



Introduction

Yung Wing was one of the most remarkable Chinese of the 19th century. Born into a poor farming family in Xiangshan county in Guangdong, he had the great good fortune to receive a western education in Macao, Hong Kong and the United States.

Considered the Chinese Columbus who “discovered’ America”, Yung was the first Chinese graduate of Yale University.

He could have enjoyed a comfortable and prosperous life in the U.S. but, instead, he chose to return home to dedicate himself to the reform and modernization of China. As the country had an imperial government that was arrogant and xenophobic this was an enormous challenge.

Yung went to the U.S. to purchase machinery for the Jiangnan shipyard in Shanghai, where China was for the first time able to manufacture the same type of heavy weapons used by the western powers.

In 1870, the government accepted his plan to send young Chinese to the U.S. to follow his example and learn science, technology and the secrets of the modern world. It appointed him to organize the programme. Between 1872 and 1881, he was responsible for 120 students sent to America for education in secondary schools and universities – before the project was cancelled by conservatives within the Qing government.

After their return, these students made an enormous contribution to the modernization of China, in education, engineering, diplomacy, medicine, industry, the military, business and other fields. They were the pioneers. Over the last 30 years, hundreds of thousands of Chinese have followed their footsteps and studied in universities in North America, Europe and Japan, bringing home the skills and knowledge they have acquired.

Yung was a strong supporter of Emperor Guangxu(光) and had to flee for his life to Hong Kong after the failure of his reforms in 1898. He supported the revolutionary programme of Dr. Sun Yat-sen and learnt of the success of the Xinhai Revolution in October 1911 while at his home in Hartford, Connecticut. Sun invited him to return to China but he died in Hartford on April 21, 1912.

In 1876, at its centennial commencement, Yale University awarded him an honorary Doctor of Law for his enormous contributions to cultural exchanges between China and the U.S. In 2004, it erected a statue in his honour, on the 150th anniversary of his graduation.

Childhood

Yung was born on November 17, 1828 in Nan Ping village, on Pedro Island six kilometres southwest of Macao.

The third of four children, he had an elder brother and sister and a younger brother. It was a poor family; his father rented three mu (0.2 hectares) of land and raised fish and shrimp. Nan Ping had no school; his father sent his elder brother to a private school in a nearby village.

By chance, a neighbour and friend of his father was the principal servant in the Macao home of Mrs Mary Wanstall Gutzlaff, the wife of Rev Karl Gutzlaff, a Protestant missionary; the couple had set up a school for Chinese children. This neighbour informed his father about the school; thanks to this introduction, the young boy was admitted in 1835, at the age of seven.

“It has always been a mystery to me why my parents should take it into their heads to put me into a foreign school, instead of a regular orthodox Confucian school, where my elder brother was placed,” wrote Yung in his autobiography *My Life in China and America*, published in 1909.

Going to a Confucian school “would have been more in play with Chinese public sentiment, taste and the wants of the country at large than to allow me to attend an English school.” A Chinese school was the only avenue to professional advancement, power and wealth.

“As foreign intercourse with China was just beginning to grow, my parents, anticipating that it might soon assume the proportions of a tidal wave, thought it worthwhile to take time by the forelock and put one of their sons to learning English so that he might become one of the advanced interpreters and have a more advantageous position from which to make his way into the business and diplomatic world,” he wrote.

As a resident of Xiangshan, Yung’s father had a broader perspective than most Chinese; since the arrival of the Portuguese in Macao nearly 300 years before, Xiangshan had been greatly influenced by this western trading and religious centre. Many of its people had gone to work and settle there and prospered. Yung’s father saw the benefits of an education that would enable his son to work in both the western and Chinese worlds.

Another reason was that tuition and boarding at the Macao school were free, while Chinese schools charged fees.

All the same, it was a brave decision by a farmer in rural China to do something so unusual; he was not sending his son to a famous and well-established school but one that had just been set up by a couple and would have been illegal in mainland China.

Macao School

The school was established by British missionary teacher Mary Wanstall who had gone to Malacca to teach; there she met Prussian missionary Karl Gutzlaff; they moved to Macao in December 1831 and

married in 1834.

They decided to use their house as a school to provide a western Christian education for Chinese children; she was the teacher and principal. It was the first school of this kind in China. The funding came from the Morrison Education Society (MES), set up in memory of Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary in China who died in Guangzhou on August 1, 1834, aged 52, and is buried in the Protestant cemetery of Macao.

This society was established by wealthy British and American merchants; they admired this pioneer who had translated the Bible into Chinese and wrote the first English dictionary of the Chinese language in six volumes. They wanted to continue his work of education through the society. Its mission was “to improve and promote English education in China by schools and other means.”

The Protestant church of Macao, near Camoes Garden, is also named after Robert Morrison; the land for the chapel and the adjoining cemetery was purchased in 1821, following the death of Mary, Morrison’s wife.

The school was close to the ruins of St. Paul’s church, which had been devastated by a terrible fire on January 26, 1835.

The MES provided 15 pounds a month to the Gutzlaffs to run their school. It opened on September 30, 1835, with 12 girls and two boys, of whom Yung was one. Additional funding came from the Ladies Association for the Promotion of Female Education.

Since her husband was away most of the time, distributing religious tracts along the China coast, it was Mary Gutzlaff who fed, clothed and educated the pupils. They had lessons in both English and Chinese.

When Yung was seven years old, his father took him to start his new life at the school, where he would be a boarder. They left Nan Ping village and made the crossing to Macao in a small boat.

They walked to the school and the boy met Mrs Gutzlaff. He had never in his life set eyes on a “Big Nose”, let alone one in a long, flowing white dress; trembling, he clung to his father in fear.

“She was somewhat tall and well-built,” he wrote. “She had prominent features which were strong and assertive; her eyes were of clear blue lustre, somewhat deep set. She had flaxen hair and eyebrows somewhat heavy. Her features taken collectively indicated great determination and will power ... I was less puzzled than stunned – having never in my life seen such a peculiar and odd fashion.”

Fortunately, she was able to win him over through her kindness and sympathy. Since he was the youngest student in the school, she kept a particular eye on him and lodged him among the girl students on the third floor of the school, while the other boy was on the ground floor.

Yung adjusted quickly to his new environment and came to like his teacher. But he resented being confined to the school; he and the girls were not permitted to go outside.

So, one day during the first year, he organized an escape with six of the girl students. While Mrs Gutzlaff was having breakfast, they ran to a nearby wharf where they had hired a boat, with two oars, to take them the short distance to Pedro Island where his family lived.

But they were not quick enough. Madame organized a search party, a boat with four oars which overtook them; the seven were brought back to the school in disgrace and forced to stand for an hour in front of the other pupils. On Yung’s chest was a placard with the words “Head

of the Runaways”; he stood in the middle of the six girls. “I never felt so humiliated in my life.”

He did not make this mistake again; he devoted himself to study, learning English and other subjects taught in a western school; this put him among the tiny fraction of the 413 million subjects of the Qing emperor who had such knowledge.

In 1839, as relations between Britain and China deteriorated over the issue of opium and war seemed likely, Mary Gutzlaff decided to leave Macao for reasons of personal safety and go to the U.S.; she took with her three blind girls whom she was teaching at the school.

As a result, her school closed; together with the other students, Yung went home. He went to work, selling candy in his home village and a neighbouring one; he rose at 3a.m. and did not come home until 6p.m., earning 25 cents a day which he gave to his mother. In spring, he went to work in the rice paddies.

In the autumn of 1840, Yung’s father died, leaving his mother without her principal means of support and making it essential that her children worked to earn a living.

Later Yung went to work for a Catholic priest in Macao; the priest needed someone with sufficient English to do clerical work. Yung was paid a modest salary, of which he sent the lion’s share to his mother. Then, for two months, he helped a foreign missionary doctor at his hospital in Macao, preparing materials for pills and ointments and accompanying him as he went round the wards.