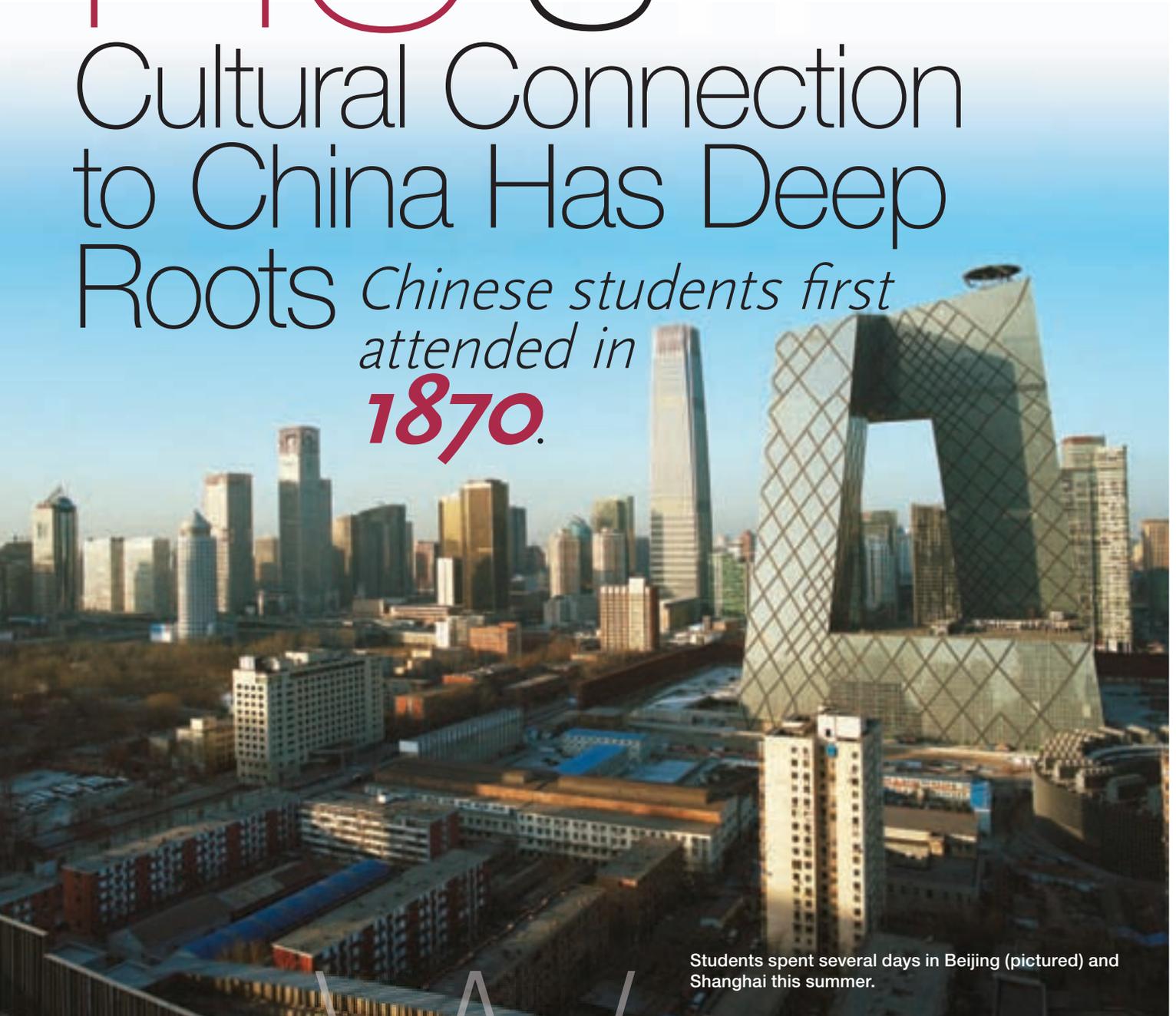


HU'S

Cultural Connection to China Has Deep Roots

*Chinese students first
attended in
1870.*



Students spent several days in Beijing (pictured) and Shanghai this summer.

By Scott D. Seligman

When 35 members of the Freshman Leadership Academy traveled to Shanghai and Beijing this summer, they were merely writing the latest chapter in the long history of Howard University's connection to

China. The students' visit included lessons about cultural awareness, intercultural communications and global citizenship. Yet, the cultural exchange between Howard students and China actually began 142 years ago with the admission of Howard's first Chinese students. Just three years

CORBIS IMAGES

after Howard opened its doors, the American Missionary Association asked that three young Chinese men be admitted.

The association's members had a strong religious agenda, and in 1869, they reached out to America's Chinese, who already numbered more than 63,000, few of whom were Christian. Chinese had first arrived in the 1850s during the California Gold Rush, and more came in the 1860s to help build the transcontinental railroad. They were seen as prime targets for conversion, but proselytizing required people able to preach in their language. Since China did not yet send its students abroad, the association had to recruit young Chinese men closer to home.

They found three at New York City's Five Points House of Industry, a charitable organization that helped the destitute find work and instructed them in English and religion. All were Cantonese from the Guangdong province who had come as laborers. Fung Affoo, 20, orphaned at 15, arrived by way of Cuba, where he had worked as a house servant, narrowly escaping slavlike conditions as a coolie laborer in the sugar cane fields. Choy Awah, 21, had come to America as a ship's cabin boy. And Leong Sing, 18, had studied to be a bookkeeper for six years in China before sailing to the United States. Like Fung, he had been in America for only six months. All three were asked to renounce "paganism" as a condition of accepting the association's offer of a full scholarship.

On Feb. 20, 1870, the trio entered Howard's "Normal School," whose preparatory course of study required a basic knowledge of reading, arithmetic, spelling and geography. They stayed for two years, and Fung and Leong were baptized at Howard in 1872. The only known photos of them, taken in 1870, show them in various stages of assimilation. Two had given up their Chinese robes and caps for Western clothing, but two had not yet cut off their queues, the long, signature braids of hair they were required to wear under Chinese law.

The men were popular and did well in their studies. Cornelius Scott, a schoolmate, wrote in 1872 that "Fung is very sociable, polite and funny. Sing is also very sociable and good-natured. We were playing football the other evening and in running at the ball we came in contact with

each other and I being the heavier knocked him down; he just jumped up and went on playing and said nothing about it."

America experienced economic depression in the 1870s, which made things especially difficult for its Chinese population. After the railroad was finished, they found themselves competing with others for scarce jobs, leading to hostility and sometimes violence. It did not take long before the nation's newspapers began to print vicious racial stereotypes about them. As public sentiment toward them deteriorated, the drumbeat to pass a law to keep them out got louder. It culminated in 1882 when Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited further immigration of Chinese laborers and forbade the naturalization of Chinese already in America. Needless to say, the law was deeply resented by America's Chinese.

There is no evidence any of the three graduated from Howard, and what became of Leong Sing is unknown; he may have returned to China. Choy Awah, however, remained in Washington for nearly two decades, operating a tea shop in the Chinese quarter, which in those days occupied a few blocks of Pennsylvania Avenue near the Capitol, where the National Gallery of Art stands today. In 1874, while it was still legal, he became an American citizen—one of the very first Chinese ever to do so—and the following year married an 18-year-old woman of Irish extraction. Unaccustomed to dealing with Asian grooms, the District of Columbia registrar listed his race on the marriage certificate as "White (Mongolian)." Choy, who may also have assisted the Chinese legation in Washington as an interpreter for a time, eventually moved to Philadelphia, where he died in 1895 at the age of 46.

It was Fung Affoo whose career must

have pleased his American Missionary Association benefactors most. He went to San Francisco—which had more Chinese than any other city—and became a teacher in its Chinese Mission School. He helped draft the constitution of the Chinese YMCA and quickly became indispensable to the mission.

Even while he was at Howard, Fung announced he was preparing to be a teacher and would eventually return to China. He proved as good as his word.



Student Andre Joyner gets a lesson from Yingwèi Liu on how to use chopsticks.

In 1881, he went to Hong Kong, where he eventually became headmaster in the school system, and an elder in his church. He spent his later years helping organize schools for poor boys in the British colony.

Looking back in 1902—when permanent extension of the Chinese Exclusion Act was being debated in Congress—Gen. Oliver Otis Howard, who had been president of the University while the Chinese students were enrolled, recalled that "no officer or instructor had any fault to find" with them. He saw their success as proof that Chinese were capable of becoming "Christianized," a strong argument, he believed, against excluding them from America's shores. But this was a minority opinion in late-19th-century America, and Chinese would be kept out for several more decades until the Exclusion Act was finally repealed in 1943. ■HU

Seligman, author of Three Tough Chinamen, is a Washington, D.C.-based writer, historian and genealogist.