Review of

FORTUNATE SONS
The 120 Chinese Boys Who Came to America, Went to School, and Revolutionized an Ancient Civilization
By Liel Leibovitz and Matthew Miller

By Deborah Fallows, New York Times, March 4, 2011

The First Chinese Exchange Students

To outsiders, China may seem purposefully dynamic. To its own people, the same ceaseless change can seem frighteningly chaotic. During my own recent three years of living there, I was often startled by the dramatic stories told by my Chinese friends — both the terrible parts (famine, split and scattered families, trust betrayed, fortunes lost) and the astonishing rebounds (an against-all-odds admission to a university, a fearless gamble that paid off, a random kindness from a generous stranger).

Visitors: A Chinese Educational Mission baseball team in Hartford, Conn.

But China has gone through previous periods of tumultuous change, as Liel Leibovitz and Matthew Miller’s “Fortunate Sons” makes abundantly clear. Their story begins with Yung Wing, who came to America in the late 1840s. The first Chinese student admitted to Yale, he returned to his homeland in 1854, determined not to be the last. Under his tutelage, 120 Chinese boys crossed the Pacific in the 1870s, intent on learning Western skills that might help their country modernize. Yet mixed fortunes awaited them on their return to a country whose Qing-era imperial rule was crumbling, where their schooling at various colleges in New England made them both influential and, in some cases, rootless and estranged.

The boys arrived in an America that was going through its own post-Civil War transformation, and Leibovitz and Miller use the newcomers’ experiences as pretexts for discourses on extraneous subjects. One such observation — “For the boys,” the story of the transcontinental railroad’s creation “could have contained many lessons about the contrasting outlooks of imperial China and the young American republic” — is followed by a lengthy discussion of the Central Pacific Railroad, ethnic tensions involving its
Chinese work crews and how John Deere tractors tamed the prairie.

On their return to China, many of these young men struggled to find a proper role, or even a measure of stability. One of Yung Wing’s nephews, Yung Leang, a skilled orator at Hartford High, had just enrolled in college when the exchange program was abruptly halted. Arriving back in China in the fall of 1881, he and his companions were arrested because they could no longer speak Mandarin well enough to explain their long absence. Despite being ill-suited to military life, he was sent for naval training and emerged as an improbable hero of the (losing) Battle of Foochow against French warships in 1884.

Occasionally, it’s a random detail in a Chinese student’s story that resonates. Chung Mun Yew, who became coxswain of the Yale rowing team, gained a small measure of vindication years later when, back in America as a diplomat, he met a scoffing Harvard graduate who bet he had never even seen a university boat race. “It is true that I had never seen a Harvard crew row,” Chung replied. “They were always behind me.”

Leibovitz and Miller, whose previous book dealt with the German wartime ballad “Lili Marlene,” are specialists in narrative history rather than Sinology, so their book will be most satisfying to readers who have had the least exposure to China and its history. Their breezily generalizing style discounts the many contradictory elements that are always at play among the country’s vast population. And they introduce a number of small but cumulatively unfortunate errors — referring, for example, to the city of Nanjing as “northern” when its name means “southern capital.” Elsewhere, they say that the “seven main languages” of China are “each as different from the other as German is from French,” which oversimplifies a complex linguistic heritage. Still, the story of these 19th-century scholars is a useful reminder of how long exchanges between our two countries have been under way, and of the risks and rewards that these connections have brought to both sides.

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