

Stepping forth into the world: the Chinese educational mission and its antecedents

Chinese have been going abroad to study since at least the early 1840s. Some did so with private support, others with government funding. This brief account will concentrate on the second group. The history of Chinese studying abroad with government funding can be divided into five phases.

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WORKING BACKWARD IN TIME, the most recent (or fifth) phase began around 1979 with the initiation of Deng Xiaoping's policy of "reform and opening out" (*gaige kaifang*) and continues into the present. During the past three decades over 1.2 million (!) Chinese students and scholars have gone overseas to study, to teach, or to do research; most of them going to the United States. Of these, perhaps 5-10% were sent by the government.

The fourth phase occurred in the 1950s, when an untold number of Chinese students went to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, at a time when China was cut off from the West. One of them was Li Peng, China's Prime Minister in the 1990s; Li Peng was in Russia from 1948 to 1955 and studied hydro-electric engineering at the Moscow Power Engineering Institute.

The third phase comprised approximately two thousand Boxer Indemnity scholars, sent to the United States from the 1910s to the 1930s. The funding for their scholarships (*Gengzi peikuan jiangxuejin*) came from the remission of a portion of the indemnity that China had been forced to pay to the U.S. for damages and loss of life during the anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion (1898-1900). Among these scholars was Hu Shi, who during the Second World War became the Chinese ambassador to the U.S.; he travelled to Cornell in 1910 where he studied agriculture, and then philosophy at Columbia, earning a Ph.D. in 1917.

The second phase, in the 1900s during the last decade of the Qing dynasty, saw about ten thousand Chinese flocking to Japan to study. They were drawn there by Japan's apparent success at modernization, as demonstrated by its military victory over China in 1895 and then over Russia in 1905. Among this group of students was the future writer, Lu Xun, who was in Japan from 1902 to 1909 and for a while attended a medical school in Sendai.

Finally, we get to the first group of Chinese government-funded students sent abroad; they travelled in the 1870s. By then China had been twice defeated by the British in the two Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-60), and the Qing dynasty had been nearly overthrown by the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64). China's rulers realized that if the country and the dynasty were to survive, reforms were unavoidable. The result was the Self-Strengthening (*zhiqiang*) Movement, which began in the 1860s and continued into the mid-1890s. Among the reforms of the Self-Strengthening Movement was the sending abroad of students. Thirty-eight students in three groups were sent to Europe in the mid-1870s to study naval and military matters. Among them was Yan Fu, who later popularized Social Darwinism in China; Yan Fu attended the Greenwich Naval College in England from 1877 to 1879. An earlier – and larger – group of students, totaling 120, were sent to the United States beginning in 1872. This was the Chinese Educational Mission (*Youtong chuyang yiye*), the very first group of Chinese government-funded students studying abroad.

The Chinese Educational Mission (or CEM) was the brainchild of Yung Wing. Born in 1828 to a farming family near Macau, Yung Wing (or, in *Putonghua*: Rong Hong) had attended a missionary school in Macau and Hong Kong. In 1847, the principal of the school, Rev. Samuel Robbins Brown, brought three of his students back with him to the U.S.. One of them was Yung Wing. Yung lived with the Brown family in Monson, Massachusetts, and attended the local academy. In 1850 he enrolled at Yale from which he graduated with a B.A. degree in 1854, becoming the first Chinese college graduate in the West. Yung then returned to China and in 1863 joined the staff of the powerful provincial official Zeng Guofan, who was a vigorous promoter of Self-strengthening. Yung Wing's idea was to replicate his own educational experience on a grand scale and with financial support from the government. He eventually persuaded Zeng Guofan to ask the Qing court to authorize the Chinese Educational Mission. The court did so in 1871 and appointed Yung Wing an associate head of the mission.



The chief responsibility of the host families was to home-school the boys and prepare them for regular American schools. Within a couple of years of their arrival in America many boys were able to enroll in local schools; middle school and then secondary (or high) school. One feature of American schooling at the time helped ease their transition. According to education historian Theodore Sizer, "Recitation was the prevailing method of instruction: the pupil memorized a portion of a text and dutifully repeated it to the teacher." This was a pedagogy with which the Chinese students were quite familiar from their Chinese studies and at which they could excel, as indeed some of them did.

Whilst learning English and attending American schools, the CEM students were expected to keep up with their Chinese studies. When still being home-schooled, they were required to write two pages of Chinese every day and to go to the CEM headquarters in Hartford for additional Chinese lessons every three months (figure 2). Later, when attending school, they were to go to Hartford during their summer vacations for two or more weeks.



By the fall of 1881, half of the CEM students had advanced beyond secondary school into college; indeed, by then, three had even graduated from college. Most went to Yale, Yung Wing's alma mater; the rest, to nine other colleges, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. In college, as in high school, the students had to choose between two types of curriculum, the classical and the scientific. The time-honored classical curriculum emphasized Greek and Latin, while the scientific curriculum, a recent innovation, paid more attention to mathematics, sciences and engineering. Most, though not all, of the CEM students in college chose to study science or engineering; for example, the three who had graduated by 1881 had all attended the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale.

Conspicuously missing from the list of colleges that the CEM students attended were the U.S. Military Academy or the Naval Academy. Between 1869 and 1881 a dozen Japanese students were attending the U.S. Naval Academy, and according to the 1868 "Burlingame Treaty" Chinese students should also have been permitted to enroll in U.S. government schools. However, at a time of rising anti-Chinese sentiment, which was to culminate in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the American government disallowed their attendance.

The American refusal to permit CEM students to go to West Point and Annapolis was one reason why in 1881 the Chinese government decided to recall the students. Another reason was a change of leadership at the CEM headquarters in Hartford. By this time Yung Wing had been transferred from the CEM to the Chinese legation in Washington, and a new commissioner, Wu Zideng, had been appointed. Upon his arrival, Wu Zideng was shocked by how Americanized the CEM students had become. They had cast off their Chinese dress, and though they still wore their hair in a queue they otherwise dressed in American clothes. They participated enthusiastically in American sports, especially baseball. They consorted easily and openly with young women of their own age. They attended church and many converted to Christianity; a group of Chinese students at Williston even founded a missionary society. And they were forgetting their Chinese.

The CEM thus came to a premature end in the fall of 1881 (figure 3). When ordered to go home, two refused; six went home, but then made their way back to the U.S. shortly afterwards. Most of the others, on their return to China, were assigned to various Self-strengthening projects, like the Fuzhou Navy Yard School, the Telegraph Administration, the Kaiping Mines, and the Tianjin Medical School. Some eventually achieved prominence during the decade of reform following the Boxer Rebellion. Several, for example, helped create the Boxer Indemnity scholarship program; one, Tang Shaoyi, became the first prime minister after the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912.

How did the Chinese Educational Mission contrast with the later groups of Chinese going abroad to study? First, they were relatively few in number: only 120. Secondly, they were all men. Thirdly, most strikingly, they were very young. Tang Shaoyi was 12 years old when he left China in 1874. By contrast, Yan Fu was 23 when he went to England in 1877; Lu Xun was 21 when he went to Japan in 1902; Hu Shi was 19 when he went to the U.S. in 1910; and Li Peng was 20 when he went to Russia in 1948. Because of their youth, the CEM students were less set in their ways and more open to new ideas than their later counterparts; at the same time, though, they were more susceptible to the blandishments of foreign life, which is ultimately what led to the termination of this first government-funded effort at study abroad.

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1(top): Six members of the first CEM detachment, on arrival in San Francisco, September 1872. Thomas Houseworth and Co., Pacific Coast Scenery

2(middle): The schoolroom in the CEM headquarters, Hartford. Harper's Weekly, 18 May 1878.

3(below): CEM students – all Yale men – on the eve of their departure from San Francisco, September 1881. Image courtesy of the Mansfield Freeman Center for East Asian Studies, Wesleyan University.



The CEM called for sending 120 boys to live and study in New England for a total of fifteen years. The boys were very young; most were between 13 and 15 years old when they left for America (figure 1). Nearly all of them came from around Guangzhou and Shanghai – the two places in closest contact with the maritime West. Hardly any of the students came from the scholar-official elite of China, for whom a foreign education would have had no appeal. This was, after all, a time when the road to individual and family success still ran through the Confucian-based civil service examination system. On the other hand, few of the students came from among the peasantry either, since the CEM students were required to have had several years of education. Instead, most of the students seem to have come from an in-between group of fairly well-to-do families, whose wealth came not from office-holding but from commerce, especially foreign commerce. Except for what they were able to learn in a few months at a preparatory school in Shanghai, the boys knew little or no English at the time of their departure.

The 120 boys of the CEM went to the United States in four annual "detachments" in 1872-75. They went by steamship from Shanghai to San Francisco via Japan, then by train across the American continent. Once in New England, they were dispersed among a number of American families who had volunteered to take them in, and who were compensated by the Chinese government. As a general rule, each family was assigned only two students, and only one family was selected from each community. Being socially isolated in this way – much as Yung Wing had been when he lived with the Brown family in Monson – would expedite the boys' learning of English.