

Book Review

China's First Hundred: Educational Mission Students in the United States, 1872–1881, by Thomas E. LaFargue. Pullman, Washington: Washington State University Press, 1987.

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Since the mid-nineteenth century, some forward-looking Chinese statesmen such as Zeng Guofan (Tseng Guo-fan) and Li Hongzhang (Li Hung-chang) implemented measures to initiate a series of reforms to provide China with modern science and technology so that the Chinese Imperial government and the social environment of the country could be guarded in increasingly frequent contact with the Occidental nations and meanwhile local rebellions and uprisings could be quashed. Part of the reformation is the Chinese Educational Mission launched in the 1870s, through which a total of 120 young Chinese students in four contingents were dispatched by the Imperial government to the United States to receive formal education in various technical professions. Although these students made an earlier return to China due to political tensions in the Imperial Court in Peking and were later treated with disdain in the Chinese officialdom, the majority of them served the nation with a sense of patriotism and duty as well as the knowledge of technical sciences that they had learned in the United States. This book, originally published in 1942, not only discusses the context of the Mission and its execution but also commemorates the career achievements of this first cohort of returned students and their immense influence on the emergence of a new China.

Despite that this Mission appeared to be an abortive scheme as the book describes because most of the students were recalled to China earlier than expected and thus did not complete more advanced professional training in university, the book author seems to refute the “belief that the students had become so westernized that they could be of little service to China” (p. 75) and suggest that the Mission has been a success in that the students’ education and life experience gained in the United States enabled them to make notable contributions to the modernization of China, even to the point that some of them sacrificed their life during their service in war battles with foreign aggressors. Owing to their efforts and resilience, the students helped China develop the telegraph industry, construct and manage mining fields and railroads, handle complicated negotiations with foreign powers as diplomats, and pave the way for the founding of the Republic (see Chapters 5–9). Not

only that, they served as role models and helped establish institutions (e.g. Tsinghua University as a successor to the Mission) to encourage more Chinese youths to study overseas in order to serve the motherland.

One prominent strength of the book is its organized style of composition. In Chapter 1, the author introduces the wider context of social tensions and political reforms in late Imperial China and several pivotal statesmen such as Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, and Zhang Zhidong (Chang Chih-tung), who realized the significance of modern education to China's technological and military advancements, launched the Chinese Educational Mission and eventually had it terminated. Chapter 2 concentrates on Yung Wing, the first Chinese who graduated from an American university, and briefly introduces the Burlingame Treaty, and then lucidly explains how Yung Wing and the Treaty contributed to the implementation of the Mission. Chapters 3 and 4 progress to describe the execution of the Mission and explicate why it ended in failure. The subsequent chapters 5–9 attempt to offer a counter-argument with evidence that the Mission in fact did not fail China and change the returned students' loyalty to the nation as it had been criticized but enabled them to deliver professional service and technical support in various critical fields of China's modernization and political change. The final chapter reiterates the importance of the students' life and study in the United States in assisting them to withstand "the inertia of Chinese life" (p. 161), which is the core value of the Mission and the foundation of the successful career life of many of the students.

Another strength of the book is that the author was able to collect old letters and short autobiographies written by the subjects that he investigated and hold conversational interviews with some of the Mission students (p. 164). These primary sources of data seem to lend credibility to the description and discussion of the topics in the book. Instead of relying on official archives often found in studies in political history, the author adopts a more qualitative and cultural approach for reporting his findings, which allows the historical figures to speak for themselves. For instance, the letter written by Huang Kaijia (Wong Kai-kah) and cited in Chapter 4 vividly describes the difficulties and disappointments he suffered upon his return to China, and Rong Liang's (Yung Leang) memory of his military experience in Foochow cited in Chapter 5 well visualizes the Battle of Pagoda Anchorage and his inflictions during the war. These personal narrations of history enable the readers to better perceive the sharp difference between the Mission students' life before and after their return and really understand them as a human being with hopes and pains just like themselves rather than a number of the Mission group. By blurring of past and present, the historical description can resonate with the readers more effectively.

The strength of the book could have been further reinforced if its shortcomings had been carefully heeded. First and foremost, inaccurate information and spelling mistakes¹ can easily be spotted. The pictures of Wu Tingfang (Wu Ting-fan) and Yuan Shikai (Yuan Shih-kai) are mismatched and should be exchanged, and the picture of the last reunion of the C.E.M. boys in 1936 includes Zhou Shouchen (Shouson Chow), who is listed as the First Premier of the Republic, a title in fact for Tang Shaoyi (Tong Shao-yi). Some other inaccuracies have also been noted by Gaskill² and Sze.³ For instance, on page 3, the “Ever Victorious Army” organized by General Charles Gordon should be a group of Chinese soldiers, not foreigners. Li Enfu (Yen Fu-lee) on page 36, one of the Mission students, should be Lee Yen-fu or Yan Phou Lee. Xuan Tong (Hsuan Tang) on page 169, the last emperor of China, should have been Hsuan Tung throughout the book. Winstead, a town in Connecticut mentioned on page 134, should be Winsted. The year 1903 on page 113, when Zhong Wen-yao (Chung Mun-yew) assumed his new position at the Chinese Legation at Washington, should be 1893. Hu Weide (Hu Wei-teh) on page 148, was not one of the Mission students. In short, the book’s credibility could have benefitted from the author’s attention to these details and more careful copy editing.

More importantly, most of the Mission students introduced in the book are those who ascended to positions of great prominence. Many other students were not focused on or mentioned because they either held humble positions or died early or disappeared after their return to China. This absence of a full picture and the practice of convenience sampling have caused a limitation of the account of the Mission, which to some extent biases the conclusions of the book and blinds the readers to the impacts of the Mission on these less visible students.

In a nutshell, this book, despite its limitations, depicts in detail the Chinese people’s unwavering determinations and efforts in safeguarding their freedom and independence in the social turmoil in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One principal contribution of the book is that it reveals the history and dynamics of the China-US relationship. It can be seen that the United States lent support to the construction of a modern China through providing education opportunities. The Burlingame Treaty signed between China and the United States in 1868 helped lay the foundation of the Chinese Educational Mission and testifies the fond friendship

¹ “enginers” in “... these first western trained enginers ...” on p. 114 should be “engineers”, “unparalled” in “... must have given him unparalled opportunities ...” on p. 118 should be “unparalleled”, “Hunan” in “Yuan now simulated a reluctance to leave his few acres of land in Hunan ...” on p. 147 should be “Honon”, and “Johnstone”, the author of *Twilight in the Forbidden City* on p. 157, should be “Johnston”.

² Gaskill, G. E. (1943). Review of China’s first hundred. *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 2(4), 406.

³ Sze, S. A. (1944). Review of China’s first hundred. *Pacific Affairs*, 17(2), 230–231.

between the two nations. On the other hand, it can also be noted that the policies of the government of the United States oscillated in accordance with the nation's own interests, for instance, abrogating the Burlingame Treaty and staging the Chinese Exclusion Act in the 1880s, signing the Root-Takahira Agreement in 1908 to sacrifice China and endorse Japan's ambitions in Manchuria when Tang Shaoyi sought support from the United States to maintain China's territorial integrity. Understanding these changing foreign policies and international tensions in the past may aid readers' comprehension of the attitudes of the two nations towards each other in history and today.

The book also triggered further studies concerning China's overseas education. Many of these studies of the post-war era used newly uncovered materials and the methodology of modern sinology to explore critical issues which, according to Kennedy, are still "at the heart of Chinese-American educational relations: the transfer of technology, cultural chauvinism, language acquisition, cultural assimilation and the interrelationships of vastly different educational hierarchies" (p. xii). Also, Kennedy mentioned that recent studies had started to compare and contrast China's current campaign of Four Modernizations and the Chinese Educational Mission in the nineteenth century, both of which involve overseas study, a key factor to understand "China's failures of the past and its hopes for the future" (p. xii).

Considering these contributions, the book is truly a valuable reference for scholars and readers who wish to better understand the history of late Imperial China and the early Republic and take the topics of the book further in research. In addition, given that the book renders a detailed depiction of the Mission students' career achievements with their dignity, integrity and sense of patriotism regardless of their stance between different socio-political forces such as the Chinese regime, be it old Imperial or radical republican, and the Occidental nations, it holds important value of reference for the great army of current returned Chinese students, who may intend to establish a career to further the development of a changing China.

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