

The Historical Evolution of Chinese Education in the United States

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Abstract: Chinese education in America is a cultural product of Chinese immigrants to the United States. In 1848, the California Gold Rush attracted many Chinese to the United States, and gradually formed Chinese communities in the local area, and then spontaneously produced Chinese education. At that time, San Francisco Chinatown was the largest Chinatown in the United States, and its Chinese education showed representative characteristics. By studying the origin and development of Chinese education in San Francisco, this paper analyzes the characteristics of Chinese education in the United States, in order to provide experience and reference for contemporary Chinese education in the United States.

Keywords: San Francisco; Chinese; Chinese education

Online publication: April 29, 2024

1. Introduction

The history of Chinese immigration to the United States dates back to the 1830s. In 1848, the California Gold Rush attracted a large number of Chinese to the United States, and then the construction of the Central Pacific Railway made the number of Chinese in the United States increase, and there was a wave of Chinese migrants. The early labor immigrants were mainly Cantonese farmers in the Pearl River Delta, who relied on strong regional and clan concepts to form Chinese communities to resist the rejection of mainstream American society, and in such communities, Chinese education sprouted and developed.

2. Historical overview of Chinese immigration to the United States

Before 1848, the number of Chinese in the United States was very small, and the class was scattered and the purpose was accidental^[1]. In 1848, the discovery of gold in California, through the publicity of local merchants, quickly rolled up a frenzy of gold rush around the world. At that time, China was in the late Qing Dynasty, with sharp contradictions. On the one hand, Western powers set off the upsurge of partitioning China, and on the other hand, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement made the domestic situation more volatile. Thus, forced to make a living, farmers from the southern coast of China went to San Francisco with high hopes of becoming

the first gold miners.

The California Gold Rush peaked in 1852 and has since waned^[2]. In the 1860s, Chinese people in the United States gradually invested in the construction of the Central Pacific Railway in order to survive, and they became the main force of basic railway projects with wisdom and diligence, so the Pacific Railway was completed seven years ahead of schedule. But from the first day of their entry into the United States, the Chinese had always suffered injustice, living in the most hostile areas, doing the most dangerous jobs, with the lowest income. Especially after the 1870s, with the increase in the number of immigrants from various countries, the United States had a surplus of native labor. Under the impact of the Great Depression in California, the native working class blamed their plight on the Chinese workers who were welcomed by their employers, and anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States was high for a time.

In 1882, with the joint efforts of the American people and the government, the Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, in which the government formulated measures to restrict the entry of Chinese into the United States. The Scott Act of 1888 deprived the Chinese of the right to return to the United States. In 1894, the government enacted the second Chinese Exclusion Act, which restricted the entry of Chinese into the United States for an additional ten years. In 1924 and 1930, in order to prevent Chinese from entering the United States, the government promulgated and revised immigration laws one after another. During World War II, the United States government, considering the importance of the Chinese battlefield, formally repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943.

3. The background and main forms of Chinese education in the United States

Most of the early Chinese who entered the United States were driven by economic interests. In the context of the times when China was in trouble inside and outside, the hungry and cold people in southern China either actively went overseas or were abducted to the United States in order to survive, with only one purpose, that is, to seek wealth. As a result, the Chinese who landed in the United States during the Gold Rush and the construction of the Pacific Railroad were mostly adult males and brought few families with them, so there were very few Chinese children^[3]. By the 1870s, the number of Chinese children in the United States began to increase, with San Francisco as the main settlement, forcing the Chinese to consider the issue of children's education, so Chinese education in the United States came into being.

The emergence of Chinese education was driven by many factors. First of all, the desire for Chinese culture had a deep historical tradition. Chinese who were deeply influenced by the traditional educational concept of Confucianism paid special attention to the education of their children no matter where they were, and promoting Chinese culture and allowing their children to receive Chinese education were more emotional sustenance for overseas Chinese. Secondly, there were also profound practical reasons for the Chinese to let their children receive Chinese education. Forced into the United States by life, the Chinese had no other survival channels except selling their physical strength, and it was difficult for them to integrate into the mainstream society of the United States. The value recognition and spiritual comfort brought by Chinese culture helped the Chinese to stay together and resist the exclusion and prejudice of the outside world. The reality of the dilemma in the United States made the Chinese believe that a good education can help their children obtain a higher social status and change their fate. Chinese had no sense of belonging in the United States and always had the mentality of living abroad momentarily, so they would rather choose the future for their children in China. Therefore, learning Chinese well and inheriting Chinese culture could lay a good foundation for returning home in the future^[4].

Before the 20th century, there were three main forms of Chinese education: voluntary private schools, government-segregated schools, and Chinese schools established by Chinese social groups ^[5].

3.1. Voluntary private schools

Early Chinese immigrants faced extremely difficult conditions. They not only had low economic and social status but also were completely excluded from public school education, coupled with the small number of Chinese children at this time, some qualified families hired private tutors to educate their children spontaneously. This kind of old-type Chinese school was similar to the domestic private school and followed the Chinese feudal education model. Some scholars who failed in the imperial examinations were forced to go abroad as teachers, and they used domestic traditional Chinese textbooks to teach children classics, arithmetic, and so on. Their teaching level was not very high, but the tuition fee was more expensive, so no ordinary Chinese could afford it ^[5]. This kind of school was a helpless way for the early Chinese to deal with their children's education needs and social difficulties. Although the form was not perfect, it was still a pioneering initiative at that time, which laid the foundation for the establishment of new Chinese schools in the future.

3.2. Government-segregated schools

In the United States, the Chinese struggled for the educational rights of their children all the time, and entering public schools was a goal of the Chinese community. Influenced by the trend of Chinese exclusion in American society, the first segregated school in California was established in San Francisco in 1859 under the strong efforts of Chinese parents. The school was closed several times by the city of San Francisco for various reasons over the course of twelve years and was finally shut down completely in 1871. Chinese children were explicitly banned from public schools until 1885. During this period, the education of Chinese children depended on the church and parents: English was undertaken by the church, and private tutors taught Chinese.

In 1884, a Chinese businessman in San Francisco, Cha Zhao was refused when he wanted his daughter Meimei to be enrolled in Spring Valley School, so he immediately hired a lawyer to sue the school president and the city education departments, then he won the lawsuit ^[4]. Even so, the state government did not allow Chinese children to enter public schools equally, but also maintained the concept of separate education, and amended the education law, finally rebuilt a separate school in Chinatown in 1885—a Chinese primary school. Segregated schools were the product of the concept of educational segregation in California and even the United States, and were directly influenced by the idea of Chinese exclusion. After the Chinese Exclusion Act was formally repealed in 1943, California's laws which prohibited Chinese children from attending public schools were gradually repealed. By this time, although the policy of educational segregation was nominally eliminated, its adverse effects continued until the 1960s.

3.3. Chinese schools established by Chinese social groups

The efforts of the Chinese to fight for the right to education also attracted the attention of local social groups. Chinese Association in San Francisco was founded in 1854, as the earliest Chinese social organization in the United States, its charter clearly stated that it would be responsible for the Chinese education of overseas Chinese children. Therefore, during the period when Chinese children were most affected by the segregated education policy, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association began to build a school under the encouragement of the Chinese Minister and finally enrolled students in 1888. The school was originally named Jinshan Academy and then renamed Daqing Academy. At the beginning of its preparation, the school aimed to teach both Chinese and English, but in the actual teaching process, due to the restrictions of funds, teachers, policies, etc., only Chinese-related courses were set up, so it was essentially the same as the traditional schools

spontaneously established by Chinese ^[5]. Its teaching level could be compared with that of domestic academies at the same time, which would be helpful for the future development of Chinese children back home. Therefore, the construction of Daqing Academy has made a significant contribution to the Chinese education of children.

4. The rapid development of Chinese education in the United States

At the beginning of the 20th century, with the educational system reform of the Qing government, Chinese education in the United States developed rapidly and gradually entered the stage of modern education. The promulgation of the Charter of the Imperial School in 1902 marked the beginning of a modern new type of education system in China. With the government's emphasis on national education, overseas Chinese education has gradually entered the rulers' attention.

In 1906, the Qing government ordered Qinggui Liang to go to the United States to organize Chinese education. In 1908, Liang arrived in San Francisco, the first stop in North America. With the support of the envoy Tingfang Wu and Bingzhen Xu, the Consul General in San Francisco, he conveyed the vision of the Qing government to promote the idea of running schools overseas. At that time, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) had set up a special academic committee responsible for Chinese education, and with the unanimous approval of CCBA's directors, the former Qing Academy was changed into the Qing Overseas Chinese Public Primary School, also known as Jinshan Academy. The school was established on the basis of the cooperation between Qinggui Liang and the CCBA and officially opened in 1909. The CCBA was in charge of the finance of this school, and the Qing Dynasty Department provided an annual subsidy of 600 US dollars. Due to financial constraints, the school could only offer some Chinese courses, which was far from the original plan of teaching Chinese and English, and at the same time, it was different from the old school, mainly reflected in the teaching content. On the basis of the original classics and calligraphy, geography, history, gymnastics, and other subjects were added, and a modern education model was formed.

After the Revolution of 1911, Chinese Schools in San Francisco entered the stage of modern education. In 1913, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China issued the Regulations on Overseas Chinese Education Affairs, entrusting embassies to take charge of local overseas Chinese education affairs. In 1914, the Ministry of Education issued the Regulations on Overseas Chinese Children Returning to Study. This series of measures stimulated the enthusiasm of overseas Chinese in running schools, and all kinds of Chinese schools sprang up in succession. It was concentrated in the following categories: Chinese schools set up by Chinese associations, such as the Chinese overseas Chinese Public School formerly known as the Qing Overseas Chinese Public Primary School; the Chinese school founded by the Confucius Church, the more typical school founded by the local church is the Concord School founded in 1925; and the schools ran by individuals. Among them, the Chinese overseas Chinese Public School relied on the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, followed the guidance of the domestic Ministry of Education, with sufficient funds and a large scale, and had become a representative of Chinese schools in San Francisco. The school began to admit girls in 1920 and set up a junior middle School in the autumn of 1922. In 1927, the school was expanded and renamed Zhonghua Middle School ^[5].

In order to strengthen the direct management of overseas Chinese and Chinese education, in 1928, the government of the Republic of China established the "Overseas Chinese Education Committee" to supervise and guide the education of overseas Chinese. It formulated and promulgated the Registration of Overseas Chinese Schools, the Interim Regulations on Overseas Chinese Primary Schools, and so on. In 1931, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee of the Nationalist Government was established, and the investigation,

filing, supervision, and guidance of overseas Chinese schools were uniformly administered by the Overseas Chinese Education Department of the Committee.

As a result of receiving direct guidance from relevant domestic departments, Chinese schools in San Francisco developed rapidly in the 1920s and 1930s. The original intention of the national government to support Chinese education was to help overseas students master Chinese, inherit Chinese culture, and cultivate national feelings. Therefore, the Chinese School in San Francisco was unified with the domestic in terms of academic system, curriculum, and teaching content. In 1912, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China issued the “Renzi-Guichu school system,” which separated the study of classics from the curriculum of primary and secondary schools, and set subjects such as self-improvement, Chinese language, arithmetic, handicraft, drawing, singing, and gymnastics in primary and secondary schools, focusing on cultivating students’ sound body and mind. San Francisco Chinese School attaches great importance to the Chinese language and culture, so the curriculum emphasizes the proportion of Chinese, puts the focus on the cultivation of Chinese listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, and details the curriculum, especially setting up composition, poetry, and correspondence, etc. In 1922, the government of the Republic of China promulgated the “Renxu School System,” which confirmed the six-three-three of the primary and secondary school system for the first time. In 1929, after the Chinese Middle School in San Francisco opened the high school curriculum, it also adopted the new school system, which was in line with the domestic standards. At the same time, the direct use of domestic textbooks focused on cultivating students’ practical application of Chinese.

During this period, there were also some hidden problems behind the prosperity of Chinese schools in San Francisco. Firstly, due to geographical restrictions, the development of Chinese schools in the United States was not balanced. Except for San Francisco, many Chinese schools in Chinatown did not have the conditions to set up complete Chinese schools. Therefore, compared with American public schools, Chinese schools had never occupied an important position in the local area, and many Chinese children had never entered Chinese schools. Secondly, due to excessive dependence on domestic policy guidance, the curriculum and textbooks in Chinese schools were too unified with that of China, resulting in many contents that students could not understand, which seriously affected the teaching effect. At the same time, due to the serious disconnect between the teaching content and American society, Chinese students in the United States could not apply what they learned, and the teaching purpose was greatly reduced. Thirdly, most Chinese schools in the United States were short of funds and lack of scale. Even schools with sponsorship and support, such as San Francisco Chinese High School, would be constrained by funds and teachers and could not achieve the development vision of the school.

5. The convergence and integration of Chinese education in the United States after World War II

After World War II, the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act made Chinese parents in the United States see the dawn of their children entering public schools, coupled with the urgent desire of Chinese in the United States to integrate into American society and the weakening of attention to Chinese language, Chinese schools in the United States gradually declined ^[4]. Until the promulgation of the Immigration Law in 1965, the new wave of immigrants brought the revival of Chinese schools, at which time Chinese education showed the characteristics of diversity and coexistence. In the 1980s, with the influx of mainland immigrants, the number of Chinese schools increased dramatically, and the teaching model became more diverse, whose influence continues today.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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