials and monopoly business interests. He was then granted a concession to build a railroad from Tientsin (Tianjin) to Chinkiang (Zhenjiang.) The German colonial authorities refused to grant permission for a non-German controlled railroad to cross their territory in Shandong Province. A circuitous bypass was proposed. Yung was told he had six months to raise the money needed solely from Chinese investors, none from foreigners, or he would lose the concession. With such impossible and senseless conditions he naturally failed.

Yung Wing became a target as a leading member of the reformist faction when the emperor was overthrown in a palace coup in 1898 after the Hundred Days of Reform he'd led had attempted to start China's modernization against the wishes of the conservatives. Many reformers were executed but Yung managed to escape from Beijing to the foreign settlement area in Shanghai outside of Chinese jurisdiction despite the high price placed on his head. In 1899 he was advised that he wasn't safe in Shanghai and had to flee to Hong Kong under the protection of the British government.

In 1901, Yung Wing visited the Japanese occupied island of Formosa (now Taiwan) and met with the Japanese governor-general, Baron Gentaro Kodama. Kodama said he'd heard much about Yung and was glad to meet him. Then he showed him the wanted notice he'd been sent by the Chinese authorities to have Yung arrested and sent back to China if he ever showed up in Formosa. Yung described the situation in his autobiography, "I was not disturbed by this unexpected news, nor was I at all excited. I met it calmly and squarely, and said in reply that I was entirely in his power, that he could deliver me over to my enemies whenever he wished; I was ready to die for China at any time, provided that the death was an honorable one."

Kodama said he had no intention of handing Yung back to the Chinese authorities then held up a Chinese newspaper that had printed Yung's proposal to lease Formosa to foreigners to raise money to fight the Japanese. The Imperial authorities had probably released the document in order to paint Yung Ying as a foreign collaborator in order to discredit him and his fellow reformers. Kodama asked him who had been the author of the proposal.

Yung Wing proudly slapped his chest and admitted to the Japanese that he'd been the author of the proposal then said, "With Your Excellency's permission, I must beg to make one correction in the amount stated; instead of \$800,000,000, the sum stated in my proposition was only \$400,000,000." He then said, "...should like circumstances ever arise, nothing would deter me from repeating the same proposition in order to fight Japan."

Baron Kodama was extremely impressed by his guest's bravery in admitting to such things and invited Yung to accompany him back to Japan where he expected to be promoted (Kodama became Minister of the Army that year and was later promoted to Viscount and Chief of the Imperial Army General Staff in 1906 just before his death.) Kodama also said he would introduce Yung Wing to Emperor Mutsuhito (posthumously known as the Emperor Meiji) but Yung declined because he was ill with severe asthma. Worried about Chinese government agents harming Yung while he was in Formosa, Kodama provided Japanese soldiers to act as bodyguards during the remaining days of his visit until he returned to Hong Kong.

In 1902, Yung Wing applied for documentation from the US consul in Hong Kong to return to the United States. For fifty years, he had been an American citizen, but he received a telegram from Secretary of State John Hay saying that his citizenship had been revoked because of a retroactive application of the Naturalization Act of 1870 that had denied Chinese and others who weren't white or African American the right to naturalization. Ironically the decision had been made by President Theodore Roosevelt, a fraternity brother of Delta Kappa Epsilon, probably made to avoid offending the Qing government that still wanted Yung's head. Yung finally slipped back into the United States illegally later in 1902 and lived near his two sons in Connecticut, seeing the youngest graduate from his alma mater at Yale. He published his autobiography in 1909 and died in 1912, still a man without a country.

Yung Wing was honored with an honorary doctorate of law from Yale University in 1876. In 1975, P.S. 124, a public elementary school in New York City's Chinatown, was named in his honor.

Publications/Patents:

Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1909
<http://archive.org/stream/mylifeinchinaand027665mbp#page/n7/mode/2up>

External Links:

<http://www.yale.edu/iefp/pku-yale/lectures.html>

<http://www.120chinesestudents.org/yung.html>

Ruthanne Lum McCunn, *Chinese American Portraits: Personal Histories 1828-1988*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 1988