
Bury My Bones in America

A FAMILY HISTORY OF HONG YEN CHANG

BY LANI AH TYE FARKAS

HONG YEN CHANG came to the United States under a program called the Chinese Educational Mission. Its originator, Yung Wing, was the first Chinese to be educated at a major American university, graduating from Yale in 1854. This project fulfilled his life-long desire to help reform and regenerate China. The plan was to educate 120 young Chinese boys in the United States for Chinese government service, and the imperial government paid all expenses. They would acquire technological knowledge of the West, and it was hoped this would help China resist foreign aggression in the future. It would also give China a growing body of trained engineers to build railroads, erect telegraph lines, construct warships, and manufacture guns and ammunition.

In the summer of 1872, the first group of 30 students started on their journey to the United States. Thirteen-year-old Hong Yen Chang was among them. His merchant father, Chang Shing Tung, had died when Hong Yen was only 10. His mother was Yee Shee. Hong Yen came from Yung Wing's district, Heungshan, a district adjoining the Portuguese port of Macao.

Upon arriving in the United States, Chang lived with the Guy B. Day family in Bridgeport, Connecticut, to learn English and American customs more quickly. Once these skills were mastered, Chang and fellow classmate Mun Yew Chung attended the Hartford Public High School in Connecticut and boarded with William B. and Virginia (Thrall) Smith. At first the boys were required to wear the traditional long gowns of Chinese scholars and braided queues. But this attire gave rise to unmerciful teasing because they looked like girls. After many fights, the Chinese dresses gave way to American coats and pants. The boys either hid their queues under their coats or coiled them around their heads.

From 1878 to 1879, Hong Yen Chang was enrolled in a college preparatory program at the exclusive Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. He completed his studies in the classical department and graduated from Phillips in 1879. Hong Yen showed unusual intelligence and gave an English oration at his 1879 commencement exercises.

Since the primary goal of the program was to educate Chinese students to return for government service, it was important that the students maintain their studies in Chinese language and Confucian classics. These courses were provided at the permanent headquarters



Hong Yen Chang on the day he graduated from Phillips Academy in 1879

in Hartford, Connecticut, in a large, double, three-story house spacious enough to accommodate Yung Wing and his co-commissioner, teachers, and 75 students. The facilities included a schoolroom where Chinese studies were taught exclusively, a dining room, a double kitchen, dormitories, and bathrooms. Pupils were divided into classes of 12, and each class stayed at the Mission House for two weeks every three months. They rose at 6 a.m., retired at 9 p.m., and between those hours took Chinese instruction in reading, calligraphy, recitation, and composition.

EDUCATIONAL MISSION'S END

The last group of Chinese students arrived in the United States in 1875, and the program continued to go well for six more years. Arriving in America at the impressionable ages of 12 to 16, the Chinese boys quickly became

Americanized. Indeed, it became increasingly difficult to keep them focused on their Chinese studies.

Yung Wing favored this complete break with Chinese culture because he felt it was the only way the youths would be able to overcome the difficulties of introducing Western technology and machinery into the hostile Chinese government environment. However, the increasing neglect of the students' Chinese education proved to be a major factor in the premature end of

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the Educational Mission. Attendance at Sunday school and church services, play and athletic games produced Chinese boys far too westernized for many conservative Chinese leaders.

Yung Wing's "ardent championing of westernization" on a personal level was also a factor in the mission's premature end. He had converted to Christianity and in 1852 became an American citizen. In 1875, he took another step toward Americanization when he married Louise Kellogg, the daughter of one of Hartford's leading physicians. His marriage was personally very happy, but it furthered conservative Chinese statesmen's suspicions and opposition.

In the climate of growing anti-Chinese sentiment in Washington, D.C., the State Department refused to admit qualified Chinese Educational Mission students to the Military Academy at West Point and the Naval Academy in Annapolis. This affront moved the Chinese conservatives to recall the government-sponsored students under the pretext of protecting them from being "contaminated" by American ideas.

The Chinese Educational Mission lasted from 1872 to 1881 — five years short of its goal. The recall came at a disastrous time for the students, since they were only half prepared to carry out their goal. More than 60 students were enrolled in colleges and technical schools, but the majority of them were just beginning their technical training.

The students eventually proved themselves in the fields of science and technology, but only after years of discouragement and always under the handicap of insufficient training. Some became leaders in establishing modern Chinese communications through the devel-

opment of railroads, telegraph lines, and coal mines, as hoped. Others became China's first modern-trained army and navy officers or consuls and diplomats.

CHANG'S RETURN TO AMERICA

Hong Yen Chang was one of the few Chinese Educational Mission students who did not remain in China, returning instead to America on his own to complete his education. Chang had been studying at Yale College (now Yale University) since 1879 when the Chinese government recalled the Educational Mission students in 1881.

The *Hartford Daily Courant* reported that Chang was "very much disappointed and chagrined at not being able to complete his studies. He went, however, with the determination that he would return to America as soon as practicable to resume his course."

Upon Chang's return to China, Chang was placed in the naval school at Tientsin. When the students first returned, their Western training and attitude was so markedly different from the old-style, Confucian-trained officials, they were treated with hostility and looked upon as only a little above coolies. The *Hartford Daily Courant* reported that Chang soon grew tired of the monotony of the naval school and obtained a release. He visited his aging mother, but only to say farewell for a second time. With the help of friends and his small savings, he reached Shanghai, then in 1882 sailed for Honolulu, where his brother was a merchant. He read law in the office of A.S. Hartwell for a year, and "showed himself so apt a student that at the end of the year he was offered a salary of \$1,200 to remain. He was anxious to become better educated in law, however, and so returned to the United States." Chang went to New York

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in 1883 and managed to enter Columbia Law School without his Yale undergraduate degree. He obtained his law degree in 1886.

FIRST CHINESE LAWYER IN AMERICA

A newspaper article reported that Hong Yen Chang was the first Chinese lawyer educated in America. Known also as Henry Chang, he received his diploma among 108 Americans at the 1886 Columbia Law School commencement. The article described Hong Yen as "taller than the majority of his race" and "unusually intelligent



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in his looks.” His “abilities in legal investigation” were among the finest in his class, and he had excelled in special branches of the law.

Chang had been in America for 16 years and was said to be extremely fond of it. During the rule of the foreign Ching (Qing or Manchu) Dynasty from 1644 to 1911, the queue was imposed upon Chinese men. It was the emblem of obedience and loyalty to the Manchu regime; those who refused to wear one were severely penalized. If a man wanted the option of visiting or returning to China, it was important to have a well-kept queue because of its significance socially and politically. After finishing law school in 1885, Hong Yen Chang cut off his queue.

CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT’S EFFECTS

The brutal effects of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act dashed Hong Yen’s hopes of being admitted to the New York bar with the rest of his classmates. Citizenship was required, but was forbidden to the Chinese under the 1882 act. A well-known judge became interested in Chang’s plight and succeeded in passing a special bill in the New York legislature that removed the disability in Chang’s case. Hong Yen drafted the bill and argued in support of it before New York Governor David Hill in April 1887.

The solution was to naturalize Chang as a United States citizen in the Court of Common Pleas in New York City on November 11, 1887, then admit him to practice law in the state of New York on May 17, 1888. On June 12, 1889, he obtained a certificate of passport describing him as an American citizen. The document was signed by Secretary of State James G. Blaine.

Chang then went West to California, where he planned to serve the large Chinese community of San Francisco as a lawyer. In 1890, he went before a California court and made a motion to practice law. He had to meet two conditions under the California Civil Code: he could present a license to practice law in the highest court of another state, and he was a United States citizen or was eligible and intended to become a citizen. Chang presented his New York license and his certificate of naturalization to the California court. However, the court refused to give him permission to practice law despite the fact that he had met both criteria.

NATURALIZATION OF CHINESE FORBIDDEN

Under United States statutes, the naturalization of aliens was limited to free white people and those of African nativity and descent. In addition, a California act passed on May 18, 1882, expressly forbade the naturalization of a “Chinaman.” It was on the basis of this act that the court ruled that Chang’s certificate of naturalization had been issued “without authority of the law” and was therefore invalid.

Chang took his plea all the way to the California Supreme Court. His case was widely reported in the San Francisco newspapers. A headline in the May 18, 1890, edition of the *San Francisco Examiner* read: “Chinese Cannot Practice; Chang Not an Attorney Though (Secretary of State) Blaine Says He is a Citizen.”

The *San Francisco Morning Call* announced “A Mongolian Refused Admission to the Bar.” It pointed out that in an earlier case, a lawyer who had been disbarred in New York applied for admission to the California Bar. When his California application was denied, he immediately went to Nevada, was admitted to that state’s bar, then returned to California at once and reapplied for admission. In admitting him, the California Supreme Court said it had no power to inquire behind the genuine certificate of the highest court of a sister state. It reached a different result in Chang’s case, however, where there had been no prior disbarment, but the applicant was Chinese.

Despite the devastating setback, Chang went on to a very successful and distinguished career in banking and diplomacy. ★

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