Yenching University and the Japanese Occupation, 1937–1941

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As a missionary university seeking to become more indigenized and more relevant in China’s turbulent Republican period (1912–49), Yenching University’s cosmopolitan, bicultural character embodied both indisputable strength and patent liability. The Marco Polo Bridge incident of 7 July 1937 and the ensuing invasion and occupation by Japan forced the university as an institution and its members as individuals to make extraordinarily difficult decisions. What should the university have done after 7 July? Did war and occupation change the meaning of the university’s motto, “Freedom in Truth through Service”? Was the very decision to stay open tantamount to some form of collaboration? There was no simple answer to any of these questions as the war expanded—until the Japanese military forced the university to close after Pearl Harbor was attacked on 8 December 1941. Seven decades later, there are still no simple answers to these questions.

Alumni memoirs of university life under occupation tend to focus appreciatively on the unique protection afforded by Yenching’s association with the United States. A few described their alma mater as solitary island (gudao) or pure land (jingtu).¹ To be sure, during the war years this missionary university made numerous noteworthy contributions to Chinese higher education and anti-Japanese resistance. The well-equipped campus in Haidian, sheltered by extraterritoriality, was in many ways a sanctuary for students and staff alike. But, in order to function, Yenching University could not operate in a vacuum. The boundaries demarcating the campus remained porous. Both university officials and the political authorities outside the campus gates kept up a vigilant patrol to safeguard their respective prerogatives. As will be shown below, the university and the occupation regime engaged in a

¹. Jingtu is the Buddhist term for Pure Land, or Western Paradise. For alumni memoirs, see Yanda wenshi ziliao, 10 vols. (Beijing, 1988–95) (hereafter cited as YWZ), and Sili Yanjing daxue (Private Yenching University), Xuefu jiwen series (Taipei, 1982).
most complicated and constantly changing modus vivendi. Many of those crafting this modus vivendi were not strangers to one another. Although war and occupation gave rise to an evolving “new normal,” shifting military campaigns and political alliances did not by any means sever the ties that had long linked many of North China’s political and cultural elites in a complex web of social networks. These networks provided opportunities for association and negotiation that bypassed political barriers erected by war and occupation, and many at Yenching used these connections to help individuals in the university community as well as the university as an institution. Without a doubt, from the summer of 1937 to December 1941, no one in the Yenching community used his contacts in these networks better than the university president, John Leighton Stuart. His status as a China-born, Chinese-speaking American allowed him to maneuver in ways and places inaccessible to Chinese and Americans without such a hybrid background.

This paper examines how Stuart and others tried to keep the university functioning while grappling with the most unenviable personal and institutional predicaments that defied easy solutions and facile analyses then as now. Stuart was wont to encourage incoming Yenching freshmen to regard their university as “family.” However, even war and occupation could not gloss over familial friction. In fact, the institution’s prewar assumptions and tensions, nurtured by its cosmopolitan, bicultural essence, were brought into sharper relief after 7 July 1937 by its continuing access to American philanthropic resources and calculated identification with the U.S. government. A brief discussion of the operation of Furen University will provide some comparisons and contrasts to the possibilities and limitations faced by missionary schools that continued to function in an occupied region. The decision by Yenching and Furen to stay open during the occupation led them to complex and sometimes harrowing challenges. Both institutions can rightfully boast of an impressive array of accomplishments in educating, nurturing, and protecting young Chinese men and women during a time of enormous upheaval. But the very adaptability that made much of these wartime accomplishments possible continues to be regarded as a shortcoming by those who insist on absolutist ideals of patriotism and nationalism.

**When the War Came**

A few years before the outbreak of war, the unstable political situation in North China prompted several public universities to make contingency plans in the event of further Japanese encroachment. Yenching University’s administration took a different stance by steadfastly in-