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Peking University

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Introduction

Founded in the waning years of the Qing dynasty, Peking University has been at the heart of China's tumultuous journey toward modernization, national self-assertion, and intellectual flourishing. Known in China as "Beida," the university has consistently occupied a unique and influential position in the nation's history, not merely as an academic institution but as a crucible of radical thought, a breeding ground for leaders and revolutionaries, and a nurturing home for generations of scholars and visionaries.

The story of Peking University is inseparable from the tides of change that have swept across modern China. Born in 1898 as the Imperial University of Peking amid national crisis and reform, the institution quickly distinguished itself as the beacon of intellectual exploration that China desperately needed. During its transformative early decades, Peking University was at the center of debates over tradition and modernity, laying the foundation for new currents in philosophy, literature, and science. Within its classrooms and lecture halls, faculty and students challenged orthodoxy and set in motion movements that would reverberate across the nation.

Throughout the twentieth century, Beida became both a witness and a participant in China's most critical moments. From the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth demonstrations to the spread of Marxism, the rise and fall of political ideologies, and the seismic tremors of war and revolution, Peking University played an outsized role in shaping China's intellectual, political, and cultural life. The university was not immune to turmoil, suffering through periods of upheaval, suppression, and forced transformation—yet it repeatedly endured, drawing upon a resilient spirit and a commitment to truth that propelled it forward.

In the decades following the founding of the People's Republic of China, PKU's journey has been marked by reconstruction, innovation, and relentless pursuit of academic excellence. Mergers with other institutions, groundbreaking research, and a rapidly expanding global footprint have solidified its place among the world's leading universities. Today, its beautiful campus, vibrant academic environment, and dedication to internationalization attract scholars and students from around the globe, who come striving for both personal achievement and contributions to society at large.

Peking University's legacy extends far beyond its leafy courtyards and stately halls. Its alumni have become statesmen, scientists, writers, and public intellectuals whose impact has transcended borders and generations. The university's long-standing ethos—embracing both freedom of thought and a diversity of ideas—remains its defining characteristic, fostering inquiry and creativity even as it navigates the demands of a fast-changing world.

In the pages that follow, this book explores the rich tapestry of Peking University's history: its origins, its leaders, its tumult and triumphs, and its enduring mission to educate and inspire. It traces the evolution of a singular institution that has come to symbolize the highest aspirations of a nation, offering not just a chronicle of events but a lens through which to understand the broader currents of Chinese history and the promise of its future.

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CHAPTER ONE: Foundations: The Birth of the Imperial University of Peking

The late 19th century was not a kind time for imperial China. The Qing Dynasty, once mighty, found itself increasingly vulnerable, battered by internal rebellions and humiliated by foreign powers. The First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, a conflict that many Chinese believed would be a swift victory, instead ended in a crushing defeat, exposing the stark deficiencies of China's antiquated military and, more broadly, its entire system of governance and education. The Treaty of Shimonoseki, which concluded the war, was a bitter pill to swallow, forcing China to cede territory, pay indemnities, and open new ports. It was a wake-up call, a stark realization that the traditional ways were no longer sufficient to ensure the nation's survival.

Amidst this national humiliation, a desperate search for reform began. The "Self-Strengthening Movement" of previous decades, which had focused primarily on adopting Western military technology, had clearly fallen short. A more fundamental overhaul was needed, one that addressed the very intellectual and educational bedrock of Chinese society. The imperial examination system, for centuries the pathway to officialdom and a cornerstone of Confucian learning, was increasingly seen as an obstacle to progress, churning out scholars steeped in classical texts but ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of the modern world.

It was against this backdrop of crisis and an urgent need for change that the idea of a modern university took root. The Guangxu Emperor, a relatively progressive but ultimately constrained ruler, championed a series of sweeping reforms known as the Hundred Days' Reform of 1898. Among the ambitious proposals put forth by reform-minded officials and intellectuals was the establishment of a national university, modeled after Western institutions, that would offer a new kind of education, one focused on science, technology, and modern learning, alongside traditional Chinese studies.

And so, on July 3, 1898, a royal charter from the Guangxu Emperor officially established the Imperial University of Peking, or Jingshi Daxuetang. This was not merely the creation of another school; it was a symbolic act, a profound declaration that the old feudal educational system, which had served China for millennia, was being dismantled, brick by brick, to make way for something entirely new. The university was conceived not just as a place of learning but also as the highest administrative office for education in the realm, underscoring its pivotal role in the envisioned transformation of the nation.

While not the very first modern institution of higher learning in China—Tianjin University had been founded three years earlier in 1895—Peking University holds the unique distinction of being the first *national* university in modern Chinese history. Its establishment signaled a shift from regionally focused institutions to a centrally sanctioned and government-backed effort to modernize education on a national scale. This distinction was crucial, as it imbued the new university with a weight and authority that other nascent institutions could not match.

The initial vision for the Imperial University of Peking was grand, reflecting the desperation and ambition of the reformers. It was to be a beacon of enlightenment, a center for scientific inquiry, and a training ground for a new generation of officials and intellectuals who would lead China into the 20th century. However, the political currents of the late Qing Dynasty were treacherous, and the winds of reform were often met with fierce resistance from conservative elements within the court.

Indeed, the ambitious reform program that gave birth to the Imperial University of Peking was tragically short-lived. Empress Dowager Cixi, a formidable figure who wielded immense power behind the scenes, viewed the reforms as a threat to her authority and the traditional order. Later in 1898, she orchestrated a coup d'état, effectively ending the Hundred Days' Reform. The Guangxu Emperor was placed under house arrest, and many of the reformers were executed or forced into exile.

The immediate aftermath of Cixi's coup cast a dark shadow over the newly established university. Stripped of its primary patron and entangled in the political fallout, the Imperial University of Peking languished. Its initial promise seemed to flicker, threatened by the resurgence of conservative forces determined to roll back the changes. The grand vision of a modern, enlightened institution was put on hold, its future uncertain as China once again retreated into a period of reaction and instability.

Yet, despite this early setback, the seed had been planted. The very idea of a modern national university, once conceived, could not be entirely extinguished. Even in its diminished state, the Imperial University of Peking represented a fundamental break with the past, a symbol of a new direction, however tentative. The forces that had necessitated its creation—the need for modernization, the pressure from external powers, and the growing awareness of China's internal weaknesses—would not simply disappear. The stage was set, albeit precariously, for the institution that would eventually become Peking University to play a far more significant role in the unfolding drama of China's tumultuous 20th century. Its quiet existence through these difficult years was a testament to the enduring recognition, even by those who resisted reform, that a new model of education was indispensable for China's future.

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