

**Document 6.2: Excerpts from the autobiography of Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America*, describing his efforts to modernize China, 1909**

*Yung Wing was born in Guangdong Province in 1828. When he was 13 years old, he enrolled in China's first English school in Macao. In 1846, he came to the United States with the founder of the school in Macao, Yale graduate Samuel Brown. Yung finished high school at Monson Academy in Massachusetts, and from there went to Yale University. When he graduated in 1854, he was the first Chinese man to earn a degree from an American university. Upon his return to China, he became a protégé of Zeng Guofan, and was deeply committed to the Self-Strengthening Movement. In 1863, Zeng sent Yung Wing to the United States to purchase machinery for arsenals. He spent years working to establish the Chinese Education Mission, which eventually sent 120 Chinese boys to the United States to be educated. Though the program was short-lived, 21 of those boys attended Yale, and a number of them later made significant contributions to China's efforts to modernize. Yung Wing died in 1912 and is buried outside Hartford, CT. The Yung Wing School PS 124 in New York City is named in his honor.*

**My College Days**

All through my college course [at Yale University], especially in the closing year, the lamentable condition of China was before my mind constantly and weighed on my spirits. In my despondency, I often wished I had never been educated, as education had unmistakably enlarged my mental and moral horizon, and revealed to me responsibilities, which the sealed eye of ignorance can never see, and sufferings and wrongs of humanity to which an uncultivated and callous nature can never be made sensitive....

“What am I going to do with my education?”.... I was determined that the rising generation of China should enjoy the same educational advantages that I had enjoyed; that through western education China might be regenerated, become enlightened and powerful.... Towards such a goal, I directed all my mental resources and energy. Through thick and thin, and the vicissitudes of a checkered life from 1854 to 1872, I labored and waited for its consummation....

*Yung appealed to Zeng Guofan, one of the most influential men in the self-strengthening movement.*

### **Interviews with Zeng Guofan**

In [an] interview he [Zeng Guofan] asked me what in my opinion was the best thing to do for China at that time. The question came with such a force of meaning, that if I had not been forwarned [*sic*] by my friends of a few evenings before, or if their hearts had not been set on the introduction of a machine shop, and they had not practically won the Viceroy over to their pet scheme, I might have been strongly tempted to launch forth upon my educational scheme as a reply to the question as to what was the best thing to do for China.... My obligations to [my friends] were great, and I therefore decided that my constancy and fidelity to their friendship should be correspondingly great.... So my educational scheme was put in the background, and the machine shop was allowed to take precedence....

In our last conference it was decided that the matter of the character of the machine shop was to be left entirely to my discretion and judgment, after consulting a professional mechanical engineer.... It was also left entirely to me to decide where the machinery should be purchased,—either in England, France, or the United States of America....

The location of the machine shop was to be at a place called Kow Chang Meu, about four miles northwest of the city of Shanghai. [It] was afterwards known as the Jiangnan Arsenal, an establishment that covers several acres of ground and embraces under its roof all the leading branches of mechanical work. Millions have been invested in it since I brought the first machinery from Fitchburg, [Massachusetts]....

## **Proposal of My Educational Scheme**

Having scored in a small way this educational victory, by inducing the Viceroy to establish a mechanical training school as a corollary to the arsenal, I felt quite worked up and encouraged concerning my educational scheme which had been lying dormant in my mind for the past fifteen years, awaiting an opportunity to be brought forward....

The...proposition was for the government to send picked Chinese youths abroad to be thoroughly educated for the public service....

## **Chinese Educational Mission**

As to the character and selection of the students: the whole number to be sent abroad for education was one hundred and twenty; they were to be divided into four installments of thirty members each, one installment to be sent each year for four successive years at about the same time. The candidates to be selected were not to be younger than twelve or older than fifteen years of age. They were to show respectable parentage or responsible and respectable guardians. They were required to pass a medical examination, and an examination in their Chinese studies according to regulation—reading and writing in Chinese—also to pass an English examination if a candidate had been in an English school....

As the people in the northern part of China did not know that such an educational scheme had been projected by the government, there being no Chinese newspapers published at that time [1871] to spread the news among the people, we had, at first, few applications for entrance into the preparatory school. All the applications came from the Guangdong people, especially from the district of Xiangshan. This accounts for the fact that nine-tenths of the one hundred and twenty government students were from the south.

[In 1872] the first installment of thirty students started for the United States...[and] in the fall of 1875 the last installment of students arrived [in the United States]....

### **End of the Educational Mission**

*To Yung's dismay, despite the success of the educational mission, conservative officials petitioned to have the program end. Zeng Guofan had died in 1871, and Yung was unable to count on his support. Li Hongzhang had taken Zeng's place. Yung described him as having an "excitable and nervous temperament, capricious and impulsive, susceptible to flattery and praise."*

The government before acceding to the memorial put the question to Viceroy Li Hongzhang first, who, instead of standing up for the students, yielded to the opposition of the reactionary party and gave his assent to have the students recalled.... Thus the fate of the educational mission was sealed and all students, about one hundred in all, returned to China in 1881....

Source: Yung Wing. *My Life in China and America*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1909. 40-41, 150-153, 170, 173, 183-184, 186, 197, 210.