

# The Power of Position

*Beijing University, Intellectuals, and  
Chinese Political Culture, 1898–1929*

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# Schools, Politics, and Reform in the Nineteenth Century

Thinking about Beijing University in the context of Chinese political culture challenges us to understand an institution that has always resided on the shifting border between China's official and unofficial realms. From the time of its founding in 1898, the university has been neither wholly of the "state" nor wholly of "society." Instead, its porous boundaries have permitted flow back and forth between those two realms; it has been a place where state and society have come together to negotiate their relationship to one another. The university's role as a meeting ground begins to explain why so many important political movements took place there over the twentieth century.

To grasp why Beida has enjoyed such an important position in Chinese political and cultural life, it is necessary to examine the historical forces that came together in its founding at the end of the nineteenth century. As an institutional type, the university represented neither a total break with the past nor merely an updated version of an entity that had existed in China before this time. Instead, it was the by-product of a tension between native models—institutional and intellectual—and more recently encountered foreign ones. In other words, the Imperial University resulted from a dialectical interaction between traditional ways of doing things and novel ways of doing things. Rather than substituting new for old, or foreign for Chinese, this interaction resulted in a unique blending specific to China's particular historical circumstances. In this

way the coming into being of Beijing University was emblematic of China's late-nineteenth-century lurch toward modernity.

#### WESTERN LEARNING IN LATE-QING BEIJING

In the late imperial period there was no institution of higher learning in the Chinese capital capable of serving as a center of radical academic innovation or political reform. One may speak about academic innovation and political reform in the same breath here because the two generally went hand in hand at this time. Intellectuals who wished to influence the direction of politics generally articulated their ideas through institutions of learning and in an academic idiom. As Alexander Woodside states, "The educationally conditioned nature of much elite politics constantly threatened to shift political activity to the schools. . . . Schools, therefore, played an inevitable part in most efforts, direct or indirect, to retheorize or reimagine some or all aspects of the late imperial political system."<sup>1</sup> China's shocking loss to Japan in the war of 1894–95 unleashed a fresh wave of politicking by intellectuals on behalf of a wholly new approach to the classification and teaching of knowledge. Radical reformers had come to assume that the West's achievement of wealth and power was rooted to a significant degree in its educational institutions, wherein knowledge and learning were organized very differently than in China. Among the reformers' highest priorities, therefore, was the founding of new schools, including an Imperial University (Jingshi daxuetang). China had long had a "highest school," or Taixue (Imperial College), in the capital, but the university proposed by the reformers in the 1890s was to be something altogether new, as evidenced by their adoption of the neologism *daxue*—borrowed from the Japanese *daigaku*.<sup>2</sup>

By following Meiji Japan in embracing a Western institutional model, the reformers were not merely attempting to establish a university that they believed would be useful, they were effectively identifying themselves with modernity and with the goal of national wealth and power as well. Western-style universities, especially the model developed in Germany in the nineteenth century, spread throughout much of the world under conditions of imperialism and colonialism and became prime symbols of modernity and power.<sup>3</sup> Though for centuries they had been "agencies of the status quo," by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries European universities had begun to place a premium on research, on the discovery and creation of knowledge that could assist in

the construction of strong nation-states. The Meiji government in Japan, as well as states in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere, consciously adopted the European university model as one means of importing modernity.<sup>4</sup> The research-focused university became one of the primary institutional bearers of the dream of modernity the world over.

Chinese reformers' ability to link the proposal for a new university with the goals of wealth and power increased the likelihood that conservatives who might otherwise have reservations about the new institution would throw their support behind the project. Widespread support for the university revealed a nearly unanimous opinion that China had to transform its education system if it hoped to withstand the imperialist onslaught. Precisely how it should do this, however, was the subject of much disagreement, for the educational field was one upon which contests for political and cultural power were routinely staged. This was especially so following China's signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which conservatives and progressives alike recognized as a moment of truth for China and for their respective political and ideological camps.

In speaking of education as a politicized field, I mean that access to power was gained by means of one's educational achievements and also that the dynasty was able to assert control over its servants through its ability to determine what counted as valuable knowledge. Traditionally, this field of power had been structured around the examination system. That system underwent constant transformation over the late imperial period, but by the end of the nineteenth century its viability was very much in doubt, owing to its apparent inability to respond effectively to the problems of the age. Intellectuals began to accept that China could survive only if it adopted some measure of "Western learning" (*xixue*), an omnibus term used to refer to academic subjects studied in Europe, the United States, and, more recently, Japan. In contrast to "Western learning" stood "Chinese learning" (*zhongxue*), shorthand for subject matter considered Chinese in origin or deemed sufficiently familiar by this time to qualify as Chinese.

By the mid-1890s, when officials first proposed that a modern-style university be established in Beijing, the debate over whether and how to adopt Western learning had been ongoing for several decades. It can be traced back at least to the early 1860s, when patriotic intellectuals stunned by the foreign invasion of Beijing began to think seriously about reform. In particular, scholars adhering to the resurgent statecraft (*jingshi*) tradition attributed China's failures in the face of imperialism to its ignorance of the outside world and called for serious study of Western

learning. One of the best-known of these individuals, Feng Guifen, had no intention of replacing Chinese with Western learning, but like others associated with the foreign affairs (*yangwu*) faction, he recognized that China had to adopt Western military methods in order to protect itself from the Westerners. Feng, who was in the employ of Li Hongzhang, the leading official associated with the emerging Self-strengthening Movement, desperately hoped that the Qing court would recognize the critical importance of training talented men in Western learning and so dedicate itself to that task in a purposeful manner.<sup>5</sup> In 1862, soon after Feng made his views known, the new General Office for Managing Affairs of the Various Countries (Zongli yamen) founded the Tongwen Guan (College of Foreign Languages) in Beijing to train specialists in foreign languages for service in China's diplomatic corps.<sup>6</sup> Similar schools were soon opened in Shanghai and Guangzhou, demonstrating that the self-strengtheners had gained influence at court.

Predictably, the Tongwen Guan emerged as a site of struggle between supporters of the *yangwu* faction and cultural conservatives. That the Tongwen Guan became the focal point of a contentious ideological battle in the late 1860s is not because it rapidly emerged as a dynamic force politically or culturally. To the contrary: in its earliest years the institution had a difficult time even attracting students. Only a minuscule number of Chinese wished to see their sons study anything other than the orthodox Neo-Confucian curriculum, mastery of which was required if one was to be successful on the civil service examinations. As Knight Biggerstaff writes: "It was said that the families of bannermen called to the Peking school regarded studying there such a disgrace that they resisted it with every available means and that only boys who were so stupid or so lazy that they could make no progress in the banner schools or whose families were without political influence of any kind actually enrolled."<sup>7</sup>

All the same, the Tongwen Guan's very existence posed a threat to cultural conservatives. In 1866 a debate erupted between opponents of the school led by Mongol Grand Secretary Woren, "the most important Neo-Confucian scholar of his time," and more progressive forces within the Zongli yamen led by Prince Gong.<sup>8</sup> The debate erupted over a Zongli yamen proposal that foreigners be hired to teach geography, political economy, mechanics, chemistry, physics, international law, anatomy, and biology—all under the heading "astronomy and mathematics," presumably because European astronomy and mathematics had been accepted in China several centuries earlier and therefore were not perceived to be distastefully foreign.<sup>9</sup> The Tongwen Guan's supporters neither came right

out and stated nor themselves believed that the addition of courses on Western subjects should be the first step toward the elimination of orthodox Song Learning. But as Kwang-Ching Liu states, the move to hire foreigners to teach Western subjects was truly “radical,” since the “broader goal was . . . nothing less than recognition by the throne and by such citadels of orthodoxy as the Hanlin Academy of the legitimacy of Western learning.”<sup>10</sup>

What most angered opponents of expanded foreign influence in 1867 was the argument that in order to raise the caliber of the Tongwen Guan’s students, *jinsi* degree holders and even Hanlin Academy members should be recruited to study there. Woren regarded the idea of teaching foreign subjects to China’s best and brightest positively loathsome. “If these brilliant . . . scholars . . . have to change from their regular course of study to follow the barbarians, then the correct spirit will not be developed, and accordingly the evil spirit will become stronger.”<sup>11</sup> But the conservatives were unable to derail the curricular reorganization, and to mollify Woren, the court appointed him rector of the Guozijian—the successor to the ancient Taixue. Located adjacent to the Temple of Confucius, its courtyard packed with tablets and stele enshrining government-approved texts, the Guozijian was inextricably identified with imperial orthodoxy.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Woren’s appointment brought him little real power, for by this time the Guozijian had lost most of its former vitality. The Hanlin Academy, not the Guozijian, was the government institution to which the ambitious aspired. More than any other late imperial institution, the Hanlin Academy wielded a combination of political and cultural power.<sup>13</sup>

However, Woren and his allies’ attacks on the Tongwen Guan, made public by the throne, did force candidates who applied for admission to defend themselves against charges that they were pro-Western.<sup>14</sup> The school was effectively tarred as an anti-Chinese bastion, and the prospect of its recruiting students from among the children of officials was thereby lost for several decades. These circumstances made it impossible for the Tongwen Guan’s head, the American W. A. P. Martin, to realize his goal of using the school to transform China’s educational system by, in his words, “engrafting science on the civil service examinations.”<sup>15</sup> From the time he became chief instructor (*zong jiaoxi*) until he resigned in 1895, Martin presided over an environment rife with ideological and bureaucratic disagreements. He later contended that the Tongwen Guan had made real contributions to China’s modernization effort, but the radical reformers who came on the scene in 1895 viewed the school and

its sibling institutions in the provinces as indisputable failures. In 1896 Chen Qizhang, an associate of Kang Youwei, stated: “In the West [the Tongwen Guan] would not qualify as a university. . . . The course levels are not divided and high quality and crude effort are not distinguished; no wonder it is so difficult to prevent foreigners from laughing behind our backs!”<sup>16</sup>

#### EFFORTS AT INNOVATION AND REVITALIZATION OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL

What modest success the Tongwen Guan did enjoy had much to do with the fact that, starting in the late 1860s, it was granted permission to begin recruiting students from the foreign language colleges in Shanghai and Guangzhou. Few of those students came from literati families (only in the 1890s did that begin to happen), but they nevertheless tended to be better prepared than students recruited from north China.<sup>17</sup> As compared to Beijing, life in Shanghai and Guangzhou was more conducive to learning about the outside world—even if literati tended to view those cities, Shanghai in particular, as dangerous locales full of profit-seekers, prostitutes, charlatans, and cheats, where men from good families were likely to be led astray.<sup>18</sup> Better-prepared students notwithstanding, Western learning-oriented government schools had only a minimal impact on intellectual life as long as social success still required mastery of the Confucian curriculum. Indeed, to the extent that Western learning did make inroads in the late nineteenth century, it was among the children of commoners who attended Christian missionary schools. By 1878 roughly fifteen thousand students were enrolled in some nine hundred missionary schools (most of them elementary or secondary) nationwide. By 1895 there were over twenty-one thousand students enrolled in more than a thousand missionary schools, the highest concentration being in Jiangnan.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, those who believed that intellectual revitalization depended on the reform of existing educational institutions concentrated on the overhaul of *shuyuan*, or academies, which provided the bulk of the training for civil service examination candidates. As an institutional type, the *shuyuan* had a complicated recent history of their own, given that they had been centers of opposition in the late-Ming and “nerve centers of the resistance during the Manchu invasion of the seventeenth century.”<sup>20</sup> In the sixteenth century, in conjunction with the spread of Wang Yangming’s teachings, the number of academies rose dramatically; more

than ever, they were associated with a spirit of anti-establishment reformism and moral awakening, which prompted John Meskill to refer to them as “cells of reform.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, *shuyuan* served as centers of loyalist resistance during the Manchu conquest of Ming China.<sup>22</sup> Only in 1733 did the Qing feel secure enough in its power to authorize the opening of new academies in provincial capitals. Later, when the court lifted its ban on them, academies proliferated rapidly, so that some two thousand existed, at various times, over the remainder of the Manchu period.

Academies with the best reputations generally owed their renown to the fact that their graduates performed well on the civil service examinations. *Shuyuan* emphasis on examination preparedness was a direct outgrowth of the remarkable extent to which success on the examinations enabled elite social and political status in the late imperial period.<sup>23</sup> Even if students were highly careerist, the requirement that they master the Neo-Confucian curriculum to succeed on the examinations assured that they would internalize at least the letter, if not the spirit, of that curriculum’s “civilizing” norms as they pursued their own benefit. In this way, the examination system produced loyal officials for the state while it enabled students to secure positions within the empire’s elite, thereby resulting in an upper social tier that reproduced the cultural and social values upon which the social order rested.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, it is also important to note that Qing *shuyuan* were not “spiritless parrot houses of Chu Hsi thought.” To emphasize this point, Alexander Woodside draws a comparison with England at roughly the same time:

No doubt Ch’ing academies did work to defend such ideologically indispensable things as the Neo-Confucian definition of the proper performance of the Five Relations . . . as well as the political attitudes that Chu Hsi himself had associated with this social code. . . . But beyond the vindication of such central social and political ideals, the academies may have been freer to innovate than we think. It would obviously be wrong to deduce that there was little freedom or variety of thought in Henry VIII’s Cambridge because Henry VIII told Cambridge university students not only which authors they must study . . . but also which authors they must shun.<sup>25</sup>

Under the Qing, curriculum was standardized to uphold intellectual orthodoxy, but the state’s primary contact with students was at the examination stage. Students were usually free to study at their own pace and to pursue interests outside the academy. The imperial center did not provide much funding for the academies, and it ordinarily had little direct control over the appointment of academy heads, which were generally



selected on the basis of personal friendships and family connections. This is not to say that Beijing adopted a wholly laissez-faire attitude; in fact, the Qing court appointed “studies officials” (*xueguan*) to oversee the maintenance of intellectual orthodoxy in the academies.<sup>26</sup> What must be kept in mind, however, is that there was always tension in the system, that *shuyuan* were many and always changing; at any given moment, one or more of them was testing the limits of official standards.

In the post-Taiping era Beijing lacked financial resources to expand local government; control over schools and virtually all other local affairs therefore devolved gradually into the hands of local gentry.<sup>27</sup> The Qing Court tolerated this trend so long as local initiative helped restore confidence in and strength to the dynasty. And, indeed, to the extent that it was successful, the Tongzhi Restoration owed much to academies, many of which were revitalized by gentry anxious to rebuild society after the catastrophic mid-century rebellions. The local elite was in turn encouraged in this endeavor by officials in the capital who sought to inculcate a sense of renewal among the empire’s intellectuals. One such official was Grand Secretary Woren, which indicates that among other things Court conservatives viewed *shuyuan* as a potential bulwark against contaminating ideas from the West.<sup>28</sup>

Yet Barry Keenan reminds us that there was no necessary “contradiction between promoting orthodox Song Neo-Confucianism and emphasizing practicality,” or between educating students in morality and preparing them for the civil service examinations. One could favor high moral and ethical standards and simultaneously support statecraft ideas that tended to lead scholars to adopt a more open mind to Western learning. For example, in reestablishing the Zhongshan Academy (in Jiangsu) after the Taiping Rebellion, Zeng Guofan’s goal was to train students in Neo-Confucian ethics *and* in practical learning. Zeng believed that rigorous self-cultivation would bring about greater understanding for practical learning. He ordered the academy to train students for the civil service examinations so they could gain government office and thereby put their seriousness of purpose and practical know-how to work for the Qing dynasty.<sup>29</sup>

Zhang Zhidong, too, aided the restoration by founding academies. His concern to train capable and upstanding “men of talent” for the state was similar to Zeng Guofan’s. Zhang saw no contradiction between moral cultivation and practical knowledge, so long as the latter was gained through rigorous study that would prevent students from misunderstanding the meanings of Western ideas. Zhang Zhidong strove to

blend the two by promoting a syncretic classical curriculum. He also worked assiduously to root out corruption from the examination system, which effort led him to develop a critical attitude toward the careerist motives that drove so many of the empire's students. Zhang removed training for the "eight-legged essay" from the curriculum at the academies with which he was associated—a bold statement in the early 1870s.<sup>30</sup>

In short, the political and intellectual crisis created by the recently suppressed Taiping Rebellion and continuing Western aggression led to a wide variety of higher educational initiatives in the capital, in treaty ports, and in provincial capitals during the final third of the nineteenth century. These initiatives came from all points on the politico-ideological spectrum. On the one hand, this indicates a consensus that ideas and how they were taught would have a direct bearing on the future viability of China's much-battered civilization. On the other hand, it calls attention to the fact that many supporters of educational modernization were also champions of China's intellectual traditions. The educational arena was of the utmost interest to those who sought to wield power over and rebuild society; what intellectuals learned, how they were taught, and by whom, mattered a great deal.

So much did it matter that cosmopolitan officials like Zeng Guofan and Zhang Zhidong were unwilling to surrender control over the most important *shuyuan* to local gentry. These would have to be directed by men like themselves, who thought in empirewide, rather than in the increasingly common provincial, terms. Even as officials like Zeng and Zhang sought to harness the gentry's energy for the good of the empire, however, they contributed to the creation of an educationally polycentric society.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, officials in Beijing who hoped for strong central government support for reform (new-style or not) recognized that there was a "divorce between the political center and educational creativity in late imperial China."<sup>32</sup> Robert Hart, of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service, no doubt spoke for many when he quipped in 1873 that "Peking is the last place in China to select for the introduction of novelties, and the Central Government is the last authority to ask for support of any kind: local growth—and that the farther from Peking the better—is the only process of development recognized or to be relied on in this country."<sup>33</sup>

#### RENEWED DEMANDS THAT THE CENTER LEAD THE WAY

More than any other factor, the steady imperialist encroachment on China in the 1880s and 1890s underscored the need for a strong, effec-

tive central government. The Sino-French War of 1883–84 contributed to the emergence of modern Chinese nationalism, and China's defeat led to vociferous criticism of Qing leadership. Li Hongzhang was the primary target for officials associated with the fervently nationalistic *Qingliu*—Pure Talk group—which adhered to a moralistic rhetorical style known as *qingyi* (“voices of remonstrance”).<sup>34</sup> *Qingliu* partisans accused Li Hongzhang of pursuing an ignominious policy of appeasement in foreign affairs and, being highly culturalistic, also attacked him for advocating the adoption of foreign technology.<sup>35</sup> They claimed that their attacks on him and his protégés were “pure,” that they were made solely with the best interests of the empire in mind.

The crisis atmosphere that resulted from China's unthinkable defeat by Japan in the mid-1890s led intellectuals to speak in cataclysmic terms, and men with conservative instincts suddenly began offering radical policy recommendations. *Qingliu* types championed an even higher degree of Westernization than the *yangwu* faction had promoted a decade earlier, thus trading places with their political opponents on that issue. For instance, though Zhang Zhidong remained a conservative moderate, his support for fundamental institutional change—which had begun to grow after the Sino-French War—increased further in the mid-1890s, revealing how rapidly the moderate position was shifting in that direction during these decades. The curricula at the academies Zhang founded in the 1860s and 1870s focused exclusively on Chinese subjects, but at the Self-strengthening School (*Ziqiang xuetang*) and the School for Gathering Talent (*Chucaì xuetang*), established in 1893 and 1896, respectively, Western subjects were the focus.<sup>36</sup>

Many who urged rapid change were sharp critics of the Qing state's weakness. They yearned for a Peter the Great-type leader who would entirely reshape society from the capital, thereby advancing China to a higher stage of historical development.<sup>37</sup> Radical reform proposals addressed a wide range of issues and were most famously enumerated in the “Ten Thousand Word Memorial” drafted by Kang Youwei and signed by 1,200 examination candidates after news of the Treaty of Shimonoseki reached Beijing in April 1895. Kang's memorial, written in the moralistic *qingyi* tone typical of New Text heroic-scholar types, called on the court to entirely overhaul Chinese society in much the same manner as the Meiji leaders had undertaken in Japan. The ambitious agenda set forth in the “Ten Thousand Word Memorial” represented a strong vote of no confidence in Li Hongzhang's *yangwu* group, which was viewed as

overly cautious by the newly ascendant *weixin*, or fundamental reform, group headed by Kang Youwei.

The list of institutions the *weixin* group wished to see overhauled was a long one, but in its members' minds nothing took precedence over the need to change the way Chinese scholars acquired knowledge. Starting with the Qiang xuehui, or Society for the Study of Self-strengthening, founded in the capital in 1895 by Kang Youwei and like-minded scholars, intellectuals across the country began to form *xuehui*, or "study societies." Members of these *xuehui* had many different understandings about what they were trying to achieve, but to a person they saw themselves as "scholars of resolve" (*zhishi*) who were first and foremost concerned to save China.<sup>38</sup> The study societies were often political in nature, as Liang Qichao later attested:

At the time society viewed new learning as an enemy, so the moment one spoke of opening schools they were seen as a rebel. . . . Because we could not openly found a formal school we organized a Qiang xuehui . . . to work for political reform. The Qiang xuehui was part school and part political party in nature . . . [and it] became increasingly influential.<sup>39</sup>

By referring to their groups as study societies the *weixin* reformers hoped to inoculate themselves against the charge that they were violating the Qing dynasty's long-standing ban on the formation of factions. Nevertheless, shortly after it opened, the Qiang xuehui ran into trouble. As more radical figures gained influence within the study society, the Empress Dowager and her supporters crushed it on the grounds that it was operating like a "private clique" (*sili huidang*).<sup>40</sup>

Soon thereafter, Li Hongzhang, who had been denied admission into the Qiang xuehui, recommended that the society's library be maintained and that an Official Book Depot (Guanshu ju) be established to house it.<sup>41</sup> The emperor assented, and Sun Jia'nai, the president of the Board of Works and a member of the Qiang xuehui, was named *guanli dachen*, or superintendent, of the new Official Book Depot. Along with Weng Tonghe, a leading backer of the Emperor, Sun had formerly served as a tutor to the Guangxu Emperor (from 1878 until 1887) and was closely identified with the so-called Emperor's Party.<sup>42</sup> At the start of the Guangxu reign, both men incurred the wrath of Manchu conservatives when they enthusiastically supported a proposal that the seventeenth-century thinkers and Ming loyalists Huang Zongxi and Gu Yanwu be enshrined as worthies at the Confucian Temple. As a political moderate,

who skillfully kept his distance from the radicals, however, Sun Jia'nai managed to maintain good relations with the Empress Dowager.<sup>43</sup>

Although the *weixin* group was accused of “interfering” in politics, its ultimate purpose had never been to question the Qing court’s right to rule. As Philip Kuhn states, for China’s leading reformist thinkers of the nineteenth century there was no contradiction between seeking a greater political voice for themselves and the desire to strengthen the state’s exercise of its authoritarian power.<sup>44</sup> Reformers like Kang and Liang attempted to influence the imperial government, to “interfere” in politics, precisely because they took Beijing’s preeminent position so much for granted. Their dissatisfaction with the existing educational system was mostly pragmatic—they were persuaded that the examination system failed to deliver real talent into the government’s hands. In the 1890s, then, the radical reformers were statist. They believed they could change the country for the better by working through the imperial center—even though the force of their campaign for greater influence proved in the long term to be corrosive of the state’s monopoly on power.<sup>45</sup>

#### THE CAMPAIGN TO ESTABLISH THE IMPERIAL UNIVERSITY

As China’s domestic and diplomatic predicament worsened, intellectuals, conservative and progressive alike, instinctively turned to schools as a primary instrument of social and political revitalization. Often, those who viewed better schools as a key part of the answer to China’s problems subscribed to the idea that in the ancient past China’s school system had reached a state of perfection. Woodside discusses this habit of mind in terms of “a myth of a preimperial golden age of education in China,” and argues that those who were enthralled by that myth tended to yearn for a more “centrally focused kind of public education.” The myth’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century adherents found comfort in its ideas because, at a time when nouveau riches were penetrating the upper tier of society and degrees were increasingly available for purchase, it described an idealized world in which “true” men of learning possessed the highest social status.<sup>46</sup>

Thinkers who lived during the Ming–Qing transition, such as Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi, laid the groundwork for the resurgence of this myth. Gu’s and especially Huang’s ideas held great currency among the radical reformers of the 1890s. For example, Liang Qichao called Huang Zongxi’s *Mingyi daifang lu* (A Plan For the Prince) “a powerful

tonic for students in the 1890s,” and stated: “My own political activities can be said to have been influenced very early and very deeply by this book.” Liang and Tan Sitong printed several tens of thousands of abridged copies of Huang’s book and circulated them secretly as a means of spreading democratic ideas.<sup>47</sup> There was in all this a mixture of progressivism and conservatism, the latter grounded in bedrock elitism. Reformers who advocated constitutional monarchy were not seeking to spread power to the uneducated masses but rather to strengthen the position of men like themselves within society, and of China within a world full of predatory nations. Tan Sitong certainly had such a view in mind in 1898 when he called on every province to found a central academy where great affairs of state could be discussed. In Tan’s words, these academies “would not be called assemblies but they would in fact be assemblies.”<sup>48</sup>

In this way, too, a figure like Huang Zongxi, who sought to enlarge the authority of Confucian scholars as a means of counterbalancing the despotic power of the emperor, had great appeal to the reformers. For Huang, political reform entailed a reworking of the educational system, for in classical times, he argued, “schools were centers of all important community and state activities” and had “a major role too . . . in debating public questions and advising the prince.”<sup>49</sup> Moral order could be achieved only by returning power to the schools. Huang argued that an expanded public school system would make education available to a larger portion of society, and that supervisors at each level of the school system should be independent of control from above.

He also called for a revitalized Imperial College (Taixue) at the top of this reformed school system. As though to call attention to the feebleness of the present-day Guozijian as a force for moral renewal, Huang Zongxi spoke of the Taixue’s heroic moments in order to identify a tradition he believed it was critical to reclaim. During the Eastern Han, Huang wrote, “30,000 scholars at the Imperial College engaged in outspoken discussion of important issues without fear of those in power, and the highest officials were anxious to avoid their censure.”<sup>50</sup> He continued: “During the Northern Song (960–1127) students knelt at the palace gate and ‘beat the drum,’ pleading for the reinstatement of Li Kang. In only these [two instances] have the schools come close to the lingering spirit of the Three Dynasties.” Huang asserted that the libationer (rector) of the revived Imperial College should be chosen from among the most upright and talented scholars in the realm, and that, in terms of his power, he should be “equal in importance to the prime minister.” Also, beginning

at age fifteen, the sons of the emperor should attend the Imperial College to take instruction about the true conditions in the empire. Even after the prince became emperor, Huang believed, he should remain a student: “On the first day of each month the Son of Heaven should visit the Imperial College, attended by the prime minister, six ministers, and censors. The libationer should face south and conduct the discussion, while the Son of Heaven too sits among the ranks of students.” At this moment, “if there is anything wrong with the administration of the country, the libationer should speak without reserve.”<sup>51</sup>

Insofar as the late-Qing reformers took for granted that intellectuals were society’s natural leaders, it is possible to trace a line of a conscious self-identification backward from reformers of the 1890s to those of the seventeenth century, and from there to the Imperial College activists of the Song and Han. Each link in this chain was forged by men who judged themselves to be in an analogous position, politically, to that faced by earlier intellectuals—the Donglin partisans, the Song Imperial College students, and so on. Undoubtedly, they found it strategically useful and psychologically empowering to borrow from the vocabulary of righteous protest evolved by those whom they regarded as their predecessors. That the *weixin* reformers called for a thoroughly revamped educational system capped by a revitalized “highest school” in the imperial capital was therefore altogether fitting.

Japan’s rapid development further convinced China’s reformers that national strength and educational reform went hand in hand.<sup>52</sup> Japanese leaders had recently established Tokyo Imperial University on the Western model, and those in China who wished to see the Qing dynasty follow the Meiji example likewise called on their government to found such a university. Tokyo Imperial University was a decidedly new-style institution; it focused on Western subjects and, especially in the early going (it was founded in the 1870s), most faculty were foreigners who taught in their native languages.<sup>53</sup> The Japanese Imperial University example is also likely to have reinforced the Chinese reformers in their belief that “scholars of resolve” were the rightful leaders of society. Tokyo Imperial University was the highest school in the state-sponsored educational pyramid and at the outset had jurisdiction over elementary and middle schools in the provinces. By the mid-1880s it had become clearly marked as a tool of the state and began to graduate a remarkably large number of men who later went on to become political and administrative leaders. Although clearly modeled on foreign institutions, and, in terms of its connection to the state, on the French and Prussian examples in partic-

ular, Tokyo University was also based on the very Confucian idea that leadership in society is the province of the few who are superior in intellect and virtue.<sup>54</sup>

Rather than seeking to build on the foundations of the existing Guozijian, those who campaigned for a revitalized “highest school” in Beijing believed it was necessary to establish an altogether new institution. In part, this was because the Guozijian had by then fallen into disrepute. Early in the Ming dynasty the college’s students were still selected from categories in keeping with the notion of aristocratic “sons of the state,” but as time passed commoner students (*minsheng*) had infiltrated the institution. Because commoners were able to buy their way into the college, Woodside writes, “a dignity-sensitive majority of the regional degree-holders began to avoid studying at a school whose student body had become so heterogeneous.” Moreover, though the Qing continued to make a show of honoring the college (in the 1790s, for example, nearly two hundred stone tablets bearing the standardized, canonical version of the Thirteen Classics authorized by the Qianlong emperor were erected on its grounds), it proved a poor patron of the Guozijian. Unlike monarchs in Europe, where Louis XIV lavished money on the French Academy of Science and Frederick the Great did the same for the Berlin Royal Academy of Sciences and Letters, Qing leaders feared the potential power of intellectuals concentrated in the capital. They preferred to allow provincial academies to develop and produce talent, and then to import that talent to the capital in a careful and controlled manner.<sup>55</sup> Early in the twentieth century W. A. P. Martin observed of the Guozijian that “this great school for the ‘Sons of the Empire’ ” has “degenerated into a mere appendage of the civil-service competitive examinations, on which it hangs as a dead weight, corrupting and debasing itself instead of advancing the standard of national education.” Martin noted that the “buildings have fallen to ruin” and that there was little chance that the one-time “ornament to the Empire” could be “renovated, remodelled and adapted to the altered circumstances of the age.”<sup>56</sup>

It was in fact this sense of “the altered circumstances of the age,” and not merely the decayed state of the centuries-old Guozijian, which led the reformers to strike out in a decidedly novel direction by seeking to follow Meiji Japan in embracing the Western university model. To the extent that they were convincing in thus representing their purposes the reformers could hope to make themselves acceptable to many who were far more conservative than they, for the goal of a wealthy and powerful China was shared by people of every political persuasion.



Officials who memorialized the throne in support of the campaign to found a new university found it necessary to explain why, given that China already had over a dozen schools devoted to Western learning, it was necessary to found a new institution. Naturally, they pointed to the poor performance of the modern government schools. For example, Li Duanfen, in his famous “Memorial Requesting the Expansion of Schools” of June 1896—which is believed to have been ghostwritten by his relation-through-marriage, Liang Qichao—stated that the existing government schools were wholly inadequate to the challenges facing China. In their place, Li called for a new, nationwide system of schools capped by a university in the capital.<sup>57</sup> This Jingshi daxuetang was to be attended by men under thirty years of age who were recommended by local governments (*gongsheng*) or already admitted to the Guozijian, and officials in the capital who so desired would be allowed to sit in on classes as well. In addition, the university was to be in charge of a translation bureau to carry on the work being done at the Tongwen Guan.<sup>58</sup>

#### SUN JIA'NAI'S VISION

Li Duanfen's memorial impressed the Guangxu emperor, who forwarded it to the Zongli yamen, which in turn sent the matter on to the newly opened Official Book Depot, ordering Sun Jia'nai to come up with a plan for implementation.<sup>59</sup> Like Li Duanfen, Sun argued that existing schools devoted to Western learning were not up to the present task. “The Fuzhou Navy School, the Jiangnan Arsenal and the Jiangnan Naval Officers and Weapons Schools are all limited to the teaching of a single skill each; they have had little success at this and fail to [demonstrate an] understanding of the overall situation (*bu ming dati*).”<sup>60</sup> Significantly, Sun implied that educational reform itself required a reorganization of China's approach to systems of knowledge. It was necessary to unite the various Western disciplines within a single intellectual framework rather than dividing them off from one another into hermetically isolated intellectual subspaces. To lead this effort, Sun claimed, a new university had to be founded, one whose intellectual reach subsumed the scattered, existing Western-learning schools. Through its offerings, this new school was also to assert in bold terms that Western learning involved the study of government, law, history, and so forth, in addition to practical techniques.

Insofar as attitudes toward Western learning were concerned, therefore, at least two substantial shifts in Chinese intellectual life are reflected

in the campaign to establish an Imperial University. First, the idea of the university rested on the assumptions that Western learning included essential knowledge in addition to practical, and that practical techniques could be achieved only through mastery of the fundamental principles that underlay Western learning. Equally important, those who championed the Imperial University sought to blend this expanded understanding of Western learning with Chinese learning, which they continued to refer to as essential learning. Pointing to the Japanese case as a negative example, Sun Jia'nai stated in 1896: "For five thousand years the spirit of the sages has been continued in China . . . [we] absolutely must not do as the Japanese have done, dispensing with their own learning in favor of Western learning."<sup>61</sup> Sun and other backers of the university now viewed Western learning as having something akin to a *ti* of its own, but it was one that could fit side by side with an even more essential Chinese *ti*, so as to form a new whole.

In this sense, the campaign to found the university recorded an intellectual shift toward an expanded sense of the totality and unity of knowledge. The Jingshi daxuetang was to be a new kind of institution that encompassed all learning—Chinese and Western, and therefore the entire universe—within its walls, and in so doing also organized and controlled it. While conceived at a time of crisis, the university plan nevertheless bespoke tremendous intellectual ambition, a belief in possibility fueled by a sense of necessity. Accordingly, those who lobbied for the Imperial University betrayed a curious mix of self-confidence and insecurity, or so I detect in their vision of the university as a monument that would, simultaneously, enshrine Chinese learning within the new galaxy of knowledge, and announce to the world that China had joined the modern world.

Though the intellectuals who lobbied for the new university decried the corrupt culture of official Beijing, they nevertheless believed it important that the Jingshi daxuetang be a capital undertaking. This reflected their commitment to the idea of a politically and culturally centralized dynastic state and their belief that the Qing Court could be persuaded to cease divorcing educational creativity from the political center. The reformers pointed out that the Western powers and Japan had universities in their capital cities and that China would send an important message to the world regarding its openness to new ideas if it followed suit. The American missionary Gilbert Reid, who had close ties to Chinese reformers, was direct on this point: "By establishing a university in the capital it will be possible to expand the people's knowledge,

and honor the imperial system, and also to raise the country's reputation. If a comprehensive school is founded," Reid wrote, ". . . talent will issue forth every generation, the country will become steadily stronger, and western countries will admire, respect and love [China]."<sup>62</sup>

Sun Jia'nai also stressed the importance of locating the university in the center of Beijing, where it could serve as a visible symbol of China's cultural accomplishment.<sup>63</sup>

Representatives from Western embassies will come to view the place when they learn that China is establishing a new school; if it is built in a poor manner it will certainly earn their ridicule and disdain. It is important to select a location in the center of the capital, a vast and open space, or to purchase private residences, in order to construct the university in a lofty manner.<sup>64</sup>

After he sketched this image, Sun turned to the question of curriculum. In the broad guidelines he proposed for the Jingshi daxuetang in 1896, Sun anticipated the classic formulation of the *ti-yong* (essence—practical use) dualism as laid out by Zhang Zhidong in his 1898 *Quanxue pian* (Exhortation to Learning). "In establishing a university in the Chinese capital, Chinese learning must be taken as the base, and Western learning as a supplement. Chinese learning should be the essence," Sun wrote, "and Western learning should be treated as useful (*zhongxue wei ti, xixue wei yong*). Chinese learning should guide [our] embrace of Western learning. Western learning cannot be permitted to override Chinese learning. Where Chinese learning is deficient, Western learning can be used to complete it."<sup>65</sup> Undoubtedly, Sun calculated that this formulation would offer political protection against attacks from conservatives opposed to any hint that the supremacy of Chinese learning was being drawn into question.

Nevertheless, the curriculum he proposed makes clear to what extent foreign academic subjects had already been accepted, at least in a formalistic sense, into the mental universe of moderate Chinese intellectuals by the late nineteenth century. Sun called for the university to be divided into ten departments, the majority of which clearly belonged to what conservatives referred to as Western learning. While there would be a department devoted to the study of Confucian socio-ethics (*daoxue*), every other department was to be partially or wholly focused on the study of the West, on Western learning, or on a discipline already known in China but not previously taught in this type of institutional setting. A list of planned departments makes this clear: astronomy

(*tianxue*), with mathematics attached; geology (*dixue*), with mining attached; government (*zhengxue*), which was to include the study of Western government and law; literature (*wenxue*), which was to involve the study of both Chinese and Western languages; military science (*wuxue*), including naval science; agricultural science (*nongxue*); engineering (*gongxue*), which would include the study of manufactures and physics (*gezhi*); commerce (*shangxue*), wherein steamboats, railroads, and the telegraph would be among the technologies studied; and medicine (*yixue*), which would cover both the herbal and chemical varieties.<sup>66</sup>

In spite of the overwhelming dominance of Western learning in this curriculum, Sun maintained that the “essential” (*ti*) place of Chinese learning could be guaranteed in several ways. First, of the four chief instructors he proposed to run the institution, two were to be respected Chinese scholars with some knowledge of Western learning, and two were to be Westerners familiar with Chinese learning and also capable of speaking and reading Chinese. As for students, they were to be drawn from among men who already possessed knowledge of both Chinese and Western learning. Initially at least, students were to be recruited from the Tongwen Guan and the other modern government schools. Sun stipulated that priority should be given to those who were strong in Chinese learning and weak in Western learning. Within both the professorial and student ranks, therefore, Chinese learning was to be in a strong position vis-à-vis the new learning; at both levels, fluency in the former was required while fluency in the latter was desirable but not required.

In Sun Jia'nai's plan it was understood that the university would be oriented toward the production of talent for official use, that its students would go to work for the government upon graduation. The graduates were to become men of real stature and responsibility; their talents were not to be wasted. In other words, at a time when more radical reformers were indicating that they believed the examination system should be abolished outright, to be replaced by a modern, Western-style system of schools, Sun was seeking to devise a system in which the civil service examination and the modern university could coexist.

The emperor backed Sun Jia'nai's proposal in 1896, but its implementation was delayed by highly placed conservatives in the Inner Court, such as Prince Yi and the Manchu Grand Councilor Gangyi. To stall a project they opposed on ideological grounds, these figures used the argument that the university would exact too great a financial cost.<sup>67</sup> Frustrated by the slow pace of change in Beijing, ardent supporters of educational reform focused their energies elsewhere—Tan Sitong, Liang

Qichao, and others, founded the Shiwu xuetao in Hunan in 1897—while keeping an eye out for further opportunities in the capital. Meanwhile, the campaign on behalf of the Jingshi daxuetang continued. For example, in 1897, Yao Wendong, who had spent six years in Tokyo during the 1880s, wrote, “In the capital cities of all Asian and Western countries there are universities where talented people are gathered together, on which twenty to thirty thousand [taels?] are expended annually.” Yao continued, “Today China cannot establish schools at the local level all at once, but if a university is first established in the capital it will establish a precedent to be followed elsewhere.”<sup>68</sup>

In early 1898 momentum for reform gathered. On June 11, when the Guangxu emperor proceeded to the Gate of Heavenly Peace to launch what would come to be known as the “Hundred Days’ Reform,” he spoke about the importance of the Jingshi daxuetang in no uncertain terms:

From this moment all ministers high and low, from princes to the various gentlemen, must exert themselves to the utmost, seeking in a heroic manner to seize the essential meaning of the sages’ righteous teachings, and to master the Western learning relevant to current affairs. . . . The Imperial University will be the model for the provinces to emulate and should be opened immediately.<sup>69</sup>

The emperor and his advisors considered the university a critically important part of the overall reform process. In drafting the June 11 edict for the emperor, Grand Councilor Weng Tonghe took pains to reassure conservatives by stressing that the education offered at the Jingshi daxuetang was to be rooted in the “sage’s righteous principles.” Reassured, Empress Dowager Cixi subsequently lent her support to the plan. Afterward, China experienced an explosion of interest in new-style learning. Whereas 14 Western-learning schools were established during the first five months of 1898, 106 were founded during the summer of reform. Thereafter, the increase in the number of new-style schools was rapid and steady, and interest in missionary schools likewise grew.<sup>70</sup>

#### THE “WUXU UNIVERSITY”: LIANG QICHAO’S VISION

In early July 1898—the *wuxu* year—the Zongli yamen memorialized the throne with a statement of its four top priorities for the new university. First, the Jingshi daxuetang should be amply funded; second, official property should be set aside for use as a campus; third, the throne should

appoint a high official to oversee the university; and fourth, special care must be given to the selection of a chief instructor for the institution.<sup>71</sup> Accompanying the memorial was a draft set of provisional university regulations (*daxuetang zhangcheng*), hastily prepared by Liang Qichao.

Liang's regulations emphasized the need for intellectual breadth and inclusiveness. "The biggest problem in China is that those who subscribe to Chinese learning do not utter a word about Western learning, while those devoted to Western learning completely ignore Chinese learning." If Chinese learning and Western learning are not combined, Liang wrote, "their followers will be as irreconcilable as water and fire." What concerned him most was that a continued intellectual standoff between those who favored Chinese learning and those who favored Western learning would prevent China from cultivating real talent. "The two [*ti* and *yong*] need one another, [having one] and lacking the other is not acceptable, if both essence and practicality are not attended to, how can talent be produced?"<sup>72</sup>

Liang proposed that Chinese and Western learning be stressed equally (*zhongxi bing zhong*) and that Western learning be a portion of what the Imperial University students study, but not the whole.<sup>73</sup> Consistent with this, he also urged that the Imperial University establish a massive library to house both Chinese and Western books. In making this suggestion Liang invoked the Four Treasuries project of the Qianlong reign, an earlier Qing attempt to collect and classify knowledge in encyclopedic fashion for the purpose of displaying imperial power.<sup>74</sup> Like an institutional version of a great encyclopedia, the university Liang envisioned was to encompass the entire world of knowledge. As such, it was marked by the modernist's conceit that the sum total of human learning could be worked into a unified and universally agreed upon whole.

Liang Qichao's draft curriculum was overwhelmingly concentrated on Western subjects in spite of his politically sensitive claim that Chinese and Western learning would receive equal attention. In their first three years all students would be required to master a number of core subjects: classics (*jingxue*); neo-Confucianism (*lixue*); Chinese and foreign historical documents (*zhong wai zhangguxue*); the ancient noncanonical philosophers (*zhuzixue*); elementary mathematics (*chuji suanxue*); elementary government studies (*chuji zhengzhixue*); elementary geography (*chuji dilixue*); literature (*wenxue*); and physical education (*ticao xue*). It was here, at the most elementary level, that Chinese learning was to be taught. In addition, every student would be required to study one foreign language, either English, French, Russian, German, or Japanese, during

the first three years. After completing the core requirements, however, all students were to do advanced study in one or two subjects. Those subjects were derived from Western disciplines, dominated by Western approaches, and clearly intended to produce specialized talent that could advance China's effort to modernize. They were advanced mathematics (*gaodeng suanxue*); advanced physics (*gaodeng gezhixue*); advanced government studies and law (*gaodeng zhengzhixue* and *falixue*); advanced geography and surveying (*gaodeng dilixue* and *cehuixue*); agriculture (*nongxue*); mineralogy (*kuangxue*); engineering (*gongxue*); commerce (*shangxue*); military science (*bingxue*); and hygiene and medicine (*weishengxue* and *yixue*).<sup>75</sup>

Liang's regulations did not spell out in precise terms what each of the fields of study was to entail, but the document does display a crude taxonomy of knowledge in which Chinese and Western learning were interwoven. Insofar as it approached the world of knowledge, Liang's university was to be an entirely new kind of institution, one never before seen in China or in the West. The Jingshi daxuetang he envisioned challenged the idea that Western universities represented the most advanced form of the institution conceivable. He did not say so directly, but there is a clear suggestion in Liang's regulations that a synthesis of Chinese and Western learning, albeit one in which Western learning played the dominant role, could result in a quality of knowledge more potent than either could offer alone.

At the turn of the century, for one of its most brilliant young thinkers, the rapid "contraction of China from a world into a nation in the world" opened up the possibility of new intellectual combinations at the same time that it fundamentally threatened old assumptions.<sup>76</sup> Lost, or well on its way to being lost, was the most basic assumption of all, not only that Chinese learning contained all the essentials of knowledge, but also that those essentials possessed a morally transcendent, sacral power. There is no question that this was a titanic intellectual transition in the happening, one full of loss, even if at this point it was not completely understood as such and was not inevitably going to play out in the fashion that it did. But to the extent that loss was comprehended, an opportunity was also perceived, one that involved the possibility of redesigning the intellectual universe by expanding the purview of the university to account for all knowledge, Chinese and Western. Liang Qichao's plan suggested the prospect of a new conceptualization of modernity, one that differed from the dominant Western model then sweeping the globe. To be sure, it was not a mature or fully articulated vision, nor did it come to fruition. But

there is inspiration here that should not simply be dismissed, à la Joseph Levenson, as an elaborate form of denial produced by intellectuals' driving psychological need to believe that the civilization they knew and loved could never be overwhelmed intellectually.<sup>77</sup>

#### POLITICS AND THE OPENING OF THE JINGSHI DAXUETANG

On the day he received the Zongli yamen's memorial the Guangxu emperor approved Liang Qichao's regulations and instructed the Ministry of Finance to provide the full amount of revenue requested (350,000 taels of silver for start-up and 180,000 taels per year thereafter).<sup>78</sup> In the short term, it was agreed that an out-of-use imperial mansion belonging to the family of the fourth daughter of the Qianlong Emperor would be used as a temporary site for the university (the Jingshi daxuetang never did move from this "temporary" site, however).<sup>79</sup> Owing to its former incarnation, as late as the May Fourth era one of the university's lecture halls was playfully referred to as the "sleeping palace," and the library, with its large rooms and ornately decorated walls, was known as the "princess's dressing room."<sup>80</sup> The mansion was situated within the walls of the Imperial City close to the Di'an Gate on the eastern edge of Jingshan Park, a short distance from the northern entrance to the Forbidden City. The Jingshi daxuetang was thus located in what had once been a highly exclusive section of the Qing capital—a neighborhood whose majority population remained Manchu for the next two decades at least. The precise place where the university was located was called Mashen miao, Temple of the Protector of Horses, because a temple at which prayers were offered to the deities of the cavalry had formerly stood on the spot.<sup>81</sup>

The emperor appointed Sun Jia'nai, his former tutor, to head the institution. When the emperor selected Sun for the position he bestowed upon him the title Director of Educational Affairs (*guanxue dachen*), which indicated the empirewide scope of his powers. In effect, Sun was both head of the university and Minister of Education. In rank, the Director of Educational Affairs was equal to the minister in charge (*shiwu dachen*) of the Guozijian. His responsibilities included selecting and supervising students sent abroad for study, approving translations of foreign books and the collation of Chinese materials for classroom use, and examination of technological inventions.<sup>82</sup>

It remained to be seen just how important the Jingshi daxuetang would become, but the imperial embrace of the university signaled the



emergence of a new domain of power that set off a round of positional jockeying among those seeking influence within the rapidly realigning institutional framework of the capital. For example, the conservative Manchu Grand Councillor, Gangyi, angled to be appointed Director of Educational Affairs. Owing to the maneuvering of leading members of the emperor's party, however, the emperor instead chose Sun Jia'nai for the position.<sup>83</sup> This put Sun in the position to name the chief instructor (*zong jiaoxi*), the officer who would have ultimate responsibility for all academic matters at the university. This most important academic post was equal in rank to the office of libationer (*jijiu*) at the Guozijian, and commanded a salary of three hundred taels per month.

In his regulations Liang Qichao stipulated that the chief instructor must be thoroughly schooled in both Chinese and Western learning. The distinguished scholar Yan Fu, who lacked the *jinsshi* degree and had therefore had great trouble gaining an official position, emerged as an obvious candidate. For Yan Fu such an appointment would have been sweet vindication, for it would have given him a high-profile platform from which to work for fundamental reform. But Yan fell out of the running—ostensibly because he lacked the proper bureaucratic rank—and Sun Jia'nai instead appointed Xu Jingcheng, a *jinsshi*, and one of China's earliest and most seasoned foreign diplomats. Xu had represented the Qing dynasty in Japan and several European countries; he was not Yan Fu's intellectual equal, but he was deemed sufficiently worldly to serve as chief instructor. Despite his time abroad, however, Xu's foreign-language skills were weak, and it was ultimately decided that the university needed two chief instructors, one responsible for Western studies (*xixue*) and the other, Xu Jingcheng, responsible for Chinese studies. Sun Jia'nai approached W. A. P. Martin about the Western studies position, which the former head of the Tongwen Guan accepted only after successfully negotiating a monthly salary of five hundred taels and an elevation in his civil service rank from the third to the second class.<sup>84</sup>

Sun then hired a number of foreign teachers at wages far higher than those paid to Chinese instructors.<sup>85</sup> Many of these men were of missionary background and were already resident in China (the Chinese government was unwilling to shoulder the expense associated with recruiting better-qualified teachers from abroad). The decision to hire foreign instructors set off a vigorous lobbying effort on the part of various Western embassies, which competed with one another to place their nationals on the faculty. With their nationals serving as professors at the university, foreign diplomats believed, their countries would stand to benefit

in the race to extend contacts and influence in China. Given this, the Italians were extremely upset to learn that no provision had been made to teach Italian at the Jingshi daxuetang. In his letter of appeal—which failed to persuade the Chinese side—the Italian ambassador reminded the Chinese government of Italy’s historical greatness, that Italians were at the forefront of the world’s nations, and that centuries earlier Italians such as Matteo Ricci had made great contributions to the cause of Chinese advancement.<sup>86</sup>

There was also competition for the position of chief manager (*zongban*), who was in charge of general operations at the university. The man Sun Jia’nai hoped would fill that office, Zhang Yuanji, an official in the Ministry of Justice and a leading reformer, refused the position because he was displeased by what he considered to be the corrupt practices of many of the proctors (*tidiao*) Sun had appointed to work with him.<sup>87</sup> In fact, Zhang was so disgusted by the stifling political atmosphere in the capital that he decided to leave Beijing. Zhang’s departure proved highly consequential, for he soon found a far more influential niche in Shanghai as the top figure at the Commercial Press. Indeed, owing to the fact that the conservative atmosphere in Beijing did not subside over the next several decades, increasing numbers of intellectuals relocated to Shanghai, whose vibrant cultural marketplace readily absorbed their talents.

When Sun Jia’nai began to develop his plans for the university he proposed the addition of a college for officials (*shixue yuan*), where men who already held *juren* and *jinshi* degrees could study foreign subjects. The addition of that college indicated how concerned he was to make officials who were at least superficially versed in Western learning available to the government as soon as possible.<sup>88</sup> It was also a way of guaranteeing that the Jingshi daxuetang would have quality students to train. Experience at the Tongwen Guan had revealed how difficult it could be to persuade ambitious men to study anything other than the traditional curriculum as long as the examination system was still in place.

Under the scheme developed by Liang Qichao and adopted by Sun Jia’nai, graduates of county-level schools would be entitled to *shengyuan* status; those who passed through provincial-level schools would earn a *juren* degree; and those who graduated from the Jingshi daxuetang would enter the ranks of the *jinshi* and become government officials. The philosopher Feng Youlan later attested to the psychological suitability of this transitional arrangement:

At that time people still thought of credentials in terms of the examination system. No matter what the rank, they always needed to convert it into an examination system equivalent for it to make psychological sense. It is like a person who is accustomed to the old calendar translating all dates on the new calendar into old ones in order to feel they really understand. The education system promulgated by the court established elementary schools at the county level, high schools at the provincial level, and the Jingshi daxuetang in the capital—the three levels of study corresponded exactly with the three scholarly ranks of the examination system.<sup>89</sup>

As had been done at the Tongwen Guan, in an effort to attract talented students the university offered free room and board, as well as a graduated series of stipends depending on the quality of a student's work. Space was initially allotted for five hundred students, the top thirty of whom were to be placed in the first rank, entitling them to twenty taels of silver per month. The next fifty would constitute the second rank, worth sixteen taels each month, and so on down to the sixth and lowest rank, which would have one hundred and sixty students, and pay only four taels per month.<sup>90</sup> These inducements helped create enthusiasm for the Jingshi daxuetang; when the entrance examinations were announced hundreds signed up.<sup>91</sup> Surely, some of these people were caught up in the spirit of reform, but the fact of the already huge oversupply of degree holders no doubt affected their thinking as well. After all, given the sudden high demand for officials with knowledge of things Western, it stood to reason that university graduates would have a decided advantage in the competition for bureaucratic office.

#### THE COST OF REACTION

Like so much else, however, the optimism that accompanied the early planning for the university was cut short by the coup of September 1898. Still, the university was one of the few reform movement initiatives to survive the Empress Dowager's seizure of power.<sup>92</sup> Its long-awaited opening day finally arrived in December 1898, when the college for officials began offering classes to one hundred plus *juren* and *jinshi* from the capital. Of these people, one observer remarked cynically that their primary interest was in the free room and board.<sup>93</sup> There is no doubt that the university that opened in the chilly winter after the coup was a pale imitation of the one that had been planned. Among other things, the bold

curriculum designed by Liang Qichao had been set aside in favor of one focused on the Five Classics.

But conservative officials still managed to find fault with the Jingshi daxuetang. Led by the censor Wu Hongjia, they attacked the university for being too expensive and poorly managed. Zhou Shuqiao, president of the Board of Punishments, even recommended that it be closed. Fed up, Sun Jia'nai excused himself from his duties on the grounds that he was ill and in need of rest. The Empress Dowager appointed Xu Jingcheng to serve in Sun's place in July 1899. Under his watch, courses in a scattering of Western subjects were reintroduced, but the Court's abandonment of the plan to award the *jinsshi* degree to university graduates, which could only have been calculated to destroy the institution, assured that few students would take their studies seriously.<sup>94</sup>

The fledgling university managed to limp along until the Boxers United in Righteousness swept into Beijing in May 1900. With its Western aura the Jingshi daxuetang stood little chance of weathering the anti-imperialist furor unleashed on the capital. The fact that Grand Councilor Gangyi declared the university full of "foreigners and traitors" (*yang hanjian*) certainly did not help. Sun Jia'nai's house was destroyed by the Boxers, and two professors, Liu Keyi and Francis James, an Englishman, were killed during the siege. Gruesomely, James, who was apprehended while outside the legation compound on June 20, was decapitated. His head was then displayed on a spike.<sup>95</sup> On July 1, 1900, with W. A. P. Martin and the rest of the foreign community bunkered in the diplomatic quarter, a dispirited Xu Jingcheng memorialized the throne to recommend that the university be closed. "The university was established to earnestly pursue true knowledge, and to give equal priority to both Western and Chinese learning. At this time Western learning is not considered a priority, and as there are already plenty of schools teaching the classics . . . there is no need for one more."<sup>96</sup> On July 11 the Court ordered that the university close.

Reform-minded officials had learned to tack in the winds of the court's fundamental political and cultural conservatism, and so were able to shepherd the university project through the bureaucracy, but events then outpaced their efforts. A few weeks after the university was shut down, Xu Jingcheng was executed for criticizing the Court's policy of support for the Boxers, making him one of the summer's most famous martyrs.<sup>97</sup> A handful of guards were assigned to protect the campus from looters, but they were soon chased away by Russian and German troops

who were billeted in the dormitories and in W. A. P. Martin's house. Ironically, the foreign troops then completed the Boxer's work by vandalizing the property, smashing "every article of furniture" in Martin's house and dumping his books "as well as those of the university . . . into the wells and cisterns."<sup>98</sup>