

Tsinghua University (Part 3)

By J. F. Lo

Outbreak of War and Relocation - 1937-1938

The hostilities that began after the "Marco Polo Bridge Incident" on July 7, 1937 did not catch Tsinghua University's authorities entirely by surprise. Two years earlier, plans had already been made to construct a new campus on the outskirts of Changsha in Hunan Province, and several boxcar-loads of books and laboratory equipment were secretly sent there in case the need for relocation arose. However, the project had not yet been completed when Beiping (the name for Beijing during 1928-1950) and Tianjin fell to the Japanese at the end of July. Meanwhile, the presidents of Tsinghua, Beijing and Nankai (a private institution in Tianjin) Universities were attending an emergency meeting in the south, and therefore unable to return to their posts.

On September 10, 1937, the Ministry of Education ordered the three schools to evacuate southward and merge to form Changsha Temporary University. The circumstances under which the move took place were extraordinarily difficult indeed. Nankai University had been destroyed by Japanese bombing, and the campuses of Beijing University (Beida) and Tsinghua were under occupation, so only a limited amount of books and equipment were available at the new site. Facilities to house the classrooms and students in Changsha had to be borrowed from several local institutions. Notifications were sent to faculty and students who were on summer vacation in many parts of the country, and transportation to Changsha was circuitous and time-consuming.

Under the joint leadership of the three university presidents, Mei Yi-qi of Tsinghua, Jiang Menglin of Beida, and Zhang Boling of Nankai, and with the cooperation of their faculty and staff, the reorganization of the academic and administrative system was worked out and classes started on November 1, 1937. The new university began with four colleges (Arts and

Humanities, Science, Engineering, and Law and Business) and seventeen departments, staffed by 148 faculty members, 73 of whom were from Tsinghua. A total of 1,120 returning students from the three universities registered for the new school year. Together with newly matriculated freshmen and transfer students from other universities, the initial enrollment was around 1,500. Among this total, the Tsinghua contingent was the largest, numbering 631. However, this was only half the size of the 1936 enrollment of 1,308.

The Changsha Temporary University was indeed temporary. After a shortened semester, constant air raids and the deteriorating military situation forced the university to embark on another move, this time to the distant southwestern city of Kunming in Yunnan Province. Planning began in earnest in January, 1938, with classes scheduled to resume there in mid-March. A forward group of administrators first set out by truck, while those faculty, staff and students who wished to travel together were organized into two separate groups. One group, which included all the female students, traveled by rail to Guangzhou and Hong Kong, then by sea to Vietnam, and finally by rail to Kunming. The other group would take the land route via Guizhou Province, using available means of transportation wherever possible, but traveling on foot most of the way. Over 200 faculty and students undertook this arduous journey of 1671 kilometers, 1,300 of which on foot, taking 68 days en-route and arriving at their destination on April 28. When second semester classes finally resumed on May 2 in Kunming, the enrollment was only 993 students.

National Southwest United University – The Early Years (1938-1941)

In April, 1938, Changsha Temporary University was officially renamed National Southwest United University, abbreviated in

Chinese as Lianda. Due to the shortage of available buildings and facilities, classes were first conducted in a variety of makeshift venues in Kunming, and the College of Arts and Humanities and the College of Law and Business were temporarily housed in the nearby town of Mengzi on the bank of the Red River. While a new campus was being planned, Kunming came under attack by Japanese bombers beginning in September, 1938. Since several middle schools and technical institutes were relocated to the outskirts of the city, Lianda also took over their facilities until a new campus was completed in the latter half of 1939. This campus consisted of crudely constructed buildings, many with walls of pounded mud and roofs of thatch, located outside the city wall with easy access to shelters during air raids.

The administration of Lianda was headed by a standing committee of three members, namely the previous presidents of the three constituent universities. Originally, the chairmanship of the committee was to be rotated annually. However, the presidents of Beida and Nankai were spending most of their time in the war-time capital Chongqing and busily engaged in other duties. Therefore, Tsinghua's President Mei was almost solely in charge of running the day-to-day affairs of the university during its long years in the southwest. He was assisted and advised by a new University Council and an elected Faculty Council on important matters such as budget, changes in academic programs, facilities planning and other general issues. While the colleges and departments in the three universities were merged, each was headed by only one dean or chairperson. The spirit of cooperation in adversity exhibited by the personnel of the three institutions seemed exemplary, and was responsible for the continuity and success of the academic programs during those difficult years.

When Indo-China fell to the Japanese in July, 1940 and Britain closed the Burma-Yunnan Highway, the military threat to China's southwest became more imminent. The Ministry of

Education began considering moving Lianda's valuable books and equipment, as well as the pre-college and freshman classes first to the town of Chengjiang, 59 kilometers southeast of Kunming. At the same time, a safer location for the entire university in Sichuan Province was being explored. Before any decision had been made, Japanese aerial bombardment on Kunming intensified after fall semester began, causing damage to Lianda buildings and injury to teachers and students. Although class and office schedules were changed to early morning and late evening hours to avoid the danger of air raids, a direct hit on campus in October accelerated the setting up of the branch campus in Xuyong, Sichuan Province and classes for a total of 600 students began there in January, 1941.

The disadvantages of the Xuyong campus, housed in the temples of this remote town without electricity, running water, library and other necessary facilities, far out-weighed the safety factor of its location. After enduring many hardships for two semesters, a decision was made to close the branch campus and re-consolidate all classes and students in Kunming beginning fall semester, 1941. Until after Pearl Harbor and the stationing of the United States 14 Air Force Squadron in Kunming, Lianda carried on its academic mission under constant Japanese air raids, at the cost of several lives and extensive property damage.

In spite of such difficult conditions, Lianda was able to distinguish itself because of its outstanding faculty which upheld high standards of academic excellence, and its student body drawn from eager and high quality candidates from all over the nation. The pre-war graduate programs in the three universities were soon restored and operated as separate entities. The College of Engineering was expanded in 1938 -39 to include a new Department of Aeronautics and a special program in Electronic Communication. A College of Education was added in 1938 to meet the urgent needs of the hinterland. Initially, separate degrees were awarded to graduates who had been enrolled in

the three universities before Lianda was established. Afterwards, undergraduate students were all admitted by Lianda. Separate offices were maintained by each component university to handle its graduate program admissions, student and graduate records, and alumni affairs. The Tsinghua scholarship program for study abroad was initially suspended, but later it was resumed and administered by its own independent office.

Lianda's Growth and Expansion (1941-1945)

During the vicissitudes of war and dislocation, many Lianda undergraduates volunteered for active military service or auxiliary support work behind the front lines. When Sino-American military cooperation began in 1941, large numbers of Lianda students were recruited or volunteered for translation work in the joint operations. A special translation training program was set up in Kunming in 1943, led and staffed mainly by Lianda professors. A total of about 400 Lianda students participated in translation and liaison work for the Joint Allied Forces fighting in the Yunnan-Burma-India Theater. Often their work experience was counted toward their university graduation requirements. Another group of over 200 students also rallied to the call for fresh military recruits and joined the "Youth Expeditionary Force" in 1944. Its mission was to counter the Japanese campaign to open a strategic route from Southeast Asia into Southwest China.

The relative stability after the winter of 1941 brought on a spurt of growth in the university, including the number of programs and student enrollment. In spite of the many disruptions and the harsh living conditions, Lianda continued to produce high quality graduates much needed by the nation. From 1939 to 1946, the university graduated a total of 2440 students; additionally, those who received Tsinghua degrees numbered 728, Beida degrees numbered 369, and Nankai degrees numbered 195, with a grand total of 3,732. Among them, a substantial number went on to advanced studies at home and abroad, eventually filling the ranks

of government, industry and academia, in China as well overseas. The honors they received included the Nobel Prize (Yang Zhen-ning, Tsinghua graduate school, 1944; Li Zhengdao, Lianda Sophomore, 1945) and other national and international awards. Many more became members of the Chinese Academy of Science (PRC) and Academia Sinica (Taiwan) and held leadership positions in numerous institutions of higher learning during the latter half of the 20th century.

Although Tsinghua was submerged under the umbrella of Southwest United University for nine long years, it is undeniable that it played a major role in the administration, teaching, and research of the war-time institution. Aside from the presidency, Tsinghua faculty members almost consistently occupied deanship positions in the Colleges of Arts and Humanities, Science and Engineering in Lianda. Tsinghua's liberal tradition continued unabated and its spirit of campus political activism of the 1930s was again in evidence after 1944 in Kunming. Sentiments against government policies began to build up even before the Japanese surrender, fueled by frustrations related to the timetable for repatriation back to North China. The academic year 1945 - 1946 was fraught with widespread student demonstrations, clashes with police, death of protestors and boycott of classes, eventually involving the student body as well as the Faculty Council. Finally, it was announced that the repatriation would begin on May 10, 1946, and elaborate plans were made to carry out the transporting of equipment and personnel along the tortuous routes which had survived the ravages of war. Faculty, staff, and students were to report back to one of the three universities of their affiliation or choice, and Southwest United University officially came to an end on July 31, 1946.

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