

The Chinese Students in Colebrook

During the 1870's and 1880's. China sent a large delegation of students to the United States to be educated in the arts and sciences of the West. The intent was for them to return to their homeland after fifteen years and apply their recently acquired knowledge to building the infrastructure necessary to bring China into the modern industrial world.

Most of the students of the Chinese Educational Mission came to New England, primarily Connecticut and Massachusetts, to receive their education. The original plan proposed that they stay for a period of 15 years, after which they would return to China to build ships, construct railroads and telegraph lines and open mines for the Chinese government. In 1881 however, a swing of political fortunes displaced the sponsors of the Educational Mission and placed in power a group of conservatives who bitterly opposed sending Chinese youths abroad to study the learning of the "western barbarians".

Part of the fears expressed by the Chinese officials concerning the education of their youths were realized in the acquired attitudes and care-free manners which the students had adopted. The new political regime claimed that some had neglected the study of Chinese to the point that they had forgotten their own language. To a certain extent these fears were justified, as many of them after several years in America acted, talked and thought like typical American boys. The fact that some of them cut off their cues [long pigtailed] or became Christians was regarded as particularly alarming evidence of their separation from Chinese culture.

One of these students was Yew Fun Tan, one of several Chinese students who were befriended by the Carrington family of Colebrook. Tan and another student named Mun Yew Chung spent considerable time in Colebrook with Tan almost acquiring the role of a son, as he spent many weekends and most vacations with the Carringtons.

The Carrington family in Colebrook during the 1870's and until 1881 consisted of Sarah Terry Carrington and her two daughters Katherine and Sarah, known to everyone as Miss. Kate and Miss. Sarah. Sarah was born May 3 1846. With the exception of the years spent at a seminary in pursuit of an education and in teaching for a period following graduation, nearly her entire life was spent in Colebrook. She derived happiness from making others happy. For several years, as a part of her church activities, she instructed a class in Sunday school. It was during these Sunday school sessions that at least two of the Chinese students were her students. Ed Simons, who was one of her regulars (he was born in 1864), mentions in his memoirs the following episode that still is capable of bringing a smile to the reader's face after more than a century and a quarter: One of the young Chinese boys (but not Tan) began attending Sunday school. At each session, a collection plate was passed to collect money "in the name of the Savior". Each student would put a coin in the plate. After the third week, the Chinese student inquired in his imperfect English "Who be fella allus bloke?"

Ed went on to say this of Miss. Sarah: "We boys of her class thought it strange that a young woman with the charming personality possessed by Miss. Sarah never married, but in after years concluded it was not from lack of desirable opportunity, but remained single from preference, thus permitting her to follow a chosen career of usefulness unhampered by 'the tie that binds'"

After living a life of continual devotion to the welfare of others, she passed from a transitory existence to one of eternal duration on November 13, 1934.”

Katherine Carrington, or Miss. Kate, was born in Colebrook on August 8, 1848. She became a successful author, a profession that allowed her to remain in Colebrook and still make a living. The two sisters were inseparable throughout their long lifetimes.

To return to the Chinese students: After completing their preparatory education, both Yew Fun Tan and Mun Yew Chung entered Yale in 1879, and graduated with the class of 1883. Soon after graduation, Chung returned to his native country, but later was assigned to the Chinese embassy in Washington. Tan became associated with the Chinese Diplomatic Mission in New York. He had embraced the American way of life to the point of wearing western hairstyle and dress code. Just three short months after graduating Yale, he was diagnosed with consumption. He returned to Colebrook, his home in America, where an unsuccessful battle was waged to save his life. Yew Fun Tan died November 13, 1883 and was laid to rest in the Carrington plot in the Colebrook Center Cemetery. On the west side of his tombstone are these words in English:

“In memory of Yew Fun Tan. Born at Hong Kong China Mar. 22, 1860. Died at Colebrook Connecticut Nov. 13, 1883. A member of the Chinese Educational Mission, he came to America in July 1872 and was graduated at Yale College in 1883”.

On the reverse, or eastern side, in three vertical columns, is inscribed in Chinese characters the fact that he was born during the tenth year of a certain emperor (1860) and that he died in the reign of another emperor (1883). The central column basically repeats what is written on the west side. It is also stated that he was buried on an auspicious day for a Chinese person to enter heaven.

In September 2002, the Colebrook Historical Society was notified that a film crew from China was coming to this country to create a documentary based on the style developed by Ken Burns in his Civil War series. We met with a point man from this crew who was very interested in the documentation to be found in our society files. He also expressed interest in the fact that Colebrook has barely changed since Tan was living here. It seems that most of the schools and buildings known to the Chinese students are not in existence any longer except in old photos and documents. The diaries kept by Sarah Terry Carrington document the events in his everyday life to the point that we know he liked to ride around Mt. Pisgah on Sundays after church, that he learned to milk cows and make hay as well as perform other farm chores.

The gravel portion of Pisgah Road is virtually unchanged from those days, and around the Center most of the major buildings are exactly as he would have remembered them. Thus Colebrook will become the segment within this documentary that depicts what the students saw in those distant years, and of course Tan’s gravestone is the only one from this group in existence in a personal family plot in the western world.

The point man [professor Qian Gang] from the film crew was genuinely impressed by the fact that an American family should have virtually adopted a Chinese student, as did the Carringtons. Apparently this is a unique situation in the annals of Chinese-American relations during the nineteenth century.

It is somehow heartwarming to know that Yew Fun Tan’s memory continues to create interest into the twenty-first century.

Historic Bytes
Bob Grigg