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WHAT TO DO WITH INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE: SINOLOGY CONFRONTS THE DISCIPLINES AT TSINGHUA UNIVERSITY

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One of the challenges in creating a modern university system in early twentieth century China was how to accommodate the rich and complex body of traditional knowledge within institutions that were the product of a radically new socio-political environment and which were explicitly charged with the task of helping to reshape China as a modern nation state. This body of traditional knowledge, which came to be known as *guoxue* (National Learning, or Sinology), encompassed more than any single academic discipline, but if it could not be considered a discipline how then might it be given the place it deserved in university curricula? After all, its proponents argued that it was only *guoxue* that would enable these new universities to become “Chinese” institutions, rather than just conduits for foreign knowledge. In contrast, advocates for the primacy of disciplinary-based knowledge argued that the content of National Learning could easily be accommodated within the respective disciplinary areas, be they history, literature, sociology or any of the other fields being established as the fundamental units within the new university system. Just because the universities were in China did not mean it was necessary to separate out the study of things Chinese as a distinct sphere of academic endeavour.¹

These debates over National Learning reflected wider anxieties associated with “the trauma of accommodation,” the need to construct a modern China while at the same time negotiating the challenges of dealing with aggressive foreign powers intent on intruding into Chinese territory, the challenges of imperialism and war.² Inability to generate an effective response to these challenges brought revolution in 1911, with the eradication of the millennia-old dynastic order, but political instability and social disorder remained. The failure of the revolution to provide a viable new social and political order increased disillusionment, particularly amongst young people, and fueled demands for more radical change. This led to what some have called the

1 In the 1920s and 1930s, the Chinese term *guoxue* was translated as either “National Learning” or “Sinology”. In more recent Chinese scholarship, the term “Sinology” is usually used to refer only to the work of non-Chinese scholars, and is called *hanxue* not *guoxue*. Unfortunately, the term *hanxue* is also used to refer to the evidential learning (*kaozheng* scholarship) of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), which was only one strand of indigenous scholarship. In this article I follow the practice of the period under consideration, translating *guoxue* as either “National Learning” or “Sinology”.

2 Theodore Hutters, *Bringing the World Home: Appropriating the West in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005), 3.

“totalistic iconoclasm” of the 1920s and early 1930s.³ This iconoclasm became part of the New Culture Movement, a progressive movement to modernize Chinese culture, which provided the wider context for the creation of China’s modern university system. Peking University was China’s first modern university, founded in 1898, when the old Imperial Academy was revitalized, and its staff and students would become some of the most radical iconoclasts of the New Culture Movement.⁴ But most of the new universities were not established until after the 1911 revolution. Tsinghua (Qinghua) University, for instance, began its life as a school, founded in 1911 to help prepare students for further education in the United States, and it was only during the 1920s that it was transformed into a university. Staff at Tsinghua faced the same dilemma as those at the other new universities established at this time: how to create a modern, outward-looking institution that would prepare students for life in the very different world of post-revolutionary China, while at the same time retaining the best of the centuries-old Chinese traditions of learning and scholarship. In this essay, I explore how these tensions were negotiated at Tsinghua University during the New Culture Movement of the 1920s and 1930s.

The Prestige of Sinology

Tsinghua and Peking universities are two of the premier modern tertiary institutions in China, but their origins were quite different. Peking University had its roots in the past, with a previous existence as a traditional academy, whereas Tsinghua was a completely new institution.⁵ It was created when the government of the United States of America, under Theodore Roosevelt Jr., decided to remit some of the indemnity money owed to it following the suppression of the anti-foreign Boxer Uprising. Roosevelt agreed with those who considered the indemnity excessive, and thus supported calls to use some of America’s share of this money to help transform China through education. This led to the establishment of the Bureau of Educational Mission to the United States of America, through which remitted indemnity funds were used to provide scholarships for Chinese students so that they could study at American schools and universities. In addition,

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- 3 Lin Yü-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).
- 4 For insight into the challenges facing the new universities established at this time see Yeh Wen-hsin, *The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in Republican China, 1919-1937* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990) and E-tu Zen Sun, “The Growth of the Academic Community,” in John K. Fairbank and Albert Feuerwerker eds., *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 13: Republican China, 1912-1949, Part 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 361-420. For more detailed considerations of Peking University, see Xiaoqing Diana Lin, *Peking University: Chinese Scholarship and Intellectuals, 1898-1937* (Albany: SUNY, 2003) and Timothy B. Weston, *The Power of Position: Beijing University, Intellectuals, and Chinese Political Culture, 1898-1929* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
- 5 Xie Yong, *Jiaoyu Qinghua* [Education at Qinghua] (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1999), 3-4.

some of the funds were used to establish and operate a school in Peking, designed to prepare the scholarship students for study in America. When it opened in 1911, the school was called “Qinghua Xuetang,” or Tsinghua College, but its name was soon changed to Tsinghua School (Qinghua Xuexiao); it was often referred to in English as the “Indemnity Funds School”. Thanks to the security provided by the indemnity funds the school was well resourced, and because its primary role was preparing students for study overseas it was outward looking, with a significant proportion of the teaching staff recruited from the United States.⁶

During the course of the 1920s, as the New Culture Movement swept across China, Tsinghua underwent increasing Sinification.⁷ Foreign teachers were gradually replaced by Chinese, many of them Tsinghua graduates. These scholarship alumni, conscious that the indemnity funding was gradually being depleted, drove forward the reorientation of the School. They wanted Tsinghua to provide a first-class tertiary education *in China*, rather than have it function as a preparatory school for American universities. As a result, after 1923 students were no longer recruited and prepared for study in the United States, as the “old program” was phased out. A new “University Division” was established within the School to prepare for the transition, and in 1928 Tsinghua School became Tsinghua University. Then, in 1929, it became a “national” university, no longer jointly administered by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with oversight from the American Embassy, but governed solely by the new Nationalist government’s Department of Education.⁸

The Sinification of Tsinghua during the New Culture Movement transformed it into a Chinese institution, yet it remained one of the most outward looking of the new universities. Most faculty and many students spoke some English, and even after its transition to university status graduates often went on to further study in the United States. With its residential campus on the outskirts of the city, Tsinghua provided a self-contained community in which faculty and students enjoyed a great deal of social interaction. As John Israel has noted, Tsinghua resembled an American liberal arts college.⁹ This was not surprising considering its origins as an “Indemnity Funds School,” established and administered, at least during its early years, as a Sino-American venture. For these reasons, it might be assumed that the issue of how to incorporate Chinese Learning into the university curricula was less problematic at

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- 6 Su Yufeng, *Cong Qinghua xuetang dao Qinghua daxue, 1911-1929* [From Tsinghua College to Tsinghua University: 1911-1929] (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiu yuan jindai shi yanjiu suo, 1996); and Zhou Xiaojun, “The Influence of the Boxer Indemnity Reparations Remissions on Chinese Higher Education,” (M.A. Thesis, University of Nebraska, 2014), 6-25.
- 7 John Israel, “The Beida, Tsinghua Connection: Yenching in the World of Beijing’s Elite Universities,” *The Journal of American-Asian Relations* 14 (2007), 67.
- 8 John Israel ed., “A Draft History of Qinghua,” *Chinese Education*, vol. 15, 3-4 (Fall-Winter, 1982-3), 1-68, and Stacey Bieler, “Patriots” or “Traitors”: *A History of American-Educated Chinese Students* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), 42-5 and 53-89.
- 9 John Israel, “The Beida, Tsinghua Connection,” 65.

Tsinghua. Unlike Peking University, with its roots firmly embedded in Chinese soil, Tsinghua was, at least in part, a foreign implant, representing a break with the past. Moreover, it was increasingly seen as the foremost university for natural science and engineering, and as the inherited tradition of Chinese scholarship was primarily textual and humanistic, the challenge of incorporating it into the modern curriculum could have been less pressing. But this was far from the case. Like Peking University, indeed like all the new universities, Tsinghua was confronted by the challenge of how to be both modern and Chinese.

According to Hu Shi (1891-1962), one of driving forces behind the New Culture Movement, the reason for the dilemma about what to do with indigenous knowledge was that Chinese universities “had no international standing, and the only [Chinese] research that could be compared with the best international scholarship was National Learning.” Furthermore, Hu argued that if China’s indigenous knowledge had no status internationally, then China itself would have no status.¹⁰ Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese scholars had been travelling overseas, initially to Japan and subsequently to Europe and North America, in order to become better acquainted within the best and latest international scholarship. It was only in the area of Chinese Studies, however, that they were able to incorporate what they were learning into a well-established indigenous scholarly tradition. Without such a foundation, other areas of scholarship required careful nurturing before the Chinese universities would be able to operate on a comparable level to that of the best international institutions.¹¹ But National Learning was not simply a continuation of this indigenous tradition. It represented a new development in Chinese scholarship.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the advocates of National Learning defined it against both “Imperial Learning” (*junxue*), the strands of indigenous scholarship associated most closely with the failing autocratic imperial system, and “Western Learning” (*xixue* or *yangxue*), which was seen as predominantly scientific and technical, the kind of knowledge that had enabled the spatial advance of Western modernity.¹² It was the inability of Imperial Learning to provide the necessary resources to respond effectively to these new challenges that provoked the refashioning of China’s indigenous scholarly traditions. By the 1920s, many intellectuals were critical of the age-old commitment to the study of the Confucian classics, which had been at the heart of Chinese scholarship for centuries. The most radical scholars argued for a

10 Hu Shi, “Zai tantan zhengli guogu,” [Another Discussion on Putting in Order the Nation’s Past] in Xu Xiaotian ed., *Guoguxue taolun ji* [An Anthology of Discussions on National Learning] (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1927), vol. 1, 22.

11 See, for instance, Grace Yen Shen, *Unearthing the Nation: Modern Geology and Nationalism in Republican China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 8.

12 Luo Zhitian, *Guojia yu xueshu: Qingji-Minchu guanyu “guoxue” de sixiang lunzheng* [The State and Scholarship: Intellectual Debates about “National Learning” during the late Qing and early Republic] (Beijing: Sanlian, 2003) and Luo Zhitian, *Inheritance Within Rupture: Culture and Scholarship in Early Twentieth Century China*, translated by Lane J. Harris and Mei Chun (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 36-59.

total rejection of all inherited traditions of scholarship, because they believed all were infected by a monolithic Confucian legacy that was impeding China's modernization.¹³ While this radical position had vocal supporters, most wanted a more qualified escape from the past. They distinguished the knowledge practices associated with the old state-sponsored imperial examination system (Imperial Learning) from the broader body of traditional scholarship, arguing that it was only the former that were problematic.

Liberating Chinese scholarship from an overriding focus on Imperial Learning was thus central to the creation of National Learning. But National Learning was not simply oppositional. The reshaping of traditional knowledge was also stimulated by new developments that enriched Chinese scholarship. Archaeological exploration, although still in its infancy in China, was beginning to produce material of such significance that it required a reexamination of the foundations of Chinese culture and civilization. At the same time, there was also a new willingness to engage with the work of foreign Sinologists. Prior to the early twentieth century, Chinese scholars had no reason to believe that foreigners had anything to contribute to the study of China, but the innovative work of a few European scholars such as Paul Pelliot (1878-1945), Alexander von Stäel-Holstein (1877-1937) and Bernard Karlgren (1889-1978) began to change that, helping to initiate a new era of cosmopolitan Sinology that would last from the early 1920s down until the Japanese invasion of China in 1937.¹⁴ As Wen-hsin Yeh has argued, the flourishing of National Learning in the 1920s and 1930s was "the product of an international system of knowledge production," which involved both "a reconstitution of 'China' as a subject of study in a world context," and the participation of Chinese scholars "in an international framework of Sinological studies."¹⁵

The clearest indication of the significance of these developments for Chinese scholarship came when the first research centers established in the new universities

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- 13 Brian Moloughney, "Myth and Making of History: Gu Jiegang and the *Gushi bian* Debates," in Brian Moloughney and Peter Zarrow eds., *Transforming History: The Making of a Modern Academic Discipline in Twentieth-Century China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2011), 241-270.
- 14 In the manifesto of the first new National Learning journal, *Guoxue jikan* [Journal of Sinological Research], which was published by the Sinological Research Institute at Peking University, Hu Shi emphasized the value of the scholarship of European Sinologists. See Hu Shi, "Guoxue jikan fakan xuanyan." [The Manifesto of the *Journal of Sinological Research*] in Ouyang zhesheng ed., *Hu Shi wenji* 12 vols. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chuabnashu, 1998), vol. 3, 16 [originally published in *Guoxue jikan* 1, no. 1 (1923)]. In recognition of this, Hu Shi ensured that this journal had an international advisory board, carried abstracts of articles in Western languages, and was published with French- and English-language titles (*Bulletin de l'Institut de Sinologie* and the *Journal of Sinological Studies*).
- 15 Yeh Wen-hsin, "National Learning and International Study: Travel and Translation in the Writing of Chinese History," in William C. Kirby, Mechthild Leutner and Klaus Mühlhahn eds., *Global Conjectures: China in Transnational Perspective* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), 9. For a detailed study of the international dimension of National Learning, see Sang Bing, *Guoxue yu hanxue: jindai zhongwai xuejie jiaowang lu* [National Learning and Sinology: A Record of Modern Scholarly Exchange Between China and the World] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1999).

were all devoted to National Learning. Peking University led the way, with the creation of a Sinological Research Institute in 1922, and by the end of the decade virtually all the main universities had established comparable centers or institutes. The intention at Peking University had been to establish dedicated research programmes in a number of areas, including the natural and social sciences, but National Learning took precedence, as it did elsewhere.¹⁶ Despite this widespread enthusiasm for embedding sinological research within the new universities, each institute was developed in distinctive ways, reflecting the fact that there was no clear consensus about what National Learning involved.¹⁷ For instance, scholars at Southeastern University (Dongnan) in Nanjing aligned themselves most closely with the established traditions of indigenous scholarship. Their National Learning Institute had sections devoted to the study of classical texts, poetry and literature, and the collection and interpretation of material culture. In contrast, the Sinological Research Institute at Peking University was more innovative, with research teams devoted to the study of popular culture, archaeology and linguistics, as well as the established strands of indigenous scholarship. Common to all, however, was the integration of traditional evidential research methodologies with modern European and American research methods. In this way, National Learning helped integrate indigenous Chinese academic practice into the norms and standards of international scholarship.¹⁸

With the enthusiasm for National Learning sweeping the country it was inevitable that it would find support at Tsinghua as well. In 1920 the prominent scholar-journalist Liang Qichao (1873-1929) had argued that because of its background as a preparatory school for overseas-bound scholarship students, it was especially important for Tsinghua to promote National Learning. This view gained considerable support amongst the Chinese staff. Conscious of developments at other institutions, and sensitive to criticism that Tsinghua was a well-resourced but foreign-focused institution, they argued National Learning was even more important for their students than for those

16 Chen Yi'ai, *Zhongguo xiandai xueshu yanjiu jigou de xingqi: yi Beijing daxue yanjiu suo guoxuemen wei zhongxin de tantao (1922-1927)* [The Rise of Modern Chinese Scholarly Research Institutes: The Sinological Research Institute of Peking University, 1922-1927] (Taipei: Guoli zhengzhi daxue lishi xuexi, 1999), 100-105. Sang Bing discusses all the different *guoxue* institutes in "Wan-Qing Minguo shiqi de guoxue yanjiu yu xixue," [Sinological Research and Western Learning in the late Qing and Republican Periods] *Lishi yanjiu* 5 (1996): 30-45.

17 Part of the appeal of National Learning came from the fact that it was not clearly defined and thus was able to incorporate a diversity of research agendas. See Luo Zhitian, "Yici ningjing de geming: Qinghua guoxue yuan de dute zhuiqiu," [A Tranquil Revolution: The Distinctive Pursuits of the Tsinghua Sinological Research Institute] *Qinghua daxue xuebao* 2 (2011): 5-13.

18 Sang Bing, "Wan-Qing Minguo shiqi de guoxue yanjiu yu xixue," 39. For a discussion of the difference approaches taken at Southeastern and Peking universities, see Shen Weiwei, "Xueheng pai" *puxi: lishi yu xushi* [The Pedigree of "The Xueheng School": History and Narrative] (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2015), 212-213.

who would remain in China.¹⁹ At the same time, establishing a higher-level research institute was attractive to those who wanted to ensure that Tsinghua could make a speedy transition from school to university. Cao Yunxiang (1881-1937), who as President from 1922 until 1928 led the transformation of Tsinghua into a university, was particularly keen to establish such an institute in order to offer students the opportunity to go on to higher-level research. Initially he favoured establishing a general research institute, a plan supported by many academics, but the man he entrusted to establish the institute, Wu Mi (1894-1978), persuaded him that it should concentrate on National Learning.²⁰ Wu had been a scholarship student, studying comparative literature at Harvard, and returned to Tsinghua in 1925 to teach Western literature. He saw the institute as an opportunity to span the disciplinary boundaries that were emerging as the transition from school to university took shape, and as a vehicle to integrate Chinese and Western traditions of scholarship. This would be best achieved, he argued, not with a general graduate school but by concentrating on National Learning.²¹ While Wu Mi was largely able to implement his vision for the institute, there remained an undercurrent of dissatisfaction amongst those who wanted a University-wide graduate research school. This tension was evident in the different names given to the Institute. Its official English-language name was “The Research Institute of Tsing Hua College,” while its Chinese-language title, “Qinghua guoxue yanjiu yuan,” included the term for National Learning or Sinology (i.e., *guoxue*: “The Tsinghua Sinological Research Institute”). Wu Mi was continually frustrated in his efforts to change the official English-language title, which reflected the ongoing concern amongst his colleagues that the Institute be transformed into a University-wide graduate school that catered to all students, not just those engaged in National Learning.

Despite this frustration, Wu Mi was able to implement his distinctive vision for the Institute as a researcher-led centre that incorporated aspects of both a traditional Chinese academy, or *shuyuan*, and an Oxbridge college.²² Particular emphasis was given to the importance of integrating Chinese, Japanese and Western traditions of scholarship and, with its holistic sinological focus, the Institute was explicitly designed to counter the disciplinary demarcation that was becoming entrenched as the

- 19 Sun Dunheng, *Qinghua guoxue yanjiu yuan shihua* [Reflections on the Tsinghua Sinological Research Institute] (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2002), 12.
- 20 Su Yufeng, “Qinghua guoxue yanjiu yuan shulüe,” [A Brief Account of the Tsinghua Sinological Research Institute] *Qinghua hanxue yanjiu* (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 1997), vol. 2, 290-291.
- 21 For Wu Mi’s vision for the Institute, see his “Qinghua kaiban yanjiuyuan zhi zhiqu ji jingguo,” [The Purpose and Experience of Establishing the Research Institute at Qinghua] in Qinghua daxue xiaoshi yanjiu shi ed., *Qinghua daxue shiliao xuanbian* (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 1991), vol. 1, 374-5.
- 22 On the desire to keep alive something of the old academy culture in modern universities, see Ding Gang, “The Shuyuan and the Development of Chinese Universities in the Early Twentieth Century,” in Ruth Hayhoe and Julia Pan eds., *East-West Dialogue in Knowledge and Higher Education* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 218-244.

fundamental structure of the new universities. The professorial staff determined what the curriculum would be according to their own particular research agendas, while students could select their course of study according to their own interests and ability.²³ Students wishing to enter the Institute were required to be graduates with an aptitude for independent research, and the method of tuition followed more closely the transmission of knowledge from teacher to individual student that was characteristic of a traditional academy than it did the pedagogy of the wider university.²⁴ That this model proved, at least initially, to be successful was due largely to the quality of the scholars Wu Mi was able to attract to the Institute. The professorial staff included Liang Qichao, at the time China's most respected public intellectual, and Wang Guowei (1877-1927), whose work encompassed the full range of sinological research and who was widely recognized as the most outstanding scholar of his generation. They were joined by the Harvard-trained linguist Zhao Yuanren (1892-1982) and also Chen Yinke (1890-1969), who was then still largely unknown in China but who would soon come to be recognized as the most brilliant historian of his generation. The final member of the teaching staff, Li Ji (1896-1979), had studied anthropology at Harvard and was soon to emerge as one of the founders of Chinese archaeology.²⁵ Even those who opposed Wu Mi's vision for Institute found it difficult to argue that he had succeeded in bringing together a group of outstanding scholars whose presence would generate considerable prestige for the university.²⁶

The research and teaching conducted within the Institute was both broad and deep, ranging from traditional philological analysis of texts through to new fieldwork-based investigation of material culture, but the primary determinant of what was done was always the particular interests of individual staff and students. This is one of the main things that distinguished the Research Institute of Tsing Hua College from other institutes of National Learning established at this time, which all organized their teaching and research programmes in ways that aligned more closely with the new

23 For a list of courses offered taught at the Institute in 1927, see the "calendar" (*Qinghua yilan*) contained in Li Sen ed., *Minguo shiqi gaodeng jiaoyu shiliao huibian* [A Compilation of Sources Relating to Higher Education during the Republican Period] 50 vols. (Beijing: Guoji tushuguan chubanshe, 2014), vol. 2, 181-183.

24 Luo Zhitian, "Yici ningjing de geming," 7-12. Qi Jiaying ed., *Qinghua renwen xueke nianpu* [A Chronological Account of Humanities Disciplines at Qinghua] (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 1999), 6-19.

25 Each of these scholars has been the subject of a great deal of research in recent years; too much to list here. For brief accounts of their contributions to the Institute, see Su Yufeng, "Qinghua guoxue yanjiu yuan shulüe," 289-357; Huang Yanfu, *Ersanshi niandai Qinghua xiaoyuan wenhua* [The Culture of the Qinghua Campus during the 1920s and 1930s] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2000), 100-139; and Sang Bing, "Chen Yinke yu Qinghua yanjiu yuan," [Chen Yinke and The Research Institute of Tsing Hua College] *Lishi yanjiu* 4 (1998): 128-142.

26 One of the best accounts of the range and quality of the research done at the Institute can be found in Yue Nan, *Nandu beigui* [Southern Crossing, Northern Return] 3 vols. (Changsha: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 2015), vol. 1, 30-68.

areas of disciplinary inquiry.²⁷ Despite this freedom given to the staff to shape their own research and teaching agendas, Wu Mi also believed the Institute should fulfill a general educational role within the university. In addition to the courses offered for students within the Institute, he wanted staff to teach courses of broad Sinological interest (*putong guoxue*) for the wider university, but only Liang Qichao agreed that this was an important service that members of the Institute should provide for all students. The Administrative Vice-President of the University, Zhang Pengchun, who had long opposed Wu Mi's plans for the Institute, wanting instead to establish a general graduate school, did not support this idea, and both Zhao Yuanren and Li Ji agreed that their energy would be best directed towards specialized research and graduate teaching, not the general education of the wider student body. This may well have been a factor in Wu Mi's gradual retreat from active oversight of the Institute. He declined President Cao's invitation to be appointed Dean of the Institute when it was established in 1925, believing that important decisions about the running of the Institute should be taken by its professorial staff. But having played such a central role in establishing the Institute, and in shaping its character, it may have been a source of some disappointment to see it move in a direction that did not accord with his vision. Thus, by early 1926, Wu Mi began to focus his attention on helping establish what would soon become the new Department of Foreign Languages, and the Institute lost one of its most powerful advocates.²⁸

Despite Wu Mi's withdrawal from active involvement in its activities, by 1926 the Institute had established itself as one of the leading research centres in the country. The quality of the research produced by its staff and the innovative nature of the courses they offered seemed to substantiate the claims of those who had argued that the best way to advance China's scholarship was to invest in a specialized institute devoted to National Learning. But this was a time of dynamic change within the new tertiary institutions, and developments within the wider university would soon undermine this attempt to create a distinctive institutional presence for Sinology. Wu Mi's shift in focus signaled a broader challenge for the Institute, which it proved unable to resist.

The Rise of Disciplines and the Retreat of Sinology

As the new university system was beginning to take shape during the early 1920s, there was considerable support for the idea that National Learning (Sinology) was China's premier field of scholarship. Most institutions recognized this by creating specialized institutes devoted to fostering research and teaching on China's cultural

27 For instance, the Sinological Research Institute of Peking University was divided into five sections, covering literature, philosophy, philology, history and archaeology. For a comparison of the Tsinghua Institute with other centres of National Learning, see Sang Bing, "Wan-Qing Minguo shiqi de guoxue yanjiu yu xixue."

28 On this see Yue Nan, *Nandu beigui*, vol. 1, 66-68. See also the entry for June 15th 1925 and January 27th 1926 in Wu Mi, *Wu Mi riji* [Wu Mi's Diary] 10 vols. (Beijing: Sanlian shudian chubanshe, 1998-9), vol. 3, 34-5 and 139-141.

heritage. Not everyone was in favour of this, but at this stage the critics were in the minority.²⁹ By the late 1920s, however, support for mainstreaming research on China across the humanities disciplines was gaining momentum. In other words, just as the Research Institute of Tsing Hua College was beginning to find its feet, the tide was beginning to turn, and institutional support for a graduate school focused solely on Sinology was beginning to fade.

Following the establishment of the “University Division” within Tsinghua in 1925, plans were initiated to create foundational departments in areas such as Chinese Literature, Foreign Languages, History, Philosophy and Sociology.³⁰ Many of these new departments would incorporate aspects of National Learning, albeit within specific disciplinary contexts. Furthermore, the methodological approaches that had been fundamental to Chinese learning in the past, especially philology, were increasingly subsumed within a broader “scientific” approach to scholarship that was the mark of the new Western-based disciplines. Thus, as the transition to a discipline-based university structure gathered momentum the status of National Learning was increasingly called into question. As Luo Zhitian has argued, this was in part “the result of its failure to match any existing Western academic discipline.”³¹ While at the beginning of the decade National Learning was seen as a way to distinguish Chinese universities, something that enabled them to compete internationally, by the late 1920s it increasingly came to be seen as a relic of the past.

The historian He Bingsong (1890-1946) captured well the essence of this increasing concern over the value of National Learning. He noted the value of Chinese scholars taking control of the study of things Chinese, and of finding a place for this in the modern university. But he argued that there was no real clarity around what National Learning actually meant, which was inevitable because the Chinese tradition was vast and complex. Why then try to constrain that richness within a single framework, when it would be better to engage with things Chinese from the diversity of perspectives offered by the new disciplines. It was understandable that scholars had sought to separate out Chinese knowledge when confronted with the force of Western knowledge at the beginning of the twentieth century, and, yes, National Learning had developed since that time, but it did not align well with the analytical spirit of modern scientific inquiry that underpinned the disciplinary approach to scholarship. Not only was it no longer a useful way for Chinese scholars to conceptualize how they went about their research, it was arrogant to proclaim that the study of China was somehow special, and thus needed to be separated off from all other forms of knowledge production. What value was there, he argued, for someone studying Chinese history to consider

29 For instance, in 1921 Chen Duxiu argued strongly in favour of disciplines rather than Sinology in “Xin jiaoyu shi shenme,” [What is New Education?] in *Xin qingnian* April 1, 1921, reprinted in *Duxiu wencun* 2 vols. (Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1922), vol. 2, 565-581.

30 Qi Jiaying ed., *Qinghua renwen xueke nianpu*, 32.

31 Luo Zhitian, *Inheritance Within Rupture*, 250.

that they were engaged in National Learning and not the study of Chinese history?³² Similarly, in 1928, when Fu Sinian (1896-1950) set out the agenda for the new Institute of History and Philology in Academia Sinica, he argued that the focus in all scholarship should be the analysis of particular source material and of particular problems. What was important was employing an appropriate methodology, and methodology was both “scientific” and universal. It applied to research on the Chinese cultural heritage just as it did to all other forms of academic inquiry. Nothing was gained, he argued, by adding the term “national” to any form of learning.³³

These concerns about the value of National Learning were shared by an increasing number of the young scholars recruited to staff the new academic departments as Tsinghua underwent the transition from School to University between 1925 and 1928. One of the most influential of these was the historian Jiang Tingfu (1895-1965), who joined the University in 1929 to take over as Head of the Department of History. Jiang had a PhD from Columbia University and was strongly of the view that the study of Chinese history should be done in accord with the same social science methodologies that were used to study all other areas of history. There was value in the philological methods that underlay National Learning, but these could be incorporated into the research methodologies of the new Department. They did not need to be separated out as a distinct form of learning that only applied to the Chinese past.³⁴ With similar arguments advanced for other disciplines such as politics, philosophy and sociology, the distinctive value of the Research Institute was increasingly called into question. Jiang Tingfu and his colleagues did not actively seek to undermine the Research Institute, but the entrenchment of the new discipline-based structure for the University was shifting momentum away from an exclusive focus on National Learning. This served to reinforce the arguments of those such as Vice-President Zhang Pengchun, who had always argued that the Research Institute should encompass all fields of research.

These developments at Tsinghua were reflected across the whole of the new tertiary sector, with discipline-based departments that replicated the organizational structure of the Western university system becoming the norm. This meant, for instance, that by the early 1930s, a student embarking on the study of history at Peking University

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- 32 He Bingsong, “Lun suowei ‘guoxue,’” [On so-called ‘National Learning’] *Xiaoshuo yueban* 20, 1 (January 10, 1929), reprinted in Liu Yansheng and Fang Xinliang ed., *He Bingsong wenji* (Beijing: Commercial Press, 1996), vol. 2, 379-389.
- 33 Fu Sinian, “Lishi yuyan yanjiusuo gongzuo zhi zhiqiu,” [The Objectives of the Institute of History and Philology] in Ouyang Zhesheng ed., *Fu Sinian quanji* 7 vols. (Changsha: Hunan jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), vol. 3, 9. For a broader discussion of these issues, see Luo Zhitian, *Guojia yu xueshu*, 359-403, and Luo Zhitian, “Guoxue bushi xue: xifang xueshu fenlei yu Minchu guoxue dingwei de kunhuo,” [National Learning is not Learning: Western academic disciplines and the Difficulty of Positioning National Learning in the early Republican period] *Shehui kexue yanjiu* 1 (2002): 117-121.
- 34 Jiang Tingfu, “Lishi xuexi de gaikuang,” [The Nature of Historical Research] *Qinghua zhoukan* 41 (September, 1934), 13-14. See also Jiang’s memoirs, *Jiang Tingfu huiyi lu* [The Recollections of Jiang Tingfu] (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2003), 126-139, and Xie Yong, *Jiaoyu Qinghua*, 5-6.

would undergo a very similar experience to one enrolled at Tsinghua. Zhu Zixu (1879-1944), the Head of the Department of History at Peking University, provided the same kind of leadership and direction for his department as Jiang did at Tsinghua.³⁵ Like Jiang, Zhu encouraged his staff and students to see history as a social science, and all majors were encouraged to incorporate courses on sociology, political science and economics in their programmes. Both believed it was essential to integrate the study of Chinese history into the wider realm of historical practice, not keep it separated off as an exclusive aspect of National Learning. For this reason, it is difficult to support recent arguments that claim there was a distinctive “Tsinghua School” of scholarship in the 1920s and 1930s.³⁶ Such arguments are based on the idea that the culture of the Research Institute was so powerful that it infiltrated the wider University, giving a distinctive character to all scholarship. But as Sun Hongyun has argued, Tsinghua’s humanities departments were not all imbued with a common spirit that radiated out from the Research Institute. They had their own trajectories, which aligned more with disciplinary developments, and thus shared as much, if not more, more with comparable departments at other universities than they did with the Research Institute.³⁷ There was also a generational shift occurring within Tsinghua at this time, with younger staff based in the new academic departments increasingly providing the direction for the University. More and more, the Institute came to be seen as an expression of the past, ill-suited to the modern university that they wanted Tsinghua to be.

In the end, it was the death of the Institute’s two most senior scholars that brought to an end the explicit focus on National Learning at Tsinghua. Wang Guowei’s suicide in June of 1927 sent shock waves throughout China’s elite culture. Widely recognized as the outstanding scholar of his generation, he embodied the wide-ranging, holistic approach to scholarship that was the hallmark of Sinology. Wu Mi considered it a major achievement to have attracted him to Tsinghua’s Research Institute, especially as he had already declined repeated invitations to join the Sinological Research Institute at Peking University because of the way members of that Institute had been dealing with the cataloguing of the imperial art collection, which Wang saw as an insult to the now dethroned emperor.³⁸ His loyalty to the emperor, and to the value system of the old imperial order, was one of the things that distinguished him in a time of such rapid change. Despite his concerns over the nature of the changes that China was undergoing,

35 Brian Moloughney and Peter Zarrow, “Making History Modern: The Transformation of Chinese Historiography, 1895-1937,” in Brian Moloughney and Peter Zarrow eds., *Transforming History: The Making of a Modern Academic Discipline in Twentieth-Century China* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2011), 16-21.

36 Xu Baogeng, *Shigu yu Qinghua xuepai* [Hermeneutics and the Qinghua School] (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 1997).

37 Sun Hongyun, “‘Qinghua xuepai’ de yuanyuan yu jiangou,” [The Origins and Conception of the ‘Tsinghua School’] in Sang Bing and Guan Xiaohong eds., *Xianyin houchang yu bupo buli: jindai Zhongguo xueshu liupai yanjiu* (Beijing: Sanlian, 2007), 431-506.

38 The best English-language study of Wang remains Joey Bonner, *Wang Guowei: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

it seemed he had settled well to life at Tsinghua and was enjoying the opportunities the Institute provided, enabling him to teach what he wanted and pursue his own research interests. Thus, his death was a major blow for the Institute, especially as it was followed by Liang Qichao's resignation in the middle of 1928 due to illness. Soon afterwards, Mei Yiqi (1889-1962), who had been overseeing administration of the Institute since the departure of Wu Mi, was sent to the United States to be Director of the Chinese Education Mission there. His administrative responsibility for the Institute was not passed on to anyone else, which meant there was now no-one representing the Institute within the University. This seemed to signal the end for the Institute. Zhao Yuanren and Li Ji had both been recruited by Fu Sinian and were working on projects for the Institute of History and Philology at Academia Sinica, spending little time at Tsinghua, while Chen Yinke was being increasingly drawn into the teaching programmes of the Department of History and the Department of Chinese Literature. When Liang died, in January 1929, there was no thought of replacing him, and it was obvious to all that the Institute could no longer be sustained. Zhao Yuanren and Li Ji both moved to fulltime positions at Academia Sinica, and Chen Yinke took a joint appointment in the Department of history and the Department of Chinese Literature. In June 1929, the Advisory Council of the University decided to establish a Graduate Division in which all the academic departments could establish programmes, and the Institute was formally closed.³⁹

Some of the sinological research centres at other universities continued on into the early 1930s, but the Tsinghua Institute had been the most prestigious of them and its demise in 1929 really marks the end of the Republican era enthusiasm for National Learning.⁴⁰ Research and teaching on aspects of Chinese history and culture was dispersed across a range of academic departments, primarily but not exclusively humanities departments, and it was no longer felt necessary to create separate academic units devoted to Chinese studies (apart from those departments that taught Chinese language). National Learning did not disappear, however, making a resurgence with the “*guoxue* fever” that began in the 1990s. But this is a very different form of National Learning from that pursued in the 1920s. It is more explicitly nationalist, and is no longer seen as integrated with the study of China conducted by foreign scholars. In the Republican period, there was a clear commitment to bringing Chinese research into dialogue with Western scholarship on China, so that “*guoxue*” was explicitly translated

39 Qi Jiaying ed., *Qinghua renwen xueke nianpu*, 68-83, and Sun Dunheng, *Qinghua guoxue yanjiu yuan shihua*, 73-80. John Israel ed., “A Draft History of Qinghua,” 85.

40 There is some debate as to when the actual transition from National Learning to academic disciplines occurred. Sang Bing argues that the height of National Learning continued on into the early 1930s, but Liu Longxin and Luo Zhitian concur with the assessment presented here, suggesting that the closure of The Research Institute of Tsinghua College marked the end for National Learning. See Sang Bing, “Wan-Wing Minguo shiqi guoxue yanjiu yu xixue”; Liu Longxin, “Xueke tizhi yu jindai Zhongguo shixue de jianli” [The Academic Disciplinary System and the Creation of Modern Historical Studies] in Luo Zhitian ed., *Ershi shiji de Zhongguo: xueshu yu shehui (shixue juan)* (Jinan: Renmin chubanshe, 2001), 544-580; and Luo Zhitian, *Inheritance Within Rupture*, 261-263.

as both “National Learning” and “Sinology”. That is no longer the case, with Sinology now clearly distinguished as “*hanxue*”. Nevertheless, in the best recent scholarship there is a recognition of the value of what was achieved in the 1920s, and a desire to build on that earlier foundation.⁴¹

There is also a resonance between these Republican-era debates about National Learning and more recent discussions by Western scholars over the relative merit of mainstreaming the study of China in academic disciplines over the more holistic approach of Sinology. For instance, at the 16th annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies there was a symposium on “Chinese Studies and the Disciplines” in which leading scholars debated the relative merits of the different approaches. Joseph Levenson argued that “the Sinology that means the control of texts is a wonderful means but a weak end,” suggesting that scholars should not march through the rich realms of Chinese literature simply because it is there, “but because it relates to intellectual problems.” Furthermore, he believed that “In our age of professionalized disciplines there is something anomalous about Sinology ... the Sinologist is a specialist in the non-specialized.”⁴² In contrast, Frederick Mote argued the case for the integrity of Sinology, indicating that what he meant by the term was what Republican-era scholars called *guoxue*. “Be aware,” he argued, “of the Western ‘disciplines’, to be sure, but remember that they are only a province of a larger realm, that they are provinces we have drawn on the map of China, that they are meaningless boundaries to the makers of this civilization, and, in fact, they are intrinsically meaningless in any time and place.”⁴³ For Mote, the disciplines at best provided useful tools, but it was the integrity of the culture and civilization of China that was fundamental, and the best way to approach that was through Sinology.

The tension between Sinology and the disciplines emerged again recently in the exchange between Geremie Barmé and John Fitzgerald, following Barmé’s argument in support of what he calls “New Sinology”.⁴⁴ Each time these issues erupt into the public arena they are expressed in a slightly different manner, but in essence the issues

41 See Zhu Weizheng’s interesting reflections on how *guoxue* has now become a “political project” in Ian Johnson, *The Soul of China: The Return of Religion After Mao* (New York: Pantheon, 2017), 100-102. For an academic analysis of the “*guoxue* fever” see Axel Schneider, “Bridging the Gap: Attempts at Constructing a ‘New’ Historical-Cultural Identity in the People’s Republic of China,” *East Asian History* vol. 22 (December 2001), 129-144. And for a recent claim that there are distinctive epistemologies that distinguish Chinese Learning from Western Learning, see Fang Zhao-hui, “A Critical Reflection on the Systematics of Traditional Chinese Learning,” *Philosophy East and West* vol. 52, 1 (January 2002): 36-49.

42 Joseph R. Levenson, “The Humanistic Disciplines: Will Sinology Do?” *Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 23, 4 (August, 1964), 507.

43 Frederick W. Mote, “The Case for the Integrity of Sinology,” *Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 23, 4 (August, 1964), 533.

44 See Geremie Barmé, “Towards a New Sinology,” in *Chinese Studies of Australia Newsletter* 31 (May, 2005): 4-9, and John Fitzgerald, “The New Sinology and the End of History,” *Chinese Studies of Australia Newsletter* 32 (November, 2005): 13-18.

remain the same. The argument revolves around what should be prioritized: China, its languages and literature, or the modes of analysis and inquiry that are cultivated by particular disciplines. The case for Sinology is somewhat different outside of China, but the origins of these debates lie within China, in the Republican-era discussions over what place indigenous knowledge should have in the modern university. Despite an initial vote for Sinology, in the end it was the disciplines that won out. As a result, indigenous knowledge lost its distinct institutional presence and was subsumed into an increasingly Westernized academic culture.

Biographical Note

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