

# From Greek/Latin To Chinese: What We Can Learn From The First Chinese Teacher At Harvard

Ye Tian  
University of Pennsylvania

## Abstract

Higher education in the U.S. underwent numerous changes during the late nineteenth century. The classical education model used for teaching Latin and ancient Greek was gradually removed from university curriculum as educators began valuing modern subjects, including modern languages.

Harvard's hiring of Kunhua Ge (戈鯤化), a language teacher from China, to teach Chinese in 1879 exemplified this change. This research examines both the external and internal factors that limited Kunhua Ge's achievements in promoting Chinese language at that time. It suggests that the external anti-China sentiments that existed in American society may have created a difficult teaching environment for Kunhua Ge. Ge's internal understanding of his job differed from American society's and the Harvard Administration's expectations for Chinese language education, which valued practical language proficiency over cultural knowledge. Using Kunhua Ge as a case study, this research suggests that the development Chinese language education is tightly connected to the development and reform of the educational system in the U.S. The case of Kunhua Ge shows how the social, political, and economic environment between the U.S. and China in fact inevitably affects the rise or decline of the Chinese language education in the U.S.

## Introduction

When discussing the formation and rapid expansion of East Asian Studies programs in American colleges and universities during the 1990s, scholars often suggest that the economic

rise of Asia at that time contributed to this phenomenon (Chang, 1999). In fact, American universities had already shown academic interest in Asia as early as the late nineteenth century, and interest in China in particular. One important example is Harvard University hiring its first Chinese language instructor—Kunhua Ge<sup>i</sup>—from China in 1879. Kunhua Ge was the first Chinese teacher who came from China to teach at an American university, and his arrival caused great public interest in the New England area. Many newspapers published news of his arrival alongside pictures of Kunhua Ge (e.g., Figure 1) and gave continuing reports of Kunhua Ge's Chinese course as well as his life at Harvard University. However, historians have overlooked Kunhua Ge until very recently. No scholarly



Kunhua Ge (1838-1882)

Figure 1: This picture still hangs at the main entrance of Harvard-Yenching Library.

article has been written about him in English, and only recently have scholarly articles appeared in Chinese that briefly introduce his story. These Chinese scholars have placed high value on Harvard's arrangement—hiring a Chinese scholar instead of an American scholar to teach Chinese language and culture at Harvard. For example, Zhang (2001) argues that it actually marks the beginning of academic two-way communication between the United States and China. Although Kunhua Ge only taught at Harvard for three short years, he impacted the image of Chinese people in the eyes of Americans, especially elite intellectuals at Harvard (Cui, 1994; Zhang, 2001; Xia, 2004).

While Kunhua Ge's experience is a landmark moment in the history of teaching Chinese as a second language, Kunhua Ge's achievements at Harvard University were quite limited. He only had five students in total during his three-year tenure, and Chinese language education at Harvard was suspended for almost forty years after his sudden death in 1882. It could thus be argued that Kunhua Ge's mission to establish and promote Chinese language and cultural education at Harvard was not entirely successful.

This article considers both the external factors, which include political, economic, social, and especially educational conditions in the U.S. in the early 1880s, and internal factors, include Kunhua Ge's own understanding of his job, which affected his teaching at Harvard. I use Kunhua Ge at Harvard as a case study to suggest that American popular sentiments towards China and attitudes towards earning Chinese contribute to the success of Chinese language education in the U.S. If Chinese language educators could better understand Kunhua Ge's relatively unsuccessful experience at Harvard, they could better understand the challenges of teaching the

Chinese language in the United States today.

### **The Rationale for Modern Foreign Language Education in the U.S.**

Foreign language education in the U.S., including Chinese language education, is tightly connected to the development and the reform of the American educational systems. To help us to understand this point, I turn to the beginning of modern foreign language education in pre-colonial America. Although as early as 1608, French and Spanish missionaries taught their native languages to their immigrant children, the instruction of modern foreign languages only took place primarily at the elementary school level from the pre-colonial era to the 1810s in the U.S. (Watzke, 2003). During this period, modern foreign languages were the medium for the instruction of other subjects, such as English, science, and philosophy, and prepared students for future social and vocational life (Watzke, 2003). Scholars claim that the number of students who learned foreign languages in the U.S. increased greatly with the establishment and early growth of public high schools during the 1820s to the 1870s. But it is worth noting that this “foreign languages” mainly refers to classical languages: Greek and Latin (Watzke, 2003). Modern foreign language was not a part of the college preparatory curriculum either in the growing public secondary education or in the declining Latin grammar school and the private academy (Watzke, 2003).

Two key concepts summarize the educational philosophy of higher education before the 1880s: classical education and mental disciplinarianism (Diener, 2008; Geiger, 2014; Thelin, 2011; Veysey, 1965). Classical education refers to the teaching of Latin, Greek, mathematics, science, and philosophy, subjects which not only composed the core curriculum of college education but permeated grammar schools,

high schools, academies, normal schools, and seminaries as well (Geiger, 2014; Nash, 2005; Thelin, 2011; Veysey, 1965). Disciplinarianism relates to the concept of mental power. American educators believed that “[j]ust as the muscles of the body could be strengthened through vigorous exercise,” the human brain “could be trained through properly conceived mental gymnastics” (Kliebard, 1986,4-5). As the task of education was to develop the mental power of the human brain, educators believed that certain types of subjects were best equipped to foster this development. Therefore, “until the end of the nineteenth century these two core doctrines of education, that true education is classical education and that the chief goal of education is to foster the development of mental faculties, went hand in hand” (Diener, 2008, 63).

In general, most educators and scholars in the U.S. before the 1880s believed in the instruction of the classical subjects because, after all, these subjects had proven for centuries the ability to provide the mental exercise and discipline necessary for the training of the brain faculties (Diener, 2008; Geiger, 2014; Thelin, 2011). At the same time, they often questioned the newer subjects, such as modern foreign languages, which were gradually being introduced by some educational reformers. The decision to include modern languages in the university curriculum was not without struggle, for these newer subjects had not yet proven their value (Diener, 2008; Lantolf, 2001; Watzke, 2003).

U.S. higher education experienced a fundamental change away from the classical education from the 1880s to the 1900s (Diener, 2008; Kliebard, 1986; Thelin, 2011; Veysey, 1965; Watzke, 2003). In fact, the hiring of Kunhua Ge and the establishment of Chinese language education was the result of this educational reform, which replaced the classical

languages with modern foreign languages. Charles William Eliot (Figure 2), who was the president of Harvard University from 1869 to 1909, played a crucial role in this historic turning point (“Charles William Eliot,” 2014, Diener, 2008; Kliebard, 1986).



**Figure 2**  
**Charles W. Eliot**  
**(1834 –1926)**

As an educational reformer, Eliot was not one of those educators who had blind faith in classical education. He removed Harvard’s requirement that all freshmen study classical languages in 1884 and the undergraduate entrance requirement in Greek in 1887 (Morison, 1930). Imitating Harvard, many other colleges began to remove their Greek and Latin requirements during the 1880s. Eliot also valued modern foreign languages because he believed that any subject had the potential to foster mental discipline (Morison, 1930; Diener, 2008). The hiring of Kunhua Ge to teach Chinese at Harvard in 1877 reflects this belief.

### **Kunhua Ge at Harvard**

On February 22, 1877, Francis P. Knight, a Boston businessman and former U.S. Consulate to Niu Zhuang, China Consular, wrote a letter to Eliot. Drawing on his fifteen years of

experience in China, he believed that the United States could derive enormous economic and diplomatic benefits from China. These benefits would keep expanding until China's importance to the United States exceeded the Western countries' importance. Knight stated that knowing nothing about Chinese language was a common mistake made by many Americans who went to China to conduct business (Records relating to instruction in Chinese, 1877). To further convince Eliot, Knight also pointed out that Yale University had already established its Chinese course in 1876. Eliot consulted with Boston merchants engaged in the China trade, and then replied to Knight on March 10, 1877 that Harvard had agreed to his suggestion (Records relating to instruction in Chinese, 1877).

With the help of Edward Bangs Drew, a Harvard graduate who had worked for several years in the Chinese customs service, Francis P. Knight soon raised a subscription of \$8,750 for the position of Professor of Chinese. Returning to China in 1878, Knight spent almost two years locating an educated Chinese gentleman willing to go to Cambridge for this service. In June 1879, he finally found and persuaded Kunhua Ge to accept a three-year contract beginning on September 1, 1879 (King, 1881). Kunhua Ge was born in 1838 in Ningbo, China. When he grew up, Kunhua Ge received the most traditional Chinese education. Although he was not a recognized scholar and he did not obtain any degrees by examination held by the then imperial Chinese government, he was very learned and was a locally prominent scholar (Records relating to instruction in Chinese, 1877). His hometown, Ningbo, was one of the five treaty ports established at the conclusion of the First Opium War between China and the United Kingdom by the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, which probably allowed Kunhua Ge to come into contact with

foreign cultures. Thus, although Kunhua Ge did not know how to speak English, he had rich experience with foreigners in China. For example, he had taught Chinese to translators at the U.S. Consulate in Shanghai for two years. After that, he worked for fifteen years at the British Consulate in Ningbo, where E. B. Drew studied Chinese with Ge ("Ge Kunhua," 2017; Cui, 1994; Lum, 2008).

Kunhua Ge's salary was \$2,400 a year. This was considered very fair, because in July 1875, Harvard fixed the salary of an assistant professor in his second term of five years at \$2,500 a year. Harvard also covered all the travel costs, including nine round-trip steamer tickets for Ge's wife, two sons, three daughters, one interpreter, and one maid (King, 1881).

Ge became the subject of massive media coverage as soon as he arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts with his family at the end of August 1879. For example, *The New York Times* reported Ge's meeting with the Mayor of Cambridge on August 29, 1879:

As Mayor Cooper sat in his office yesterday afternoon, he was somewhat surprised by the entrance of two Chinamen, gorgeously attired in the peculiar costume of their county, and wearing long pig-tails and silk skui-caps[sic]. They bowed to his honor, who came forward and shook them warmly by the hands...Mayor bade them welcome to the City...

On August 29, 1879, Harvard University held a welcome party for Ge. *The New York Times* not only reported on this party but also expressed concerns about the new Chinese course:

Nothing has been said about studying Chinese literature as a branch of

education at Harvard, nor has there ever been an expressed desire on the part of any student for an opportunity to perfect himself in that department. It is not decided yet how the language will be taught...how ample will be the opportunity of taking up the study, or what books will be used.

In fact, Kunhua Ge already had a basic plan for how to teach Chinese at Harvard. According to E. B. Drew's memo to President Eliot, the textbook that Kunhua Ge planned to use was *A Progressive Course Designed to Assist the Student of Colloquial Chinese*, written by Thomas Francis Wade in 1867. To guarantee teaching quality, enrollment would be limited to three to four students per class. Classroom instruction was one hour per day, five days a week. Students had to conscientiously devote two to three hours daily to studying and practicing Chinese after class (Records relating to instruction in Chinese, 1877). According to the plan, Kunhua Ge would give instruction to any competent person (except for women) who had serious purpose for acquiring the Chinese language. Harvard faculty, staff, or businesspeople could also take instruction even if not enrolled as students at Harvard. Harvard students who wished to do future business or missionary work in China were especially welcomed. This course was free for Harvard students; non-Harvard students had to pay 450

dollars per year (Records relating to instruction in Chinese, 1877).

Although Ge and Harvard had a relatively detailed plan, *The New York Times'* concern that students might lack interest in taking Chinese unfortunately became a reality. Originally, the course would start in the fall term of the 1879 collegiate year, but for the first few months no one wanted to take it. For a long time, Kunhua Ge had only one student in his class, who was actually Harvard's Pope Professor in Latin: George Martin Lane (Cui, 1994), who had taught at Harvard for 43 years. When he passed away in 1897, *The American Journal of Philology* lauded Lane as the greatest scholar of Latin in America. Kunhua Ge and George Lane soon became friends and language partners and, with Lane's help, Kunhua Ge gradually learned some English. In fact, Kunhua Ge only had five students in total before he died in 1882 (Cui, 1994).

On February 14, 1882, after suffering a cold for two weeks, Kunhua Ge died of pneumonia somewhat suddenly at his home in Cambridge, leaving his wife and six young children behind him. Harvard University and Edward Drew helped to raise funds in Boston to pay for his family's return to China and his children's education ("Ge Kunhua," 2017; Lum, 2008), though no record has been found about where Kunhua Ge was buried.

Just aswithhis arrival, his death also caused a stir in the local community. Newspapers published a series of articles to report his death. For example, on February 15, 1882 the *Boston Daily Advertiser* reported: “The professor was a genial man of a kindly nature, warm in his attachment, loyal to friends—a high-minded, honorable gentleman...”*The Daily Graphic: New York*reported on Feb 18, 1882 that:“When he came here Professor Ko could not speak a word of English, but he couldconverse quite fluently in it before his death.He was a man of very refined manners, simpleand modest in his demeanor” (Figure 3). As a Chinese proverb says, “you can draw definitive conclusion on a person’s merits or demerits after death” (Gai Guan Ding Lun, 盖棺定论). We can also find American public opinions towards Kunhua Ge from newspapersobituaries. In general, most of these articles devoting much space only focus on introducing Kunhua Ge’s life story, praising his honorable behavior and character, and mourning for him.

### What LimitedKunhua Ge’sAchievements at Harvard?

However, it is worth noting that, among those obituaries, some newspapers also fairly pointed out that his work was not that successful.For instance, the *Boston DailyAdvertiser* wrote on Feb 18, 1882 that “If **this trial has failed to prove satisfactory** [emphasis added] to those whose money and whose public spirit made it possible, it is certain that the work of intruding so recondite a study as this could not have been entrusted to better hands.”*The New York Times* reported on February 15, 1882 that “Whether his experience will be regarded as a successful result of the experiment undertaken by the college byhis engagement is a question. He has had only fouror five pupils in



Figure 3  
Kunhua Ge’s obituary in The Daily Graphic: New York, Feb 18, 1882

all...” After all, his Chinese language class only attracted five students in three years.It seems that Harvard University also held the same

opinion as these news reports. For example, in 1930 the Harvard University Press published*The Development of Harvard University Since the Inauguration of President Eliot, 1869-1929* (Morison, 1930). In this book, the development of modern languagesat Harvard covers 41 pages, yet Chinese language and Ge’s story were notmentioned at all.Moreover, Harvard University did not offer courses in Chinese again until the spring of 1922.

This gap begs the question,what limited Kunhua Ge’s achievements at Harvard?This paper argues that althoughthe educational environmentwas supportivetowards learning and teaching modern foreign language at Harvard, Kunhua Ge, and especially the Harvard administration, failed to recognize the American people’s anti-China sentiments and pragmatic attitude towards Chinese language learning.

### ModernLanguage Teaching at Harvard

Despite the negative influence brought by the classical education and mental

disciplinarianism in higher education before the 1880s, it's fair to say that, compared to other higher educational institutions in the U.S., Harvard was quite supportive of modern language education. For example, as early as in 1787, French teacher Joseph Nancrede became Harvard's first paid instructor in a modern language ("Joseph Willard", 2014). Italian and Spanish have been offered since at least the early nineteenth century. Portuguese was added in 1886 ("Academics," 2014). In 1868, French even became obligatory in the first year and was an elective in the last three years, along with German, Spanish and Italian ("History," 2014). In 1900, the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures was formed, which merged the Department of French with several Romance branches of the Modern Language Department, which was formed in 1869 ("History," 2014). Although specific enrollment data on these programs are not available, judging from their continuity we can conclude enrollment was at least good enough to keep these programs running continuously throughout this period. Since Harvard students were quite interested in learning modern foreign languages, we have to consider the context of this new Chinese language course to find the reasons for Ge's abbreviated tenure.

This research suggests that the following four factors constrained Ge's work. First, the anti-Chinese sentiment existing in society at the time did not provide a friendly environment that would have encouraged students to take Chinese. Second, the Harvard administration and Kunhua Ge failed to recognize the real significance of China and Chinese language education to the United States. Third, the Harvard administration had different expectations about this new Chinese language course than did the public. Last, Kunhua Ge's teaching practice also

deviated from the original rationale for establishing this course.

### **Americans' Anti-Chinese Sentiments**

Kunhua Ge started his venture in the U.S. in 1879, which was not an ideal time either for Chinese immigrants or for Chinese language teaching. The 1870s and 1880s saw American society's anti-Chinese sentiments reach their peak (Cole, 1978; Pfaelzer, 2007; Spring, 2007; Takaki, 1990). As the first of group Asian immigrants in the U.S., the Chinese arrived in California in the 1850s to join the goldrush. There were about 20,000 Chinese immigrants in California by 1852 and approximately 16,000 Chinese immigrants were working in the California gold fields by the 1860s (Spring, 2007). But as mining profits decreased, the Chinese immigrants had to compete with other Americans, including European Americans for other jobs, which directly caused racial tensions (Cole, 1978; Pfaelzer, 2007; Spring, 2007; Takaki, 1990). For example, in 1871, 22 Chinese men were lynched by Los Angeles mobs due to this racial hostility (Spring, 2007). Although Chinese immigrant workers contributed to California's economic growth through their labor in the mines, in agriculture, and on the railroads, they, like other racial minorities, in the U.S. also raised complex economic, cultural, and political questions.

At that time European Americans tended to rationalize the economic exploitation of people from Asia by portraying them as immoral and racially and culturally inferior. For example, California Congressman James Johnson labeled Asians as "barbarians" and considered them an "inferior" race (Spring, 2007). Similar discrimination can also be found in the field of education (Fraser, 2010; Spring, 2007). For example, the California school code regulated that no public education was to be provided for Asian Americans in 1872. All children of Chinese

immigrants in California had to attend private schools established by other Chinese immigrants until 1885 when the state legislature created segregated public schools for Chinese (Spring, 2007). These prejudices were not confined to California. For example, in Mississippi, Chinese immigrants were required to send their children to segregated “colored” school till the early twentieth century (Spring, 2007).

During this period, fears of so-called “yellow peril” stalked the U.S. American politicians further fortified these anti-Chinese sentiments. For example, the U.S. Congress passed the Page Act in 1875, which was the first restrictive federal immigration law and prohibited the entry of immigrants considered “undesirable.” This term was defined as any individual from Asia who was coming to America to be a forced laborer, and any Asian woman who would engage in prostitution. Racial discrimination against Chinese immigrants eventually peaked in 1882, the year that Kunhua Ge died at Harvard, when President Chester A. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited further immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States (Cole, 1978; Pfaelzer, 2007; Spring, 2007; Takaki, 1990). The hostility towards Chinese immigrants on the East Coast continued to grow after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. For example, Boston police arrested over 300 Chinese after an immigration raid in 1903, which cut the number of Boston’s Chinese residents by almost one-third (“History of Chinese in Boston,” 2014).

This is the larger social context in which Kunhua Ge worked during his three years at Harvard. Although we do not have direct evidence to show that it affected Ge’s work or Harvard students’ attitudes, this pervasive and escalating anti-Chinese sentiment could help to explain why both Harvard and Yale had low enrollments for

Chinese courses compared to other modern language courses that were established at the same time. It is hard to imagine that Harvard students would like to learn a foreign language spoken by an “immoral” and “inferior” race, or to learn a language spoken by people who are not allowed to come to the U.S. It is also worth noting that Chinese scholars who have studied Ge’s life and work have not considered this social context of anti-China sentiments that prevailed in this period.

### **American Public Opinion on Chinese Language Education**

Although privately established Chinese schools were already in operation by the 1870s in the U.S. (Lai, 2000), no evidence suggests that students other than Chinese immigrants’ children attended these schools. Harvard’s surprising decision to offer a new Chinese course reflected a world-class educational institute’s foresight and sagacity. However, American public opinion valued this new Chinese course at Harvard solely from an economic perspective. They hoped this course could help equip young American businessmen with necessary language skills before they traveled to China. For example, when reporting Kunhua Ge’s arrival at Harvard, one newspaper forecasted that: “The day is probably coming when the hieroglyphics on tea chests and firecracker boxes will be as intelligible to the average Yankee boy as the signs over the shops of his native village are now” (Lum, 2008). Here the “tea chests” and “firecracker boxes” stands for two of China’s major exported goods to the U.S. at that time. *The New York Times* directly pointed out on Aug 30, 1879 that this new Chinese course was proposed for commercial purposes alone. When reporting Kunhua Ge’s death, the *Boston Daily Advertiser* emphasized the same argument on Feb 15, 1882, “the sudden death of this gentleman, professor of the Chinese language and literature at

Harvard University brings a sad termination to the experiment of introducing this study here as **a means of promoting our commercial interests in China**[emphasis added].”

In fact, when Francis P. Knight first proposed the establishment of the Professorship of Chinese at Harvard to its President Charles W. Eliot in February 1877, his main reasoning was that “it would be of great advantage to young men intending to enter **commercial life** [emphasis added], and who would like to engage in **business**[emphasis added] with the East, to have a speaking familiarity with the Chinese language” (Harvard’s Chinese professor, 1879). This course was established to serve the American businessmen’s interests in China. Since the pre-colonial era, American educators have distinguished different functions of classical languages and modern languages. Although classical languages served some vocational needs—for example, Latin for lawyers and doctors and Greek for ministers—they were mainly taught for higher education and leadership. Modern languages, including English, mainly served vocational and societal purposes, such as doing business (Watzke, 2003). American’s public opinions on this new Chinese course fit into this tradition very well.

### **The Harvard Administration’s Expectations about This New Course**

However, Harvard sought much more than this direct commercial purpose. An article published in *The Harvard Register* in 1880 was representative. It stated that Harvard considered this course as a new way to communicate with China and the Chinese beyond the common channels of trade and commerce (King, 1881). Through this course, a student would not only simply “qualify himself to hold business relations with the Chinese people,” but also might be able to “make a critical study of it [Chinese

language]” (King, 1881, 161-162). This article also points out that mastering Chinese “is an indispensable key to Japanese, Corean [*sic*], and the dialects of the Burmese peninsula, and at the same time is rapidly acquiring a political and commercial values[*sic*]” (King, 1881, 161-162). The author even relates this course with immigration and religion. As more and more immigrants had come into the U.S. from China, American people should “adhere to the broad, free, and Christian principles of our forefathers.” The author continues: “we shall not deny them a foothold [*sic*] in America, but rather exert ourselves to elevate and improve those among us” (King, 1881, 161-162). Thus, knowing Chinese would be an advantage even in the U.S. It was also hoped that by mastering the language, “We [Harvard students] may now, if we will, look at them [Chinese people] through the finer telescope of the mind. This is the only way in which we shall come to understand their real worth as a people, and the important relations sustained by their venerable civilization to ours” (King, 1881, 161-162).

In short, unlike the public’s pragmatic attitude towards this new Chinese language course, which mainly focused on commercial interests, the Harvard administration had very idealized and, sometimes, unrealistic expectations about it. In fact, Yale University had a similar problem. In his letter to Eliot, Knight pointed out that Yale University had already established its Chinese course in 1876. But the fact was that no one signed up for Yale’s Chinese course in 1876 (Cui, 1994; Zhang, 2002).

### **Kunhua Ge’s Understandings about His Job**

Unfortunately, little direct evidence remains allowing for an investigation of Kunhua Ge’s daily classroom teaching practices, from which his own understanding of his role at Harvard could be inferred. Judging from the

available evidence, however, it seems that Kunhua Ge never considered himself merely as a language teacher in the modern sense but more like traditional Chinese literati. Unlike other Chinese language educators in Europe both before and during his time, who compiled many practical Chinese language textbooks (Zhang, 2002), Kunhua Ge wrote his own book called *Chinese Verse and Prose* (Ge, 1881) (Figure 4), which he intended to use as a textbook to teach English speakers to write Chinese poetry. As the first Chinese poetry textbook written by a Chinese person in English, this book certainly has its unique value, but its effectiveness in terms of teaching language was quite questionable.

Unlike Samuel Wells Williams at Yale, the first professor of Chinese in the United States, who laid out many specific hints and suggestions for learning Chinese sound, grammar, and characters (Chao, 2007), it seems that Kunhua Ge seldom talked about learning Chinese language; at least, no record about his language teaching activities has been preserved at all. When describing his teaching contribution and his communication with local intellectuals at Harvard, research only emphasizes that he composed and shared Chinese poetry with his friends and guests. Researchers tend to interpret this activity as Kunhua Ge's unique way of promoting Chinese culture and re-establishing a civilized image of China in the eyes of the American public (Zhang, 2001; Guo, 2007). In his book, *Chinese Verse and Prose*, readers can still find the poems that he wrote for his American friends and colleagues. Even though most of his friends did not know Chinese at all, Ge wrote many of the poems explicitly for them. For example, amongst others, the poems were dedicated to: Samuel Wells Williams, the first Professor of Chinese language and literature at Yale University;

Charles W. Elliot, the President of Harvard; George Martin Lane, Harvard's Pope Professor in Latin and Ge's first student at Harvard; Edward Bangs Drew, his former student and official in Ningbo Taxation Division, who initially introduced him to



Figure 4  
*Chinese Verse and Prose*

Harvard; Ge's doctor Morrill Wyman; a colleague who was one of Harvard's French language Professors; and three American ladies. One of his quatrain poems was dedicated to Charles William Eliot in November, 1881:

歲歲櫻桃熟，掄才大典逢。  
短長量玉尺，四國仰文宗。

In cherry time, the summer's prime,  
You, Wisdom calls to classic halls.  
For she hath made a rule of jade,  
Our precious stone, and thus alone  
Your wealth she measures of learning's  
treasures,

Whose honored name, and glowing fame,  
The North and South, the East and West,  
Proclaim the wisest and the best.

This poem is considered as "striking, both for its preservation of the adulatory tone typically of classical Chinese poems written for social superiors, and for the Victorian idiom of the loose

English translation that Ge presented with it” (Ge Kunhua”, 2017).

In addition to the scholarly focus on Ge’s poetry, many American newspapers also noticed this feature. For example, in his obituary, *The New York Times* wrote on Feb 15, 1882:

He published a volume of poems in China.... Since his residence here he has written and published poems in his native language. At the time of his death he had nearly finished a translation of some of his poems into English, which it was his purpose to publish the coming year.

*The New York Daily Graphic* similarly emphasized his poetry in their obituary for him on Feb 18, 1882. Composing and sharing poetry is the most representative feature of traditional Chinese literati. Obviously, Ge brought this habit to Harvard University. As elegant as it was, this kind of activity was a long way from language instruction for everyday use.

Besides poetry writing, Kunhua Ge’s another feature that was mentioned the most was that he insisted on wearing traditional Chinese clothes, especially official mandarin costumes, no matter how strange it made him look to the American public at large. Almost every newspaper article about him at that time dedicated a significant amount of copy to describe his exotic attire. For instance, after *The Boston Book Bulletin* sent a reporter to visit Kunhua Ge’s family in Cambridge, they printed almost two pages to describe the Ge’s family’s behaviors, manners, and clothes (Figure 5):

At a later visit we met Prof. KoKun-Hua. He had the face of a gentleman and a scholar, refined and thoughtful, and his bearing was as lofty as that of a Spanish grandee. His attire was elegant. A skull cap of a solid kind of satin, with the red silk

button, which denoted his rank, came down to his forehead. On his feet were "Mandarin boots," which seemed to be of soft, white leather, and reached half-way up to the knees in wrinkles like Turkish boots. His lower garment was a skirt of heavy blue silk, and the upper one was of superlative beauty and richness, made of silk of a deeper blue, and worn over another of a lighter shade, the smaller sleeves of which showed below the ample folds of the outer when he raised his hands. It had a close collar and was fastened with gold buttons; and on the shoulders, the sleeves, and down the breast were exquisitely wrought medallions in a pattern which indicates his rank (Records relating to instruction in Chinese, 1877).

In fact, when Ge taught at Harvard University, the clothing choice of Chinese diplomats and Chinese students who came to the U.S. on the Chinese imperial government’s sponsorships were very sensitive. For example, the first Chinese ambassador to Britain and France, Songtao Guo, was removed from his office in 1879. One of the indictments was that he wore western clothing once (Wang, 1995). The first group of young Chinese students was sent to the U.S. in 1871 to study western science and



Figure 5

A picture of Ge and his two sons on *The Boston Book Bulletin*

engineering by the then Chinese imperial government. Conservative Chinese officials also launched a strong attack on their “over-westernization” behaviors, including playing basketball and wearing western clothing (Chu, 2004). These attacks and criticisms took place from 1877 to 1881, exactly the time when Ge taught at Harvard. Afraid of “losing” these students, the then Chinese government forced all these young Chinese students to come back to China in 1881, whether they had graduated or not (Chu, 2004). Chongjie Ding belonged to this group of students. He had only spent one year at Harvard University when he received this order in 1881. He was also one of Ge’s five students (Ding, 2005). We don’t know if Kunhua Ge’s choice of traditional Chinese clothing had something to do with these incidents. However, researchers now prefer to interpret Kunhua Ge’s choice of clothes as his way to demonstrate his own cultural identity as a Chinese official, literati, and teacher (Cui, 1994; Zhang, 2001; Guo, 2007).

From these few records, we can infer that Kunhua Ge positioned himself more like a traditional Chinese poet and literati than as a modern Chinese language teacher, and firmly defended his own dignity as a teacher in the conventional Chinese sense (Shi Dao Zun Yan, 师道尊严). Heaven-Earth-Sovereign-Parent-Teacher are the most remarkable characteristics in Chinese traditional culture, and they reflect the ethics of Confucianism. The teacher was a sacred occupation in China. In 802 AD, Han Yu (韩愈), one of the finest prose writers in China, wrote his famous article about the teacher, which has influenced the teacher’s role in China until now. He (and most Chinese after him) believed that a real teacher should “propagate the doctrine, impart professional knowledge, and resolve

doubts” (Chuandao, 传道; Shouye, 授业; Jiehuo, 解惑). A teacher who only teaches a child to read and to punctuate is not propagating the doctrine or resolving doubts. As a traditional Chinese intellectual, it was impossible for Kunhua Ge to get rid of the influence of this value about his role as a “teacher” at Harvard. Only after grasping this point can we understand why Kunhua Ge could never fulfill this new course’s initial purpose and American businessmen’s expectations about it, which was helping young American businessmen with necessary Chinese language proficiency to do business with China. To Kunhua Ge, teaching students how to bargain with Chinese businessmen cannot compare to teaching them how to write and appreciate Chinese poetry in terms of “propagating the doctrine.”

### Conclusion

When President Chester A. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, only five American students had studied Chinese at Harvard. However, during his recent State Visit to the U.S. in 2015, the Chinese President Xi Jinping met the U.S. President Obama and announced a “One Million Strong” initiative that aims to have a million American students learning Mandarin by 2020. I believe that understanding where the Chinese language education begins can help to understand where it goes in the future.

Although Kunhua Ge only taught Chinese at Harvard for three short years, his story reflects American elite intellectuals’ foresight and sagacity at the end of nineteenth century when American higher education experienced a historic transformation. However, as the first Chinese teacher and scholar who was hired to teach at an American University, Kunhua Ge’s mission to promote Chinese language teaching at Harvard was relatively unsuccessful. The larger anti-China sentiments that existed in American society led to

an extremely difficult teaching environment for Kunhua Ge. Though evidence is scarce, this research finds that Ge and Harvard clearly had their own ideas about Chinese education, and they invested it with their own hopes and expectations. The conflicted goals and expectations about this course amongst American public opinion, the Harvard administration, and Kunhua Ge contributed to this unsuccessful experiment. The initiators and the American public hoped this course could equip young Americans with necessary language skills when they conducted business with China in the future. The Harvard administration believed this course would start the new era of comprehensive understanding of China and Chinese people in the U.S. But they all over estimated China's influence in the world and attractions to its students at the end of the nineteenth century, when China was only a semi-feudal and semi-colonial country where powerful Western states could dump their surplus goods. Furthermore, Kunhua Ge did not adjust himself into a language teacher in the modern sense. His insistence on his identity as a traditional Chinese official, literati, poet, and teacher impeded his teaching practice at Harvard and also inevitably posed an obstacle to satisfying the original intention of this course.

### **Pedagogical Implication**

Although Kunhua Ge's achievement was limited, Harvard's experiment and Kunhua Ge's story are still worth studying. Even though 140 years have passed, the Chinese language program at Harvard (and at most American Universities) today still has the same pedagogical structure (one hour per day, five days a week, plus homework) that Edward Bangs Drew proposed in his letter to Charles Eliot. More importantly, it makes us consider the following three issues that are critical to Chinese language teaching in the U.S. today.

First, Chinese language teachers should be aware of their role as a language teacher. As mentioned above, Kunhua Ge encountered the problem of role definition more than 140 years ago. He did not realize that his role as a Chinese language teacher was not the role of a teacher in the traditional Chinese sense. Shengli Feng, the former director of the Chinese language program at Harvard University, once said that a common mistake made by the greenhorn in the field of teaching Chinese language was that he/she did not consider himself or herself as a language teacher but as a conventional teacher who always tries to propagate the doctrine to his/her students. He even stated that it would be better for a Chinese language teacher to consider himself or herself as an athletic coach rather than a teacher (S. Feng, personal communication, June, 2006). In other words, Kunhua Ge's identity dilemma affords us lessons that still merit attention today.

Second, Chinese language teachers should be aware of the limitations of their role as a language teacher. Kunhua Ge only had five students. However, according to the China Association for International Education, more than 330,000 foreign students studied Chinese in China in 2012. 25,000 of them were from the United States, second only to South Korea. But Chinese language teachers should be aware that the number of Chinese language learners is growing due to the fact that China's political, economic, and military conditions and national strength are increasing on a global scale. Chinese language teachers in the U.S. should therefore not be complacent or take credit. In 2007, I met Lawrence H. Summers, Harvard's former president, at a ceremony and told him that the Chinese language program was the second largest foreign language program at Harvard. He replied that in the 1980s the most popular language was Russian; in the 1990s, it was Japanese; now, it's

the turn for Chinese (L. H. Summers, personal communication, January, 2007). While his reply could be discouraging, in fact, his comments were thought provoking. As evidenced by Kunhua Ge's career at Harvard, to the previous Harvard president's comments, the development of Chinese language teaching in the U.S. has always been closely bound up to the development of China.

Third, Chinese language teaching and language teachers must adapt to the macro educational environment in the U.S. and fulfill American society's expectations about Chinese language learning. Instrumental motivation, such as commercial interests, are likely still the biggest motivation for American students to learn Chinese, not an attraction to Chinese culture, as was the case 140 years ago when Harvard hired Kunhua Ge (Wen, 2011). Therefore, in the Chinese language classroom, the dissemination of culture must serve the interests of improving language proficiency, not the other way around. If Chinese culture is overemphasized, we will only fail just like Kunhua Ge, or raise concerns that Chinese language programs will present a selective and politicized view of China, like the ones shared by the Confucius Institutes, as a means of advancing the country's soft power internationally.

## References

- "Academics." The Department of Romance Languages & Literatures at Harvard University, accessed September, 20. <https://rll.fas.harvard.edu/pages/concentrations>.
- "Charles William Eliot." Harvard University, accessed March 15. <https://www.harvard.edu/about-harvard/harvard-glance/history-presidency/charles-william-eliot>.
- "Joseph Willard." accessed June 1st. <https://www.harvard.edu/about-harvard/harvard-glance/history-presidency/joseph-willard>.
- "Ge Kunhua." The Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University, accessed September, 20. <https://ealc.fas.harvard.edu/ge-kunhua>. August 30, 1879. "Harvard's new Chinese professor." *The New York Times*, 1. February 15, 1882a. "Kun-Hua Ko." *Boston Daily Advertiser*. Accessed September 20, 2014. February 15, 1882b. "The Chinese professor dead." *The New York Times*. February 18, 1882. "Harvard's late Chinese professor." *The New York Daily Graphic*.
- Chang, Mitchell J. 1999. "Expansion and Its Discontents: The Formation of Asian American Studies Programs in the 1990s." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 2 (2):181-206.
- Chao, Der-lin. 2007. "Samuel Wells Williams (1812-1884): A Pioneer Student and Scholar of Chinese as a Foreign Language." *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association* 42 (1):26.
- Chu, T. K. 2004. "150 Years of Chinese Students in America." *Harvard China Review* 5 (1):7-32.
- Cole, Cheryl L. 1978. "Chinese Exclusion: The Capitalist Perspective of the Sacramento Union, 1850-1882." *California History* 57 (1):8-31. doi: 10.2307/25157813.
- Cui, Songren. 1994. "The forerunner of teaching Chinese in the United States: Kunhua Ge." *Chinese Teaching in the World* 29 (3):77-80.
- Diener, David. 2008. "The Intellectual Climate of the Late Nineteenth Century and the Fate of American Normal Schools." *American Educational History Journal* 35 (1):61-79.
- Ding, Zhihua. 2005. "The First Chinese Deputy Commissioner at the Customs Office: Remembering My Father Chongjie Ding." *Journal of Jiangsu Normal University Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition* 31 (3):1-5.
- Fraser, James W. 2010. *The school in the United States: A documentary history*. 2nd ed. ed. New York.
- Ge, Kunhua. 1881. *Hua zhiying wen: Chinese verse and prose*. Cambridge, Mass.
- Geiger, Roger L. 2014. *The history of American higher education: Learning and culture from the founding to World War II*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Guo, Tianxiang. 2007. "Ge Kun-hua and the Intercultural Communication between

- China and the United States." *Historical Research in Anhui* 4:39-45.
- Harvard, University. 1877. Records relating to instruction in Chinese and the appointment of Professor KoKun-hua as a teacher of Chinese language at Harvard, 1877-1882 (inclusive).
- Jackson, Leon. 2000. "The Rights of Man and the Rites of Youth: Fraternity and Riot at Eighteenth-Century Harvard." In *The American College in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Roger Geiger, 46-79. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- King, Moses. 1880-1881. *The Harvard Register: An Illustrated Monthly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Kliebard, Herbert M. 2004. *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958*. Hoboken: Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
- Lai, Him Mark. 2000. "Retention of the Chinese Heritage." *Chinese America: History & Perspectives* 10:1-35.
- Lantolf, James P., and Gretchen Sunderman. 2001. "The Struggle for a Place in the Sun: Rationalizing Foreign Language Study in the Twentieth Century." *Modern Language Journal* 85 (1):5-25.
- Lee, Erika. 2003. *At America's gates: Chinese immigration during the exclusion era, 1882-1943*. Chapel Hill.
- Lum, Raymond. 2008. "KoK'un-hua: Brief Life of Harvard's First Chinese Instructor: 1838-1882." *Harvard Magazine*, accessed December 16. <https://harvardmagazine.com/2008/03/ko-kun-hua.html>.
- Morison, Samuel Eliot. 1930. *The development of Harvard university since the inauguration of President Eliot, 1869-1929*: Harvard university press.
- Nash, Margaret. 2005. *Women's education in the United States, 1780-1840*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pfaelzer, Jean. 2007. *Driven out: The forgotten war against Chinese Americans*. New York: Random House.
- Springs, Joel. 2007. "Asian Americans: Exclusion and Segregation." In *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality*, edited by McGraw Hill, 67-81. Boston.
- Takaki, Ronald T. 1990. *Strangers from a different shore: A history of Asian Americans*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Penguin Books.
- Thelin, John R. 2011. *A history of American higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Veysey, Laurence R. 1965. *The emergence of the American university*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Wang, Weijiang. 1995. "Guo Songtao and Liu Xihong." *Academic Monthly* 4:76-81.
- Watzke, John L. 2003. *Lasting change in foreign language education: A historical case for change in national policy*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.
- Wen, Xiaohong. 2011. "Chinese Language Learning Motivation: A Comparative Study of Heritage and Non-Heritage Learners." *Heritage Language Journal* 8, no. 3:41-66.
- Xia, Hongwei. 2004. "The Paragon of Intercultural Communication under the Circumstance of Cultural Exchange Surplus: A Communication Interpretation of Ge Kunhua." *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 41 (1):7.
- Zhang, Hongsheng. 2001. "Teach Chinese at the United States." *Reading* 2:8.
- Zhang, Xiping. 2002. "A survey of Chinese teaching during the Ming and Qing Dynasties." *Chinese Teaching in the World* 1:11.

---

<sup>i</sup> "Kunhua Ge" is the modern spelling for his name. During his lifetime, his name was spelled in various ways in English. For example, in the contract with Harvard, it was spelled as "Ko K'un-hua." In his book, the author's name is "Yen-Yun K.H. Ko." In *The New York Times*, it was spelled as "Ko Kun Hua." In *The Boston Book Bulletin*, it was spelled as "Ko Kun-hua."