Yung Wing: A Man Caught between Two Worlds

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Historical Paper
I. Introduction

Yung Wing lived the American dream, but despite his best efforts, he failed to preserve that opportunity for his fellow Chinese, and was ultimately cut-off from both countries. Following the economic depression of the early 1870s, a movement grew, primarily in California, to restrict Chinese immigration. The public debate of this issue took several forms. Philosophically, the open immigration side’s ideals were based on the promise of equality expressed in the Declaration of Independence. In economic terms, struggling western workers and politicians seeking their votes blamed Chinese laborers for taking jobs away and reducing wages. On the other side, big business wanted to retain its cheap and docile labor source, and worried about diplomatic retaliation from the Chinese for violating the Burlingame Treaty. Though strongly defended by local missionaries, the Chinese were also accused of immorality in this multifaceted debate. Contrary to such stereotypes, Yung Wing’s personal life was an impeccable success. He was the first Chinese graduate of an American university. He became a wealthy man and had influential friends like Mark Twain and U.S. Senators. He assimilated well into American life. He was a Christian, became a naturalized citizen, and married a Connecticut woman. He worked as the number two man in China’s Washington embassy. However, even Yung’s strong protests from the Chinese embassy ended in failure as tensions heightened against his people. Despite his efforts, and the intervention of his friends, Congress passed the first of a series of anti-Chinese immigration measures in 1882, which were the first in the country’s history to be based solely on ethnicity. The immediate consequence of the Chinese Exclusion Acts was the virtual halt of Chinese immigration, which left a damaging stain of hypocrisy on American diplomacy with China, even after the Act’s formal termination in 1943.
II. Yung Wing’s Life Story

Coming from a humble family background, Yung led a very successful life. In 1835, he joined a missionary boarding school in Macao at the age of seven. Twelve years later, Yung traveled to America and spent most of his time in the company of American missionaries, learning English and practicing Christianity (Yung Autobiography 1-20). He attended Yale University at age twenty, became a naturalized U.S. Citizen, and in 1854, became the first Chinese to graduate from an American university (Fessler 8). After graduating, Yung was employed by the Chinese Government and moved to Hartford to educate Chinese boys sent to the States. In 1875, Yung was appointed as the associate minister from China to the U.S., Spain, and Peru (Worthy 277). From 1878 to 1882, he served as an advocate for his people, investigating Chinese labor conditions in Peru (The New York Times 1912) and working a minor position in the Chinese Educational Mission (CEM) (Worthy 265).¹ He married Mary Louisa Kellogg of Hartford with her family’s full approval, and together, they raised two sons in Connecticut.

To the horror of his native country, Yung became increasingly “Americanized.” He converted to Christianity and began to view the Chinese as “narrow-minded, ignorant and superstitious” (Worthy 273). By fully assimilating into American life, through education, hard work, Christian values, and the making of influential friends, Yung defied the time’s stereotypes.

¹ As part of its modernization, the Chinese government established a high school in Hartford, Connecticut (the Chinese Educational Mission) to expose Chinese boys aged 12 to 16 to western science, engineering, and English. Yung, the CEM’s first director, also saw the Mission as an opportunity to instill western culture and values. Between 1872 and 1875, 120 Chinese boys were enrolled in various high schools throughout the state. The boys were supposed to stay for 15 years, but the Mission was cut short in 1881, so most returned to China before college (Pan 263).
He became a rich businessman\(^2\) and moved in the circles of senators and notables like Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain).

**III. Anti-Chinese Arguments**

The Chinese, like many other immigrants from around the world, came for the California Gold Rush. Initially, they were welcomed, and their immigration was even enthusiastically encouraged by the Burlingame Treaty\(^3\). Businesses like the railroads appreciated the hardworking, cheap Chinese labor. However, once the railroads were completed and the gold scarce, hard economic times and social stresses posed by the national depression dealt workers a heavy blow. With intense job competition, whites lost out to the hard-working Chinese, who accepted lower wages. The Chinese were considered unfair competition and were blamed for white unemployment. Thus, tensions between Chinese and whites increased, particularly in California, where most of the Chinese population in America lived (Haddad 5).

Given the number of Chinese immigrating to the U.S. each year, this white fear and hatred was perhaps predictable. Few Americans knew that the poor conditions in China were what pushed citizens to the U.S., rather than the promise of wealth. The Taiping Rebellion and a series of famines led to conditions so bleak that an estimated 15 million Chinese left Southern China in the late 19\(^{th}\) Century. More than 90% went to other regions, particularly Southeast Asia, rather than America. Likely, the immigration wave the Chinese Exclusion Acts were designed to

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\(^2\) While he professed no plans for a profession, he amassed $25,000 from the silk trade in only two years (Worthy 275). He also traded rice on the great canal in China and as a railroad concessioner, among other ventures (“Yung Wing a Yale Man” 15).

\(^3\) The Burlingame Treaty was approved in the Senate with virtually no dissent, and was praised as a wonderful progressive movement towards greater trade and business opportunities with China.
halt would have slowed as economic conditions in China improved, as they did after about 1885 (Chaliand 126-130)(Daniels 2010)(Pan 261-265).

People who were ignorant and outraged over the poor state of the economy attacked the Chinese. Accusations of immorality and opposition to assimilating into American society were commonplace: “He gambles incessantly, smokes opium incessantly, keeps his women in a state of sinful and abject bondage, and generally brings his quarrels to a conclusion by chopping his antagonist’s head open” (Fessler 132). Though unfounded, these accusations were frequently repeated in public debate. Even the positive working habits of the Chinese were mocked. California Senator John F. Miller described the Chinese immigrants as “inhabitants of another planet … machine-like … stolid, unemotional .. [and] herd together like beasts” (Chang 130). In other words, they were less than human.

Politicians seized this wave of anti-Chinese sentiment as an opportunity to gain Western votes. The 1878 candidate of the Workingman’s Party of California campaigned on the platform that “Chinese must go!” (Avakian 44). Even the Republicans and Democrats agreed that Chinese immigration should be restricted, though there were differences. “Republicans called for limitations and restrictions while Democrats sought a total Chinese immigration ban, except for travel, education or foreign commerce.” (Cohn, 32-35). Soon, the anti-Chinese slogans became so popular that March 4th became a state holiday in California and Nevada to support the Workingman’s Party slogan (Fessler 144).

Yung himself named Republican Presidential candidate and Senator from Maine, James G. Blaine, as the most dangerous critic of Chinese immigration. Seeking western support for his national ambitions, Blaine stirred the pot of racial discrimination and helped make it a national
campaign (Yung Autobiography 208). This contributed to violent riots in several states in the late 1880s.

**IV. Pro-Chinese Arguments**

Most politicians who did not agree with such strident anti-Chinese platforms were Eastern Republicans who believed in “equality for all” (Cohn, 32-35), or were simply ignorant of the economic conditions in the West (Fessler 124-125). Pro-Chinese senators would have been key to any repeal or modification of legislation, since at that time, the Senate had the most influence on major policy changes (Cohn 5). However, politicians with pro-Chinese platforms were unable to compete with the large number of anti-Chinese campaigns held by Westerners.

The strongest support of the Chinese came from those who had experience dealing with them as individuals. These included missionaries, businessmen, and friends of educated Chinese. Many of the Chinese supporters felt that restricting immigration would harm American commercial and missionary interests (Chamber 24). Businessmen acknowledged the hard work and diligence of their Chinese workers, and supported Chinese immigration to maintain their cheap sources of labor (Chamber 3-26)(Select Committee 348-362).

The personal experience of supporters belied common stereotypes and moral objections. Mark Twain, Yung’s close friend, and U.S. Senators, Connecticut’s Hawley and Platt, and Massachusetts’s Hoar, helped Yung advocate for the rights of his people (Cohn 8-10). Twain even brought their ideas to the attention of popular ex-President Grant, to whom he introduced Yung’s friend, mentor, and pastor, Reverend J. H. Twichell (Cohn 61). In 1878, Yung asked his neighbor, women’s suffragist Isabella Beecher Hooker, to speak on behalf of the cry for “equality for all” and to put in a good word for his people. Though Hooker was unsuccessful in
completing this request, she assured Yung that “there would be no ‘Chinese problem’ if women could vote in California” (Cohn 61).

Yung’s friend, Massachusetts Senator George Frisbie Hoar, mocked the hypocrisy of the legislation based on race in the Senate in February 1881. “[It has] left its hideous and ineradicable stains in our history… We go boasting of our democracy, and our superiority, and our strength…. The flag bears the stars of hope to all nations. A hundred thousand Chinese land in California and everything is changed… The self-evident truth becomes a self-evident lie” (Chang 131). Chinese critics made the same point. CEM graduate Lee Yan Phou complained of the departure from American values in talks and magazine articles (Lee 1887)(Lee 1889). Twichell and Yung took up the same theme in addresses to Yale graduates (Twichell 1886)(Yung 1886). Yet as a diplomat, Yung repeated the businessman’s legal argument that the Acts would violate America’s treaties with China (Worthy 279).

**V. The Chinese Exclusion Acts and Their Aftermath**

Although the pro-Chinese supporters were ultimately unsuccessful in preventing the Chinese Exclusion Act from passing, they did succeed in keeping competing views of Chinese immigrants alive in public debate. With time, even Chinese leader Prince Kung felt the need to restrict Chinese immigration, as he once told Grant that his government “would keep all the Chinamen at home” if they could and were “willing to consider any proposition to relieve the Americans from the burden of Chinese emigration” (Grant 162). Thus, both sides came to see restricting immigration as positive, though for different reasons.

Once passed, the 1882 Act further inflamed anti-Chinese hysteria. Mass violence against the Chinese reached its peak in 1885. In response, the Chinese government threatened to use similar treatment in regards to Americans in China. To prevent this from happening, the U.S.
government paid China $140,000 in compensation for damages (Liu 154). However, the Chinese were still not satisfied. “Among educated Chinese there is a strong feeling and the insult to their nation is deeply felt” (Chamber 24). Since the Acts remained in place, mere monetary compensation was not enough to mollify China (Worthy 279).

**VI. Yung Wing’s Failures and Frustrations**

In the midst of this Chinese-American conflict, Yung suffered at the hands of both of his countries. China took away his prized CEM while the U.S. revoked his citizenship in 1898. Surely, Yung realized this risk, given his divided loyalties, but this loss of two major parts of his identity was devastating nonetheless. “Yung Wing’s life was a paradox in which he sometimes found himself frustratingly bound; he strove for the benefit to China which bore him, while professing cultural and familial allegiance to America which educated him” (Worthy 287).

The CEM was closed against Yung’s wishes for two main reasons. First, as China recognized Yung’s diplomatic potential for working in the Chinese Embassy, his position of leadership at the CEM was handed over to Minister Wu. This change in leadership power led to the second reason for the CEM’s eradication. Upon Wu’s arrival at the CEM, he was greeted by the horror of China’s best and brightest Americanized, Christianized, and queue-less! Immediately, he sent alarmed reports back to Peking, accusing Yung of elevating the goal of an American education to the CEM’s top priority position, all the while letting the boys grow lackadaisical in their Chinese studies (Haddad 10). When Yung heard of these complaints, he desperately fought to keep the CEM in America, and had his numerous American friends help him with a petition that even Grant signed. However, his efforts were unable to prevent the Chinese government from closing down the CEM. The boys were recalled to China in 1881
(Haddad 10). Just like that, the institution Yung Wing had pinned all of his hopes and dreams to seemed to have disappeared.

To make matters worse, by 1898, Yung Wing found himself stripped of his American citizenship (Sherman) and with a $100,000 price on his head from the Manchu Court for his alleged role in the reform movement (The New York Times 1912). Suddenly, Yung belonged nowhere.

Although Yung’s future seemed bleak, and his precious CEM was closed, his students carried on his legacy. In Hartford, citizens mourned the loss of the CEM, and the school’s students brought their ideas back to China. At first, many of the boys struggled back home, viewed by many as “damaged goods.” However, with intense spunk and determination, the boys rose above these initial challenges, carrying their ideas from America up with them (Haddad 10).

Yung might have been out-maneuvered by the conservatives in China and may never have fully understood how American politics worked, as Twain once suggested, but he continued to fight for the rights of Chinese workers long past his retirement (1902 Diary). The Chinese Exclusion Acts were only repealed in 1943, more than 30 years after Yung Wing’s death. Ending the laws demonstrated support for America’s ally in the World War II effort against the Japanese. The Chinese were no longer specifically targeted for restricted immigration.

**VII. Conclusion**

Neither Chinese enough to convince the Manchu Court to keep the CEM, nor American enough to prevent the Chinese Exclusion Acts from passing, Yung Wing’s attempts to preserve the opportunities for other Chinese to live the American dream proved futile. Even with the support of influential friends, Yung was unable to prevent Chinese reactionaries from withdrawing the students, and Congress from enacting a succession of increasingly
discriminatory laws directed first at Chinese, and then at other nationalities. Although it took
decades to undo this discriminatory legislation, opposition did not completely disappear. Yung’s
influence and dreams lived on in his CEM students, friends, and family, even after his death.
Caught between two worlds, Yung Wing lost all he cherished despite his attempts to stand up for
his people.
Bibliography
Primary Sources

Books (Including eBooks)

This pro-business, East Coast organization studied “the Chinese problem” and recommended modification of the Act, but did not propose its repeal. The report contains useful perspectives from business, education and religious leaders in both China and the U.S.


Written when he was in his seventies, Yung Wing’s autobiography is not very reflective. He shows passion concerning the Chinese Educational Mission, the refusal of CEM boys’ admittance to American military academies, and love for his American family. However, the book says very little about his role in resisting the Chinese Exclusion Act in America, his conversion to Christianity, or naturalization as an American citizen. The front piece includes a large photograph of Yung Wing, one of the few seen in any of the compiled sources.

Journal Articles

This contemporary article gives an objective picture of Boston’s Chinatown with statistics and observations. Other sources focus on the largest concentration of Chinese, which was in San Francisco, but a similar picture emerges in Boston. It is not known whether Yung visited Boston’s China town, but he certainly was in contact with people from Massachusetts.

Lee was a graduate of the Chinese Educational Mission, converted to Christianity and stayed in America as a journalist. This is one of several articles which he wrote arguing the moral case for Chinese to be treated like any other human beings.


His address to the graduating class at Yale University, where he once attended, makes a passionate indictment of American hypocrisy concerning equal. He speaks both of the values in the Declaration of Independence and those of Christians.


Twichell was Yung’s pastor, advisor, and one of his closest friends. This address, recorded in a Christian magazine, appealed to Christian values to oppose the Chinese Exclusion Acts.


Yung took a similar approach to Twichell’s article above in mustering Christian values against the Acts. Yung refers to the Western violence against Chinese and his diplomatic mission’s efforts to gain compensation and fair treatment.

**Government Publications**


The Chinese Exclusion Acts affected a number of international treaties with China and confused local immigration officers and consular staff with their complexity. This document from a Harvard immigration collection summarized legislation for such staff as of 1908, when the most restrictive of the legislation was in force.

This speech by a Massachusetts Congressman supported limiting the scope of anti-immigration legislation but shows that, by 1893, even Massachusetts Congressmen were careful not to oppose Chinese Exclusion Act-type legislation completely. Representative Everett apparently felt the need to defend himself when accused of favoring open immigration.


In this 1893 speech, another Congressman from Massachusetts agrees that Chinese are so different, that they pose a threat, but argues for the need to honor the Burlingame Treaty obligations.


This letter from the Secretary of State to the American Envoy to China is in response to Yung’s request for embassy support, as an American citizen, for his bid to gain a railroad concession in China. Denby sought guidance as to whether Yung was truly a citizen, despite having seen his naturalization certificate and several U.S. passports. This inquiry resulted in Yung’s understanding that he had lost his American citizenship. Sherman also cited legislation and the interpretation of recent court cases.


This site contains the original image of the 1869 bill, encouraging the importation of Chinese workers, which eventually became the Burlingame Treaty.

Leading up to the Chinese Exclusion Act a number of speeches and studies investigated the Chinese problem. The House Select Committee took place over several months and involved hearings in Chicago, San Francisco, Des Moines, New York, Boston, and letters from many parts of the country. Witnesses were called from a wide range of professions with different perspectives on the problem: local businessmen for various industries, businessmen involved in China trade, missionaries, religious leaders who interacted with Chinatown residents or their neighborhoods, etc. Hundreds of pages of testimony tie the Chinese question to the general state of the economy in different parts of the country. The two sides were highly selective in the witnesses they called and the questions they were asked.


The Angell Treaty severely limited Chinese immigration by suspending, but not yet prohibiting, immigration. The full text of the treaty is provided by this source.


Violation of the Burlingame Treaty was a significant argument against the Chinese Exclusion Acts which Yung and other appointments of the legislation employed. The Burlingame Treaty strengthened importation of Chinese labor, a popular move in 1868. The full text of the treaty is provided by this source.

Newspaper Articles


This New York Times obituary summarizes Yung’s life and what were considered his life achievements at the time. The article is useful in terms of providing dates and chronology of events and appointments. He was considered a significant figure in the spheres of business, diplomacy and education.


The New York Times described Yung in a long article in connection with his railroad deals and coal mining in China, his diplomacy on behalf of China with American and Japanese interests and his family life. Yung is praised for his “masterly handling of the English language.”


This short New York Times wedding announcement describes the particulars of Yung’s marriage to Miss Kellogg. Yung’s friend and mentor Twichell presided over the
ceremony. Significantly, the article makes the point that all of Miss Kellogg’s family was in attendance. This suggests their acceptance of him into the family.

Diaries
Excerpts from Reverend J.H. Twichell's Diary (February 24, 1875 and July 9, 1881). The Yung Wing Project. 15 Aug. 2010

Twichell’s diary entry describes his “beloved friend Mandarin Yung Wing,” Yung’s marriage, and Yung’s request to intercede with President Grant on behalf of the Chinese Educational Mission. It shows that Twichell and Yung were quite close and that Yung used his contacts with influential figures like Mark Twain heavily.


Grant spent May through September, 1879, traveling to China (Hong Kong, Macao, Shanghai, Peking, and Tientsin) with his wife just over two years after the end of his presidency as part of a two-year around the world trip. Grant met with a number of Chinese and American officials and discussed “the Chinese question” on several stops. While Grant was cautious about taking sides on the issue as the legislation came up after he left America, he seemed to see the Chinese as having been brought to America in slavery unlike other immigrant groups (113). Grant met the top leaders in China, Prince Kung, the effective ruler of the dynasty, and Viceroy Li. He was not only an influential American politician, but the Chinese valued his military expertise and knowledge of modern weaponry.

Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) was a friend of both Twichell and Yung. This letter reveals Twain’s concern about Yung as expressed to Twichell, but also suggests that Yung might be naïve about what motivates American politics and foreign policy. Both Twain and Twichell obviously knew Yung very well.


This letter from Yale’s Yung Wing collection shows how disappointed the Chinese Educational Mission students were by their treatment upon returning to China. Wong was a CEM boy writing a young female friend from his host family. He complains about the poor treatment and prospects that he and the other boys received on their return to China.
Secondary Sources

Books (Including eBooks)


This overview contains a comprehensive and heavily illustrated survey of the Chinese in America from their arrival, the Chinese Exclusion Act period, and leading up to the present day. It is complete with statistics, legislative developments, maps and charts.


This survey of world immigration patterns gives statistics about the sharp declines in population in 1849, 1857 and 1850-64 due to war, famine and the Taiping Rebellion. While hundreds of thousands immigrated to the United States, this was only a fraction of those who immigrated to Southeast Asia at the same time.


This popular survey by Chinese-American historian Iris Chang chronicles the rise of the anti-Chinese movement. The book contains some excellent quotes representing the two side of the debate and colorful descriptions of the anti-Chinese violence in the West as well as some of the leading players.


Although not as well written or produced as some of the other books, this overview contains a wealth of detail about Yung, the growth of anti-Chinese sentiment, and the efforts by the Chinese government and community to resist.


Historian Andrew Gyory traces the anti-Chinese movement not to economic issues but to Southern ideas of racial superiority and Federalist-Whig distrust of the poor and immigrants. Whether one accepts his thesis or not, he demonstrates how scapegoating the Chinese came so easily to politicians of both parties, because it tapped into their historic roots.

Professor Samuel Wells Williams was a friend of Yung’s and a scholar of Chinese culture at Yale. This book describes the stereotyping of the Chinese and his efforts to resist it. Williams makes the case that the Chinese had a very advanced culture, very different from the stereotypes ascribed to them by the popular press.


This survey of world immigration patterns shows that the period immediately preceding the Chinese Exclusion Acts was an exceptional period in China’s long history, the first time in 350 years in which China’s population actually declined. The Guangdong region, from which most of the Chinese immigrants came, was particularly hard hit by war and famine.


Hoover Institute scholar Thomas Sowell describes the changing economic position of Chinese immigrants. Their changing role from a source of much needed cheap labor in large numbers in good times of expansion with the building of the railroads to competition for white workers when times turned bad goes a long way to explain changes in legislation.

Journal Articles


This 100-page journal article gives details of Yung’s relationship with two important Senators and a women’s suffragette leader through his church, friends and neighborhood. The article contains useful quotations and discusses the intellectual origins of opposition to the Chinese Exclusion Acts, rooted in a strong belief in the equality of all men that had earlier been reflected in the anti-slavery movement. It also describes the personal connections between many of the key figures including the “three sons” (Connecticut Senators Hawley and Platt, and Massachusetts Senator Hoar, born in Connecticut) and suffragette activist Isabella Beecher Hooker.

This journal article is one of the few sources which uses Chinese sources (from both Beijing and Taiwan) in describing the impact of the Chinese Exclusion Acts on the image of America in China and foreign relations for the last century.


This journal article looks at Yung’s relationship with America and China. It is most useful in describing Yung’s efforts to resist the Chinese Exclusion Acts while acting as the Associate Minister to the U.S. for China, and the depth of his Christian beliefs. These two important topics received little coverage from other sources, which rely too much on Yung’s autobiography.

**Encyclopedias**


The Chinese were only one immigrant group in 19th Century America. This long essay places the Chinese Exclusion Acts in the context of other immigration trends up to the recognition of China by the U.S. by President Carter.


This encyclopedic reference book contains information about the origins of Chinese laborers from a particular region in the Pearl River Delta and concerns the Chinese Educational Mission. It is a useful quick survey for some of the issues discussed in this paper. The entries are heavily illustrated in color.