

St. John's University

[Shanghai](#) (China)

On April 14, 1879, crowds drawn from the agricultural district outside of Shanghai watched a ceremony taking place on a peninsula of land surrounded by the Soochow Creek. The Chinese who were to be the neighbors of St. John's University observed "the novel proceedings with apparent wondering interest," according to the North China Herald, as the cornerstone of the school's first buildings was laid.

St. John's was the vision of Samuel I. J. Schereschewsky, Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in China. The first buildings of St. John's were an unpretentious quadrangle used for classrooms and residence. The tiled roofs were ornamented at the corners by "upturned horns," emblems said to signify a place of learning to the Chinese.

The first building of a more permanent nature was the Pro-Cathedral, erected in 1884. In the early years, daily attendance at chapel services was obligatory for all students, with two services on Sunday. This policy was changed in 1931, so that attendance was obligatory only for students of Christian persuasion, who constituted about one-third of the student body at that time. At length, chapel attendance became voluntary for all students, in accordance with the regulations required by the Chinese government for registration of educational institutions.

Since St. John's original quadrangle was deemed "quite unworthy, as far as architecture was concerned, to be called a college," a new main building was erected in 1894. Architectural plans were drawn in America, but St. John's President F. L. H. Potts found them unsuitable and received approval to engage Shanghai architect Brennan Atkinson to design the building. The result was a style of architecture that meshed Chinese elements like a graceful curved roofline with more standard Western elements of educational architecture. This style became the model for future buildings on the campuses of various mission-supported colleges and universities in China. Named Schereschewsky Hall (though generally referred to as the more manageable S. Y. Hall), this central building provided space for classrooms, dormitory rooms, and a dining hall, allowing St. John's to increase the size of its student body on both the preparatory and college levels.

Science Hall, built in 1894, was the first instance in China of a college erecting a special building for the purpose of teaching the Natural Sciences. Of a similar architectural style as Schereschewsky Hall, Science Hall contained dormitory space on its top floor in addition to classroom and laboratory facilities. The demand for Western education was growing so quickly in the Shanghai area that, despite its expansion, St. John's had room to admit only one-third of those who applied in 1900. The need for more space was addressed in 1904 by the completion of Yen Hall, named after the Reverend Y. K. Yen, a member of St. John's first faculty. This building provided dormitory accommodations for 150 more students as well as

quarters for resident faculty, an assembly space that could seat 600, a reception room, administrative offices, and a library.

College life provided a new and exhilarating freedom for the Chinese students. One alumnus reflected:

The reading of novels, the learning of amateurish Chinese and foreign music, the gormandising of food or sweet-meats and the telling of stories in the dormitories represented the sweetness of freedom. Once in a while a clique of older and braver students might take it into their heads that to emulate grown-ups, they would smoke cigarettes, drink some wine bought from the village, or even hold beanfeasts after midnight when the proctors were snoring to the rhythm of the college clock. Then it was the duty of the sentinel to listen for the approaching footsteps of Dr. Pott, who, after writing his sermon for Sunday must necessarily air his brain and incidentally catch a few mischievous boys at their escapades. However the 'kok-kok-kok' of his heels on the pavements soon transformed the whispering revelry into grave-like silence, so the 'nosey' president retired with the comforting thought that 'All's well.'

The assembly hall within Yen Hall was named Alumni Hall in recognition of the financial contributions of St. John's alumni toward the project. St. John's successfully sought to develop the kind of school spirit and alumnaal loyalty characteristic of American universities. The idea of loyal devotion to one's alma mater, backed by generous financial support, quickly caught on with the St. John's graduates, especially as many went on to continue their education in the United States. By the 1907-1908 academic year, thirty St. John's graduates were studying in America and ten in Great Britain.

School ceremonies and traditions became an important part of what made mission-supported colleges and universities distinctive. A contemporary description of the Closing Exercises held July 5, 1907 in Alumni Hall gives a sense of this distinctive atmosphere: "Our spacious hall was elaborately and beautifully decorated. Looking into it one would be struck first by the sight of the flags - the Chinese, the American, the British, and the College flags - hanging in the most friendly manner at the back of the platform. Besides these big flags there were six Intercollegiate Athletic champion banners, also hanging on the wall, the great achievements of the College, proving to the world that our school excels other institutions in China not only in intellectual capacity but also in bodily strength."

Later in the month of July 1907, tragedy struck a young member of the St. John's faculty. Arthur S. Mann was twenty-eight years old, a graduate of Yale College who had come to St. John's in 1904 and was a well-loved teacher of economics and New Testament exegesis. On the morning of July 29th five young men on holiday from their work in educational institutions in China began the trek from Kuling to White Deer Grotto, on the south side of the Lushan range, near Kiukiang. Arriving before noon, they examined the tablets and inscriptions to be found in the Grotto, had lunch, and then began their return journey. Around 2 p.m. the men stopped to swim in the pools formed by the river near the Goddess of

Mercy Bridge. A memorial to Mann in the October 1907 St. John's Echo recounts the unfortunate events that followed:

While the better swimmers of the day were hunting for a path to the main pool, which is very difficult of access, Mr. Warren B. Seabury of the Yale Mission College in Changsha, Hunan, who was undressing on a large slimy rock, slipped and fell into the torrent, and was hurled over the waterfall into a boiling cauldron. As the other friends were planning to reach him, Mr. Mann unhesitatingly jumped into the pool, about twenty feet below the place where Mr. Seabury was last seen and attempted to swim into the waterfall. After several unsuccessful attempts, he was finally caught by the whirlpool and was seen to sink; and he never rose again. Meanwhile all the others exerted their utmost strength to rescue the two men, but to no avail.

A dormitory building built at St. John's the following year was named after Arthur Mann. Mann Hall, designed by architect A. E. Algar, provided accommodations for ninety-six students and three Western faculty. A memorial placed at the foot of its main stairway read "Greater love than this hath no man, that he lay down his life for his friend."

The campus continued to grow. In 1915 the cornerstone was laid for Anniversary Hall, named in recognition of President F. L. H. Pott's twenty-five years at St. John's. This building, which housed the growing library as well as seminar rooms, was funded entirely by St. John's alumni and students. A new Science Hall was begun in 1918, the first building to extend the St. John's campus to the other side of the Soochow Creek. It contained quarters for the biology, chemistry, and physics departments, including state-of-the-art laboratories.

Cooper Memorial Gymnasium, opened in 1919, was one of the first college gymnasiums in China. It had an indoor swimming pool, as well as facilities to play sports such as basketball, which had been introduced to China in 1915. The mission-supported colleges and universities, and St. John's in particular were pioneers in introducing physical education to China. The first formal sports activities at St. John's were held on the lawn in front of the chapel on May 20, 1890, and by 1902 outdoor sports were very popular on campus. As one faculty member wrote, "Any afternoon after half-past four the playground is alive with boys, who seem to have caught something of the Western out-of-school spirit. They rush and run and shout in a very unChinese way. In the three tennis courts really good play can be seen, while several bicycles fly around on what seems to be a mad career..." The popularity of intercollegiate athletic contests is attested to by broad coverage in the St. John's Echo.

At the time of St. John's Fiftieth Anniversary in 1929, a Memorial Arch was given to the university by the gentry of Zau-ka-doo (Ts'aochiatu) and the Social Hall built in memory of Mrs. Soo-Ngoo Pott, wife of President Pott, was opened. This Hall provided an elegant site for banquets and receptions, as well as other student activities. Christmas time brought an evening celebration with a visit from Santa Claus and a pageant by the students before they gathered around the lighted Christmas tree in front of the Pro-Cathedral to sing carols.

Political turbulence took its toll on St. John's as well as on all educational institutions in China from the 1920s through the 1940s. In September 1937, following the start of the Sino-

Japanese war, it was decided to move St. John's temporarily within the International Settlement in Shanghai. By 1938, the St. John's campus near Soochow Creek was filled to overflowing with more than 900 people, most of them refugees. Buildings on campus were used as storehouse and the verandahs were blocked up with huge rolls of paper belonging to a local newspaper firm.

Further reading

Fulcher, Helen McCracken. [Mission to Shanghai: The Life of Medical Service of Dr. Josiah C. McCracken](#). New London, NH: Tiffin Press, 1995.

Lamberton, Mary. [St. John's University, Shanghai, 1879-1951](#). New York: United Board for Christian Colleges in China, 1955.