The May Fourth Era at Yale-in-China, 1917-1921

Roy B. Campbell
Presbyterian College

In 1906, Yale University founded a missionary middle school in Changsha, the capital city of China's Hunan province. Long regarded by foreigners as China's most conservative and anti-foreign province, Hunan, only five years previous, had been the last Chinese province to open its doors to foreign settlement. In this new and seemingly fertile field, the Americans of the Yale Foreign Missionary Society cultivated their middle school (Yali) and, by 1916, had greatly expanded their presence by also opening a School of Nursing, a College of Arts and Sciences, and a Medical School. As with most missionary educational enterprises of this period, the primary objective of the Yale educational missionaries was to inculcate their students with Western Science and knowledge, and, most importantly, Christian values. With the anti-traditional and pro-democracy message of the New Culture movement that erupted amongst China's youth both before and after the May Fourth incident of 1919, the Yale missionaries, like others, believed that their efforts were being fulfilled. However, after this rising student consciousness turned increasingly nationalistic and anti-foreign, the Yale missionaries eventually not only had to address its implications within the context of the greater missionary enterprise in China, but, even more importantly, had to confront its manifestations amongst the students in their own institution.

In recent years, many historians of the general missionary experience in China have focused upon the missionary's inflexibility, insensitivity, cultural superiority and paternalistic methods, and the manner in which these actions and attitudes provoked reactions from the Chinese populace. However, my research has shown that this only partly reveals the complexities

associated with the rise of student consciousness at the institution. As the tide of student consciousness rose in both Hunan and China, the Chinese students and foreign teachers at Yali did not immediately, nor conclusively, become diametrically opposed to the ideas and actions of one another. Instead, especially in the early years of the movement, there existed a spirit of cooperation between Yali's Chinese students and their foreign educators, which was exemplified in the former's actions to share their ideas for reform with the latter, and the willingness of the latter to not only listen, but to consider and offer accommodations, such as the hiring of more Chinese instructors, offering more courses in Chinese language, history and culture, and, most importantly, the removal of religious requirements from the institution's curriculum. Ultimately, the Yali missionaries' reactions to, and perceptions of, the growing student consciousness, both within and without their institution, between 1917 and 1927, represented, not an inflexible resistance and opposition to change as is often depicted or assumed, but a fairly enlightened attempt to adjust their attitudes and policies in order to meet the demands and needs of the youth of a changing China. This article examines one facet of student-teacher relations at Yali during this period, the student literature that was produced at the institution during the May Fourth era, 1917-1921.

Yali Student Writers

In 1917, the Yali Middle School students began the publication, on a bi-annual basis, of a student magazine, *The Yale-In-China Student***,** which provided a forum for the institution's students to broadcast their activities to the greater Chinese community. Coincidentally, while the magazine provided a useful vehicle for transmitting the students' activities to their fellow Chinese, it also served to affirm the Yali educational missionaries' belief that they were succeeding in their objective to Westernize and Christianize their students. For example, in an article titled "What Constitutes Good Scholarship," one student, Hwang Pu, lamented:

> In discussing what constitutes good scholarship we feel sorry when we see the present condition of Chinese scholarship. We find that our scholarship has many defects in cultivating mind, body, and heart symmetrically. These defects are so pernicious to our education, to our civilization and to our country that they are certainly worth discussing.[1]

This frustration over the limitations of Chinese scholarship highlighted by Hwang Pu is a major theme within the May Fourth era literature produced at Yali. Like their peers at Chinese institutions, the Yali student writers identified the source of this problem as China's attachment to, and veneration of, the past. This predisposition toward traditionalism manifested itself in myriad ways, and had, from the students' perspective, stunted China's intellectual and cultural growth. In particular, Chinese literature was criticized by students like Ho Lien, who, in his "A General Aspect of Chinese Literature," argued that China's literary talents had stagnated due to "the spirit of exclusiveness and mental inertia as is shown by the old customs that have ever been ingrained in the nature of her people."[2]

While students like Ho Lien found the cause of China's stagnation in her traditionalism, they found the solution to it in the modernism of the West. This hope for the amelioration of China along Western lines is particularly well expressed by Ho who referred to a coming "Oriental Renaissance," describing it in the following hopeful manner:

> It is in expectation that the twentieth century will be the nuptial period for the elements of World Civilization, namely; western and oriental;…Let us, accordingly, get our room decorated, feast prepared, and everything ready for the celebration of this couple –the Western Bride and the Eastern bridegroom–which will result in a sacredness of family life and a glory for the family tree forever.[3]

Though it has been suggested by some scholars that the Yali students simply borrowed the best that the West had to offer in order to use it in throwing off the yoke of Western influence and domination, we see, in the above paragraph, a more representative aspiration that China's future would be intimately connected to that of her Western peers. For the Yali educators, this type of positive recognition seemed to suggest that their efforts to bear positive influence on the Chinese were finding success.

Specifically, the Yali students championed Western-style education as one of the fundamental cures to China's ills of traditionalism. One student, Conrad Yuen Shen Shu, argued that the reason America and Europe had become so dominant and wealthy in comparison to the rest of the world stemmed "not only from their modern inventions,...but principally as a result of their universal education."[4] Recognizing that "a nation's advance in civilization may be measured by its attention to education," the author advocated that his fellow countrymen follow the model of the West, "so that education in China shall some day become universal and unrestricted."[5] Yuen Shen Shu's thoughts reveal not merely the influence of the Western-style education he had received at Yali, but also his overwhelming approval of it.

Perhaps more interesting, and revealing, than the above-mentioned student articles are those statements that directly applaud the work and contributions of the American missionaries at Yali. For example, in an article titled "Student Life at Yale-in-China," the author, Tsai-I-O, offered the following commendation of the contributions that Yali was making not only in the lives of its students, but, even more importantly, in the life of the new Chinese republic:

> ...the student life at Yale in China is unique. The various wholesome influences derived from work and play all tend to mold the young life of the student along lines of the greatest possible service to his country—spiritually, intellectually and physically.[6]

Resounding corroborations of Tsai's approval are echoed in many of the *Yale-in-China Student* articles from this period.

Student Activism

Following the May Fourth incident of 1919, Yali's students recognized, even more clearly, the urgent need for social and political change in China. Aside from education-related issues, Yali's students demonstrated a positive regard for the social elements of campus life at their institution. Many issues of the *Yale-in-China Student* contain articles discussing extra-curricular activities such as athletics, in which the students issue their praises for the opportunity to participate in organized Western sports, like volleyball, football, and tennis, that had been introduced by their American instructors. In addition to these positive representations of campus life, students discussed their participation in community service projects, which, as explained in Lei Ch'iang's "The Social Activities of Yali Students," were inspired by the institution's Christian dedication to the promotion of good works. In this particular article, Lei describes how, during times of strife, Yali students were willing and eager to help those who needed it. He explains, for example, how, after the general Chang Ching-Yao ransacked Changsha during his advance through the region the previous year, Yali students went into the city and brought helpless women and children back to Yali where they could take refuge.[7] The influence of the institution on these activities is evidenced in the following statement made by Lei: "This is the spirit of Christians and illustrates one of the social activities of Yali."[8] Like others, Lei sees the work of Yali as having an integral place in Chinese state and society. He explains that the benefits of Yali's social activities can only be accomplished through the united strength of the student body and that, through this unity and cooperation the students would be "able to make our institution famous, society improved, and the country strong."[9]

While Lei focused upon the social activism at Yali, one student, K.C. Hwang, in an editorial, provided a telling testimony of the general nature of student consciousness at Yali. In

assessing this rising consciousness amongst him and his peers within the context of the greater student experience at Yali, K.C. Hwang wrote:

> On the side of students, self-development which Yali always emphasized, the great thing is the awakening of the students' own initiative and energy. Attention is fixed not only upon externals, such as the performance of set tasks and the gaining of marks, but also upon their growing power of thought.[10]

Inspired by the May Fourth movement, this "growing power of thought" to which the author refers seemingly served as an intellectually liberating influence in the lives of the Yali students. According to K. C. Hwang, the students at Yali were now no longer limited to "accepting ideas of the teachers or facts of the textbooks, but also to give forth ideas that had been produced within themselves."[11] Hwang further revealed his notion of a change in the intellectual climate by insisting that from that point forward, the students at Yali would no longer merely be the "receivers" of information, but also the "givers."[12]

While Hwang's editorial represented a virtual intellectual "coming of age" amongst the students of Yali, it is important to note that he maintained his belief in, and support of, the educational and social agenda of his Western institution. In explaining the manner in which the students still sought to work within the practical and ideological framework that had been established by their American instructors Hwang wrote:

> In every activity the students undertake, the spirit of cooperation, the so called "Yali Spirit," is exhibited...whatever the students do is done for Yali as a whole. Exactly what Chinese students are in need of, now, since they are going to be the future social leaders, is to discuss all kinds of social questions. No social problem can be easily solved unless a great cooperative spirit is well promoted in those who are going to solve it.[13]

As evidenced above, therefore, Hwang believed that the best way for Yali students to contribute to the amelioration of society was not to reject the Western influence of their institution, but rather, embrace it. He saw Yali as a cooperative forum of exchange and liberality, in which new ideas could not only be discussed and developed, but also implemented. For the American instructors at Yali, Hwang's words would have been received most eagerly, because they echoed the very charter of their institution, which advocated Western-guided progress and development for China and the Chinese.

The Yali Faculty: Impressions of the May Fourth Era

The positive attitudes toward both the West and Yali itself that the above-cited student articles conveyed served to confirm, in the minds of the American instructors, that their efforts to reform their Chinese students along the Yale model were succeeding. As a reflection of the modernizing and liberalizing trends of the greater May Fourth era, the articles in the magazine convinced the Yali faculty that their institution was playing no small part in engendering these same values in their students between 1917 and 1921. Similarly, their students' participation in the strikes and protests during this same period, and in later years, was seen not as a reason for the faculty to be concerned, but, instead pleased, due to the manner in which it seemed to reflect a positive change in the direction they had long envisioned. A publicity article from this period demonstrates, in the following excerpt, the manner in which the institution was increasingly coming to see itself as a bridge between the West and the East:

> Yale in China is aiding much in the development of a closer friendship between China and America. Chinese youths are there receiving the best that the Orient and the Occident have to offer, and the achievements and ideals of the Western world are being adapted to the atmosphere, needs, and traditions of China...The Yale family has reason to be proud that among its number have been those whose faith, foresight and sacrifice

> have built up at Changsha an institution which is making so important and direct a contribution towards a better understanding between the West and East.[14]

Of particular significance, in regards to the manner in which the Yali faculty viewed their institution's role in the atmosphere of a changing China, was their perceived success over the traditional pervading influence of the scholar-gentry class in Hunan. For example, in 1921 Hume described, with great delight, to a friend, "how significant an enterprise has arisen in the very heart of China where formerly there was only conservatism and an antiforeign spirit."[15] In another publicity article published by the institution, this apparent change is heralded even further: "The old order is changing and our order of things is superseding it. Even in remote places like Changsha, pink socks and light tan shoes represent our style of dress if not taste."[16]

In assessing the overall significance of the May Fourth Era at Yali, it is important to consider this period from the perspective of both the institution's Chinese students, as well as the foreign instructors. Though the Chinese students at Yali contributed to the greater May Fourth movement, through their literary productions and participation in strikes and protests, their experiences and consequent developing consciousness were quite different from those of their peers at Chinese institutions. Having been isolated within a foreign institution, and educated along Western lines, the students at Yali were somewhat limited in their exposure to, and involvement in, the greater movement. In fact, it may be said that the Yali students were torn between two worlds. While they sympathized with their fellow Chinese students, they also identified with their Western instructors. Though the students sought similar changes as their peers at Chinese institutions, they believed that their own institution, with its American curriculum and instructors, could serve as a guiding force. Of course, as these Chinese students at Yali became increasingly more mature in their ideals and vision for China's future, they became more confident in both their right and ability to demand more of their instructors and institution.

Conversely, for the American instructors at Yali, their students' participation in the May Fourth movement seemed proof positive that their educational objectives were indeed being fulfilled. These instructors heralded their students' willingness to join in the strikes, protests, and boycotts against both the Japanese government and China's own seemingly weak bureaucracy, which seemed to suggest that their efforts to channel their students' growing political consciousness in a positive direction were succeeding. Nothing corroborated the faculty's feelings more than the students' own words found in the articles of the *Yale-in-China Student*, as well as the positive impressions and commentaries issued by Yali graduates about their institution. Even when the students took their instructors to task, by asking them to make certain changes to Yali's curriculum or policies, the tone of their requests were not confrontational, but cooperative. Assuredly, because this expressed spirit of cooperation was exactly what the foreign instructors at Yali were endeavoring to cultivate within their students; it would have been perceived, and welcomed, as a positive sign of the institution's growing influence on their students.

After 1921, as student consciousness across China became increasingly radical, anti-foreign, and anti-Christian, the instructors at Yali could take certain comfort in the fact that at their institution, their students remained in a loyal and subordinate position. The Yali faculty saw their students as not part of the general student population, but, instead, as partners in their educational enterprise, who, as a result of their guiding educational and moral influence, had become not only different from their peers at Chinese institutions, but, in terms of manners, maturity, and capability, better prepared to lead China into a new era. This impression is important, as it set the tone for student-teacher relations from that point forward, especially during the difficult years between 1923 and 1926.

It was because the Yali faculty had come to firmly regard their students as partners in the educational enterprise that they later refused to acknowledge any expressed animosity or

opposition from them as sincerely motivated. Instead, between 1923 and 1926, when their students began participating in anti-Western and anti-Christian protests and, later, even launching strikes against the institution itself, the Yali faculty almost always looked for some outside influence upon which to fix blame for their students' having been led astray. Similarly, when the Yali faculty began pursuing an increasingly active program of accommodation for their students, it was based far less on student pressures and agitations, than it was on the instructors' established notion of, and good faith in, the cooperative relationship they had promoted between themselves and their students. Therefore, when the tide of opposition and frustration grew increasingly high amongst Yali's students during this later period, its actual impact on the institution itself was softened to a marked degree based almost exclusively upon the well-established perception of the Yali faculty that their students remained their allies, despite outside distractions and interferences, in the Yale-in-China enterprise.

Endnotes

[1]Hwang Pu, "What Constitutes Good Scholarship" *The Yale-in-China Student* 1 (June 1917): 7, Records of the Yale-in-China Association. In further explaining the cause of China's weaknesses, Hwang Pu added that China lacked the virtue of self-sacrifice, a principle promoted amongst the Yali student body.

[2]Ho Lien, "General Aspects of Chinese Literature," *The Yale-in-China Student* 2 (November 1916): 6.

[3]Ibid. , 6-7.

[4]Conrad Yuen Shen Shu, "Universal Education in China," *The Yale-in-China Student* 2 (November 1916): 21. The author further expressed his support for, and admiration of, the West by stating: "They all know how to read, write, calculate, and do business for their country and society, both men and women, boys and girls; even the coolies and house servants all know how to read newspapers, write familiar letters, and how to calculate simple problems in arithmetic."

[5]Ibid., 21-22.

[6]Tsai-I-O, "The Student Life at Yale-in-China" *The Yale-in-China Student* 2 (November 1917): 5.

[7]Lei Ch'iang, "The Social Activities of Yali Students," *The Yale-in-China Student* 7 (June 1921): 33. In addition to this, Lei states that during peacetime, Yali students provide free elementary education through their Y.M.C.A, and also give speeches on topic such as sanitation and hygiene to the "ignorant people."

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid., 34.

[10]K.C. Hwang, "Editorial," *The Yale-in-China Student* 7 (June 1920): 4.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid. K. C. Hwang demonstrated this newly felt freedom by explaining that: "all school societies organized by Yali students are provided with a constitution based on students' control and with minimum of faculty supervisions."

[13]Ibid.

[14]Publicity Article (no date), Records of the Yale-in-China Association.

[15]Edward Hume to Helena McMillan, 28 August 1921, Edward H. Hume Papers, Sterling Memorial Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

[16]"China in Flux," 1, Records of the Yale-in-China Association.