

China Trip – 2004

This trip actually began back in October 2002, when China Central Television paid a visit to Colebrook as part of their documentary on the 120 boy students, who came to this country in the 1870s to gain western educations. Of all the locations associated with these students during their years here, only Colebrook had remained essentially unchanged. The large building owned by the Chinese Educational Commission in Hartford had been razed and replaced by another building, Monson Academy in Massachusetts, one of the prep schools used in the program, had been destroyed by fire, and although rebuilt, was totally different from the original. One after another, the locations familiar to someone in the 1870s and 80s had changed until they would have been unrecognizable at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Little Colebrook would serve as the graphic example of what had been. It wasn't the only reason however, Steve Courtney, an author writing a biography on Joseph Twichell, once a frequent visitor to the Carrington estate in Colebrook, had discovered a wealth of information about not only Twichell, but everyone else who had visited there in papers and documents now on file at the Colebrook Historical Society. Among these visitors were several Chinese students who had been part of the educational experiment in the latter half of the nineteenth century. One of these students stood out among the rest; his name was Yew Fun Tan, and he had not only been accepted by the Carringtons as a member of their family, he had succumbed to consumption three months after graduating from Yale University and was buried in the Carrington family plot in the Colebrook Center Cemetery.

A short while after this, Courtney was contacted by a friend who was a professor of Chinese language at Wesleyan University. This professor had been contacted by a film director at China Central Television in Beijing, China asking for any information concerning the Chinese youths who had been part of the group sent to America beginning with the year 1873. His reply was something on the order of "strange that you should ask, I have just uncovered a trove of documents in Colebrook in my research on Joseph Twichell that contain many references to Chinese students".

At this point Steve called the curator of the Colebrook Historical Society and set up a meeting with a researcher for the documentary. This man, Qian Gang (pronounced "Chan Gong"), proved to be a well known investigative reporter as well as a prominent professor at Hong Kong University. Professor Qian and the director of the documentary, a lady by the name of Hu Jingcao, were to become my close friends over the next two years. The Carrington diaries proved to contain very valuable, previously unknown information. Eventually the entire collection of Carrington papers was gone through with a fine-toothed comb and every scrap of information was gleaned from them concerning Tan and the other Chinese visitors to Colebrook.

After the film crew had returned to China, it was found that there was more information about the students in the microfilm files in the State Library in Hartford. Several trips deep in the bowels of that institution yielded more data, which was duly sent off to Beijing.

In the course of these investigations, when Ms Hu's and my correspondence touched upon other topics, the fact that the Colebrook teachers at the old Center School used to take the students of that two room schoolhouse to visit Tan's grave and at the

same time tell us about not only his story, but also about the struggle that was then ongoing against the forces of Japan known as World War II. There is little doubt that Colebrook students were better versed on Chinese matters than the average American students at that time period. These conversations led her to suggest that perhaps it would be a good idea if the students of the Colebrook Consolidated School and the students in a school in the city of Zhuhai in southern China were to meet via the Internet and forge a bond of friendship.

Zhuhai was chosen because it is a modern city near where Yew Fun Tan spent his first 12 years, and also because it is the birthplace of a man named Yung Wing, the first Chinese to graduate from Yale (in 1854) and the man considered to be the founder of modern education in China as well as one of the founders of modern China. It was Mr. Yung who eventually persuaded the Chinese government to choose 120 promising students to be sent abroad to acquire a western education. Eventually the technologies that were brought back to China lifted her out of medieval feudalism and placed her in a position that would eventually lead to her becoming a leader in the industrial world.

As the year 2004 marks the 150th anniversary of the graduation of Yung Wing from Yale, it was decided to gather a convocation of the descendants of those 120 students at Zhuhai in November 2004. Jingcao felt that because of the special association that existed between Tan and the Town of Colebrook, a representative of Colebrook should attend the conference as a surrogate for Tan and a representative of the Colebrook Consolidated School. She suggested that I should attend the conference in that capacity.

The attendees were asked to submit a speech of fifteen or twenty minutes duration by July first to enable the organizers to have printed copies ready by the November 17 convention date. The theme of my talk explained the special role Tan's presence had made upon the townspeople of Colebrook.

My 15-½ hour non-stop flight brought me to Hong Kong, where professor Qian, who had arranged for me to stay at the University of Hong Kong, met me. It had been 48 years since I had last seen the city of Victoria, and to say that the city had changed did not do it justice. The old dusty city of the 1950s had undergone a transfiguration as remarkable as that of a caterpillar into a butterfly. The next two days were spent traveling about the former British Crown Colony, accompanied by either professor Qian or his assistant, a lovely young third year law student at the university. Tuesday evening professor Qian and I, accompanied by several of the arriving delegates, were on board one of the sleek, hydrofoil-type ferries that connect Hong Kong with Macao, the former colony of Portugal, and its twin city, Zhuhai, situated some fifty miles westward across an arm of the South China Sea. The trip took about one hour, and was as smooth as if it had been a bus ride over a superhighway.

The conference was covered by media from TV stations from Beijing, Hong Kong and Zhuhai as well as reporters from various newspapers. The two diaries of Mrs. Carrington were, to say the least, a tremendous hit. The media had a field day with them, and a representative of the Zhuhai Museum asked if they could copy them for their archives. The process of scanning them into their computer took two and one half days to complete.

Perhaps the most important aspect of my trip was the meeting with the staff of the brand-new Yung Wing School in Zhuhai. This state of the art facility boasts a campus that any university in the World would love to have; yet it is a kindergarten through ninth

grade school. I brought with me photos of the Colebrook schoolchildren as well as small objects as gifts. There is great interest among the entire school in America and especially American children. They are eager to begin Emailing their new friends. As we were leaving, the program director remarked in an off-hand way that by the end of next year, they hope to begin sending some of their graduates to prep schools in the United States, but so far the results of their inquiries had not yielded positive results; the respondents did not measure up to their expectations. Here at the very end of our meeting came possibly the greatest opportunity of the entire trip; as it happens, I graduated from Lyndon Institute, a prep school in Vermont having the highest accreditation ratings. Using this school as a key, we hope to begin a new era of cooperation in international education between the students of Mainland China and the United States. At this time, the prospects seem to be very bright indeed.

It is fascinating to reflect on the string of chance encounters and fortuitous archival discoveries that so far have led from a small town in the Connecticut hills to the prospect of greater educational opportunities for the most populous nation in the World.

Historic Bytes
Bob Grigg