

YUNG Wing

Róng Hóng 容闳

1828–1912 *Educator and diplomat*

Yung Wing was the first Chinese person to graduate from an American university (Yale, class of 1854). Enthusiastic about his education, he persuaded the Qing government to send the Chinese Educational Mission to preparatory schools and colleges in the United States (1872–1881). He also championed the cause of better treatment of Chinese overseas laborers.

Yung Wing 容闳, (also known as Rong Hong) the first Chinese to graduate from a North American college (Yale, 1854), was born into a farming family in the village of Namping, Guangdong Province, now part of the south Chinese city of Zhuhai. The village was only a few miles from the Portuguese colony of Macao, and at the age of seven Yung Wing became the youngest pupil in its foreign-run school. After the First Opium War (1839–1842) the school, now the Morrison Education Society School, moved to Britain's newly acquired colony, Hong Kong. This early start gave Yung a remarkable fluency in English, part of the explanation for the achievements of his later life.

In Hong Kong, when a missionary teacher sought student volunteers to take back to the United States, Yung's autobiography recalled, "I was the first one on my feet!" (Yung 1909, 18) He sailed for the United States in January 1847, his destination being Monson Academy in Massachusetts, where he spent three years on English-language skills and the Latin, Greek, and mathematics required for college entrance. He began his freshman year at Yale in 1850.

Finances were a problem. Funding was available provided that after graduation he would return to China as a missionary, but although he had become an enthusiastic Christian, he declined, deciding: "I wanted the utmost freedom of action to avail myself of every opportunity to do the greatest good in China (Yung 1909, 35–36). He found others willing to help him and took paid jobs waiting tables, singing in the choir, and working in the library.

Yung Wing was so delighted with his Yale experience that he appealed to the Chinese government to replicate it for other Chinese boys. In 1871 the government organized the Chinese Educational Mission to the United States, with a preparatory school in Shanghai and competitive examinations. The plan was for students to remain in the United States for fifteen years, first studying English in southern New England homes, where they were lodged, then attending local grammar and high schools, and finally entering U.S. colleges, preferably to gain an education in technical subjects that would be useful in public service. Over the course of four years the program sent 120 boys in four groups of thirty. Although China recalled the students after only nine years, some had already received a good education. Mission members later became well known in China: One was foreign minister, another served as prime minister in the new republic, and one became the first Chinese to direct a railroad-building project in China; such projects had before than been directed by Westerners.

Midway in supervising the mission students, Yung Wing was appointed deputy at the newly opened Chinese legation in Washington, D.C. The duties of this post soon involved an investigation of the treatment of Chinese laborers in Peru and Cuba. In Peru Yung surreptitiously



Photograph of Yung Wing, the first Chinese man to graduate from an American university. His positive experience at Yale spurred his later advocacy of Western education for Chinese young men.

photographed the whiplash marks on the backs of Chinese workers. The eventual report provoked China into ending the infamous coolie trade.

In 1876 Yung Wing married a U.S. citizen, Mary Louise Kellogg. They had two sons. His final years were devoted to writing his autobiography. He died in Hartford, Connecticut.

Beatrice S. BARTLETT

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