

Cultural Imperialism Redux?

Reassessing the Christian Colleges of Republican China

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Symbols of Cultural Imperialism

In 1952, just three years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the new Communist government ordered the closure of all private universities. Coming in the midst of the Korean War, the announcement was accompanied by a torrent of government-orchestrated criticism directed in particular against the thirteen Protestant Christian colleges that had once operated under predominantly American missionary auspices. Among the institutions subject to acrimonious attack as bastions of "American cultural imperialism", two were singled out for special condemnation: St. John's University in Shanghai and Yenching University in Beijing. Like the other Protestant colleges in China, St. John's and Yenching were denounced for their Western-style curricula taught primarily in English by a faculty that included a sizeable number of foreign missionaries with proselytizing aspirations. But more than the others, these two universities had played unusually prominent (albeit dissimilar) roles in the political history of Republican China that rendered them especially vulnerable to charges of fostering cultural imperialism.

St. John's University was well known for having introduced to China an American model of higher education (complete with alumni association, athletics competitions, school newspaper and yearbook, and a wide range of extra-curricular activities).¹ More incriminating still, St. John's had a reputation for responding harshly to the rising tide of student nationalism that swept Chinese universities in the Republican period. During the anti-imperialist May Thirtieth Movement of 1925, the American missionary president of the university (Francis Lister Hawks Pott) had refused to accede to demands from Chinese students and faculty to lower the Chinese flag on the campus flagpole to half-mast in honor of student demonstrators who had been gunned down by the British police on Nanjing Road in Shanghai's International Settlement.² The result was that more than 500 students along with 17 of the 25 Chinese faculty members withdrew from St. John's in protest. Many of these protesters went on to found a rival university, which they named "Guanghua" 光华 or "Glorify China", whose patriotic curriculum was intended as an indigenous alternative to the quintessentially American institution. St. John's solidified its imperialist image by being the last of all the Christian colleges to register with the Nationalist government. In 1906, St. John's had been the first Chinese university to register in the United States; not until 1947 was it officially accredited in China.³

Yenching University, by contrast, was among the first Christian colleges to register with the new Nationalist government after its establishment in 1927. Unlike President Pott of St. John's, the American missionary president of Yenching (John Leighton Stuart) took a comparatively conciliatory stance toward student nationalism.⁴ During the December 9th Movement of 1935 to protest Japanese incursions in Manchuria, President Stuart convened an emotional all-campus assembly where he pledged his own support for patriotic resistance.⁵ But this did not protect either Stuart or Yenching from the charge of cultural imperialism. After Stuart was appointed U.S. Ambassador to China during the Civil War between the Communists and the Nationalists, he attracted the ire of

1 Xiong Yuezhi/Zhou Wu 2007; Xu Yihua 2009; Lamberton 1988.

2 Perry 2013.

3 Xiong Yuezhi/Zhou Wu 2007.

4 West 1976, chapters 4-5.

5 Wang Yuanmei 1991.

Mao Zedong himself in an essay that soon became required reading in classrooms across China. Entitled “Farewell Leighton Stuart” (“Bie le, Situleideng” 别了, 司徒雷登), Mao’s celebrated essay aimed to unmask the former president of Yenching as a fake friend of China:

Leighton Stuart is an American born in China; he has fairly wide social connections and spent many years running missionary schools in China, [...]; he used to pretend to love both the United States and China and was able to deceive quite a number of Chinese [...].⁶

In a follow-up essay, “‘Friendship’, or Invasion?” (“‘Youyi’ haishi qinlue?” “友谊”, 还是侵略?, August 30, 1949), Mao listed Yenching first among ten famous Christian schools (including St. John’s) that he named as prominent examples of American imperialist aggression conducted under the guise of cultural and religious philanthropy.⁷

Thanks to these ostensibly ignominious antecedents, St. John’s and Yenching (along with the other Christian universities) were disparaged throughout the Mao period as reviled exemplars of American cultural imperialism. Only with the liberalization of the post-Mao era did it become politically permissible to contemplate the positive contributions of the former Christian colleges.

Reassessing the Christian Colleges

In 1989, the President of Central China Normal University, respected historian Zhang Kaiyuan, organized an international conference to reconsider the legacy of the Christian colleges in China. As a graduate of the former University of Nanking (an American missionary institution), Zhang appreciated the excellent education once offered by the Christian colleges. At the conference he called for scholars to move beyond the tired framework of imperialism in favor of an alternative paradigm that pictured the Christian colleges as pioneers in Sino-Western cultural exchange.⁸ Now the door was open to new approaches to the Christian colleges that presented their history in a more sympathetic and complimentary light.

This trend assumed additional significance following the Ministry of Education’s introduction in the 1990s of two major funding initiatives, known as Project 211 and Project 985, intended to catapult China’s leading universities into the ranks of “world-class universities” for the twenty-first century. In an effort to repackage themselves as global institutions rooted in a history of cosmopolitan cultural exchange, Chinese universities began – at first cautiously and then more boldly – to assert longstanding links to the former Christian colleges. The practice accelerated in the twenty-first century with the establishment of new academic joint ventures between Chinese and Western universities. In a strange twist of history, the legacies of the old Christian colleges were being reimaged and appropriated for the PRC’s own pedagogical and propaganda purposes. Previously disavowed and disparaged connections were now affirmed and embraced.

The opening in 2012 of NYU Shanghai prompted declarations on the part of its Chinese partner, East China Normal University (ECNU), which had been established only in 1951, of an illustrious lineage dating back to the nineteenth-century founding of St. John’s University.⁹ Previously, ECNU had traced its origins to St. John’s erstwhile nemesis, Guanghua. Similarly, the inauguration in 2014 of a “Yenching Academy” at Peking University (PKU) produced proud claims of a direct

6 Mao Zedong, 18.8.1949.

7 Mao Zedong, 30.8.1949.

8 Ng 2014, 82.

9 Zhu Xiaoyi/Tong Huaming 2015.

connection to the former Yenching University.¹⁰ Previously, PKU – which moved from its cramped downtown quarters onto the beautiful and spacious Yenching campus after the latter’s closure in 1952 – had acknowledged only the old Peking University (where the co-founders of the Communist Party and Mao Zedong had all once worked) as its legitimate ancestor. In both cases the reputational rehabilitation proceeded without any serious attempt to reconcile the current project with the pejorative treatment of these institutions throughout most of PRC history.

NYU Shanghai and the Yenching Academy at PKU

Concurrent with its strategy of developing “world-class universities” able to compete in the global rankings of research universities, the PRC government aimed to capitalize on the potential of its universities for expanding the international influence of Chinese soft power. In the spring of 2014, on the 95th anniversary of China’s historic May Fourth Movement, President Xi Jinping delivered an address at Peking University in which he enjoined his country’s leading universities to become “world-class universities with Chinese characteristics”.¹¹ While progress toward the “world-class” part of their mission would presumably be assessed by the familiar (if flawed) criteria of the various global rankings of research universities, currently headed by leading American and British institutions, the meaning of “Chinese characteristics” was left unspecified and unclear.

Chinese universities responded to this ambiguous challenge with a multi-pronged strategy. On the one hand, they beefed up teaching and research on official Chinese Communist ideology, most recently seen in the establishment of dozens of new departments of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”.¹² On the other hand, they introduced new degree programs in “Chinese studies” (*Zhongguoxue* 中国学), taught in English and designed primarily for foreign students.

Among the new programs established in conjunction with China’s higher education reforms, NYU Shanghai and the Yenching Academy at PKU have drawn particular attention. US-based critic Yaxue Cao portrays the new “Global China Studies” major at NYU Shanghai as “a thinly disguised version of the Party-state’s propagandist narrative about China” and observes more generally:

I should point out that China Studies have been popping up in Chinese universities in the last two years or so, mainly to attract foreign students as China sets to promote “Chinese culture” as a competing system of values against what the world recognizes as universal values, so as to gain the power to reshape the political discourse in the international arena. Ultimately, the goal is to redefine power, justice and freedom on the Party’s own terms. Leading the charge, Peking University launched the Yenching Academy in the midst of strong student and faculty opposition....¹³

While Cao likens the Chinese studies program at NYU Shanghai to the controversial Yenching Academy, the reaction among the Chinese public to these two academic initiatives was actually quite different – and in rather surprising ways.

On the face of it, one might have expected NYU Shanghai to have generated greater opposition. For one thing, the new university is widely seen as an American transplant, pure and simple; alt-

10 The official website of the Yenching Academy features a time line asserting the historical connection to Yenching University and the Harvard-Yenching Institute, in addition to Peking University; see <http://yenchingacademy.org/about>.

11 <http://learning.sohu.com/20140911/n404229913.shtml>

12 <https://qz.com/1114975/the-19th-communist-party-congress-chinese-universities-are-falling-over-themselves-to-teach-xi-jinping-thought/>

13 Cao 2015.

though its legal status is as a joint venture with ECNU, there is little public awareness of this fact. For another thing, the claimed connection to the former St. John's University – whose “national flag incident” is featured in standard histories of Republican China as a textbook case of American imperialism – could easily have set off alarm bells about the dangers of ceding educational sovereignty to foreign powers. Yenching University, by comparison, seemed saddled with less of a burdensome reputation to overcome. During the Republican era, Yenching had displayed a friendlier attitude toward Chinese nationalism, a stance reflected in its prompt government registration and its relative tolerance of anti-imperialist student protest. Mao Zedong's ad hominem attack notwithstanding, John Leighton Stuart had already been posthumously rehabilitated and his ashes returned to China for burial in his birthplace of Hangzhou in 2008.¹⁴ In fact, however, it was the Yenching Academy rather than NYU Shanghai that sparked a firestorm of public criticism.

The opening of NYU Shanghai in 2012 was generally understood to be a timely contribution to China's commitment to global education, rather than a forfeiture of educational sovereignty. To support this positive interpretation, the Party Secretary of ECNU who initiated the joint venture with NYU, Zhang Jishun 张济顺, explicitly invoked a link with St. John's. She noted continuity in the “American dream” of global education, once championed by St. John's University prior to its closure in 1952, and then reimagined with the founding of NYU Shanghai exactly 60 years later.¹⁵ The former president of ECNU and first chancellor of NYU Shanghai, Yu Lizhong 俞立中, praised the enterprise as “a new historical page of Chinese higher education in the global era”.¹⁶ The Shanghai municipal authorities, in particular the leading officials of Pudong district where NYU Shanghai is located, warmly welcomed the new university as a conduit of cutting-edge higher education – offering not only American-style liberal arts, but also professional training from business administration to cultural entrepreneurship. Public enthusiasm for this curriculum was apparent in the large number of applications for admission from local students.¹⁷ Even *People's Daily* weighed in with a vote of confidence, describing NYU Shanghai as beneficial for accelerating Shanghai's development into the embodiment of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”.¹⁸ The result of this strong government support was in effect a promise of “extraterritoriality” which exempted the new university from many of the restrictive regulations that apply to normal Chinese universities.

Such opposition as was voiced against the establishment of NYU Shanghai emanated almost entirely from critics outside of China who raised fears about possible limitations on academic freedom. At first the concerns came mostly from NYU's own faculty at the flagship campus in New York, and were similar to those expressed by other faculties with regard to Duke University's joint venture with Wuhan University in Kunshan and Yale's collaboration with the National University of Singapore.¹⁹ The misgivings moved beyond academic circles into the public arena when a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee convened hearings to assess whether the activities of American universities in China threatened to compromise academic freedom.²⁰ In his testimony before Congress, the American Vice Chancellor of NYU Shanghai, Jeffrey S. Lehman (former president of Cornell), offered assurances that the new university would function like an American university, in full compliance with the accreditation requirements of the Middle States Association and with complete control over its own curriculum, faculty, teaching style, and operations.²¹

14 Hayford 2008.

15 Zhang Jishun 2015.

16 Yu 2013.

17 Author's interview with Yu Lizhong, Shanghai (August 2014).

18 Li Hongbing/Jiang Hongbing 2015.

19 Farrar 2015; Sharma 2015.

20 Fischer 2014.

21 Lehman 2015.

To date, the students and faculty of NYU Shanghai have indeed enjoyed freedoms beyond what are permitted at other universities in China. Their building is not subject to the Great Firewall that restricts Internet access on most Chinese campuses, for example. Students at NYU Shanghai have been granted the right to unionize, and professors are free to decide on lecture content and reading assignments without recourse to approval from higher authorities.²² How long these special privileges of “extraterritoriality” will last is not certain, however. Recently, the Organization Department of the Chinese Communist Party issued a directive stipulating that all foreign-funded universities must have functional party branches invested with decision-making powers over university administration. Vice Chancellor Lehman was quick to shrug off any suggestion that the new decree might augur a roll back of academic freedom on his campus:

From the beginning, we were assured that NYU Shanghai would operate with academic freedom. That promise has been kept for the last four years . [...] Academic freedom is fundamental to our identity. We have not received any directives that would change things, and I don’t expect to receive any in the future.²³

Denis Simon, Executive Vice Chancellor of Duke Kunshan University, reacted more cautiously to the directive:

DKU is still in an evolving state and thus it would be premature to indicate what the final impact might be.²⁴

The relative confidence of the NYU Shanghai Vice Chancellor reflects the unusual support and protection that his institution has received from municipal government authorities. Shanghai’s cosmopolitan ambitions, laced with nostalgia for its “glory days” during the Republican era, help explain the city’s readiness to grant the new university special dispensations of extraterritoriality that otherwise might be decried as evidence of imperialist aggression.²⁵ Despite its portrayal during the Mao era as the epitome of American cultural imperialism, St. John’s University never quite lost its luster among Shanghaiese as “the Harvard of the Orient”. The international recognition that so many St. John’s alumni once attained as distinguished diplomats, writers, scholars, judges, physicians, architects, and the like surely contributed to the welcome reception for the new American transplant.²⁶ Access to American liberal arts education, it was hoped, might once again enable Shanghai to produce the world-class talent befitting a global metropolis.

If ECNU and NYU Shanghai thereby managed to elude condemnation as beneficiaries of extraterritoriality and conduits of cultural imperialism, the same did not apply to PKU and the Yenching Academy. Like NYU Shanghai, the new Yenching Academy was framed by PKU as an enterprise that would reclaim its Republican era pedigree to produce an elite cohort of cosmopolitan graduates. Named to evoke the positive legacy of Yenching University, whose former campus had housed PKU for the past 65 years, the Academy features a fully-funded and accelerated MA degree in Chinese

22 Fischer 2015.

23 Feng 2017.

24 Ibid.

25 Yeh 2007; X. D. Zhang 2008.

26 St. John’s counted among its alumni such luminaries as diplomat Wellington Koo, writers Eileen Chang and Lin Yutang, politician T. V. Soong, industrialists Rong Yiren and Liu Hongsheng, and architect I. M. Pei. The prominence of St. John’s alumni was apparent even from an early period. A recent memoir notes: “With thirty-six graduates, the class of 1917 was the largest in the history of St. John’s. They joined an elite fraternity. Alumni were serving as ambassadors to Germany, the United States and England. They managed steel mills and railways. They were university presidents and college deans; judges and surgeons; church rectors and directors of the YMCA in China.” Lin 2017, 64.

studies, taught in English to a select group of international and Chinese students who are expected to constitute

[...] a new generation of global citizens with a nuanced understanding of China and its role in the world.²⁷

In contrast to NYU Shanghai, however, the inauguration of the Yenching Academy ignited a heated nationwide debate, conducted over social media and in the pages of some of China's most influential academic journals and popular periodicals. The controversy was fueled in part by the politicized image of the old Yenching University as a symbol of American cultural imperialism and in part by the standing of Peking University as a national bellwether of academic trends in the PRC.²⁸ The prospect of an elite group of mostly foreign students enjoying special classes and posh living conditions unavailable to ordinary Peking University students generated a hostile backlash.

While much of the student opposition stemmed from the University's announced plans to construct the new academy in the Jingyuan Courtyard, one of the most beautiful remaining sites on the crowded PKU campus, these young critics seemed unaware that the courtyard had once housed the women's dormitories of Yenching University. More stinging than student complaints about the choice of construction site were criticisms from faculty at PKU and a number of other universities, who explicitly confronted the Yenching connection. In a newspaper opinion piece entitled, *Whose Yenching Academy?*, the chair of PKU's Department of English Language and Literature, Professor Gao Fengfeng 高峰枫, drew a sharp distinction between Yenching University and Peking University. Gao noted that, while some of the former Yenching University faculty had in fact been incorporated into PKU when the Christian college was closed in 1952,

[...] this definitely did not amount to an amalgamation of the two universities. Although Beida moved on to the Yenching campus, it did not consciously absorb the pedagogical concepts, governance, and other basic features of the Yenching University tradition; still less did it perpetuate its spirit.

Professor Gao contrasted the thoroughly Christian ethos of Yenching with PKU's resolutely secular roots in the "Science and Democracy" of the May Fourth Movement. As he put it,

Beida occupied Yenching's land, but did not seek to emulate its soul.

Citing a specialist in the history of PKU, Gao stressed that

Beida has a responsibility to maintain the Yenching University architecture, but it has no responsibility to keep alive the Yenching University spirit.

Finally, Gao raised the question of how the "Chinese studies" (*Zhongguoxue*) to be taught in the new Yenching Academy would differ from the old Western tradition of "Sinology" (*Hanxue* 汉学).²⁹ Another newspaper essay by a senior professor of Chinese literature at PKU, Li Ling, criticized the lack of clarity of the proposed Yenching program as a goulash containing both

[...] foreign and local, ancient and modern, internationalization and Chinese characteristics, humanistic scholarship and strategic studies, teaching and research – all mixed together.

Like an overstuffed dumpling in a thin wrapping, Professor Li warned, it would burst as soon it was boiled!³⁰ Other detractors ridiculed the (implicitly imperialistic) use of English as a language of in-

27 <http://yenchingacademy.org/>

28 The newspaper *Nanfang ribao* 南方日报 (*Southern Daily*) and the magazine *Dushu* 读书, among many other influential outlets, carried extensive coverage of the debate. Even foreign newspapers reported on the controversy. See, e. g., Jacobs 2014.

29 Gao Fengfeng 2014.

30 Li Ling 2014.

struction for Chinese studies and characterized the Yenching Academy as a “school within a school” or a “foreign concession” in the heart of the PKU campus.³¹

Critics both inside and outside of China have raised concerns about the political agenda driving the recent proliferation of Chinese studies programs at Chinese universities. PKU Professor of Literature Qian Liqun charges that

[...] advocating “Chinese studies” is simply a state strategy intended to promote Chinese soft power.³²

To critics like him, the introduction of programs in Chinese studies at the major public universities in the PRC, much like the proliferation of hundreds of government-sponsored Confucius institutes around the world, reflects strategic rather than scholarly considerations. In other words it may be understood as a kind of “cultural imperialism redux”, being conducted now not by Christian colleges operating under foreign mission boards but by the Chinese government itself as part of a calculated bid for international influence.

While the Chinese state defines “world-class universities with Chinese characteristics” in terms of Marxist orthodoxy and Communist Party control, with the promotion of Chinese studies intended to be little more than bait to lure foreign students, the universities themselves have attached these programs to names from the “imperialist” past in order to convey a more cosmopolitan image.³³ In this effort, the Christian colleges offer a fertile source of inspiration, but the Cold War politics that underlay their ignominious demise – as well as the post-Cold War politics that propel the PRC’s current push for global influence – present formidable obstacles to objective assessment. As a result, neither the advocates nor the opponents of this proposed linkage have cared to dig very deeply into the history of the Christian colleges to make their case. There is, however, much in that rich and complicated history that merits careful excavation and reconsideration as Chinese universities seek to construct “world-class universities with Chinese characteristics”.

The Christian Colleges as “World-Class Universities with Chinese Characteristics”

In addition to serving as media of Western values (whether interpreted today as “cosmopolitan” or “imperialistic”), the Christian colleges of Republican China strove to adapt to their Chinese setting. The striking campus architecture of these institutions was itself a visible symbol of the colleges’ appreciation of Chinese culture:

At a time when many new Chinese building projects were imitating utilitarian Western styles, the architects of the Protestant colleges and universities sought to include Chinese elements of architecture in their buildings.³⁴

31 Gan Yang/Liu Xiaofeng 2014.

32 Qian 2014.

33 At a congress on ideological and political work in Chinese institutions of higher education in 2016, President Xi offered some clarification of his call for universities with Chinese characteristics. Exhibiting Chinese characteristics, he explained, required strengthening ideological (i. e., Marxist) instruction and adhering strictly to Communist Party direction: “China’s higher education institutions are under the leadership of the CPC and are socialist colleges with Chinese characteristics, so higher education must be guided by Marxism, and the party’s policies in education must be fully carried out.” <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2016/12/09/calls-strengthen-ideological-education-china>; <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2016/12/xi-calls-thought-control-chinas-campuses/>

34 Smalley 1998, 13.

This indigenization drive on the part of the Christian colleges was discernable not only in the outward appearance of their campuses, but also in terms of academic administration and curriculum. Under pressure from the new Nationalist government in Nanjing, most of the Christian colleges by the late 1920s had installed Chinese presidents to replace foreign missionary presidents and had lifted mandatory chapel attendance and required classes on Christianity, introducing in their stead newly designed political education courses on Sun Yat-sen's *Three Principles of the People* and the "partisan principles" (*dangyi* 党义) of the Nationalist Party. Moreover, in response to a virulent anti-Christianity movement that swept China in the 1920s, many of the colleges also developed robust programs in Chinese studies or National Learning (国学 *guoxue*) intended, among other things, to soften their alien image.

To be sure, the Christian colleges had been established by Western missionaries for the explicit purpose of religious evangelism. They reported to overseas Boards, received substantial foreign funding, and featured a liberal arts curriculum that served as a conduit for introducing core Western values and knowledge. Nevertheless, a number of these same colleges also became renowned centers of Chinese studies. The best among them – including Yenching University in Beijing, Shantung Christian University in Jinan, and even St. John's University in Shanghai (despite its reputation as a thoroughly American institution) – combined a rigorous Western-style education with serious instruction in Chinese history, philosophy and literature taught by some of the leading Sinologists of the day. When the Communist regime summarily terminated these institutions on charges of trying to poison students with bourgeois Western values, their innovative experiments in developing a unique educational model that was at once contemporary cosmopolitan and classically Chinese were disbanded and disparaged.

Although the Christian colleges were first and foremost missionary institutions committed to Christian education, to view them only as transmitters of Western religious beliefs would be quite misleading. As early as 1928–1929, less than a decade after its founding, Yenching's distinguished Department of History offered a rich curriculum of some fifty courses, fully half of which were in the field of Chinese history. In subsequent years, both the number and the specialized focus of the Chinese history offerings increased.³⁵ These were complemented by a wide array of China-focused courses in other departments as well, humanities (philosophy, literature, religion) and social sciences (geography, sociology, economic, politics) alike.

Yenching University's development of a significant Sinology program was not simply a strategic or superficial move on the part of a Christian institution trying to deflect criticism from detractors in the midst of an anti-Christianity movement. It also reflected a general academic trend toward "National Learning" (*guoxue*) that was underway in China at the time. The trend was encouraged by the Nationalist Party, which saw National Learning as a means of promoting its agenda of political and cultural unity. Despite indigenous origins, the National Learning movement was strongly influenced by European and American modes of scholarship. Although the earliest expression of National Learning was a nativist effort to recover the essence of Chinese national character, it soon acquired a more cosmopolitan flavor under the influence of the liberal intellectual Hu Shi. Hu established the first research center for National Learning in 1922 at Peking University, China's first modern national university, as an outgrowth of the ongoing New Culture Movement that sought to radically reassess the Chinese cultural tradition in light of the Western challenge.

The conception of National Learning formulated by Hu Shi and his colleagues at Peking University advocated

[...] the critical study of the national past through the investigative technologies of Euromodernity.³⁶

35 Chen Jianshou 2009, 23–86.

36 Dirlik 2011, 6.

The goal was selectively to recover and reinterpret China's historical legacy with the tools of modern Western scholarship so that ancient traditions would no longer pose an obstacle to China's political and economic progress. For Hu Shi, student of John Dewey that he was, applying the "scientific method" to the study of China's cultural heritage was the key to national rejuvenation.³⁷ Two years later, in Nanjing, Southeast University (soon to be renamed Central University) opened a similar National Learning center. The following year, in 1925, Tsinghua College (which had been established with American funds remitted from the Boxer indemnities) inaugurated its own center as an effort to blend the practices of Chinese academies and Anglo-American universities.³⁸ In rapid succession, the major public institutions of higher education in Beiping and Nanjing thus pioneered the development of National Learning as part of a broader project to critically appreciate the Chinese past from a cosmopolitan perspective conducive to national modernization.

When Yenching University opened a center of Sinological studies in 1928, it was clearly influenced by the ongoing promotion of National Learning at China's leading public universities. But Yenching's action was not only domestically driven; it also enjoyed a powerful international impetus thanks to the newly founded Harvard-Yenching Institute (HYI). An independent foundation headquartered on the campus of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, HYI's mission was

[t]o conduct and provide research, instruction and publication in the culture of China [...] by founding, developing, supporting, maintaining and/or conducting one or more educational institutions [...].³⁹

As an article in the Harvard newspaper at the time explained, the establishment of the Harvard-Yenching Institute was inspired by a global vision of scholarship:

The purpose of the Institute is to promote both in China and America graduate study and research in the various branches of Chinese culture, with the primary objective of encouraging the Chinese to study their own highly developed civilization in the light of occidental methods of research and to interpret this civilization to the West. It will thus be made possible for Yenching University to offer graduate work to its own students and to those who come from other parts of China, and thus assist in strengthening the emphasis on Chinese culture which is one of the beneficial consequences of the recent nationalistic awakening among Chinese students.⁴⁰

Founded less than a decade after the May Fourth Movement, when patriotic students had called for "science" and "democracy" to strengthen the Chinese nation against foreign imperialism, the Harvard-Yenching Institute hoped to encourage the study of Chinese civilization in innovative ways that would benefit both China and the West. While Harvard University would anchor the American side of this global effort, Yenching University would serve as its primary base in China.⁴¹

The selection of Yenching University as Harvard University's Chinese partner in this transnational undertaking was due above all to the efforts of Yenching's farsighted president, John Leighton Stuart. An American Presbyterian missionary born in China, Stuart was among the first foreign educators to appreciate the value of incorporating Chinese studies into an otherwise basically Western curriculum.⁴² Thanks to a generous infusion of HYI funding (from the estate of Charles Martin

37 Lei 2008.

38 Chen Jianshou 2009, 88-92.

39 "Agreement of Association" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard-Yenching Institute, January 4, 1928).

40 "Newly Formed Harvard Institute at Yenching", *The Harvard Crimson* (January 10, 1928).

41 Fan 2014.

42 As Stuart wrote in his first annual report to HYI: "In general, we should confine ourselves to a cultural purpose, aiming at original results, through modern scientific methods [...]. We endeavor to assist Chinese to a fuller appreciation of their own great cultural heritage through the comparative study and the critical

Hall, the founder of the Aluminum Company of America), Yenching University suddenly found itself in the enviable position of being able to hire away a number of leading Sinologists from China's less affluent public universities. Soon Yenching could boast a faculty roster that included luminaries such as the philosopher Feng Youlan, historians Gu Jiegang, Chen Yuan and Zhang Xingliang, and literature scholar Huang Zitong. The combination of HYI funding and the energetic leadership of Yenching's Dean of Liberal Arts, William Hung (Hong Ye 洪业),

[...] made Yenching University an instantaneous international center for Chinese studies.⁴³

The Harvard-Yenching Research Office on the campus of Yenching University, which William Hung directed for many years, became a focal point for Sinological research and publication, with attendant benefits for classroom instruction as well as library development.⁴⁴

Hu Shi 胡适, who taught at Peking University when William Hung was Director of the Harvard-Yenching Research Office at Yenching, praised the latter's efforts to Sinicize the Christian university:

Yenching [...] became more and more a Chinese university, which, with the help of the Harvard-Yenching Institute of Chinese Studies, was the first of all the Protestant missionary colleges to develop an excellent program of Chinese studies [...]. William Hung [...] deserves special credit for building up a very good Chinese library at Yenching, for editing and publishing the excellent *Yenching Journal of Chinese Studies* and that most useful series – the *Harvard-Yenching Sinological Index Series*.⁴⁵

Under William Hung's direction, Yenching University sought to pioneer an approach to Chinese studies that was informed by, yet distinct from, that of Peking, Central and Tsinghua universities. Rather than operate a separate School of National Learning, Hung advocated successfully for the integration of the study of China into existing academic departments. In his view,

[...] to have a school of "Chinese Studies" isolated from the rest of the university was as absurd as lumping European sciences, literature, history and so forth into a school for "European Studies".⁴⁶

Hung, whose own field was Chinese history, was also insistent that Chinese studies should be conducted by scholars with "modern training" who were fluent in foreign languages and conversant with the world of scholarship outside of China. His objective was

[...] no less than to raise a new breed of Chinese historians whose purview encompassed the whole world, and who could be relied upon to rediscover and conserve those permanent values in China's cultural heritage not incompatible with modern requirements.⁴⁷

William Hung's protégés, most of whom were Yenching graduates who also studied or taught at Harvard, became key contributors to the *Harvard-Yenching Sinological Index Series*, the signature achievement of the HYI's research office at Yenching University. This was a massive effort to compile systematic concordances to the Chinese classics, complete with detailed cross-references to key words, events, dates and places. Anticipating the advent of computerized data bases by several decades, the goal of the indices was to render the ancient classics readily accessible to modern scholars who had not been trained in the rote memorization of canonical texts.

methods which are perhaps the chief Western contribution to the work of the Institute, and to enable Western students to a more intelligent understanding of Chinese civilization." Stuart 1929.

43 Egan 1987, 117.

44 Chen Jianshou 2009, 96-137.

45 Quoted in Egan 1987, 110.

46 Egan 1987, 129.

47 Egan 1987, 144.

Hu Shi was not alone in his positive assessment of Yenching's academic achievements. In 1928, the Ministry of Education of the newly established Nationalist government in Nanjing held a special examination for the 14 leading private universities in China in which two students from Yenching University placed as the top scorers.⁴⁸ An international review carried out that same year by the University of California ranked Yenching as one of the two best universities in all of Asia, rendering Yenching's graduates directly admissible to graduate studies in the U.S.⁴⁹ Under William Hung's leadership, Yenching's overall academic strength served as the foundation for cutting-edge research and instruction in Chinese studies. In 1937, on the recommendation of the famous French Sinologist Paul Pelliot, Hung was awarded the prestigious Prix Stanislas Julien from France's Academie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres for a volume in his *Sinological Index Series*.⁵⁰

The excellence of Yenching's research programs was officially acknowledged by the Chinese government at the time. A comprehensive national survey of research projects in the humanities, conducted by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 1936-38 at the 13 national universities, 9 provincial universities and 20 private universities, ranked Yenching University second, behind only Wuhan University (with Tsinghua third and Peking University fourth). That Yenching managed to out-rank all but one of 42 accredited universities across China in the quality of humanities research was due primarily to William Hung's ability to identify and recruit outstanding scholars and graduate students in Chinese studies in the disciplines of history, philosophy and literature with the aid of attractive salaries and fellowships provided by the Harvard-Yenching Institute.⁵¹

The appeal of the humanities at Yenching was reflected in a steady rise in the percentage of students studying in these disciplines in the decade following the university's receipt of HYI funding; whereas in 1927-28 more than a quarter of the student body was enrolled in professional training, ten years later the proportion had dropped to a mere one percent.⁵² The fact that Yenching University paid its faculty members equitably across the board, regardless of their specialty or seniority, further enhanced its appeal among serious scholars anxious to escape from the factional rivalries that beset the public universities.⁵³ After Hu Shi assumed the presidency of Peking University in 1946, he warned that

[...] if the national universities don't strive harder, and show greater scholarly accomplishment, they will very likely be displaced by several of the Christian universities.⁵⁴

As Hu Shi's remark indicated, Yenching was not the only Christian college in China to achieve a reputation for academic excellence. Nor was it the only Christian college that could boast a serious program in Chinese studies, thanks in no small measure to support from the Harvard-Yenching Institute. Five other Christian colleges – Shantung Christian University (also known as Cheeloo University), the University of Nanking (known in Chinese as Jinling University), Fukien Christian University, Lingnan University, and West China Union University – also received regular annual

48 Chen Yuan 2013, 88.

49 Chen Yuan 2013, 93.

50 Egan 1987, 122, 148.

51 Historians Gu Jiegang, Deng Zhicheng, and Li Fanggui as well as philosopher Feng Youlan were all lured away from public universities by Yenching's handsome salaries. See Chen Jianshou 2009, 264-266.

52 Chen Yuan 2013, 85.

53 Chen Jianshou 2009, 267-268.

54 Chen Jianshou 2009, 271.

grants from HYI to promote the study of Chinese culture.⁵⁵ The funds were used to hire faculty, develop library and museum collections, undertake archeological expeditions and other collective and individual research efforts, and publish both general textbooks and specialized journals in the field of Chinese studies.

While Yenching University had the largest and most comprehensive program of Chinese studies, other HYI grant recipients among the Christian colleges developed impressive expertise in particular sub-fields. A noteworthy feature of the Christian colleges, like the foreign enclaves in which they were situated, was their diversity. As Rudolf Wagner has noted,

[t]hese enclaves were not subject to the homogenizing pressure that was strongly felt elsewhere in the country. They presented, on Chinese soil and protected by cannon, alternative options of ideology, institutions, life-style, and technology.⁵⁶

The same was true of the foreign-funded colleges that sprang up in these enclaves. The University of Nanking, which was well known for its School of Agriculture, used HYI funding to assemble a research library on Chinese agricultural history that included a valuable collection of rare gazetteers. In addition to expanding its undergraduate offerings in Chinese studies, Nanking University also compiled a catalogue of Chinese geographical works and an encyclopedia of Chinese agriculture.⁵⁷ Shantung Christian University in Jinan focused its HYI-supported research program on the cultural history of Shandong Province (the birthplace of Confucius and Mencius), with particular attention to stone monuments related to Confucianism.⁵⁸ One of China's most celebrated novelists, Lao She, also taught Chinese literature for four years there on the payroll of the Harvard-Yenching Institute.⁵⁹ Fukien Christian University in Fuzhou devoted special attention to the folklore, folk art, and music of Fujian Province, and offered a rich curriculum in local history and literature. It also undertook a research expedition to the birthplace of Zhu Xi, the influential Neo-Confucian scholar who was born in the province.⁶⁰ At Fukien, HYI support was credited with

[...] a general move toward the "sinification" of the college.⁶¹

Lingnan University in Guangzhou tailored its Chinese studies program to the large number of Overseas Chinese students on campus, drawn from countries across Asia. At Lingnan, HYI funding was primarily used to develop effective methods for teaching Chinese language and cultural history to overseas students interested in recovering their Sinic "roots".⁶² At West China Union University in Chengdu an archeological museum to study and display both tribal and Han cultures was established with HYI support. After just a couple of years of operation, the museum curator, Professor David C. Graham, noted a

[...] great change in the attitude of the Chinese toward the work of our museum [...] to an extent that seems almost incredible.

55 Although these six Christian colleges were the principal beneficiaries of HYI funding, they were not the only ones. For example, Central China University in Wuhan also received significant HYI support for the development of its library and museum collections in the area of Chinese studies.

56 Wagner 1982, 118.

57 Porter 1932.

58 Porter 1932, 2.

59 Zhang Guixing 1992; "Shantung Christian University, 1929–1937" (HYI archives).

60 Porter 1932, 6.

61 Scott 1954, 63.

62 Porter 1932, 8.

Initial suspicions and opposition, even within the university, had been replaced by a general attitude of appreciation and approval – with many of the most valuable gifts to the museum now coming from Chinese donors.⁶³

The Harvard-Yenching Institute was thus a key contributor to the Sinification of Yenching and a number of other American missionary colleges in China. Thanks to annual grants earmarked for the development of Chinese studies, the HYI-supported Christian colleges built impressive curricula as well as significant museum and library collections in the area of Chinese civilization and culture. But HYI was certainly not the only catalyst driving this phenomenon. Even Christian colleges that were not beneficiaries of HYI largesse devoted substantial resources to the development of Chinese studies.

Take the case of St. John's University in Shanghai, widely regarded as the most typically "American" of all the Christian colleges in China. As we have noted, St. John's figured prominently in Shanghai's May Thirtieth Movement of 1925, when President Pott's refusal to fly a Chinese flag on campus during the height of the nationalistic demonstrations resulted in an irate walkout by many of the Chinese faculty and students. The protest was led by a professor of Chinese at St. John's, Meng Xiancheng, who is lionized in standard histories of May Thirtieth for his patriotic action in spurning his "imperialistic" alma mater in favor of establishing a homegrown rival, Guanghai. Meng's dramatic walkout in 1925 is conventionally attributed to St. John's disdain for both Chinese studies and Chinese sensibilities;⁶⁴ the reality was considerably more complicated.

Three years before the May Thirtieth Movement, St. John's had convened a commission, headed by the prominent educational reformer Huang Yanpei, to make recommendations on how to strengthen its Chinese studies offerings in order to meet the increased student interest developing in tandem with what President Pott described in positive terms as the "growth of a new national spirit". In response to the commission's advice that the university should hire a scholar of the "highest attainment in Chinese" who also embraced "modern methods of education", St. John's recruited Meng Xiancheng. A 1918 graduate of St. John's, Meng seemed to fit the bill perfectly because he was not only an acknowledged leader in new approaches to Chinese literature who had studied in the U.S. and U.K., but was also "a Christian and in thorough sympathy with the aims of St. John's". Recruiting Meng proved to be a challenge, however, inasmuch as he required a salary that was considerably higher than that of many of the more senior foreign faculty.⁶⁵ Indeed, a significant increase in the operating expenses of St. John's in 1923 was attributed to the above-scale salaries that were now being paid to properly qualified Chinese studies instructors, including Meng Xiancheng and several of his colleagues.⁶⁶

In his annual report of 1923-24, one year before the May Thirtieth Movement, President Pott admitted that St. John's still had "room for improvement" when it came to course offerings in Chinese literature, history and philosophy, but emphasized that the University was working hard to reform its curriculum so as to overcome this deficit.⁶⁷ The St. John's Middle School Headmaster's report for that same academic year noted that Meng Xiancheng had hired a number of well-trained Chinese teachers as part of

[...] a serious effort to meet the criticism that mission schools don't prepare students sufficiently in their own language.⁶⁸

63 "Report of West China Union University – Harvard-Yenching Committee for 1931–32" (September 20, 1932); and "Report of West China Union University Museum of Archeology, 1933–34" (HYI Archives).

64 Tao Feiya/Wu Ziming 1998, 229.

65 F. L. H. Pott 1922.

66 F. L. H. Pott 1923.

67 "St. John's University President's Annual Report, 1923–24".

68 "St. John's Middle School Headmaster's Annual Report, 1923–24".

New curricular requirements introduced in 1923 stipulated that students must successfully complete a substantial number of credits in Chinese language and literature courses in order to qualify for a St. John's degree. Special classes were arranged to provide extra assistance to students whose poor grades in Chinese studies threatened to jeopardize their graduation.⁶⁹

Ironically, then, while the May Thirtieth protest at St. John's University is portrayed in standard Chinese histories as a patriotic action in opposition to American cultural imperialism, led by the heroic Meng Xiancheng (who would later serve as the founding president of East China Normal University under the new Communist regime), Meng's teaching position at St. John's had actually been specially created as part of that university's commitment to develop a sound program in Chinese studies. President Pott felt stunned and betrayed when Professor Meng and most of the other recently recruited Chinese Department faculty resigned in protest over the flag incident in the spring of 1925. But St. John's did not react by abandoning its project of building a serious program of Chinese studies. On the contrary, Pott wrote in his annual report of 1924–1925 that the university would need to secure yet “more Christian teachers of Chinese literature and philosophy.”⁷⁰ By early 1926, President Pott was able to report with evident satisfaction that these continuing efforts had borne fruit, and that St. John's had recently succeeded in hiring the “best possible teachers for courses in Chinese language, literature, history, and philosophy.”⁷¹

Although Francis Hawks Pott has been vilified in standard Chinese accounts of the May Thirtieth Movement as a strident apologist for American imperialism, he threatened to resign from his beloved university in 1930 when his recommendation that St. John's install a Chinese national to replace him as president was rejected by his superiors in the Episcopal Church.⁷² While Pott (whose wife was Chinese) would remain as president for more than a decade to come, his commitment to Sinitization did not wane. In 1933 he reported with evident pride on a recent survey indicating that St. John's University offered more hours in Chinese instruction than any other institution of higher education in the country.⁷³ This did not mean, however, that the teaching of English was reduced; in Pott's view, the English language was an indispensable key to global knowledge for twentieth-century Chinese, playing a part comparable to the role “that Latin played in the education of Europe during the Middle Ages.”⁷⁴

The impeccable command of English displayed by St. John's graduates helped contribute to the university's reputation for purposely privileging Western learning at the expense of the teaching of Chinese, but the reality was in fact quite different. Some years later, James Pott, son of Francis Hawks Pott and himself acting president of St. John's for a time, reacted with indignation to accusations that the university's closure in 1952 could be attributed to its neglect of Chinese studies:

It seems to me to be entirely incorrect to say that the language, history, and culture of China remained almost wholly neglected by the student body. In the Middle School or Preparatory Department the afternoons of every school day were set aside for the study of Chinese literature and history. In the College, Chinese Literature was allotted the same amount of time in the curriculum as was English Literature and credits for these courses in Literature and Composition were always the same as those given in English. It is true that the students were more eager to acquire knowledge in Western subjects through the English language, but this was not the fault of the administration or the faculty. The important thing to take cognizance of is the widespread rejection of a culture that was Confucian, which set in around the beginning of

69 Xiong Yuezhi/Zhou Wu 2007, 247.

70 “St. John's University President's Annual Report, 1924–25”.

71 F. L. H. Pott 1926.

72 “Meeting of Episcopal Clergy in Shanghai to Discuss the Registration of St. John's University (June 10, 1930)”; F. L. H. Pott 1930.

73 F. L. H. Pott 1933.

74 F. L. H. Pott 1942.

the twentieth century [...]. The classics no longer held much interest [...]. Furthermore, St. John's was located in a city that was largely international. Commercial interests predominated. Students came from all parts of China and border countries like Malaya, Indonesia and Indo-China, where different languages were spoken. English came to be the common language.⁷⁵

The Western orientation of St. John's, James Pott insisted, was due to demand on the part of its cosmopolitan constituency rather than to any inherent anti-Chinese bias on the part of the faculty and administration.

Conclusions

If the termination of the Christian colleges in 1952 was not attributable to their failure to cultivate "Chinese characteristics", how then do we explain their demise? In recent years, scholars in China have put forward various reasons for the early PRC regime's antagonism toward the Christian colleges. Some have suggested that the colleges' liberal arts curriculum (in contrast to that of Soviet-style technical academies) was deemed unsuitable to the industrialization demands of a developing country.⁷⁶ Others have pointed to the religious motives of the missionary educators as the principal irritant.⁷⁷ The more convincing accounts have recognized that the Christian colleges were closed not out of pedagogical, or for that matter even proselytizing, concerns but rather as a politicized reaction to international Cold War hostilities.⁷⁸

After the outbreak of the Korean War, when America emerged as China's foremost foe, the fact that the Christian colleges had been founded by Americans and were reliant on funding from the United States was considered reason enough to seal their fate.⁷⁹ The result was the dismantling of a cluster of remarkable universities that had offered a "world-class education" imbued with "Chinese characteristics". They were replaced by institutions that were neither world-class in academic quality nor distinctively Chinese in character. In the process of redesigning China's universities to serve as intellectual bases for Cold War battles, a revamped political education curriculum replaced the writings of both Confucius and Sun Yat-sen with Stalinist texts. The PRC's sudden adoption of a Soviet-style educational model also saw the substitution of Russian for English as the primary foreign language for scholarly research and exchange.⁸⁰ The thoroughgoing "faculty and department adjustment" (*yuanxi tiaozheng* 院系调整), as China's 1952 restructuring of higher education came to be known, was intended to remake Chinese higher education in the Soviet image. Regarded as symbols of American cultural imperialism, the Christian colleges obviously had no role to play in this makeover.

Today, as the Chinese state energetically promotes the development of "world-class universities with Chinese characteristics", the legacy of the Christian colleges is viewed more favorably as a source of positive rebranding for new academic ventures. Even so, the shadow of cultural imperialism continues to complicate efforts to connect current initiatives to the once reviled Christian colleges. Critics dismiss contemporary programs of Chinese studies in the PRC as shallow displays of the state's pursuit of soft power, susceptible to a charge of cultural imperialism redux. Such accusations are reminiscent of criticisms leveled against Asian studies during the Vietnam War, when U.S.

75 J. Pott 1953.

76 Ye Zhangyu 2001.

77 Shi Jinghuan 1989.

78 Ma Min 1996; Tian Zhengping 2004, 909.

79 Wang Hongyan 2004, 210.

80 Wang Hongyan 2004, 56-57.

government funding for area expertise exposed the field to sharp attack.⁸¹ As the history of our own field attests, however, politically motivated state sponsorship does not necessarily negate the teaching and research that occurs under its aegis. By the same token, the academic contributions of the Christian colleges of Republican China merit further consideration despite the stigma of cultural imperialism that continues to confound such efforts.

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81 See the early issues of the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, which carried many of these criticisms. An index and back issues can be accessed at <http://criticalasianstudies.org/bcas/index-by-date.html?page=1#v01n04>; and <http://criticalasianstudies.org/bcas/back-issues.html>.

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