University of Illinois has 100-year history of interaction with China

By Jodi Cohen

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Walk around the campus of Tsinghua University, one of the top schools in China, and you may feel like you're at the University of Illinois.

There's the stately Grand Auditorium, which looks remarkably similar to Foellinger Auditorium on U. of I.'s Urbana-Champaign campus. A large grassy area — a rare sight in congested Beijing — resembles U. of I.'s quad.

These are not coincidences. Many of Tsinghua University's buildings were designed by Tsin Chuang, who graduated from U. of I. a century ago with a degree in architecture, becoming part of an early wave of Chinese citizens to graduate from Illinois. He returned to China after graduation and guided Tsinghua's design.

While U. of I.'s relationships with China have expanded recently — including the December opening of a university office in Shanghai and a surge in undergraduates in the past few years — the university's connections to China date to the early 1900s. The buildings at Tsinghua are only the most visual representation.

For example, U. of I.'s commencement speaker in 1908 was Wu TingFang, the Chinese diplomat to the United States.
Perhaps most significantly, university President Edmund James was behind efforts in the early 1900s to persuade Chinese students to study in the U.S.

In a March 1906 journal article, James wrote: "The nation which succeeds in educating the young Chinese of the present generation will be the nation which, for a given expenditure of effort, will reap the largest possible returns in moral, intellectual and commercial influence."

He wrote that educating Chinese students would benefit the U.S. because it would "influence the entire current of their thought and feelings" and help secure relations between the two countries.

James also persuaded President Theodore Roosevelt to create the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program, which used money that China paid to the United States at the end of the Boxer Rebellion in 1901 to support Chinese students' studies in the U.S.

In a typewritten letter to Roosevelt in 1906, James raised the idea of using the indemnity funds from the Boxer Rebellion: "I am thoroughly convinced that the subject of how to enlarge and strengthen our influence over China is one of the most important and pressing problems before the American public today," according to the letter, in the U. of I. archives.

Of the 1,300 Chinese students who received scholarships to study in the U.S. from 1909 to 1929, about a third of them studied at the U. of I., according to the university. Some later became prominent in Chinese society, including Coching Chu, a 1913 bachelor's degree graduate who became a well-known meteorologist and scientist.

The ties with China were re-established in the late 1970s after the end of the Cultural Revolution. When Chinese students began studying abroad for graduate degrees, many picked U. of I. because they had heard of it.

A single graduate student enrolled in 1979, and the number gradually increased each year. By 2004, the university had 793 graduate students from China. Undergraduate enrollment remained low until 2008, when about 250 enrolled. Three years later, Chinese undergraduates outnumbered graduates for the first time.

"Chinese college students heard these stories, and those historical roots opened the door at the right time for us. When the floodgate was lifted, students were thinking of U. of I. as a nice destination because of all of these stories," said Gary Xu, a U. of I. professor in East Asian studies.

Xu, a native of Nanjing, China, who attended graduate school in the U.S., said the original outreach by James, the university president, is "paying longtime dividends."

"He was a visionary," Xu said. "He had ideas about what the U. of I. should be, and it has played out."

In addition to the increase in international students on campus, more than 80 academic partnerships exist between U. of I. and Chinese colleges and universities, including in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, and the College of Education.

Faculty have partnered on research projects, and joint degree programs allow students to get a master's degree in five years by studying for three years at a Chinese university and then two years at U. of I.

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