

↪ The Good Immigrants ↪

HOW THE YELLOW PERIL
BECAME THE MODEL MINORITY

Madeline Y. Hsu

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

Princeton and Oxford

*Nurturing Nationalism Overseas:
Chinese Students in 1930s America*

A Chinese internationalist, Meng Zhi shared the vision of American counterparts such as Stephen Duggan and Paul Monroe that Chinese students should be able to experience the best of American civilization's democratic culture and social order, albeit for different reasons. Meng hoped to help the students train and acquire knowledge to help China's development by learning from the United States. However, he also faced the challenge that apart from their academic programs, most Chinese students continued to experience unfriendly and inequitable treatment by a majority of Americans. For example, the poet Wen Yiduo had arrived in the United States in 1922 with the goal of studying Western arts to "absorb the best in Western culture in order to create a new Chinese culture." Contrary to these aspirations, he remained quite isolated during his three years in America, later explaining "that his withdrawal from American society was a deliberate decision to avoid racial humiliation." In letters home he commented on racism in the United States: "In America only white people are respected. The colored people (here the yellow, black and red people are called colored) are barbarians." Rather than becoming an advocate for China's Americanization, Wen developed pointed criticisms, producing the poem "The Laundry Song" to capture the perspective of a laundry worker.⁶⁸ A decade after Wen's stay, Chinese students still regularly experienced unfriendly and discriminatory interactions with Americans.

During the 1930s indifference to Chinese still prevailed, as captured in a survey of 125 midwestern students conducted by Tsung-kao Yieh in 1932 and 1933, revealing the limited impact of programs enacted by the Cosmopolitan

Clubs, the CFRFS, and the IIE. Yieh's PhD dissertation, "The Adjustment Problems of Chinese Graduate Students in American Universities," focused on understanding Chinese student perspectives.⁶⁹ Unlike earlier publications, which focused on giving guidance to studying in the United States or how to improve the services offered, Yieh's findings resonated with a 1933 study run by Adelaide T. Case of Columbia's Teachers College for the YWCA appraising the work of the International Student Committee. Case identified the key problem as the "lack of genuine friendship and understanding on the part of Americans" for foreign students and limited opportunities for international and domestic students to interact socially and gain "deeper understanding."⁷⁰ Yieh's survey confirmed the limited impact of missionary and internationalist agendas and revealed the profound nationalism and sense of connection linking Chinese students to their troubled homeland. Although very high percentages of Chinese students complained of discrimination or the lack of meaningful interaction with Americans—with 81 percent encountering problems in "contacts with persons outside the university"; 79 percent "social and recreational contacts"; and 77 percent "contacts with American students"—their most significant concerns stemmed from financial difficulties (89 percent) and the ongoing Sino-Japanese conflicts (90 percent) (35). Chinese students remained more preoccupied with problems in China than with the possibility of life in the United States.

By the early 1930s mistreatment on entry was not a significant issue, with a total of only thirty-six complaints listed. The students understood that educational exchanges were meant to cultivate stronger international relations but that restrictive U.S. laws and unfriendly government bureaucracies operated in contradiction to these goals. However, the most frequently cited source of offense concerned class rather than race, for "immigrants are measured in terms of money rather than factors which foster international cultural relations." Only eleven complained about the "many details [that] delay landing." Although some legal changes had recently been made, "the common practice of discrimination against foreign students, and particularly Oriental students, which received its fullest expression in the Act, has tended to be continued" (104-5).⁷¹ Despite these difficulties, the students seemed deeply appreciative of the opportunities at American educational institutions, particularly their democratic and scientific emphasis and the "excellence" of teacher qualifications, buildings, and organizational facilities (95-97).

Yieh's survey unpacks the tenuous financial position of most Chinese students. Distance and war interfered with the arrival of funds from both family and government agencies, while foreign student status sharply limited job options. The China Institute aimed to buffer some of these fluctuations. Oscillations in rates of exchange diminished the value of Chinese student resources. The currency in use by Chinese, Mexican silver, fell in value from a 1931 exchange rate of 5 for each U.S. dollar to only 3 to 1 in 1934

(41). Students also found it harder to find jobs because employment offices did not help foreign students and immigration restrictions “discriminate against the foreign student” (37–38).⁷² However, only three students complained that their student status prevented a search for jobs, and only two about the requirement of returning to China (104–5).

Chinese students knew that they had some important American advocates who tried to reform conditions to improve their situation. “A number of the most prominent educators in the United States” linked the “problems of adjustment for the foreign students in the United States” to “the probable increase of racial and national prejudice” while criticizing “the injustices to the foreign students and the complications resulting from the operations” as aspects of “the strained relations with their countries of origin” (105–6). For example, the 1933 restriction on foreign student job options received sharp criticism in the *New York Times*. “The withdrawal from needy foreign students of the privilege of working their way through school in traditional American fashion has been denounced in the strongest terms by many leading educators,” whose ranks included Nicholas Butler of Columbia, Cloyd H. Marvin of George Washington University, William John Cooper, commissioner of education in the Interior Department, and John H. MacCracken, associate director of the American Council on Education (106).⁷³ Advocacy on the part of some prominent Americans nonetheless did not mitigate indifference in everyday lives.

A minority of the students, just under a third, admitted to being Christian, but their religion seems to have exacerbated their maladjustment. Yieh observed that Christian students experienced *greater* feelings of alienation through starker “contrasts between the actual situation found and the idealization that has been built up prior to coming to the United States.” One Christian student recalled: “When I was in China I had religious interests. I went to church every Sunday and was interested in various religious meetings. . . . In America, however. . . I am a stranger. . . . Sometimes I go to church but I do not feel as if I should be there. The church people are cordial to me but they do not treat me as one of their group. . . . Much worse than the church is the life in the social circles. Many places I cannot go” (43–45).⁷⁴ As feared by internationalist Christian leaders, Chinese impressions of the United States actually diminished after arrival.

Generally adverse conditions included complaints about rooming situations, prejudiced landlords, and difficulty getting into dorms (61–63). Yieh’s survey subjects widely registered their embarrassment at “America’s racial discrimination” and “movies derogatory to Chinese life.” Of the eighty-one complaints about experiences off campus, fifty involved prejudice of some sort (71–72). The largely male student population, at seventy-nine out of ninety, referred to many instances of difficulties interacting with American women, which Yieh ascribed to “race discrimination” (73–74). Yieh recorded

seventy-seven complaints of problems involving contacts with American students, which included forty-three complaints that “American students take an indifferent attitude toward us” (77).

An American staff member of the Chicago International House shrewdly observed the divide between institutional efforts to foster American and Chinese friendships and the token and ultimately alienating consequences of programs that provided few opportunities to develop real relationships. Referring to the occasional events at which “foreign students and other scholars from abroad” were invited to dinners or banquets and asked to speak, the commentator noted that these superficial efforts did not provide “frequent contacts to make possible real friendship between American citizens and foreign citizens” and left the foreign students feeling as if they were “being made exhibits before American organizations” (74–76). Chinese students understood that friendly interest directed toward them as “exhibits” nonetheless did not gain them true acceptance or standing in the United States, experiences that affirmed their connections to and futures in China. Such racial divides reinforced their attachments to China and Chinese efforts to deploy international students to advance national development.