

"A fascinating and well-told history."—PETER HESSLER,  
author of *Country Driving*

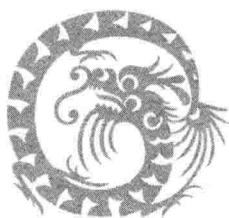
# FORTUNATE SONS

The 120  
Chinese Boys Who  
Came to America,  
Went to School, and  
Revolutionized  
an Ancient  
Civilization



LIEL LEIBOVITZ & MATTHEW MILLER

# Fortunate Sons



The 120 Chinese Boys Who  
Came to America, Went to School, and  
Revolutionized an Ancient Civilization

常州大学图书馆  
藏书章

Liel Leibovitz & Matthew Miller



W. W. Norton & Company  
New York • London

Copyright © 2011 by Liel Leibovitz and Matthew Miller

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

First published as a Norton paperback 2012

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book,  
write to Permissions, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.,  
500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact  
W. W. Norton Special Sales at [specialsales@wnnorton.com](mailto:specialsales@wnnorton.com) or 800-233-4830

Manufacturing by Courier Westford

Book design by Chris Welch

Production manager: Julia Druskin

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leibovitz, Liel.

Fortunate sons : the 120 Chinese boys who came to America, went to school, and  
revolutionized an ancient civilization / Liel Leibovitz & Matthew Miller. — 1st ed.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-393-07004-0 (hardcover)

1. China—History—1861–1912. 2. China—History—Reform Movement, 1898.
3. China—Politics and government—19th century. 4. China—Education—19th  
century. 5. Chinese Educational Commission—History. 6. Chinese students—  
United States—History—19th century. 7. Yung, Wing, 1828–1912.

I. Miller, Matthew I., 1979– II. Title.

DS761.2.L45 2011

951'.035—dc22

2010037724

ISBN 978-0-393-34230-7 pbk.

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110

[www.wwnorton.com](http://www.wwnorton.com)

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd.

Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

## CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	9
---------------------	---

### Part I

1	The Freshman	15
2	The Qing	27
3	The Foreigners	53
4	Self-Strengthening	71

### Part II

5	The Arrival	93
6	The Forbidden City of Willard Street	111
7	The Return	135

### Part III

8	The Prisoners	171
9	"One Vast Jellyfish"	192
10	The Hundred Days	223
11	Sunset	253

<i>Epilogue</i>	279
-----------------	-----

<i>A Note on Translation</i>	283
------------------------------	-----

<i>A Note on Sources</i>	285
--------------------------	-----

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	289
------------------------	-----

<i>Notes</i>	291
--------------	-----

<i>Index</i>	305
--------------	-----

Further Praise for  
**Fortunate Sons**



"The story of the West's engagement with China is often told through the voices of colonists, correspondents, and fortune-seekers who sailed East a century ago. *Fortunate Sons* is a captivating look at the reverse journey: a page-turning narrative about Chinese patriots schooled in the United States who returned home to modernize a moribund, imperial society. This book is a reminder that historically, U.S.-China relations are more than political; Leibovitz and Miller have unearthed an important, and all but forgotten, story that resonates today."

—Michael Meyer, author of *The Last Days of Old Beijing:  
Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed*

"This is a must-read for those interested in American history and/or Asian American history. Leibovitz, an author and professor, and Miller, a New York writer, add a unique voice to the history of the Asian experience. . . . Consider yourself fortunate to get your hands on this captivating book."

—Elizabeth Franklin, *Portland Book Review*

"What happened when the Qing dynasty sent a bunch of boys off to school in Connecticut at the end of the nineteenth century? Well, they became good at baseball, and they picked up some great nicknames—Fighting Chinese, By-Jinks Johnnie—but they also came home and did their part to try to change China. *Fortunate Sons* is a fascinating and well-told history of this early educational exchange between China and the United States."

—Peter Hessler, author of *Country Driving:  
A Journey Through China from Farm to Factory*

"Not only does the book tell a gripping story of a quest for education, but it re-creates the environment which the Chinese lived in the United States 150 years ago."

—Chen Weihua,  
*China Daily USA*

"I read this book in one sitting, utterly engrossed in the rugged journeys undertaken by the first generation of west-going Chinese scholars. To read this book is to understand the fundamental obstacles and frustrations all Chinese intellectuals faced then and now!"

—Da Chen, author of  
*Colors of the Mountain and Brothers*

"As Leibovitz and Miller show in their thoroughly enjoyable account, the sojourn here took hold. Many of these men became prominent in China's drive for modernization in the next century. The authors use a wealth of primary sources to tell the boys' stories, and the result is an outstanding tale of cross-cultural fertilization."

—Jay Freeman, *Booklist*

"The authors' effective, quick-stroke treatment of momentous historical events, their sensitive portraits of schoolboys who became technological, military, industrial and commercial reformers, and their deft juxtaposition of two cultures, one on the rise, the other coming apart, make for a rich, multilayered tale. . . . Vividly told."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Not only do Leibovitz and Miller (coauthors, *Lili Marlene: The Soldiers' Song of World War II*) narrate a fascinating cultural exchange unknown to many of today's readers, but they also share the personal stories and finer points about a very interesting time. . . . Not to be missed; those interested in the social history of Chinese American relations and history buffs generally will find it very informative."

—Susan Baird, *Library Journal*

ALSO BY LIEL LEIBOVITZ AND MATTHEW MILLER

*Lili Marlene: The Soldiers' Song of World War II*



*To Lisa, evermore. —L.L.*

*To Francesca. —M.M.*



## CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	9
---------------------	---

### Part I

1	The Freshman	15
2	The Qing	27
3	The Foreigners	53
4	Self-Strengthening	71

### Part II

5	The Arrival	93
6	The Forbidden City of Willard Street	111
7	The Return	135

### Part III

8	The Prisoners	171
9	"One Vast Jellyfish"	192
10	The Hundred Days	223
11	Sunset	253

<i>Epilogue</i>	279
-----------------	-----

<i>A Note on Translation</i>	283
------------------------------	-----

<i>A Note on Sources</i>	285
--------------------------	-----

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	289
------------------------	-----

<i>Notes</i>	291
--------------	-----

<i>Index</i>	305
--------------	-----



## INTRODUCTION

Attempting to write even a slice of Chinese history is a monumental challenge, requiring patience and untangling. The task grows more complex when, in addition to recording the nation's intricate past, one focuses on the biographies of 120 men, many of whom led China during the final days of its empire and attempted to shepherd it through ambitious reforms. For us, the undertaking often seemed doomed. Yet, something about the story of the Chinese Educational Mission compelled us to persevere.

Despite its considerable implications for China, the United States, and the relations between the two nations, the story of the mission is not well known today. We came across it while watching television on a rainy afternoon in Beijing: suddenly, the screen was filled with creased and yellowing photographs of young Chinese boys wearing voluminous silk robes, standing in the midst of austere New England landscapes. The boys were sent to the United States in 1872, during the twilight years of

the Qing Empire, in the hopes that a few years in America's leading schools would produce a band of leaders capable of rescuing China from its technological and military stupor. In the high schools and colleges of Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York, the sons of the world's oldest surviving empire and the sons of an ascendant young republic met, played games, and exchanged ideas. In many ways, their interactions would shape both their nations in the decades and centuries to come.

While this book is primarily a work of history, it may also be read as a primer on the present. Had they strolled down the main street of contemporary Zhuhai, for example, or enjoyed a meal in Harbin, the men whose stories this volume tells would have likely recognized many of the same challenges and some of the same opportunities that had baffled and enticed them as they struggled to push and pull their ancient nation into the modern era. In America, too, they would probably have encountered the same enthusiasm and the same prejudices that at times served to promote them and at other times blocked their way. Although much has happened in Chinese history over the course of the last 100 years—too much for this book to attempt to describe—the fundamental challenge facing China has not changed since the boys first tackled it.

It is a challenge that starkly defined the lives of the Chinese Educational Mission's graduates. On the one hand, the students were infatuated with the promises inherent in modern machinery, in global commerce, in Western interpretations of innovation and progress. On the other, they were loyal sons of China who, even as they fought for sweeping reforms, revered

the rituals of the past and took immense pride in their heritage and tradition. In resisting the clarion call of either ideology, they achieved, if only for a few passing years, a kind of harmonious balance between East and West, past and future, self and nation.

We hope that those who today call on China to abandon its essence and take up foreign ideas, and those who reject America out of hand and deny its virtues, will read this book. In it, they will find a brief retelling of China's struggle to become a modern nation, as well as the beginnings of America's rise to the pinnacle of international influence. Most importantly, however, they will find a story about men from two countries, two cultures, two worlds, who met in friendship and tried to craft a better future. This, we believe, offers a universal lesson, timeless and true, which we would do well to recall.





# Part I

