

Tsinghua University (Part 5)

BY J. F. LO

Coming of the Storm – Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, 1966 - 1976

By the early 1960s, Mao Zedong had already been sidelined in the Chinese Communist Party, as his successive political campaigns had brought ruin to the nation's economy. His strategy to regain power was to launch an unprecedented mass movement which would topple the State Chairman, Liu Shaoqi, as well as all others in the party establishment who stood in his way. At the same time, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was also intended to eradicate all the old elements in traditional Chinese society and to establish a true dictatorship of the proletariat.

Mao began by targeting the institutions of higher learning, from which he wanted to purge the remaining capitalist-roaders, liberals, and Soviet-style revisionists among their administrators and faculty. A big character poster written by a group of junior faculty at Beijing University on May 25, 1966 signaled the all out assault against the leadership at the university and the Beijing city government. Soon, the entire upper echelons of the Chinese Communist Party itself came under attack. As the nation's premier university, Beida immediately witnessed waves of frenzied demonstrations and indiscriminate attacks against these targets, thereby serving as the model for colleges, universities and school all over the country.

Opponents of Mao's tactics, headed by Liu Shaoqi and Premier Zhou Enlai, quickly tried to stem the tide by sending a "working group" to take charge at Beida, but to no avail. They next moved to Tsinghua University and briefly succeeded in keeping its small "rebel clique" under control. Soon, however, its president Jiang

Nan-xiang was removed from his position, and all top level political administrators were branded as members of the "black gang", humiliated and paraded on the streets. In August, 1966, after the nation-wide "Red Guard" movement received Mao's personal blessing, the persecutions at Tsinghua widened to include all faculty members, among whom were such prominent names as Liang Si-cheng (Architecture), Liu Xianzhou (Mechanical Engineering) and Qian Weichang (Physics). Many were beaten, imprisoned on campus, and had their homes ransacked, and an estimated 70% of faculty and staff were also sent away to receive "re-education through labor".

Thus, beginning in the summer of 1966, Tsinghua replaced Beida as the hotbed of student radicalism, as well as the Mecca for students from all corners of the nation. For the next two years, educational activities were at a virtual standstill, while the campus served as center stage in the national power struggle through the staging of marathon meetings, massive street demonstrations, breaking into government offices and seizing classified documents, and holding kangaroo courts for senior military and political officials. Splinter groups among the radical students also fought against each other, as well as against the "workers' brigade" sent to disarm them. 1968 witnessed numerous violent confrontations on campus, and in a pitched battle fought with real weapons in July, five members of the "workers' brigade" were killed, and 731 persons were wounded.

A Revolution in Education

After crippling his major opponents at the highest level of the party and the government, Mao's second objective was to completely overturn the existing educational system by

launching a “revolution in education”. In May, 1966, he had already formulated the principle of “merging school and workplace”. Each of the three most important sectors of society, namely, workers, peasants and soldiers, must learn not only its own skills, but also the skills of the others, while purging all detrimental influences of the well-to-do and intellectual classes. The goal was to eliminate the gap between those who labor with their minds and those who labor with their bodies; between those who work in the factories and those who toil in the fields; and between the cities and the countryside. This would then result in the emergence of a new class of people who could wield the hoe, the hammer, the pen and the rifle with equal facility, and who could carry on the mission of continuous revolution.

Under this new system, education must serve the interests of the proletariat, and the educated class must be transformed through learning from the other classes. Higher education must thoroughly reform its curricula, duration of study and other requirements under the direction of a “Revolutionary Committee” at each institution. In July, 1968, a “workers’ propaganda brigade” moved onto the Tsinghua campus, and officially established such a Committee which began by sending study groups to factories, communes and military units to gather opinions regarding educational reform. Then, for the next nine years, this all-powerful Committee was the highest authority at Tsinghua University, replacing the president, deans, department chairs and the faculty council.

1968 was a watershed year when Tsinghua graduated around 5,000 students from the classes of 1960, 1961 and 1962, all of whom were admitted and educated under the old system and had to undergo practical training before being assigned jobs. Under the new guidelines dubbed “amateurs should lead professionals”, all 20 “units” at the university were administered by committees chosen from among faculty, staff, and members of the “workers’ brigade”. Each committee was headed by either a skilled factory

worker or a military representative who would oversee all teaching, research and production activities. This was called the “three-in-one” system which put all three functions of the institution under a unified command. Beginning in 1970, all competitive entrance examinations were abolished and incoming students were selected only on the basis of their ideological purity, work experience and three types of family backgrounds (workers, peasants and soldiers), with a minimum requirement of a junior high school education. According to the 1971 statistics on incoming freshmen at seven universities and colleges in Beijing, 21% were at the high school level, 78% were at the junior high school level, and 0.6% were at the upper primary school level.

In order to adjust to the lowered academic standards of the new student body, the curriculum in each discipline had to be modified accordingly. Programs were shortened to three or two years, and new simplified textbooks and manuals had to reflect the spirit of “revolution, practicality and progressiveness”. Tests and grades were de-emphasized, and graduation requirements were substantially reduced, with practical courses outweighing theoretical ones. In every discipline and in overall student performance, Maoist ideology was to be at the center of all instructional activity and evaluation, and no effort was spared in upholding the principle of class struggle. When a few small steps were taken to upgrade the academic components in some programs in 1972 and 1973, a renewed campaign was launched against such “restoration of elitism”, resulting in 64 faculty and staff being severely reprimanded, 403 censured, and numerous others designated for self-criticism or dismissal.

The “Nightmare” at Tsinghua

The new system at Tsinghua also required that faculty and students be sent to off-campus and distant sites to participate in factory and farm work and to gain hands-on experience through labor. At the same time, a variety of workshops and manufacturing facilities were set up on campus, engaged in such activities as

producing transistors and chemicals, die-casting, welding, and automobile assembly. Beginning in 1969, groups consisting of hundreds of teachers and students would be constantly rotated to the countryside for field studies and “revolutionary education” work, while tens of thousands from all over the nation would come to Beijing to learn from the Tsinghua experiment.

While Tsinghua was being transformed into a brand new revolutionary institution, it was by no means immune to the continuous waves of disruptive campaigns launched by Mao and his cohorts in order to hold onto political power. Precious time was spent on criticism sessions during the “Anti-Lin Biao and Anti-Confucious” (1971 – 1974) and the “Anti-Rightist Revivalism” (1973-1974) campaigns. In March, 1974, Tsinghua graduated its first class of about 2,000 “worker-peasant-soldier students”, and in September, former president Jiang Nan-xiang was finally freed from his reform school at an automobile factory. During a discussion session there in 1971, Jiang voiced his concern for the future of his university, lamenting that “if a university of science and technology only teaches the know-how of a middle school-level technical institute, then this university can only fulfill the mission of such an institute.” In actuality, this was to remain Tsinghua’s fate until after the death of Mao in September, 1976 and the arrest of the “Gang of Four” a month later. The long road of recovery, however, would not begin until after 1977.

National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan

The story of the re-birth of Tsing Hua University in Taiwan began with the departure of President Mei Yi-qit from Beijing in late 1948 and the move of the Nationalist Government to Taiwan. Since the assets of the Tsinghua University Foundation were invested in the United States, its interest earnings were at first used to support research by Chinese academics in the United States and to purchase books and equipment for colleges and universities in

Taiwan. After the signing of the “Sino-American Agreement on Cooperative Research in the Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy” in 1955, the ROC government recalled President Mei from the United States to head the preparatory committee for establishing a graduate institute in nuclear physics, as a first step in the re-building of Tsing Hua University in Taiwan.

It was decided that the campus would be located in Hsinchu County, on a site totaling 86 hectares. Funding for construction would be provided by the Ministry of Education, while Tsing Hua’s own Foundation would shoulder the cost of the library and equipment. In early 1956, President Mei went to the United States entrusted with the tasks of recruiting faculty and initiating the purchase of a nuclear reactor. In September, 1956, the new Institute of Nuclear Science admitted twenty-one graduate students to its two-year master’s degree program, and classrooms were at first borrowed from National Taiwan University. Students moved to the new campus the next year, and from 1958 to 1961, the Institute purchased and installed a Van de Graaff accelerator and an open-pool reactor after the completion of the Nuclear Reactor Laboratory and Nuclear Science Building. In 1960, the Nuclear Engineering and the Radio-isotope Laboratories were also completed. These developments took place while President Mei concurrently served as the Minister of Education (1958-1961), Vice-chairman of the National Science Development Commission (1959-1962) and Chairman of the Nuclear Energy Commission (1961-1962). Although American aid contributed substantially to the steady growth of Tsinghua’s nuclear research program, installation of the equipment was the result of cooperation between local architects, the Institute’s own engineers and scientists, and other public and private agencies in Taiwan.

The growth of Tsing Hua’s Hsinchu campus during its first decades owed much to the leadership of its presidents, deans, and distinguished permanent and visiting faculty, among whom many were loyal alumni, and quite

a number had chosen to return from abroad. The 1960s saw steady growth with the addition of the Institute of Mathematics in 1963, undergraduate programs in Nuclear Engineering and Mathematics in 1964, Physics in 1965 and Chemistry in 1966. In 1966, a separate Institute of Physics was inaugurated and its first doctoral degree was awarded in 1970. The spurt of expansion in the next decade was made possible with the support of the National Science Development Commission, fund-raising efforts by the alumni, and cooperation with American and local institutions such as the Argonne National Laboratory, the Academia Sinica, and other universities in Taiwan. By 1972, a total of eleven graduate institutes and seven academic departments were in operation, divided later into the Colleges of Science, Engineering and Nuclear Science. Some of the early results in research and development included a Mobile Educational Reactor, a Chinese language key-in method for use in computer programming, and vehicles with electric engines. Also, beginning in the mid-1970s, several types of training and continuing

education programs were regularly held during the summer for public sector employees and secondary school science teachers.

Planning for restoring the teaching of the humanities was begun in 1974. With Taiwan's rapid economic growth and in an environment favorable to expansion in education, the university established the Departments of Chinese Literature, Foreign Languages, and Economics, the Institute of Humanities and Sociology, and the Institute of History. When National Tsing Hua University celebrated its 70th anniversary in Hsinchu in 1981, it had come a long way towards regaining its former status as a comprehensive university.

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