

# Yenching University

## Yanjing da xue

## 燕京大學

[Beijing](#) (China)

Yenching University was a union venture blending Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, American, and British strands. Predecessor institutions included the Methodist-supported Peking University and the North China College, which was established by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and located in Tungchow, about twelve miles east of Peking. The union institution was originally known as Peking University, but in 1912 the name of the Chinese government institution in Beijing (called the Imperial University by Westerners) was changed to Peking University and it seemed wise to rename the Christian university Yenching University in order to avoid confusion. From 1916 to 1926 Yenching was housed in buildings in Beijing, but its site was deemed too small for the proposed growth of the University, so land was sought outside the city. Dr. J. Leighton Stuart became President of Yenching in 1919 and was a strong force in the development of the school.

Finally in the summer of 1920 a site was secured for the new campus five miles to the northwest of Beijing on the main highway to the Old Summer Palace and the New Summer Palace. The land had been a country estate developed by Ho Shen, Minister of State in the reign of the Emperor Ch'ien Lung, and was called Shu Ch'un Yuan, Garden of Modest Gaiety. When Emperor Ch'ien Lung died in 1789, Ho Shen was condemned to death by the new Emperor; his estate was confiscated and became part of the cluster of parks, palaces, gardens, and residences belonging to the Manchu Emperors.

The estate that became the core of Yenching University's new campus covered sixty acres and was landscaped with man-made hills, grottos, lakes, and islands. It had fallen into considerable disrepair when purchased by Yenching, but the underpinnings of a beautiful campus remained. The University purchased several surrounding plots of land and by 1925 200 acres were available for campus development, of which 116 were owned by the University.

Yenching's Construction Bureau, headed by Professor John McGregor Gibb, was kept busy for years as the new campus developed. The first building erected was a School of Religion building named for Bishop William Ninde of the Methodist Church. This was followed by a library named for Thomas and Janet Berry and a central administration building named for Bishop James W. Bashford. Bashford Hall contained a large assembly hall and administrative offices. To the left of Bashford was a recitation or classroom building named McBrier Hall, and to its right a science building housing the biology and physics programs.

The North China Women's College became the Women's College of Yenching University in 1920. It received support from the "Seven Oriental Colleges for Women" fundraising campaign to erect several buildings, including a recitation building named Sage Hall and an administration building named Luella Miner Hall in honor of the first Dean of the Women's College.

Yenching began operating from its new campus in the fall of 1926, though the Dedication and Formal Opening of the campus were not held until October 1, 1929. The enthusiasm engendered by the new campus is reflected in the following description:

Entering the campus from the west through the gorgeous Alumni Gateway with its bright-red doors and pillars and gaily cornered cornices, and with its two fierce-looking marble lions constantly on guard, the visitors beheld a charming panorama of academic buildings, designed in Chinese style. The grass lawn ... was adorned with two lofty marble pillars, entwined with carved dragons reaching up to clouds which projected horizontally and thus seemed to be floating in air. Atop each pillar was a mythical animal. These pillars originally flanked the Imperial Ancestral Hall in the Yuan Ming Yuan (Old Summer Palace). These sculptures, plus the lions at the gate and two other mythical animals which flanked the entrance to Bashford Hall, had been rescued by the University from the ruins of the nearby Yuan Ming Yuan and installed on the campus by permission of the last Emperor of China, confirmed by the Mayor of Peking.

South of the main group of buildings was a large man-made lake, with the Luce Pavilion on an island reached by an arched bridge. A graceful octagonal structure with scarlet pillars supporting its roof, sheltered by an ancient pine tree, the Pavilion was financed by friends in Scranton, Pennsylvania, to honor Yenching's Vice-president, Henry W. Luce.

From a distance the most striking feature of the Yenching campus was its pagoda. Located on the southeastern border of the lake, the tower was a thirteen storied replica of an ancient Tungchow pagoda, but was used as a water tower. As Dwight Edwards, Yenching's historian relates:

*Before it was built there was considerable debate whether it was seemly for a Christian institution to adopt a type of structure brought to China by Buddhist missionaries. But a study of the function of pagodas revealed that they had very wholesome associations and that, when the breeze stirred the little bells hanging from the successive pent roofs, the listener was expected to turn his mind to pure and exalted thoughts. So the pagoda was accepted, but not the proposal made by some members of the faculty that the smokestack be concealed in the water tower. The majority did not want to see smoke billowing out of the top of the pagoda.*

This hexagonal pavilion was located on a hill near President J. Leighton Stuart's residence. Hours were announced by its great bronze bell, which had been cast by order of the Manchu Emperor Yung Cheng more than 200 years previously. The bell was decorated with imperial dragons and ocean waves, and was made to sound by a swinging wooden beam.

The Women's College buildings were clustered on the southwest portion of the campus. The two square buildings with Chinese roofs rising to a central knob-shaped finial were Miner Hall, and administration and student activities building, and Gamble Hall, the Dean's residence. These buildings were modeled after two small towers flanking the central tower over the main gate to the Purple Forbidden City in Beijing.

At a time when the Chinese government was largely utilizing Western styles for its new public buildings, because of their flexibility and lower cost, Yenching wanted to demonstrate its desire to preserve the best in Chinese culture, and adopted a modified Chinese style of architecture. Some of the faculty, including Dr. T. T. Lew, were more in favor of a Gothic style of architecture, but the architectural firm engaged by the University strongly supported the Chinese style, which it had already implemented on the University of Nanking and Fukien Christian University campuses. According to Dwight Edwards' account, when architect Henry K. Murphy first visited Beijing's Forbidden City, he "wandered spellbound for hours among the magnificent palaces there, which he described as the finest group of buildings in the world, matchless in stateliness and grandeur." The architects sought to replicate this sense of grandeur in a kind of modified "palace" architecture on the Yenching campus, creating structures with massive pillars and beams, overhanging curved roofs, and ornate, brilliantly colored decoration.

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### **Further reading**

Edwards, Dwight Woodbridge. [Yenching University](#). New York, United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, 1959.

West, Philip. [Yenching University and Sino-Western Relations, 1916-1952](#). Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1976.