

## Update on China

The sequence of events dealing with the visit two years ago of China Central Television continues. Documents uncovered in the archives of the Colebrook Historical Society proved to be of tremendous historical importance proving that the reason given by official Chinese sources were not only inaccurate, but had been deliberately misconstrued on the directive of the highest government officials.

Perhaps I should recap here to refresh your memories of the 120 Chinese students that came to America (primarily to Connecticut and Massachusetts). The idea was to train these youths, some of whom were as young as 12 years old, in the finest preparatory schools here and then to enroll them in the best colleges and universities. From the outset there was a degree of resistance among some officials, as China was just attempting to emerge from a closed society where anything foreign was viewed as evil. The progressive elements recognized that extreme measures had to be taken in order for the nation to become a member of the modern industrial world. They were challenged by the strong conservative faction, and while the progressives were able to initiate the establishment of a group called the Chinese Education Mission to recruit and establish the framework for the chosen students to gain an American education, the conservatives never ceased in their attempts to terminate the whole undertaking, citing their beliefs that instead of gaining a valuable education, the students would instead lose their Chinese traditions and become Westernized.

The entire program was to last fifteen years, and when it is remembered that the bulk of the students were teenagers or less, and were not to return even for visits to their families, the strain had to have been enormous. Teenagers the world over were the same then as they are today; they soak up new concepts at a pace that boggles the mind, especially the minds of their parents or older members of society in general. The best examples that I can think of are today's computers and cell phones. If you were born prior to 1960, these two bits of technology have finally been embraced, but it wasn't gained with the ease and alacrity of today's ten-year-old.

After ten years, the government of China underwent a return to a more conservative central government, and one of their followers became the director of the Chinese Education Mission in Hartford. It wasn't long before his reports back home began to spell out examples of gross deviations from the traditions that were held so dear.

In August 1881, the decision was made to terminate the Education Mission and bring the entire student body home regardless of the level of education they had already achieved. Two of the students defied their orders and chose to remain in this country. One was Yew Fun Tan, a youth who had been a frequent visitor to the Carrington home in Colebrook Center. Indeed, he was accepted into the Carrington family as a member. Perhaps it was because the Carringtons particularly liked him; perhaps it was that he reminded them of their lost son Edward, killed on the battlefield during the Civil War some years before. At any rate, Tan had a home to retreat to after the recall. The government in Beijing wasted little time in pointing an accusing finger at Tan and the other student as ringleaders in the attempt to sabotage the intentions of the Education Mission. Tan's friends, chief among them the Carringtons, saw that his education at Yale University went on uninterrupted, and he graduated with the class of 1883. After graduation, he gained employment with the Chinese mission in New York City, but three

short months later, tragedy struck. Tan fell desperately ill, and the medicines of the day were not able to save him. He came home to Colebrook, where the two Carrington sisters made him comfortable until he passed away. He was interred in the Carrington family plot adjacent to Edward Carrington and Catherine, Edward's mother and Tan's champion. Many years later the two remaining sisters would join the rest of the family in the Center Cemetery.

With Tan's demise, the Chinese government redoubled its efforts to vilify the students they claimed were responsible for the early termination of the Education Mission, Tan especially, because now that he was not able to refute their claims, was the perfect scapegoat. And so the official line remained from regime to regime down to and into the twenty-first century. Not everyone believed the official version, as many of the Chinese diplomats sent over the years to Washington and New York, have made it a point to visit Tan's grave, and the tradition continues today. There is one other grave of importance for the Chinese people in Connecticut, and that is of Yung Wing, (1828-1912), buried in a Hartford cemetery. Yung Wing was the first Chinese student to graduate from Yale University in the 1850's. When he returned to China, among the many achievements to his credit was the laying of the foundation for what was to become the Education Mission and the establishment of a school in the city of Zhu Hai, near his hometown of Nanping Village. This is in southern China, west of Hong Kong. This school still exists, with a current enrollment of some 700 students. They are now in correspondence with the Colebrook Consolidated School, having the common connection of Yew Fun Tan and Yung Wing.

To commemorate of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Yung Wing's graduation, the Zhu Hai Municipal People's Government will host a program of activities November 17 and 18, 2004. I received the following invitation last month:

"We have pleasure in inviting you and your partner to come to Zhu Hai to participate in these celebrations. Besides the descendants of the 120 Chinese Education Mission students, we would like also to invite representatives of Yale University, interested academic experts and scholars from China and overseas, and some leaders from Guandong Province and other parts of China."

"We wish to invite you to present papers at the conference. For interested scholars, both within China and overseas, we shall be very interested in your research into this subject of common interest to all of us. Your papers may be presented either in English or Chinese. Your presentation should be limited to 15-20 minutes duration. There will be facilities for Chinese-English and English-Chinese interpretation available at the meeting during discussion and question time."

"At the end of the conference, we intend to compile and publish the collected works as a record of the occasion. Furthermore, we shall be very pleased if you could bring along any relevant photographs and memorabilia of your forefathers and your families to share with us by exhibiting them during the conference".

Now I am waiting for November and my trip to the birth country of Colebrook's Yew Fun Tan. In the meantime, the five-disk DVD copy of the documentary film will be delivered to me on Monday, August 9 and we will try to determine how best it should be made available to the public. I will keep you posted.

**Historic Bytes**  
Bob Grigg