

TSINGHUA UNIVERSITY (Part 2)

By J. F.Lo

TRANSITION TO A NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

After the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, the Republic of China was established with Nanjing as its capital. Soon the fragile government was taken over by powerful northern warlords who moved the capital back to Beijing and made a travesty of the republic in the next decade and half. Fortunately during this time, Tsinghua University, with its financial independence guaranteed by the presence of the American Legation in Beijing, was not significantly affected by the festering political conflict. The distance of its campus from the center of the city and the relative youthfulness of the student body were among the reasons why Tsinghua was less embroiled in the May Fourth Movement of 1919 and the prolonged student unrest that subsequently spread to all parts of China. On the other hand, this unique institution had also acquired a reputation for elitism, as its students were guaranteed an education in the United States supported by its generous scholarship fund.

In 1926 the Nationalist Party, founded by Sun Yat-sen and led by Chiang Kai-shek after Sun's death in 1924, launched its Northern Expedition against the warlords. By 1928, it had established a central government in Nanjing, and Beijing and large portions of North China were brought under its control. Thirteen major public institutions of higher learning in the nation became national universities under the jurisdiction of the new Ministry of Education, and Tsinghua was renamed National Tsinghua University headed by a new president. Educated in the U.S. and Europe, President Luo Jia-lun arrived in September, 1928 with the mission of carrying out the transition and the necessary reforms. In his inaugural address, he argued that China's political unification was the first step

towards achieving the nation's quest for independence, freedom and equality, and that China's academic institutions must take the lead in reaching these goals. He pledged to accelerate the growth of Tsinghua into a full-fledged university by building a strong faculty; reorganizing the departments within the three Colleges of Arts and Humanities, Science, and Social Science and Law; phasing out the program for sending students to continue their studies in the U.S.; opening the scholarship program for graduate study abroad to qualified applicants from other universities; and admitting female students for the first time in the university's history.

EXPANSION AND TRANSFORMATION – 1928-1937

The new president's plan for reforming the management of the endowment and his ambitious program of construction and expansion soon met with opposition by the Board of Directors. Being an outsider (a graduate of rival Peking University), he also encountered dissatisfaction from among faculty, staff, students and alumni groups whose interests were adversely affected by the new measures. Furthermore, his tenure at Tsinghua coincided with the growing wave of student activism, which was fueled by the political polarization that followed in the wake of the turmoil of the May Fourth Movement.

Luo began his two-year administration with the immediate replacement of more than half of the faculty with young outstanding Chinese degree-holders from abroad. Many foreign teachers who had taught at Tsinghua under the old system were denied tenure and new permanent and visiting professors from abroad were hired. Faculty salaries were increased in

order to attract the best minds from the national pool, with no preference given to Tsinghua alumni. After prolonged negotiations between the university administration, student and faculty representatives, and the Nanjing government authorities, the Tsinghua Board of Directors was formally replaced by a new China Cultural Foundation in 1929, while both the Policy-Making Faculty Council and the advisory Faculty Council were institutionalized in the new University By-laws.

Under Luo's insistence and backed by the Faculty Council, new rules were approved for the management of the endowment, including setting aside an annual percentage for construction and facility improvements. A balanced budget was achieved through better administrative efficiency and the elimination of waste. Increased attention was given to the College of Science while the teaching of traditional Chinese culture was not to be neglected. An enlarged library and gymnasium, a Biology Lab Building, a meteorological observatory, and new dormitories were among the projects begun during this period. Planning for graduate programs was begun in nine departments. While enrollment was being increased, the last graduating class under the old system was sent to the U.S. in 1929. Faculty sabbatical year abroad was instituted, and tuition scholarships were set up for qualified needy students. In a university already rich with student activities, the appearance of women infused new vigor to Tsinghua's campus life. In sum, the reforms and initiatives undertaken during Luo Jia-lun's term as president (1928-1930) enabled the university to transform itself into a liberal institution of higher learning that became the envy of the nation.

"THE GOLDEN ERA" AND PRESIDENT MEIYI-QI

From 1931 until the Japanese invasion forced its evacuation to the Southwest in 1938, Tsinghua enjoyed a period of stability and growth under the presidency of Mei Yi-qi. An American-educated and experienced educator, his vision for the university was two-fold: to cultivate a wide range of talents needed in China's development,

and to make the university a catalyst in the creation of a modern culture. He argued against early specialization, and introduced a broad-based curriculum in the arts and humanities and the basic sciences for all students during their first two years. Besides continuing to enlarge and upgrade the quality of the faculty and increase the size and number of departments, Mei also stressed the urgent need to train students in the applied sciences by instituting the College of Engineering in 1932 in order to meet the growing demand of national reconstruction and defense.

The growth of Tsinghua during the decade before the Sino-Japanese war was significant in several respects. Because the annual allocations from the endowment remained fairly constant, unaffected by periodic fiscal crises encountered by the central government, the physical setting of the university did not cease evolving. The campus almost doubled in size, and the infrastructure increased rapidly. While President Luo began with construction of the expanded library, the women's dormitory, and major buildings in the College of Science, President Mei's continued with multiple projects, especially those for the College of Engineering, as well as faculty and student housing. Student enrollment rose from 473 in 1928 to 1338 in 1937, while faculty increased three fold' from 75 in 1928 to 232 in 1936. Meanwhile, the ratio between student and faculty remained low at under 6:1.

Tsinghua's reputation among China's universities was built upon its funding stability, outstanding faculty, and its facilities for teaching and research. Among the faculty, those with doctorates and master's degrees from abroad accounted for about 25% each, and around half were alumni of the university. Foreign faculty consistently remained around 5%. The College of Arts and Humanities and the College of Science initially led the university in size and reputation, but the College of Engineering began catching up in the mid-1930s with a rapid increase in imported laboratory equipment for the departments of Electrical and Mechanical

Engineering. The completion of an aeronautical laboratory in 1935 and the successful installation of a wind tunnel by a faculty team the next year propelled the university to the forefront in this national defense priority. In terms of its academic excellence and leadership in research, Tsinghua in the 1930s was definitely in the forefront in the nation, and the standards of its Engineering College were almost comparable to those of first tier institutions in the West.

For students who attended Tsinghua during the mid-1930s, those were the golden years of their lives when they were able to pursue their studies in a stable and comfortable environment, under the tutelage of a high caliber and devoted faculty. They took pride in their special "Tsinghua Spirit", which was a blend of western liberalism and the traditional Chinese literati ideal, enabling them to enjoy a high degree of intellectual freedom and remain largely above the political fray. The faculty, on their part, carried out their teaching and research free from financial worries and political interference. As Chen-ning Yang, the Nobel laureate in Physics whose father was a professor of mathematics at Tsinghua, reminisced many years later, "The eight years (1929 - 1937) I spent on the Tsinghua campus were full of beautiful and happy memories. Although Chinese society was undergoing great turmoil, with pressures from within and without, and the difficulties were numerous, we lived our lives within the walls of the university, and we had little contact with the world outside."

During the period 1929 - 1938, a total of 1520 students graduated from National Tsinghua University with bachelor's degrees, and 27 obtained advanced degrees from the graduate programs. The College of Social Science and Law (with three departments: Sociology, Political Science and Economics) produced the largest number of graduates, followed by Arts and Humanities, Science, and Engineering. Women consisted of only 7.1% of the total. A small percentage of the graduates continued their studies abroad while large numbers landed

positions in teaching and research, and in government agencies and private sector industries across the nation.

The achievements of the pre-War graduates have been responsible for enhancing the reputation of Tsinghua during the better part of the 20th century, in China as well as overseas. Those from the Colleges of Science and Engineering held responsible positions in both the civil and military sectors involved in China's war effort against Japan. Graduates from the other Colleges filled the ranks of governmental, educational, financial and research institutions. After 1949, a majority of Tsinghua faculty and graduates remained on the mainland, and three physics alumni distinguished themselves in developing China's nuclear and space programs. Other faculty and graduates from the Colleges of Science and Engineering also played important roles in major areas of science and technology. On the other hand, most of the faculty and graduates in the social sciences and humanities there were less fortunate in their career paths, due also to their western-oriented Tsinghua connection. In contrast, the smaller percentage that moved to Taiwan, Hong Kong and the United States was generally successful regardless of each individual's field of specialization. The economic, scientific and technological development in Taiwan owed much to Tsinghua graduates who served in a whole range of capacities, some of whom as university presidents, deans, department chairs, cabinet ministers and diplomats. In the United States, many pre-War Tsinghua faculty and alumni were also able to make smooth transitions and significant contributions in a variety of professions during the latter half of the 20th century.

THE END OF AN ERA - 1937

The presidency of Mei Yi-qi began in 1931, soon after Japan invaded China's Northeastern Provinces (Manchuria), followed by its unrelenting political and military pressures to expand its control of North China. Beijing, being in the center of the noose, was racked by

student protests that called for resistance by the central government. Tsinghua students, egged on by left-wing organizers, became heavily involved in the anti-Japanese agitations. However, Mei was skillful in preventing major disruptions to campus life, particularly in late 1935 and 1936. When the Japanese attacked the Marco Polo Bridge southwest of Beijing on July 7, 1937, the university was on summer vacation and totally unprepared for the emergency. The hurried decision to move the faculty, students, and equipment to the interior was arrived at while the invaders were closing in on the city. The College

of Arts and Humanities was the first to resume classes in Changsha, Hunan# Province in November, but it had to move again in early 1938 to Kunming where Tsinghua merged with two other northern universities. National Peking University and the private Nankai University, to form the United Southwestern University. Thus, Tsinghua's "golden era" came to an end and a new and very difficult era began.

Jiu-Fong Lo was born in China and has studied and worked in the U.S. since 1955. A life-long student of history, she is now retired from teaching and lives in Seattle.