We have been for several months past experiencing violent anti-Christian-education attacks and scarcely less vigorous intellectual discrediting of religion. How could it be made clear that Christianity was not an agency of Imperialism, Capitalism, Conservatism, and that the students in Christian schools were not denationalized and dominated by foreign interests.—John Leighton Stuart, 1925

Writing in the midst of the May Thirtieth Movement and powerful anti-Christian sentiment directed against mission schools, Yenching University President John Leighton Stuart defined with singular clarity an issue that would perplex Yenching for much of its existence. Yenching’s leaders assumed that a modernized Christianity would shape intellectual, academic, political, and social life at Yenching, but maintaining Christianity’s centrality to the university proved a more daunting task than anticipated. Although Stuart was preoccupied with formulating an effective response to a specific political crisis, he also had identified a long-term need: to define the relationship between a Christian education and Chinese nationalism in ways that could appeal to China’s youth while retaining the essential values of Christianity. This was not the only challenge to maintaining a Christian purpose.

The changing conception and role of Christianity at Yenching must be placed in a larger context of global changes in higher education, tension between Christian-oriented education and secular schools, and liberal Protestantism. The dominant academic culture in the world had become hostile to the model of the evangelical liberal arts college. In the United States and Britain, most higher-education institutions like those that merged to form Yenching began as unspecialized church-run liberal arts colleges emphasizing theology and character building. A full 161 of the 182 colleges in the United States founded prior to 1861 were

1. Stuart to Board of Trustees, 22 June 1925, Archives of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (hereafter cited as UBCHEA), RG 11, Special Collections, box 354, folder 5459 0544-46, Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, Conn.
established by churches. Starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, evangelical Christianity began to lose its dominant position in higher education. Newly established public universities introduced a model of specialized education more appropriate to the needs of an industrializing economy. Professionalization and disciplinary expertise displaced character training and theology as the principal foci of higher education. As Ruth Soulé Arnon observes:

With the appearance of the highly specialized secular university, it became harder to make an academic case for the unspecialized Christian college, and many of the more liberal Protestants began to doubt its usefulness on philosophic grounds as well. Those who had ceased to believe in the literal meaning of their creeds could not be expected to believe that a Congregational college really provided an education so very much different from that of an Episcopalian or even, for that matter, a secular college. Nor did Science and secular culture seem to be so threatening once the Bible was no longer seen as the perfect manifestation of divine revelation.

Other intellectual currents further undermined Christianity as the foundation of the college curriculum. The ideal of scientific objectivity spread from the natural sciences to the social sciences and the humanities, pushing aside theological perspectives in the name of truth and research. Liberal Protestantism broadened the definition of Christian purpose by seeing service to mankind as an expression of the true religious and ethical meanings of Christianity. George M. Marsden offers a trenchant analysis of the process by which liberal Protestants and educators justified the move away from an evangelical approach, oftentimes in the name of religion: they posited science as God in Nature; replaced the common school with denominational colleges; viewed scholarship as an expression of the divine and an essential part of character building; argued for the civilizing role of the university as advancing God’s purposes; and advocated the religion of humanity. The result was the displacement of religious perspectives from the mainstream academy.

“Missionary” colleges in the non-Western world came to find themselves in a non-Christian setting where their approaches to religion and education were alien to the established culture. On the one hand, Chris-

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3. Ibid., 236.
4. George M. Marsden, The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief (New York, 1994). Marsden believes that these changes have led to a deep-seated prejudice against religious perspectives in higher education, and that the dominant academic culture puts pressure on colleges with different perspectives to conform to its norms.