

Interview with Prof. Edward Rhoads

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Q: How did you first become interested in China?

It was before college, actually. I was born in China and my mother is Cantonese. My father had gone to China in the early 1930s, during the Great Depression when it was difficult to find employment in the US. He was hired to teach English at a university in Southern China— Guangzhou— and we lived there from 1938 until 1951, when the Communists came in and closed down the school. I grew up speaking Cantonese as well as English, but when I came to the states I pretty much forgot all of the Chinese. In college, I decided to major in Chinese studies, probably because at parties I was often asked where I was born or where I'd grown up, and when I'd say I was born in China people would respond, "Oh, well isn't that interesting! Tell me about China..." –but I hardly knew anything about China. That was a reason for majoring in Chinese studies.

When I graduated in Chinese studies in 1960, federal funding for graduate studies was available. This was after Sputnik and the US decided they needed to catch up with the USSR and develop equivalent expertise in foreign languages. There was a lot of federal money for graduate study and so I was able to attend graduate school on those grants. At that time, if you didn't want to be drafted then one way of avoiding that was to be in graduate school, get a deferment. I did my masters at Harvard in East Asian Studies and continued on at Yale for a PhD in Chinese History. With a PhD in History there's little one can do besides teach, so one thing led to another and I went to the University of Texas Austin and stayed there for my entire career. I've enjoyed doing it because you have a lot of free time and to a large extent you're your own boss and can research what you want.

Q: A lot of your most recent research focuses on the stories of Chinese immigrants living in the US, was this an interest that developed as a result of your personal experience moving to the US from China?

Most of my work has been on Chinese history, particularly the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the last years of the Qing dynasty. My dissertation was on the 1911 Revolution in Guangdong province, which was my home province, and the second book I did was also on the 1911 Revolution, but from a very different perspective—that of the Manchus, who were overthrown. So my interest in China and America is really something that I developed as a secondary interest. While I was teaching at Texas, I would occasionally have Chinese or Chinese-American students in my class who came from within Texas or whose families had come recently but others came from families who had been in Texas for decades. I was curious in particular about the latter group, and so I started researching the history of Chinese immigrants in Texas and wrote an article on that. Later, when I happened to be in Pittsburg for a couple of years, I became curious about the Chinese in the Pittsburg area and discovered that there was a group of Chinese who had been hired in the 1870s by a cutlery manufacturing factory. They had hired the Chinese to come as strike breakers and so a group of about 150 Chinese were brought from San Francisco, California to Massachusetts. So I wrote a couple of articles about that, and that research got me interested in other groups of Chinese who worked in the Northeastern part of the US back in the 1870s—especially at a time when most Chinese were living in California and the West Coast. When you think about most Chinese back then, you instinctively think about Chinese on the West Coast. But I was curious about these outliers in relatively small numbers living in the Northeast, and there were basically four groups of Chinese in the Northeast in the 1870s: One was the group who worked in this cutlery factory, another was a group of shoemakers in Northwestern MA, a group of commercial steam launderers in New Jersey, and finally this group of Chinese students who had been sent by the Chinese government to live and study in New England in the 1870s. And so you had these four groups and what I've wanted to do- haven't done it yet- is to look at these four groups and compare and contrast their experiences.

Q: In your previous book, Manchus and Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861-1928, you discuss the extent to which the 1911 Revolution was not only anti-monarchical but also anti-Manchu. Were the Chinese youth sent to China of the Han or Manchu ethnicity?

The program said that they would accept either Han or Manchu but no Manchus applied. In fact, the program wasn't terribly well known in China. The Chinese who promoted the program had a very difficult time finding Chinese kids to participate. Nobody who was well educated—which at this time basically meant people who were Confucian educated—wanted to participate. So they had a difficult time finding people to take part in this program. Most of them were Cantonese, three-quarters came from the greater Guangzhou area and about one third came from the Shanghai area. And they were all boys— no girls.

Q: Was this exchange program initially created as an agreement between the US and Chinese governments?

Well, it wasn't really an agreement between the two governments; it was a project of the Chinese government. The Chinese government selected and sent these students abroad, and it didn't require the permission of the U.S. So it wasn't an exchange program the way you think of an exchange program today—the US didn't send an equal number of American students to China.

Q: How did the Chinese government organize such a program abroad without the permission or help of the US government?

The Chinese government put out a notice in the US, saying they needed families who would be willing to look after these boys from China. Many more families volunteered than they could accommodate. The families were compensated and I think for some families the compensation was probably why they did it. It was a way of making some supplementary income. But also, I think for many of them there was a sense of Christian duty. At this time of course, American schools and church attendance was expected and so this was seen as a way of converting the boys, which many families did.

Q: What was the main impetus for sending Chinese students abroad in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century? Were they really expected to return with knowledge that would be immediately implemented?

This was the first group of Chinese students to be sent abroad by the Chinese government to study. It was part of the beginnings of modernizations in China. These students went abroad in 1872. By that time, China had been beaten by the British twice in the First and Second Opium Wars and the dynasty had almost been overthrown by the Taiping rebellion in the 1850s and 60s. Chinese leaders realized at that point that they needed to modernize, but weren't very enthusiastic about it. So they decided on a program of limited modernization called the Self-Strengthening Movement- 自强运动 in the 1860s. During this time they set up some schools in China that taught foreign languages and they also began to send a few Chinese overseas to study. Some were sent to Europe, England, France, and Germany to study military and naval matters. But 120 students were sent to the US and the thing about the group that went to the US was they were supposed to be abroad for 15 years. This was a really incredible venture, and because of that the kids sent abroad were very young— only 12 or 13 years old. They knew hardly any English when they left China. They were sent to the New England area, specifically Western Massachusetts and Connecticut and assigned to American families who volunteered to take them in. The kids were dispersed so each family would get only two boys to raise and home school. An effort was made to try to have no more than one family in each community so that the kids were widely dispersed to learn English more easily.

Q: After 15 years when the students were called back to China, was it difficult for them to uproot and leave their jobs, education, and friends behind?

Interestingly, they ended up not staying for the full 15 years because the Chinese government got cold feet. After 9 years the government called them back to China, but even then the government became worried that the kids were becoming too American. By this time, the students were no longer dressed in Chinese clothes but American clothes. They

did continue to grow their hair in the Q, because this was something the Chinese government had said they absolutely could not get rid of. They students wanted to get rid of it, I think, but couldn't do it. But except for that they dressed in American fashion, played American sports, particularly baseball, they associated openly with young American women of their own age, and they attended church. Many of them actually converted to Christianity. So, all of these things I think upset the leaders of the movement back in China, the Chinese Education Administration. The result was that in 1881, the Chinese government ordered all of the students to go back to China. With two exceptions, they all went back.

Another reason for calling the students back was that the Chinese government had planned for their students to be able to attend the naval and military academies- West Point in Annapolis. By treaty between China and the US, the Chinese students were supposed to be able to attend, but the American government later refused, and so the Chinese government was upset about that.

Q: Did the Chinese students feel that tension between the two governments while they were in the US?

This was a time when there was a lot of anti- Chinese sentiment in the US, which eventually led to the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. But the students themselves were not that adversely affected by anti-Chinese feelings. This is primarily because they were very well educated by this time; they'd gone to American schools, they lived with American families, and probably spoke English better than they spoke Chinese. And by this time, they had already been in the US for six years. A lot of anti-Chinese sentiment was really directed at the manual laborers who weren't terribly well educated, who kept to themselves and who were taking jobs away from American workers. So, I think the feelings on the part of many Americans towards these students were very different.

In fact, when this group of Chinese students went to Philadelphia in 1876 for the centennial exhibition—celebrating 100 years of the Declaration of Independence—their presence attracted a lot of attention. They were treated as honored guests and at the end of the exhibition, they were invited to meet with President Grant who was there at that time,

and Grant shook hands with every one of them! So, you know, these guys were very well treated.

Q: Having come to the United States at such a young age and adapting to American culture, how difficult was the students' transition once they returned to China?

They had a difficult time when they got back to China, for a couple reasons. While they were in the US, they were supposed to keep up with their Chinese studies and complete an hour of language training each day. Every three months they were supposed to go to the headquarters of the Chinese Education Initiative in Hartford for a couple of weeks of Chinese lessons, and then in the summertime they were supposed to go back to Hartford for more Chinese lessons. So, there was an effort made for the students to keep up with their language skills, but it was very hard for them to do. And many Chinese students hated studying, hated going to Hartford and described the headquarters as "hell house".

Q: During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, some Chinese scholars who had studied abroad—like the famous author Lu Xun—rose to become highly respected intellectuals upon their return to China. What was the experience like for this group of students when they returned to China?

By the time they were forced to go back to China, I think many of them found that they really couldn't speak or read Chinese and discovered that all of the conveniences they had gotten used to American did not exist in China. The students who came to the US were supported by the Chinese government and the proviso was that when they got back, they would work for the Chinese government. And they did, they were assigned to various self-strengthening projects like a shipyard school in Fuzhou and also a naval school in Tianjin. A number of these students served as officers in the new Chinese navy and were killed, actually. Many of them were killed—first in the Sino-French war of 1883-1885 and then again ten years later in the Sino-Japanese war 1894-95. By the time they were recalled about half had

entered college but only two or three had graduated. Even those who hadn't graduated had at least six years of American schooling and some of them had nine years. They were very young, well-educated students and could be considered the "cream of the crop" in China at that time. And so, in a way, they were like cannon fodder in the Sino-French and Sino-Japanese wars. But some avoided the wars, and were assigned instead to work at the Kaiping coal mine and the telegraph administration.

Six students also attended the Tianjin medical school. These were all occupations that most Confucian-educated Chinese at that time would not have done very well in. So, I think exposure to the West helped prepare these students for certain positions in China. But when they first got back in 1882, they were not seen as very important, and sort of labored in obscurity for twenty years or so. They didn't have much standing because at this time, if you wanted to get ahead you needed a Confucian education and they had an American education. So, it wasn't until after the First Sino-Japanese War, the Hundred Days of Reform, and the late Qing reforms that their competence in English became an asset rather than a liability.

Q: To what extent did this first group of Chinese students inspire later scholars to travel abroad?

When other Chinese began to go abroad to Japan after 1900 and the US after 1910, they sort of looked back on this group of students as the forerunners and there was definitely interest in what their experiences had been like. But I think all later groups of Chinese who have gone abroad have been much older; more mature, more set in their ways, and have had a firmer grasp of Chinese learning. So, you could say this first group of students sent abroad to the US was very unique.