Cultural Mixture: Yenching Students and Missionary Christianity

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Yenching University, one of the most influential institutions in Chinese education in the first half of the twentieth century, also was emblematic of Sino-American cultural interchanges. Its development in the late 1910s and the 1920s coincided with a strong upsurge in national sentiment and anti-Christian movements in China. When the Communist victory and the Korean War brought patriotic anti-American feelings to a peak, the university was deeply shaken and was forced to close its doors. Forty years after its closure, Yenching’s name still arouses memories and fierce unresolved controversies. Both strong critics and defenders of the school need to include the Yenching experience in any discussion of cultural activities between the United States and China in the twentieth century. Yenching is more than a historical interlude, for the Yenching experience sheds light on issues that may influence the future of educational and cultural interactions in Sino-American relations.

Yenching University’s Chinese and Western faculty and administrators ranged from faithful missionaries who pursued purely religious aims to well-known scholars who loved knowledge and wisdom in both religious and secular fields. There were moderate thinkers who lived in the world of the mind, career-minded students committed to professional careers, and radical students who believed action was the only way to change the world. By examining the great diversity of people in Yenching, we may better understand the complexity of the institution and the ways cultural activities worked. This article will focus on two groups at Yenching who represent the two poles of education. The first consists of missionary educators like John Leighton Stuart, Lucius C. Porter, and other Westerners who believed that Christianity was exportable and could contribute to China’s modernization. As the ranking administrators of the university, they transformed the school into an experimental laboratory in which they could implement their ideas. Students stand at the other pole, not only as recipients of the new education and main products of Yenching’s experiment, but also as actors in their own right.
Cultural Mixture: China-born Missionary Educators and Yenching

The term “cultural mixture” refers to people or institutions shaped by exposure to two or more different cultural backgrounds or experiences. Christian schools were organized by Western missionaries on Chinese soil. In this sense, every Christian school and educator, including those who were there only for a short period of time, was a cultural mixture. But among the Westerners in Yenching, there were notable figures who fully exemplify the experiences and attitudes of cultural mixtures. The most famous and influential of the missionary educators at Yenching were those who lived in China for most of their lives. There were two who served from its inception almost to its closure. They were born in China, had a unique experience of living with Chinese people while young, received most of the school education in Western countries and returned to China to pursue their careers. They wanted to utilize modern Christian education from the West to change China, but they also had an empathetic understanding of the Chinese people.

John Leighton Stuart was a prime example of this phenomenon. He was considered “a mother who fostered Yenching”1 and a “synonymy” of Yenching.2 So if the university had a rationale in the early years, it was Stuart who set the agenda. Stuart was born in Hangzhou on 24 June 1876. Like many “miss kids” who were born in China, his wet-nurse and servants were all Chinese. His first language was Chinese. His mother, a well-educated and experienced teacher, started to teach him English and other knowledge only after he was four years old; by then he already was fluent in Chinese. The first time he went to America, Stuart called the American newsboys “foreign children.”3 As a child, Stuart considered himself more Chinese than an American. It took him a long time to make the adjustment.4

Stuart began his school education in the United States when he already was eleven to twelve years old. He was an excellent student and an active leader of the YMCA throughout his school years. He entered the Union Theological Seminary in Richmond in 1899 when the Student Volunteer Movement was reaching its peak. Unlike most of the Student

1. Bai Xuzhi, “Situ Jiaowuzhang nan xia ji” (The Trip of President Stuart to the South) Yanda yousheng (Voice of the friends of Yenching University), 27 Apr. 1935.