

Life of Tong Yuen Chan

By Daphne Tong

Tong Yuen Chan (Tang Yuan Zhan in Mandarin) 唐元湛 字:露园

Birth: 1861, Lunar calendar June 7

Death: 1921, November 10.

Tong Y.C. was a native of Tangjia Village 唐家村, Xiangshan 香山 County, Guangdong 廣東 Province. Currently, Xiangshan is renamed as Zhuhai 珠海. He was the second son of his family, born and brought up in nearby Macau where he received a few years of education.¹

A Chinese named Yung Wing 容闳 (Rong Hong in Mandarin) was educated in USA and a Yale graduate of 1854. After returning to China, he envisioned sending Chinese boys to foreign countries for education. He enlisted the help of various high Qing dynasty officials including Zeng Guofan, 曾国藩 and later Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 in petitioning the Qing government for his goal.

In 1868, the Burlingame Treaty allowed reciprocity of Chinese nationals to study in the public educational institutions in United States.

In 1871, Prince Gong 恭亲王 voiced his support of the proposal of sending boys abroad for education with the aim to strengthen and improve China in the international arena. Finally the government approved Zeng and Li's memorial and agreed to provide funding for 120 young boys to study in US for 15 years before returning to China.

The Chinese Education mission (CEM) was established to send 30 young boys per year for four years. The criteria of the candidates were: between the age of 12 and 15, had studied Chinese books for several years, had family permission to go abroad for an extended period and not the only son of the family. Even though both Manchu and Han ethnicities were allowed, all the 120 boys were Han Chinese, and 69% were from Guangdong Province. Thirty nine were from Xiangshan 香山 County and among them six were from Tangjia Village 唐家村 alone. Some of them were related.¹ Tong Y.C. and Tang Shaoyi 唐绍仪 were cousins.

In rural villages, official messengers were sent, banging on gongs, and announcing the opportunity of sending boys to study abroad. The applicants were sent to Shanghai where a school was established to screen the candidates and prepare them for their study abroad. They were taught both Chinese and English there. The time the students spent at the preparatory school varied from a few months to a year or more. Only 30 students were selected for each detachment.

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Tong Yuen Chan belonged to the second detachment and was sent abroad at the age of 12. The second detachment departed from Shanghai on June 12, 1873. They first stopped at Yokohama, Japan for a few days, then on the Colorado, a paddle-wheel steamer belonging to the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, reaching San Francisco in about 3 weeks in July 1873. The students were on board the ship as first class passengers. Upon arrival in the United States, they continued their journey by train. In the evening of July 21, 1873 as their Rock Island train was going through western Iowa, they came under attack by the notorious Jesse James and five Ku Klux Klan-attired Confederates, who killed the engineer and made off with US \$2400 that had been under the custody of the Wells Fargo Express Company. Fortunately, the passengers were not robbed on that occasion. The CEM boys behaved calmly throughout the ordeal. The students detrained in Springfield, Massachusetts on July 24, 1873.¹

Shortly prior to the arrival of the CEM boys, on Yung Wing's behalf, Secretary Northrop issued a call for "cultured families" in Connecticut and Massachusetts to host the Chinese boys. Many families responded to the request. Most families took in two boys. Only very few took in three or four boys. Within a day or two of the boys' arrival in Springfield, they were assigned to specific host families in New England.

The host families were generally prosperous, middle class. The American home tutors were usually the women of the families. They were given instruction and compensation for housing, feeding, looking after and instructing the CEM students. The host families were required to submit a progress report on each of their charges to the Chinese Educational Commission (CEC) in Hartford on a quarterly basis, at the same time that they submitted their bills.¹

Tong Y.C. was assigned to Alexander S. and Rebekah R (Brown) McClean. A.S.McClean was a medical doctor and he took in four boys in his home. In 1874 when Mrs.McClean became ill and could no longer look after the four boys in her care, she recommended to the CEC that three of them be removed from the program. The probable cause was their "mischievous behavior" conceded later on by one of the students, Rong Shangqian. Tong Y.C. was one of the three on the verge of being sent back to China. However, after interviewing the three boys, Yung Wing decided otherwise. Impressed by the fluency of their English, he chose to give Tong Y.C. and Cai Tinggan another chance. The two were sent to Lowell, an industrious city in eastern Massachusetts "to learn practical mechanics instead of studying". During their half year in Lowell, they were taught to manufacture cartridges. Tong Y.C. lost a finger presumably in an industrial accident. In Lowell, they lived with a nephew and namesake of the statesman Daniel Webster. Cai and Tong were

allowed to cut off their queues lest they got tangled in moving machinery.² After about 6 months, Tong YC and Cai resumed academic study.¹

While at New Britain High School in 1878-1880, they first stayed with Henry G. Sawyer's family. Subsequently, both Tong and Cai were boarding with John N. Bartlett.

In 1921, Mrs. L. Hoyt Pease, daughter of Henry G. Sawyer (associate principal of the "Normal school" in New Britain, CT), with whom Tong Yuen Chan and Cai Tinggan had lived while attending New Britain High School in 1878-79, recalled: "*...they were good boys. I well remember the dinners they used to have in our dining room. They would ask if we had any objection to their having a Chinese dinner and of course, we were pleased to have them enjoy themselves. They would go up street and buy their liquid salt and Chinese sauce and provisions, and of course they had to cook them, because I did not know how to do it.*

After, they would have several Chinese boys from Hartford down to dinner, and once, I recall, we girls ate with them. We could not manage the chop sticks as deftly as those boys could, but we certainly enjoyed the dinner. Always after those dinners, the boys would wash the dishes and clean up the dining room.

When they came to our home, they could speak some English and after two years at school their English was perfect. You could sit in this room and hear them talking in the next room, and you could not tell but that they were native born Americans. They were excellently mannered, perfect gentlemen. In fact, I often pointed them out as an example for my own boys to follow."³

For the academic year of 1881-1882, Tong Y.C. was enrolled at Columbia University. It was unclear whether he studied there from 1880-1881.¹

The CEM boys attended both private and public schools. The typical curriculum, as mandated in Massachusetts, included, for example, penmanship, reading, writing, English grammar, geography, arithmetic, algebra and American history.

There were two types of secondary schools in New England at the time, "high schools" and "academies". High school was free, but not compulsory. Admission to public high schools was based on the applicant's performance at rigorous entrance examinations that could stretch over two days. In high schools, the CEM students had to choose between the "classical" course and the "English" course. The classical curriculum included Latin and Greek, preparing students for the liberal arts college. The "English" curriculum was a recent innovation for students aspiring for a career in business, science and engineering. Most of the CEM boys in secondary schools opted for the classical program. The CEM boys did well at the American schools, even excelling at exhibitions and prize competitions in oratory.

They enthusiastically participated in American sports, such as rowing, baseball despite their cumbersome long queues which they often tugged under their coats while playing.

They made friends with their American school mates. Some attended Christian religious meetings and a few converted to Christianity despite that it was forbidden by the CEC.

Throughout their stay in the US, even as they were acquiring a western education, the CEM boys were expected to keep up with their Chinese studies. Each student was to devote one hour of every working day to the study and writing in Chinese. Their work was sent to CEC every three months. To encourage the boys to do their work, the CEC held a monthly contest, with monetary rewards for the best written submissions in each of three categories: Commentaries (論 lun), explications (解 Jie) and calligraphy (字 Zi). The boys were also asked to write home twice a month at regular intervals.

In addition to their daily hour of Chinese lessons at home, the CEM boys were required to come to the CEC headquarters in Hartford for several weeks of intensive Chinese study each year under the two Chinese instructors on the CEC staff.

Aside from their Chinese school work, the CEM boys were also reminded during their stays at the CEC headquarters of their political and cultural obligations. Besides the lectures, they had to perform the Chinese rituals at each of the three great annual festivals: the Lunar New Year, the Dragon Boat Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival. The annual pilgrimage to Hartford was viewed by some students as a chance to socialize with other CEM boys, while others viewed it as a reluctant obligation.¹

In 1876, 113 CEM boys joined millions Americans to attend the Centennial Exhibitions in Philadelphia. They spent five days at the event, visiting various exhibition halls including the Chinese exhibit. During a special reception by the president of the Centennial Commission, They were introduced to the president of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant, who shook hands with each and every CEM boy.¹

At the end of 1880, the censor Li Shibin sent a memorial to Emperor Guangxu 光緒, criticizing the CEM for its laxity in controlling the students. In summer of 1881, the students were recalled back to China. The decision by the Qing court was probably of multiple reasons: the students' apparent neglect of and disdain for their Chinese studies, the high cost of CEM, the refusal of the American government, despite the promise in 1868 Burlingame Treaty of "most-favored nation" treatment to China, to allow CEM students to enroll at Annapolis and West Point, the recent surge in anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States.¹

Li Hongzhang obviously realized the ill fate of the CEM and attempted to obtain some practical benefit of the program. As part of the Self-Strengthening Movement in China, Li had overseen the building of a telegraph line between Tianjin and Shanghai, which was scheduled to go into service at the end of 1881 and was in need of operators. In May, Li asked Yung Wing and Wu Zideng to select twenty from among the CEM students and

enroll them in a short course on telegraphy, after which they were to be sent back to China. The course was organized by G.B. Hubbell of WUTCo. of Hartford and took place from early June to late July 1881.¹ It is likely Tong Y.C. was one of those selected for the course.⁴

The CEM students departed from US in August and September of 1881. the first group of 21 was made up largely, but not all, of Hubbell's telegraph students. They traveled by train from Hartford via Springfield, Albany, Buffalo, Chicago, Council Bluffs and Ogden to San Francisco where they waited about a week for the ship to cross the Pacific Ocean. One group of students with the Oriental Baseball Club received a challenge from the Oakland Baseball team and won the game and brought joy to the local Chinese community. The Iron screw-propelled steamers shortened the duration of the transoceanic trip and the students traveled in comfort on the ship. They arrived at Shanghai about a month and a half after departing from Hartford.

The CEM students arrived in Shanghai without any welcome from their Fatherland. Instead, they encountered callous reception. They were first taken to the harbormaster's office on large, uncomfortable, open air wooden wheel barrows. After a simple meal, they were taken to the accommodation where they slept on wooden planks without mats, with dirty, smelly quilts. They were confined with guards posted outside their gloomy lodging. Their confinement ended only after subsequent audience with the Daotai 道台 Li Ruifen of Shanghai.¹

In an 1885 memorial from Li, the twenty one students in the first group of returnees were sent to the Telegraph Administration in Tianjin where the telegraphy students were given additional training at the Telegraph School. They were taught the technical subjects that were directly relevant for operating and managing a telegraph system, such as Morse code and electrical engineering, as well as courses in basic sciences, mathematics and language training. The School's graduates went to work for the telegraph service as managers and technicians for many local offices.¹



Tong Y.C. was conferred by the Qing government an official ranking in civil service as the Expectant Daotai. During the decade after the boxer revolt, he was one of the three returned CEM students who successively headed the important Shanghai Telegraph bureau.⁵

He was appointed the chief superintendent and acting manager of the Imperial Chinese Telegraph Administration, Deputy to His Excellency the Viceroy of the Liang Jiang 两江总督, and Commissioner of Inland Taxation 内陆厘金.¹¹

Sometime after 1904, Tong Y.C. compiled in Chinese calligraphy a list of the 120 students of the CEM titled *Youmei Liuxue Tongren Xingminglu* 遊美留學同人姓名錄. It provides

valuable information on the names, places and dates of birth for all of the students, with some additional details on parentage and careers subsequent to the CEM for many of the students.⁶ This document became a valuable historical resource.

In autumn of 1905 Tong Y.C. was a member of the five Imperial Commissioners who went abroad to investigate the various forms of government in the different countries of Europe and the U.S. While on his travels he met many princes and distinguished statesmen and notables abroad.¹² He was also awarded the *Precious Star Baoxing* medal 宝星; decorated by the monarchs of Denmark, Sweden and Norway.⁷

In 1909, Tong Y.C. was appointed by the Office for Selection of Students for America (on Boxer Indemnity scholarship) as its Commissioner in Shanghai. He made arrangement, accommodations on steamers for the students. With vast experience and information, he advised them regarding how to act and feel and live in US.

His interest in educational matters led him on the directing committee of Fuhtan 复旦 College, the World's Chinese Students' Federation, the Chi-Sue Girls' School, Harvard and the German Medical College.⁷

Among many offices he held, Tong Y.C. was an officer of the American University Club, a director of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and one of the leaders in Canton Guild. He has also been Superintendent of Chinese Customs at Shanghai, the director of the Red Cross Hospital and vice-president of Boy Scouts Association of China. As a charter member and treasurer of the Shanghai Rotary Club, Tong Y.C. was the first Chinese member of the international organization. He received a great amount of publicity in the US and was written up in the New York Times in 1910 after he was appointed the chairman of the Executive Committee of the International Institute of China.⁸

In 1913, during the "second republican revolution," the pro-Constitution party sent Tong to take over the Shanghai Telegraph Company from the control of the pro-Yuan Shikai party. But the foreign consulates deemed the act to be a violation of Treaty agreements; whereupon Tong was forced by the Shanghai Municipal Council to relinquish his position.⁹

Tong YC was known as a great Chinese baseball fan at the Shanghai baseball club. Not only was he at the games, but also at practically every practice session before big series.¹⁰

In November 1921 while Tong Y.C. was at his desk at the Shanghai Commercial and Savings Bank where he was a director, he suffered a stroke. He died shortly after on November 9, at home, 640 Avenue Haig, Shanghai. He was 61 years old. There was a family service at home, followed by a public funeral at Hongqiao 紅橋 Cemetery with nearly 500 friends attending on a rainy day¹⁰. Tong Y.C. was survived by his wife Deng Feng 鄧凤, sons Kyat 唐觀翼, George 唐觀爵 and daughter Kumsiu 唐金兆, grandsons Norman 唐耀良 and Bingliang. 唐炳良



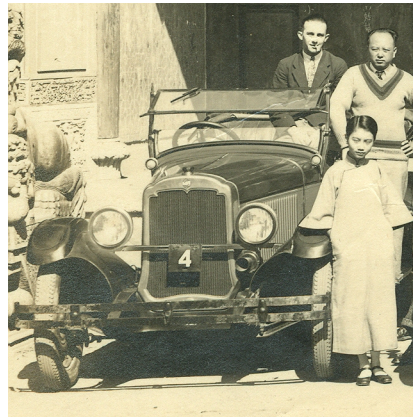
Picture 1: Sons of YC Tong, George on the left and Kyat (Albert) on the right



Picture 2: Family photo of YC Tong , (from left to right)
 Back row: Kumsiu 唐金兆, Kyat 唐觀翼, Kyat's wife 麥鴻寶, George 唐觀爵
 Middle row: YC Tong and his wife Deng Feng 鄧鳳
 Front row: Norman 唐耀良 and Bingliang. 唐炳良



Picture 3: Tong's house 範园 at 604, Avenue Haig, Shanghai ⁴



Picture 4: This is Tong Y.C.'s car, a Studebaker with a license number 4, and is one of the first motor cars in Shanghai. The car was well recognized and legend has it that police officers would salute when it happened to approach checkpoints on the street. ⁴

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Addendum:

As a young girl growing up in Shanghai, we had in our house two elaborately carved wooden chairs, one with a dragon and the other a phoenix. Those belonged to Tong Y.C. My sister and I used to play with beautiful jewelry beads made of ivory, amber and jade. We were told that they were decorations on Tong Y.C.'s Qing dynasty court uniform. All these are now lost.