Yung Wing, the Chinese Educational Mission, and the Politics of Chinese Exclusion
Society in decay. Foreign intervention. A rigid social and political context maintained by the bounds of traditional Confucianism. Decreasing political stability. Economic and social upheaval. Open rebellion. This was Yung Wing’s China during the time in which he studied in the United States and established the Chinese Educational Mission. In understanding the complex breakdown of Chinese society at this time it is not surprising that Yung looked to the outside world for ideas for reform. After sustaining a string of humiliating and consequential military losses at the hands of foreign powers, it became clear to many that China, once the most powerful empire in the world, was in decline. This sentiment heavily influenced an entire generation of Chinese who saw the late Qing Dynasty as struggling to maintain the political and cultural foundations of the empire. They sought to change the system of governance, which was viewed as archaic, by implementing western technological practices and modernizing government structures.

Yung Wing, the celebrated academic who was the first person of Chinese descent to graduate from an American college, sought to bring about this change through the introduction of western education to Chinese students. When he returned to China after his graduation from Yale in 1854, it is reported that he “at once began to devote himself to...the overthrow of the spirit of hostility to foreigners...and the education and elevation of his race by a closer acquaintance with the customs and institutions of western nations.”1 He eventually came to see the maladies of the times as a symptom of China’s inability to compete with other nations. He believed, however, that providing Chinese scholars with western education similar to his own would provide the

1 “Yung Wing’s Grand Coup,” *The New York Herald*, April 18, 1872
country with the necessary resources to develop capable engineers and ministers who could understand western practices and western technology, especially military technology. In 1870 he himself was able to demonstrate the value of western-educated Chinese ministers to high ranking imperial officials during his service after the Tientsin Massacre. During the settlement of the diplomatic fall-out from this anti-foreign riot Yung showed other elder statesmen how valuable western-educated ministers could be in the service of the government by providing the imperial officials with a western perspective during international negotiations. Although there was a very hostile, anti-foreign, and conservative political contingent within Chinese society, and among the ministers of government, this event, and Yung’s skillful participation in the settling of the dispute between China and France, gave his proposal to establish an educational mission in America the vitality it needed.

In his plan for the mission Yung called for the recruitment of 120 male students between the ages of 12 and 14, who were proficient in English, and who had passed competitive examinations to be sent to the United States to study and learn for a period of fifteen years. These students would attend American schools in the Connecticut River Valley area while simultaneously receiving tutoring in their native Chinese studies so as to maintain ties with their social and cultural traditions. They would arrive in groups of 30 beginning in 1872 and ending in 1875, and they would become immersed in American culture in order to better understand the workings of western society. In 1871, after fifteen years of proposing his plan to various imperial officials with a western perspective during international negotiations.

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officials he was eventually successful in garnering the adequate political support for its approval when Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, and Ting Yi Cheang all agreed to jointly memorialize his proposal after the Tientsin Massacre. Although this hard work gave him deep satisfaction, the first experiment of Chinese students in the United States would not last through its intended fifteen year duration. By the ninth year of its existence, the relationship between the United States and China had become toxic. Labor unrest in California, the poor treatment of Chinese workers, the fears of Chinese conservatives, and the political machinations of the Democratic and Republican parties led to an evaporation of goodwill between the two countries that was once encapsulated by the Burlingame Treaty of 1868. That treaty had allowed for open immigration between the two countries, but in 1880, at the behest of the Hayes Administration and amid the political context of growing anti-Chinese sentiments in America, it was revised to allow for potential restrictions on immigration. By 1881 pressures from the anti-Chinese forces in the U.S., and pressure from conservatives in China, who saw the mission’s only accomplishment as the rapid Americanization of the students, made the position of the Chinese Educational Mission untenable. In 1881, according to the *New Haven Evening Register*, the educational mission was ended by the Chinese government with the newly appointed education Commissioner Woo Tsze Tung as “the avowed author of the recall.” According to Yung himself “Woo was a member of the conservative party, which looked upon the Chinese Educational Commission as a move subversive to the principles and theories of Chinese culture,” and that

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5 *My Life in China and America*, p. 180

even his appointment as commissioner demonstrated that the conservative and “uncompromising Confucian” Qing Dynasty was no longer in favor of cultural exchange.\textsuperscript{7}

At a time when Dennis Kearney, the extreme labor activist, was amassing huge mobs and expounding slogans such as “the Chinese must go...peaceably if they will, forcibly if they must;”\textsuperscript{8} when newspapers like the \textit{San Francisco Evening Bulletin} were running countless articles on the “evils” of Chinese labor; and when politicians of both parties were slowly marching towards Chinese exclusion from America - it is hard to fault the Chinese officials for not being overly supportive of this new and culturally threatening endeavor. Despite the apparent antagonism between the two cultures however, the example of the 120 young Chinese boys studying peacefully in the Connecticut River Valley still remained a hopeful enigma in its time. When it seemed as if the country was pulsating with vehement anti-Chinese sentiment, the educational mission was seen as a positive and hopeful example of the relationship between the two societies- even in the West where anti-Chinese sentiment ran highest. This can be gleamed by observing the differences in press coverage between the Chinese on the West and East Coasts, as well as between Chinese workers and the Chinese students. Whereas Chinese workers were constantly derided in press coverage on the “Chinese question,” the immigration of young Chinese scholars was regularly framed as a positive step forward for China in terms of its relationship with the United States. Even in San Francisco where the coverage of the Chinese was especially hostile, and routinely negative, the \textit{San Francisco Evening Bulletin} described the mission in a positive light. In an article published in August in 1872, about a week before the arrival of the first 30 students, the paper praised the Chinese government for “following the

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{My Life in China and America}, p. 207

\textsuperscript{8} “Denis Kearney On The Chinese Veto,” \textit{The New York Times}, April 15, 1882
example set by the Japanese” in sending over a contingency of students to learn from American institutions in order to remit their knowledge back to their country.\(^9\) This simplistic but positive sentiment was characteristic of this paper’s portrayal of the Chinese scholars, but is extremely different from its treatment of the Chinese in general. In fact, two weeks prior to the publication of the positive article discussing the students the same paper published an article deriding Chinese bereavement traditions during a memorial gathering held to commemorate the deaths of the innocent Chinese who died in the 1871 lynchings of eighteen Chinese workers in Los Angeles. After sarcastically describing their clothing and rituals the paper ended its blurb about the Chinese with “Aside from the constant din, the ceremonies were wholly unintelligible.”\(^{10}\) That example may be one of the most mild. As the decade went on and as the “Chinese question” became more intertwined with the political considerations of state officials on the Pacific Coast and in Congress, the criticisms became more pointed and negative.

Eventually, politicians and labor activists on the Pacific West Coast began clamoring for the full exclusion of the Chinese as more and more immigrants arrived. Although it can be assumed that these exhortations were directed at the Chinese workers, who were sometimes referred to as “coolies,” the arguments that were made on the West Coast often attacked the personality traits and the moral standards of the Chinese as a race. Between the beginning of the 1870’s and the passage of the Exclusion Acts in 1882 countless articles from the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* alone made fun of the perceived inferiority of the Chinese, and often highlighted or used racial slurs or distinctions to characterize even everyday common Chinese immigrants. In one article entitled “Celestial Poker Shaefs” the paper printed a story of two

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\(^{10}\) “The Latest Pacific Coast Dispatches,” *The San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, August 8, 1872
young men that went to Chinatown in San Francisco to view the “barbarous festivities of the “heathen Chinee” on the occasion of his New Year.”\textsuperscript{11} It then proceeds to demean all Chinese people as simple and suggests that the “Chinese are a gambling nation.”\textsuperscript{12} The story itself and the details are so farfetched that it makes the reader in modern times question if the story is reporting an actual incident or simply giving voice to the rabid anti-Chinese sentiment in San Francisco.

Another article published in the \textit{Bulletin} in the “Brief Mention” section of the paper stated “A fresh importation of heathen were disembarked from the China steamer, \textit{America}, yesterday and carted up to the Chinese quarters. The urgent necessity for a few more wash houses will be received.”\textsuperscript{13} Without even addressing the use of the term “heathen” for describing the immigrants, the entire second half of the brief article was entirely unnecessary except for the purpose of degrading the Chinese immigrants in the city. By suggesting that the urgent need for wash houses would be received once new Chinese immigrants arrived suggests that the article’s main purpose in reporting the piece of news was to indeed highlight that perceived racial inferiority.

Early on in the debate regarding the “Chinese question” in San Francisco, proponents of Chinese exclusion tended to oppose immigration because continued immigration of Chinese laborers would supposedly lead to the degradation of white labor because whites were unable to compete with the low Chinese wages. A series of editorial exchanges between two anonymous writers, Anglo-Saxon and Laborer, demonstrate the nature of the early arguments both for and against Chinese labor in California. In a series of exchanges published in July of 1857 the anti-Chinese elements contended that “the Chinese are an undesirable population; and that their

\textsuperscript{11} “Celestials Poker Shaefs,” \textit{The San Francisco Evening Bulletin}, February 12, 1872

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} “Brief Mention,” \textit{The San Francisco Evening Bulletin}, July 15, 1872
further influx should be discouraged.”¹⁴ By 1877 the rhetoric was indeed far more dramatic and 
negative. In an article in the Bulletin published in November of 1877 California’s Senator A. A. 
Sargent, a Republican law-maker, wrote to the administration in Washington asking it to address 
Chinese immigration to California. In his appeal he stated “the vast body of Californians of all 
classes believe that the influx of Chinese under which we are suffering is a great evil, and one 
which will lead to a terrible disaster.”¹⁵ However, most of the “disasters” that had occurred in 
San Francisco up to this point had been caused by Irish labor agitators like Dennis Kearney, 
whose agitations were responsible for riots in Chinese neighborhoods and mob violence against 
innocent Chinese immigrants. As Kearney was arrested not more than four weeks prior to 
Sargent’s public appeal for the crime of inciting breaches to the public peace, it is clear that 
Sargent’s argumentation was bordering on hyperbole.¹⁶

Despite these manifestations of the Pacific Coast’s disdain and hatred of Chinese 
immigrants, the attitude towards the Chinese as expressed in newspapers around the rest of 
country, especially on the East Coast, were much less derogatory and seemed to genuinely take 
interest in topical issues related to Chinese news and culture. In New England, where the 
Chinese students resided, the press was much more sympathetic to their plight as well as to the 
plight of all Chinese immigrants in the country. Out of the approximately 75 East Coast news 
articles surveyed for this project three had a negative bias that was overt in a similar fashion to 
the articles of the West Coast. Many of the articles published on the East Coast of the country


¹⁵ “The Chinese Question: Senator Sargent Writes a Letter to Secretary Evarts,” The San Francisco Evenining 
Bulletin, November 30, 1877

¹⁶ “The Incendiary Agitators: Arrest of Dennis Kearney, J.G., H.L. Knight and others,” The San Francisco Evening 
Bulletin, November 5, 1877
admired a certain skill the Chinese seemed to have, or addressed peculiar and interesting aspects of Chinese culture without interjecting racial or negative overtones. One such article published in the *Farmer’s Cabinet* out of Amherst, New Hampshire in 1872 discusses the topic of Chinese immigration and seems to simply report factual immigration statistics without using the derogatory language typical of any article on the same topic from the West Coast.\(^\text{17}\) From the same publication there was also an article that discussed the virtues of Chinese engineering. Specifically, the article was referring to the superiority of Chinese “flying bridges,” which were bridges built by Chinese engineers that used sophisticated construction techniques in order to stretch “from mountain to mountain, over a chasm of five hundred feet.”\(^\text{18}\) The article ends by doing something that was entirely absent from articles published by those on the West Coast. It suggests that Chinese bridge building techniques were so advanced that it is possible “the hint” of making long bridges out of iron “may have been taken from these for similar constructions by European engineers.”\(^\text{19}\) Suggesting that an aspect of Chinese culture may have been superior to European culture was acceptable in New England, but would not have been acceptable as an uncontroversial suggestion on the West Coast. Additionally, in an article published in the *Boston Daily Globe*, the paper recounts “a story from Memphis” where a group of Chinese workers had arrived. Whereas on the West Coast this article would most likely have expounded on the trickery of the Chinese in stealing work from the white laborer, this article actually highlighted the strong work ethic and intelligence of the Chinese workers in the South. The article in particular noted the skill and aptitude of Ah Maun, the leader of the Chinese laborers, and

\(^{17}\) “The Chinese of California,” *The Farmer’s Cabinet* [Amherst, New Hampshire], January 3, 1872

\(^{18}\) “Mechanical Skill of the Chinese,” *The Farmer’s Cabinet* [Amherst, New Hampshire], April 4, 1872

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
discussed the quality of his work when it stated “Ah Maun’s energy and skill and that of his hard-working companions are admired.”

It also noted that “the white folks regard him as a prodigy.” On the West Coast, in places like California, such a message and sentiment applauding the work of a Chinese immigrant was entirely absent from the surveyed articles for this project, and such a fact demonstrates the difference in treatment and feelings towards the Chinese immigrants.

Despite these differences in treatment between Chinese on the West and East Coasts however, the fears surrounding the “evils” of Chinese competition were not completely absent from the East Coast. According to The Philadelphia Inquirer a group of workingmen in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania held “a large meeting...[where] measures were adopted to prohibit the introduction of Chinese coolie labor into the manufactories of th[e] city.” According to that article the residents “agree to support no candidate for office who is not in sympathy with their movement.” Additionally, in Massachusetts a Chinese strike in North Adams at Mr. Sampson’s shoe factory in 1873 caused quite a stir when it resulted in an episode of mob violence. Although the author of that article seems to employ a similar tone as the West Coast publications when he noted that the “disturbance...furnishes another illustration of the brutal elements which are slumbering in every New England town,” the author quickly changes course and spends the majority of the article discussing the horrible treatment of the workers by the mob that descended “upon the defenseless Chinamen with clubs, stones, and brass knuckles, venting their rage in the

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20 “Chinese in Arkansas,” Boston Daily Globe, November 8, 1872
21 Ibid.
22 “Pennsylvania: Opposition to Chinese Cheap Labor,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, August 8, 1878
23 Ibid
most wanton excesses of cruelty and abuse.”24 These articles serve to demonstrate that even
despite the limited number of Chinese in the east, the political issues surrounding the “Chinese
question” and the immigration of Chinese to the United States eventually creeped across the
country.

This build up of anti-Chinese sentiment in the West fueled the development of anti-
Chinese political sentiments in the East and eventually spurred action against the Chinese
immigrants in Congress. In 1882, less than a year after the recall of Yung Wing and the last
students of the Chinese Educational Mission, Congress moved to exclude the Chinese as a race
from the country for a duration of ten years. After a series of long political debates between the
labor activists, as supported by Democratic politicians in California and Washington vying to
split the Republican Party’s coalition, and pro-Chinese immigration forces, as initially
championed by Republican politicians, the decision was ultimately made to prohibit Chinese
immigration. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the culmination of a series of attempts on
behalf of the Democratic Party to try and force the Republican Party’s hand in either standing
firm on the political premise of liberty as encapsulated by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth
Amendments to the Constitution, or fracture under the pressure of potential electoral college
outcomes in the upcoming Presidential elections. The Republican Party’s initial stance on the
issue of Chinese immigration was one of tacit acceptance as demonstrated by the speeches of
Republican Senator Yates and others at the “Republican Mass Meeting” in California in 1869. In
his speech, which was a campaign speech for the Republican ticket in California, Yates
precarioulsy fused the political legacies of the Civil War, the Republican Party’s firm stance on

“liberty for all,” and the idea of continued Asiatic immigration despite the “local” insistence against it in the state of California.²⁵ Although Chinese immigration was already unpopular in the state, Yates was able to hold the Republican line while maintaining support for immigration - a feat that would become increasingly difficult to do. By the 1880’s and the consideration of the Chinese Exclusion laws by Congress the Republicans in California needed to completely abandon Yate’s position to remain viable in statewide elections, which had significant consequences for the Electoral College election of President at that time. In 1879, after the Republican President Rutherford B. Hayes vetoed an earlier version of the exclusion act called the 15 Passenger bill, which limited the number of Chinese passengers that any one ship could carry, the Daily Los Angeles Herald ran several articles that clearly articulated the political conundrum of the Republican Party. One article stated that “it may be questioned whether Hayes cares a baubee about his successor being a Republican...Should he veto the Chinese restriction bill his conduct will be open to interpretation.”²⁶ Another stated that “curses not loud but deep are going up from the Republican ranks in California. It is rather pitiful that, after having made Hayes President, that Pecksniffian individual should give the [state] party the coup de grace.”²⁷ By April of 1882, it was clear that a complete about face had occurred within the G.O.P. when it was reported in the New York Times that “a memorial to President Arthur, reviewing the local aspect of the Chinese questions, and asking his signature to the restrictive bill, ha[d] been adopted by the [California] Republican State Committee.”²⁸ These articles demonstrate the

²⁵ “Local Matters: The Republican Mass Meeting,” The San Francisco Bulletin, August 31, 1869
²⁶ Daily Los Angeles Herald, Sunday March 2, 1879
²⁷ Ibid
tenuous nature of the politics surrounding Chinese immigration in the 1870’s. Whereas the Republican party originally believed in free immigration for all immigrants despite their race in 1869, the party was forced to succumb to the boisterous protests of the Western states because of their electoral importance for the maintenance of Republican control over the presidency.

The political realities of the “Chinese question” are what ultimately contributed to the demise of the Chinese Educational Mission in New England. Relations between the two countries had become very hostile since the beginning of the experiment, and this hostility, although reserved more for the Chinese workers, inevitably interfered with the labor of the young Chinese boys studying in the Connecticut River Valley. Many East Coast articles tried to highlight the political agitation on the West Coast, which was blatantly in favor of turning the local “Chinese question” into a national one in order to increase hostility towards the Chinese across the country. The Chicago Tribune, for example, in 1876 published an article which stated that “the anti-Chinese agitation in California is now being avowedly engineered with a view to forcing the Chinese immigration question into the approaching Presidential canvass.”

This excerpt from the Tribune was published in article in the San Francisco Evening Bulletin that was published with the purpose of disproving the Tribune’s claim. Regardless of the arguments made by the Bulletin in that article, it was clear that western presses were indeed agitating for such a political development. A myriad of articles from the West, which explicitly state such an intention, demonstrates this fact. In an article published by the Bulletin, for example, not even two weeks prior to its article “disproving” the Tribune’s claim, the paper literally stated “But if...
[the revision of the Burlingame Treaty to restrict Chinese immigration]...is to be attempted the position of Congress preceding a Presidential election is the most promising,” and that

“The Democratic House...will not be disposed to throw away the votes of the Pacific states for we presume Nevada and Oregon will be with us in this matter. The Republican Senate will likely be swayed by precisely the same motives.”

This public discourse only served to heighten the awareness to the “Chinese question.” As the agitation grew in scope, and its implications for presidential politics in America became apparent, the anti-Chinese sentiments were almost impossible to ignore or resist.

Thus, when Yung Wing petitioned the United States government in 1878 to allow some of the most qualified Chinese students into the West Point Military Academy and the Naval Academy in Annapolis he was rebuffed in a way that “breathed the Spirit of Kearnyism...with which the whole Pacific atmosphere was impregnated and which had hypnotized all departments of the government.”

The response of the government was simply “there is no room provided for the Chinese students” and when Yung reported this decision to Viceroy Li Hongzhang he knew the “fate of the mission was sealed.” Without being able to train the Chinese students in western military tactics the mission’s purpose was called into question at home and this provided the perfect opportunity for Chinese conservatives like the newly appointed Education Commissioner Woo Tsze Tung to again appeal to the Viceroy for the students’ recall. According to Yung they “took advantage of the strong anti-Chinese prejudices in America to memorialize the government to break up the Mission and have all the students recalled.”

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31 *My Life in China and America*, p. 208
32 Ibid.
33 *My Life in China and America*, p. 209
Although it would take a few more years for the conservatives in China to succeed in successfully memorializing the government, the students were eventually recalled in 1881, despite Yung’s best efforts to forestal their removal. According to the *New Haven Evening Register* “the last installment of 27 students, with Commissioner Woo, left Hartford...en route for China” on September 26th.\(^{34}\) The ending of such a hopeful and positive cultural exchange between the two countries was lamented in presses around the country, especially in Hartford where the mission was based out of. In the *Hartford Daily Courant* published in July of 1881 the newspaper stated that the educational mission “had been the object of so great and friendly interest to multitudes of the citizens of this country, and especially to the people of this vicinity.”\(^{35}\) It continued by blaming the recall on the circumstances surrounding the soured relations between the two countries, and then it lamented the sadness felt by the students’ sympathizers around the country. After wishing for their return it stated that

> “if that may not be, it is reasonable to hope that these young men who have deserved and obtained so much favor amongst us, and who by their abilities and character have reflected such credit upon their race and country, will be enabled to turn the fruit of the opportunities they have enjoyed to some good account in the service of their fatherland. Departing they will leave a host of friends behind them, and will be followed by the good wishes of the whole community.”\(^{36}\)

Clearly these sentiments highlight the sincere positive outlook of the press and, implicitly, the surrounding community on the Chinese students despite the overarching vehement anti-Chinese sentiment that was fomenting in America at this time. Later articles from the *Hartford Daily Courant* criticized the Chinese government for failing to see the error in removing the Chinese boys. An article in August of 1881 stated “The present Chinese government does not apparently

\(^{34}\) “Various Matters,” *The New Haven Evening Register*, September 27, 1881


\(^{36}\) ibid
desire progressive patriots, but the old stupid sort who regard all change as an error” and that “in this late action the government is making a stupid blunder.” These sentiments echoed the voices of invested citizens, and demonstrate the extent to which these young scholars were accepted into the community as valuable members, despite their race and American antipathy towards the Chinese.

Ultimately the close of the Chinese Educational Mission represented not only the end of Yung Wing’s plan to look to the West in order to reform China, but it also represented the successes of both the Conservatives in China, who wished to abolish Yung’s liberal experiment, as well as the anti-Chinese activists in America, who were prejudiced against the entire race. Although many of the boys eventually reached success at home, they were initially derided, chastised, and treated like traitors upon their return. The Hartford Daily Courant reported in 1882, four months before the final approval of the law geared towards excluding the Chinese race from the United States for a decade, that two of the boys who lived in Northampton, Massachusetts were homesick and wished that they “could return to dear philanthropic New England.” That article also reported that their ill treatment in China was the result of the false reports from Commissioner Woo, which had even caused the boys’ “relatives to taunt them with being “foreigners.”” The irony of these students’ longing to be in a country where they felt at home but where the rest of their race was excluded, while at the same time being called “foreign” by their own kin upon their return to their actual home accentuates the tragedy of the failed mission. As sad as the mission’s conclusion was however, it would turn out to be only the start in

37 “The Chinese Reaction,” Hartford Daily Courant, August 3, 1881
39 Ibid.
a series of legal steps taken by Congress to exclude the Chinese from America for a prolonged period of more than 50 years. Despite this however, the educational mission dreamed up by Yung Wing still stands out as an example of the positive and hopeful results of cultural exchange between the United States and China at a time when American antipathy towards the Chinese as a race was at its peak in the nineteenth century.