

West China Union University

Hua xi xie he da xue

華西協合大學

[Chengdu](#) (Sichuan Sheng, China)

West China Union University was established in 1910 as a union venture of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, the Friends' Foreign Mission Association of Great Britain and Ireland, the General Board of Missions of the Methodist Church of Canada, (later the United Church of Canada), and the Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, USA. The Church Missionary Society of England became a partner in the University in 1918 and the Women's Foreign Missionary Boards of the American Baptist Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Canada were admitted to participation in 1925.

In 1911-1912, shortly after WCUU was established, political unrest forced most Westerners to leave West China, and the activities of the University were in abeyance for two years. Beginning operations again in 1913, the University planned an ambitious building program of more than twenty buildings. According to the articles of union, each mission partner in the venture was responsible for purchasing property, erecting buildings for the housing of its staff and students, and contributing a college building for teaching purposes. The Board of Governors of the University purchased property for the teaching buildings and general campus and erected the university administrative and teaching buildings and residences for those members of the staff who are maintained by the Board of Governors. Accommodations were to be provided for six hundred and fifty students, as well as the faculty and staff.

A firm of British architects, Fred Rowntree and Sons, was selected by competition to design a plan for the WCUU campus. An initial difficulty facing the architects was the large number of grave plots, some very old, that were scattered on the more than one hundred acres of farm land just south of the city of Chengtu that had been purchased for the WCUU campus. These graves, mounds of earth built up on raised land above the general level of the water which covered the adjacent fields at rice-growing season, all needed to be transferred elsewhere. A second difficulty was the system of irrigation canals on the plain where WCUU was to be situated. Some of these canals were diked up higher than the surrounding land, so care had to be taken to not interfere with agricultural needs beyond the campus.

The scale of WCUU's building program was particularly ambitious considering that before the advent of air travel, three months of travel were required to reach Chengtu from Europe or North America. According to a 1932 report:

One to two months of that time would be spent on a houseboat amid the perils of rapids, rocks, and robbers along the Yangtse River. On arrival at Chungking it was

often deemed advisable to take the overland trip of four hundred miles to Chengtu. That stage was made on foot or by sedan chair, through territory usually infested by bandits and often occupied by armies engaged in civil war. By night "China's millions" of creeping, crawling, hopping things lay in wait to devour the wayfarer in the poor shelter of China's inns."

Such difficulties of transport did not prevent WCUU from developing a well-appointed campus. Of particular note was the installation of a central heating system in the new Library-Museum building. A brochure from this time period reports:

Not only is it the first modern heating plant installed in this part of the world, but, as expressed by our Dean of Arts, it is the greatest cultural contribution that has been made. It is expected to transform a deserted building into the center of scholastic activities during long winter evenings and remove the fire hazards of a lot of stoves.

The Administration Building, designed by British architect Rowntree, was built under the supervision of Superintendent of Construction Raymond C. Richer. Richer's March 21, 1920 report to the WCUU Board of Governors gives a glimpse of the difficulties encountered in the building process:

It was a great disappointment to me, and to the Senate, that the work was not completed earlier. A year ago last November finishing lumber enough to complete the flooring of the North wing was contracted for, and all was to be delivered within a few weeks. The dealer kept making promises along with his excuses for delay, and official pressure being unavailing, it became necessary to place another contract, the time then being very disadvantageous from the standpoint of price, and of stage of water to ensure a prompt delivery. It was actually eight months before this lot of lumber, promised in full within five weeks, was delivered, and that only after both official and consular pressure had been exerted for many months. Of course the lumber was wet and unfit for use immediately without kiln-drying, so that extra expense and time was necessitated.

Richer's problems were compounded by a long distance relationship with an architect unfamiliar with Chinese building materials:

I have learned from experience in these buildings that I should not attempt to follow as closely as a builder in America is supposed to follow, the architect's plans. There have been very grave problems in the construction of the roof of the Administration building, owing to the "trusses" being in no case real trusses, i.e. structures stable in themselves, without the aid of supporting walls or buttresses to take up the thrust. These have not held up under the great weight of the Chinese tiles, and have caused spreading....

Hart College, built by the Canadian Methodists, was formally opened in April, 1920. It was used by the University for chemistry, physics, and biology laboratories and classrooms, as well as classrooms for the Faculty of Religion. It contained a chapel used for Sunday evening services.

The Coles Memorial Clock Tower, completed in 1926, was the gift of J. Ackerman Coles of New York. To the chagrin of WCUU, Coles died in 1925 and left no provision in his will for the funds necessary to complete the tower. A hefty file of correspondence in the WCUU archives documents the University's efforts to negotiate a settlement with the Coles estate.

The West China Union University was renowned for its medical and dental education programs.

The Faculty of Medicine was organized in 1914. The Faculty of Dentistry was organized in 1920, the first such program in all of China. By 1932 nearly half of all the students at West China Union University were registered in the Medical-Dental College. At that time fifty-eight of the 112 students registered in the Faculty of Medicine were women; six of forty-four students registered in the Faculty of Dentistry were women. The missionary hospitals in Chengtu associated with the Medical-Dental College were treating more than 100,000 people per year in the 1930s.

Further reading

Walmsley, Lewis Calvin. [West China Union University](#). New York: United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, 1974.