The Power of Position: Beijing University, Intellectuals, And Chinese Political Culture, 1898-1929

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K.E. Brashier (Religion and Humanities, Reed College); “Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Stelae.” Brashier reminds us that writing did not devalue memorization; indeed, memorization seems hardly to have suffered in later millennia when printing became common. The key would be the ritual of oral reprise, for which faultless recital required accurate memory.

Davis, California

Benjamin E. Wallacker


This very important work adds to a rich and growing body of scholarship that explores the changing role of intellectuals in the 20th century China. It does so by studying the academic and political culture of Beijing University [Beida], China’s premier university during the early Republican period. This is not the only study of Republican-era Chinese academia to emerge recently. Whereas other historians tend to focus on intellectual history, however, Weston directs our attention toward the political side of the university’s life by reviewing the school’s history within the context of the struggle for self-redefinition that Chinese intellectuals waged after the collapse of the Confucian order. Here we find higher education uniquely portrayed as a “politicized field” [14], an arena for conflict between two visions of what a university should be: 1) a “cloistered sanctuary dedicated to academic research and self-cultivation,” and 2) “a center of political and cultural activism” [147].

As is well known, the first version was promoted by Chancellor Cai Yuanpei and his associates, men who attempted to create “a great institution of higher learning on a par with the oldest and most prestigious universities of Europe” [222]. The dominant culture of the university they hoped to build would celebrate the values of freedom of thought, intellectual inclusiveness, and professional integrity, and in order to protect those ideals the university would avoid direct engagement in the political life of the nation. Another objective of the university, however, was to prepare elite leaders for the mobilization of the Chinese people in service to the cause of modernization. The university was to become a social institution uniquely endowed with the responsibility to reach beyond the classroom by training leaders who could take the power of elite ideas to the people. Its mission, therefore, contained the elements of a paradox the contours of which would appear as the university matured into China’s leading institution of higher learning.

Ironically, once Beida had become the preeminent university in China it drew many students who were attracted to the promise of high-status and careers and the cultural and political dynamism of the school. Such people were not likely to be satisfied by the apolitical tone that Cai tried to set, and as a result a significantly influential sub-set of them drove the university to the forefront of Chinese political life. Some of them, constituting

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1 See, for example, Xiaoqing Diana Lin, Peking University: Chinese Scholarship and Intellectuals, 1898–1937 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).
what Weston terms “a new breed of intellectual celebrity” [186]; were capable of catalyzing the political energies of other sectors of society, and in doing so they increased the public perception of Beida as a breeding ground for political activists. Ultimately, Cai Yuanpei’s efforts to secure the boundaries between academic work, government service, and politics could not prevent the growth of political radicalism on Beida’s campus, and by the time Cai broke his ties with the university in 1927 the school was nothing like the world-class institution of higher learning that Cai had hoped it would become. In fact, Weston claims, the very existence of an academic culture such as that which Cai sought to sustain became a political symbol, for as Chinese political forces emerged in the 1920s that were hostile to the values of free inquiry and debate, Beida’s effort to preserve its identity as an academic institution became a powerful symbol of resistance to power. Ordinary university life “acquired a political valence” [229]—it was perceived as threatening to politicians who sought to use the university for their political purposes, and it was self-consciously recognized by Beida’s faculty and students as an expression of resistance to the authority of an increasingly intrusive and oppressive state.

Enough has been said above to indicate that this is a path-breaking study. Rooted in solid archival research and cogently argued, it answers an important question that has arisen in Republican-era scholarship: how it was that an organization that was conceived by its founders as a self-consciously academic and professional institution of higher learning was transformed into a hotbed of political activism? Weston makes an insightful contribution to our understanding of the paradox that was embedded within the Chinese effort to establish a foundation for liberal higher education, and he does much to illuminate the struggle that early 20th-century Chinese intellectuals waged to find a social role commensurate with the traditional conception of the place educated elites occupied in the nation’s body politic.

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The author of this piece, Erleen Christensen, is the daughter of Emery Carlson, a missionary and physician who served in the Lutheran Hospital in Xuzhang, Honan Province during World War II and the Chinese Civil War. Part of a contingent of roughly 250 missionaries who were stationed in Honan when the Japanese invaded in 1937, Carlson and his family remained in the province until they were forced to evacuate in the face of the last major Japanese campaign of the war, the Ichigo Offensive of April 1944. Having escaped with his family to India, Carlson himself was recruited by the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) to serve in its Morale Operations project, an effort to weaken Japanese morale, encourage defections, and inspire popular resistance among Chinese by spreading disinformation and propaganda behind Japanese lines. As chief of an advance base, Carlson returned to Honan in May, 1945, and by early July his operational group, Team Viper, was functioning “in high gear” [p. 197]. The group’s activities had very little