



10-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Lamb, Connie (2014) "Liel Leibovitz and Matthew Miller. *Fortunate Sons: The 120 Chinese Boys Who Came to America, Went to School, and Revolutionized an Ancient Civilization*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 71 : No. 71 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol71/iss71/14>

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**Liel Leibovitz and Matthew Miller. *Fortunate Sons: The 120 Chinese Boys Who Came to America, Went to School, and Revolutionized an Ancient Civilization*
New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009**

Reviewed by Connie Lamb

In 1850, at Yale University, the annual football match of freshmen vs. sophomores was underway. A freshman spectator on the sidelines dressed in a long robe with his long hair in a queue was trying to understand this mass of bodies pushing against each other when he saw the ball pop loose from the group. He picked it up and ran as fast as he could toward the goal line. The players stood in amazement for a moment, then a sophomore ran after the freshman and pulled on his queue. The pain made Yung Wing drop the ball, which he kicked across the goal line winning the game for the freshman team – a true upset. The boys hefted Yung to their shoulders in celebration. Thus begins the book *Fortunate Sons* about Chinese students in America, in particular the Chinese Educational Mission of 1872-1881, which Yung Wing championed and directed.

This introductory story demonstrates that the book reads like a novel – like historical fiction – except that it is true and well documented. The book is divided into three sections. Part I tells of Yung Wing who was brought to America by a Christian missionary. Yung graduated from Yale and returned to China with the goal of encouraging the Imperial Court to send Chinese students to the United States for education in western knowledge. The book describes his work and eventual success in the creation of the Chinese Educational Mission (CEM) and his return to America to direct the program. Part II explains the journey of the 120 Chinese students, thirty per year for four years, and their experiences living with New England families and attending school. Part III details their return to China when the mission abruptly ended and then follows a few of them through their lives and activities. It provides an overview of Chinese history from the 1880s into the 1900s, including the French attack on Foochow, the war with Japan, the demise of the monarchy, and the struggle to modernize China.

In 1847, at the age of 19, Yung Wing was taken to America by a missionary-teacher, Reverend Samuel Brown, who schooled Yung while serving in China. Rev. Brown lived in Connecticut, so Yung lived there too and was the first Chinese student admitted to Yale University, graduating in 1854. He returned to China and the rest of part I explains his adjustment back in his homeland, the challenges China was facing, the corrupt Qing dynasty, the increasing European presence, and Yung's work to earn money for his own stability. He helped found an arsenal with purchased Western technology, which produced guns and cannons. He also aided in establishing an engineering school near the arsenal where local Chinese students could train in designing, building, and operating the Western machines. He finally became a mandarin, in recognition of his knowledge and abilities. He promoted the idea that China should send students to America and pay for their education at the finest colleges there, with the idea that they would become the future

leaders of China unburdened by antiquated thinking and superstitions (p. 85). They would learn Western skills that would help their country to modernize.

In the late 1800s China was ravaged by poverty, population growth, and aggressive European armies. Driven by a desire for progress and reform, called the Self Strengthening Movement, the Chinese Imperial Court agreed to send students under the direction of Yung Wing to America to study at New England's finest schools. The students chosen to go (with their parent's permission) were 11-14 years old and were expected to stay in America for 15 years, going to high schools and universities to learn skills that would help them advance China toward modernity. The students sailed across the Pacific Ocean, landing in San Francisco in September 1872. To these boys, mostly from poor families in Southern China, the bustle of the city, the strange language, the hotel amenities, and the new technology were amazing and difficult to comprehend. "They could never, it seemed, ring an electric bell often enough and giggle as it emitted its metallic trill, or turn on a faucet and stare, hypnotized, at the never-ending stream of fresh water. They rode the elevator, up and down and up again" (p. 94). The book provides short snippets of U. S. history to provide context, including the Chinese who came to America to work on the railroad or other menial jobs and who settled in Chinatown, San Francisco, the opening up of the Western U. S., the completion of the transcontinental railroad, and the educational system. The students traveled by train across the United States where they saw vast open plains, high mountains, native Americans, buffalo, fields of grain, and as they drew nearer to their destination, the change in scenery to green forests, church steeples, and developed cities. They settled in with welcoming families in Hartford, Connecticut and began their American schooling. They learned English quickly, made new friends, and participated in American sports and culture. They were also provided instruction in Chinese traditions and language so they would not forget. In 1891, due to the growing anti-Asian sentiment on the American West coast, and fear among the Imperial Court that the students would become too Westernized, the mission was closed after nine years and most of the students returned to China.

When the students returned home, they had to overcome the suspicions of their countrymen in an environment deeply resistant to technological and cultural change. In fact they were first imprisoned and interrogated for a few days before they could go home and finally reunite with their families. The book follows the lives of Yung and a few others that provide an overview of about 20 years of Chinese history and the work of these particular students. The students most mentioned (with their American nicknames) are: Yung Leang (Byjinks Jonnie), Tong Shao-yi (Ajax), Liang Ju-hao (Cold Fish Charlie), Tsai Ting Kan (Fighting Chinese), Jeme Tien-yau (Jimmy), Liang Dunyan, who was an excellent baseball player, and Cai Shaoji. Yung Leang, who was a nephew of Yung Wing, was assigned to a naval academy along with a handful of other CEM graduates. He was seriously wounded when French naval ships stationed there attacked the Chinese fleet in August 1884 over a minor scuffle. Tong and Liang, who were

cousins, were dispatched to Korea, which figured prominently in the dispute between China and Japan. As bureaucrats, they encountered widespread corruption and the determination of Dowager Cixi of the Qing dynasty to stay in power. Some of the students fought in the first Sino-Japanese War, which China lost. They watched in dismay the Boxer Rebellion against imperialist powers in 1898-1900 because, to them, the Boxers represented all that had been stifling China's growth.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, mission graduates were sprinkled throughout the empire, and it seemed that the American-educated boys would be able to guide their nation toward progress. Liang Dunyan, Tong Woo and Cai Shaoji were secure in midlevel positions in the Qing's hierarchy; Liang Ju-hao was entrusted with running the all-important Beijing-Shanhaikuan railway line. Jeme helped build other railways and became a national hero. Liang Dunyan helped establish a preparatory school to teach English and other subjects; the school later became a university. He and others convinced the United States to use the Boxer Indemnity Fund to pay for more students to study in America. When the Republic of China was established in 1912 with Yuan Shikai as the newly elected president, Tong Shao-yi was named prime minister; Liang Dunyan was appointed minister of foreign affairs with Cai Shaoji and Liang Ju-hao as his deputies; and Tsai Ting Kan was now senior advisor to the president. Unfortunately, although Yung Wing's American-trained students had helped achieve the goal of the mission to modernize China, he did not see this good work happen. Yung had married an American but she died young. He had two sons and moved back and forth between his native land and adopted country, dying in 1912 in the United States, penniless and quite alone. However, his vision of Chinese youth being educated in America was not lost, but revived later, and since the first mission, thousands of Chinese students have studied in the United States and other Western countries.

The first author, Liel Leibovitz, has a Ph.D. from Columbia University and his main focus is on video games and interactive media research and theory. He has written several books with Jewish themes, one on video games, and he and Matthew Miller also wrote the book, *Lili Marlene: the Soldier's Song of World War II*. Both authors live in New York City.

There are several other published works that discuss the Chinese Educational Mission to varying degrees. Much of Leibovitz and Miller's book is based upon the autobiography of Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America*, published in 1909. In 1954, the China Institute of America published a small book in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Yung Wing's graduation from Yale titled, *A Survey of Chinese Students in American Universities and Colleges in the Past One Hundred Years*. It provides descriptions about Yung and his first group of students and other later Chinese student groups. For a detailed assessment of the CEM, readers should consult Edward Rhoads' book called *Stepping Forth into the World: the Chinese Educational Mission to the United States*. The author gives specifics about each of the 120 students of the CEM program and what they

accomplished in America. He provides statistics and scholarly analysis, and discusses their work upon returning to China. There are also other books that discuss the CEM, China's search for modernity, the perceptions of those involved, and the results of Chinese-American transnational activities.

Fortunate Sons is a fascinating read because it includes dialogue and story lines like a novel. But it also includes considerable history, biography and culture. There are a few pictures, mostly of people, and the content is documented with 14 pages of notes. However, it would be helpful to the reader to have maps, especially of China, and a glossary of the student's names (and nicknames) that are mentioned in the book and a short blurb about them because it was hard to keep them straight.

Leibovitz and Miller's book is a captivating story rather than a scholarly rendition, which makes it a good introduction to the topic and very enjoyable to read while providing insights into the mission, its participants, and its impact upon the students and countries. It also reminds us of how long exchanges between these two countries have existed and the risks and rewards that these connections have produced.