On 25 November 1948, soon before the Chinese Communist forces took over Beiping (Beijing), Kenneth Chen, the Chinese assistant director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute (HYI), closed the Institute’s Beiping Office and opened a temporary office on the campus of Lingnan University in Guangzhou. In August 1949, when Communist troops approached Guangzhou, Chen moved the office again, this time to Hong Kong. Chen, who was also the executive secretary of the Beiping Office, explained that his decision to leave Beijing was based on warnings from the British and American consulates to their nationals that emergency evacuation might soon be impossible and they should leave at once before the arrival of the Communists.¹

Chen’s relocation of the Beiping Office can be viewed as a prelude to the gradual weakening and demise of HYI programs in China. The HYI and all other Western/American-backed cultural and educational enterprises in China, especially the Christian colleges, were seriously weakened in their academic programs after 1949 due to the increasing demands of the new ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for control. These institutions were eventually taken over by the new regime and merged into the Chinese national educational system in the early 1950s, marking their physical demise in China.

Contrary to conventional Cold War belief that by 1949 informed Americans thought the Communist victory implied an end to Western/American-sponsored cultural and educational enterprises, the
demise of HYI’s humanities programs and the Christian colleges in China shocked many Western/American missionary educators both at home and in the field in the early 1950s. In fact, in the months following the Communist victory, many hoped stability under the new government would provide a new opportunity for them to make contributions to China’s modernization. However, the reality was the opposite, which was hard for them to accept and digest. John Leighton Stuart, former president of Yenching University (1919–46) and former U.S. ambassador to China (1946–49), recalled in 1953–54 that foreigners in China, especially those having roots there, “were loath to believe and slow to admit that the Iron Curtain was being lowered around China, that the Communists wanted none of their works inside the Curtain and meant for them to leave. They have been forced to face the hard facts. They have seen their institutions and enterprises destroyed or taken over. . . . They have found themselves mistreated, squeezed out and, in many cases, forcibly deported.”

Scholars have not done serious academic research on the demise of U.S.-China cultural and educational interactions in the 1950s. Some pointed out that the Chinese Communist policies toward American educational work in China in the transitional New Democracy era had ambiguities that might offer a space for American educational enterprises to continue in China, had not the Korean War come along in the early 1950s. Others highlighted the impact of the interactions of a series of complicated factors both before and after the Korean War on the fate of the China Christian colleges. More and more scholars have tended to adopt an inevitability thesis. They contended that the continuities of Chinese Communist policies toward the United States/American educational enterprises in China in the 1940s and 1950s foreshadowed the final demise of these enterprises. The expulsion of
