

The Contributions of Chinese Japanese-Studying Normal Students to the Modernization of Chinese Education in the Late Qing Dynasty

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Abstract: The defeat of the First Sino-Japanese War led to the intensification of the national crisis, and the call for “education saving the nation” was rising. To consolidate its authority, the Qing government implemented various policies to encourage Chinese students to study teacher education in Japan. This paper focuses on those students who studied in Japan during the late Qing Dynasty, summarizes the factors of the rise of the study abroad movement and the situation of teacher education in Japan, and discusses the contribution of overseas students to the modernization of Chinese education from multiple perspectives.

Keywords: Chinese Japanese-studying normal students; Education modernization; Innovative education

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1. Introduction

The educational transformation in the late Qing Dynasty experienced a long and challenging process. The innovative education, which broke the shackles of traditional education, underwent profound changes in its system, content, and methods, and cultivated a cohort of individuals essential to social modernization-modern citizens. It can be seen that the modernization of Chinese education is a key component of the modernization of the whole Chinese society. In this process, the students who studied in Japan at the end of the Qing Dynasty were an indispensable force.

2. The historical context of the study abroad movement in Japan during the late Qing Dynasty

In 1840, China suffered a defeat in the Opium War, leading to its gradual transformation into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. The subsequent series of defeats and the signing of several unequal treaties starkly exposed the educational disparity between ancient China and the advanced Western

countries to the Chinese populace, prompting enlightened Chinese intellectuals to recognize the imperative of learning from the West.

The inception of China's official studying abroad programs can be traced back to 1872 when Rong Hong launched the pioneering "The young boys studied abroad US" Program. Regrettably, this initiative came to an abrupt halt in 1881 due to the opposition's interference. Consequently, many students were unable to complete their studies and were repatriated under orders from Qing government authorities. Nonetheless, within China's modernization process, undeniable evidence exists regarding significant societal contributions made by these returning "young boys" across diverse fields. The imperative nature of overseas study became irrefutable even for the Qing government.

After the defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1895, China's semi-colonial and semi-feudal society deepened significantly, prompting a growing demand for national salvation and an urgent necessity to acquire advanced knowledge from the West.

In June 1898, Zhang Zhidong, in his "Essay on Encouraging Learning" discussed the correlation between reform and talent, emphasizing the significance of overseas education in nurturing valuable talent. Subsequently, due to Japan's conducive objective conditions for studying abroad and its constitutional monarchy that could fulfill the Qing government's need to sustain its authority, Emperor Guangxu issued an imperial edict on June 15, 1898, mandating the development of regulations for selecting students from various provinces to study in Japan.

In 1896, Liang Qichao published an article titled "On Teacher Education" in the journal *Shi Wu Bao*, marking the first time that a specific discussion on teacher education had been presented in the history of modern Chinese education. Liang Qichao analyzed the teaching abilities of teachers in both modern and traditional schools, concluding that most teachers in traditional schools lacked profound academic knowledge and were unfamiliar with the most advanced Western technologies that were most in need of study at the time. He argued that it was difficult to achieve the goals of "enlightening the people" and "making the nation strong" through their teaching. He also pointed out that China needed a large number of high-quality teachers to meet the needs of the newly established modern schools that were becoming increasingly popular.

In 1902, Zhang Zhidong corresponded with Zhang Baixi about his proposal to send normal school students to Japan: "Normal school students need to pursue studies in Japan. They should not only acquire general knowledge but also master effective teaching methods and pedagogy... I am currently in discussions with the Japanese Ministry of Education regarding this matter. By enrolling in a short-term program, these individuals can complete their studies within eight months. Upon returning to China, they can instruct normal school students within four months. Each individual can educate six students. If we dispatch 50 people to Japan, 400 students could be instructed within four months, and another 1,800 students could receive instruction over the subsequent four months. Those with limited knowledge may attend basic normal education programs in Japan and subsequently serve as primary school teachers; while those possessing deeper understanding may pursue advanced normal education for roles as middle school educators."^[1]

Under the guidance of esteemed scholars, the Qing government also developed pertinent policies to oversee the employment of returning professional and normal school students, while actively promoting their engagement in pedagogical studies.

On March 25, 1906, the Qing government issued regulations mandating that government-funded overseas students must engage in teaching upon their return to China. To incentivize students to pursue education, the Qing government sanctioned the "Regulations on Rewarding Completely Trained

Teacher Graduates Who Have Studied Abroad” on February 25, 1909. This regulation stipulated that elementary education students would be given an official rank as a reward, and those who had taught for five years after returning to China would be promoted in rank.

While the Qing government was promoting its policy of sending students abroad, Japan, with its aim of extending its influence in China, actively collaborated with China’s initiative. Japan established numerous specialized schools for Chinese students studying there, such as Hongwen College for training teachers, Seijo School for training military personnel, and Rihua School for general students. Additionally, some higher education institutions began admitting Chinese students; for instance, Waseda University accepted students majoring in politics and economics while East Asian Women’s College opened a normal education department specifically for Chinese female students.

3. Overview of overseas teacher education in Japan

In the late Qing Dynasty, there was a growing trend of Chinese students pursuing education through accelerated teacher education programs in Japan, driven by the emphasis on rapid educational attainment. The Qing government sought to address the slow pace of reform and the shortage of talent. Simultaneously, students studying in Japan were eager to return to China upon completion of their studies and actively seek governmental positions.

In 1903, Zhang Baixi and others formulated the “Proposal for Fundamental Principles of Educational Reform” which vigorously advocated for the acceleration of teacher education. Following its promulgation, numerous provinces nationwide responded positively, leading to a surge in the enrollment of accelerated teacher education programs in Japan. According to incomplete statistics, a total of 175 graduates (excluding those who pursued further studies elsewhere) completed their studies in Japan from April to October 1903. Among them, 71 were enrolled in teacher education programs and graduated from Hongwen College, accounting for 40.6%. From October 1903 to April 1904, a total of 124 graduates, with 86 pursuing teacher education programs, constituting approximately 69.4%, and among them were also included are forty-one graduates from Hongwen College’s accelerated teacher education program ^[2].

Among the specialized educational institutions established by the Japanese government for Chinese students, Hongwen College is primarily focused on teacher education. It has played a significant role in training a substantial number of Chinese students, positioning itself as one of the largest schools. Notable figures such as Lu Xun, Chen Duxiu, and Huang Xing have been studied at Hongwen College. The duration of the intensive teacher training program varies from 6 to 12 months based on specific learning objectives. This expedited acquisition of specialized knowledge and skills has effectively catered to the needs of numerous Chinese students pursuing studies in Japan.

The prevalent adoption of accelerated teacher education programs among Chinese overseas students has led Japanese institutions into intense competition as they emphasize abbreviated course durations to appeal to international students. Previously one-year programs have been reduced to eight months or less, resulting in accelerated completion timelines and issuance of graduation credentials. Consequently, this trend has enticed numerous Chinese learners to pursue academic qualifications for career advancement purposes. On March 29th, 1903, Lu Xun and his peers orchestrated a demonstration at Hongwen College denouncing its negligent management of the accelerated teacher education program ^[3]. Subsequently, the Qing government ^[3] also recognized the limitations of the accelerated education system. On February 19, 1906, the Ministry of Education issued the “Regulations

on Restricting Sending Students Abroad from Each Province”, which elevated the criteria for selecting students to study abroad. Consequently, despite a large number of participants in the accelerated education program, their educational attainment proved challenging to fully equate with that of a three-year regular course of study abroad.

From the perspective of China’s educational modernization process, it is evident that Japanese-trained accelerated normal school graduates made significant contributions. After 1904, a substantial number of educators across Chinese provinces were products of Japan’s accelerated teacher training programs. Likewise, many prominent figures in law and politics have undergone a similar accelerated education system in Japan ^[4]. At that time, China was in the initial stage of modern education, and few people knew modern education theory, so these individuals undeniably played a pivotal role in advancing contemporary pedagogy.

4. The contributions of Japanese-studying normal students to the modernization of Chinese education

The trend of academic pursuits in Japan led to the emergence of a significant cohort of Japanese-trained educators who actively engaged in educational initiatives during the late Qing Dynasty, thereby providing sustained impetus for the modernization of China’s education. The contributions are mainly manifested in the following aspects:

4.1. Criticizing the deficiencies of conventional education and promoting contemporary Western educational theories

Before going abroad, overseas students generally receive traditional Chinese education then they experience a new perspective from their own experiences, realize the differences between modern education and traditional Chinese education, and recognize the close relationship between education and the rise and fall of nations. Studying abroad broadens the students’ horizons, and the update of their knowledge and values allows them to reflect on traditional Chinese education, including the imperial examination system, the traditional educational system, traditional teachers, and teaching methods. As a result, they begin to try to introduce Western modern educational theories to promote the reform of traditional education.

Chinese educators studying in Japan played an instrumental role in disseminating modern educational theories within China. Following 1900, numerous translation groups emerged translating a wide array of educational literature from Europe and Japan, including works like *Problems of Education in Japan*, *Practical Management Methods for Schools*, and *The American Educational System* ^[5]. Simultaneously established newspapers and magazines by Chinese students studying abroad published extensive articles introducing Western pedagogical concepts from figures like Comenius, Rousseau, Locke, Spencer, and Herbart. These publications not only encompassed translations but also offered critical insights into contemporary challenges facing the Chinese education system thus reflecting these educators’ ambition to reform the traditional education system.

4.2. Engaging in educational practices at an innovative school that aligns with the principles of progressive education

A significant number of Chinese graduates who had studied in Japan returned to China and enrolled in domestic normal schools, subsequently becoming a crucial source of teachers for the modernization

of China's education system. As per the 1909 statistics, out of the 467 teachers at advanced normal schools across all provinces, 144 were graduates from Japan, constituting 30.8% of the total ^[6].

While the number of female students who studied in Japan during the late Qing Dynasty constituted only a small proportion of the total students studying abroad, their post-graduation educational practices significantly contributed to the advancement of the female teacher education system and women's education in that era. For instance, Qiu Jin, an alumna of the Practical Women's School in Tokyo, established Daduan Women's School in 1907. Yang Yinyu, a graduate of Tokyo Higher Normal School, taught at Jiangsu Second Provincial Women's Normal School and served as superintendent at Beijing Women's Normal School.

After returning from Japan, the graduates of normal schools established and provided instruction at new-style educational institutions. The substantial cohort of newly-trained intellectuals served as a formidable pedagogical force, thereby reshaping the educational structure in China at that time. This transformation mitigated the reliance on foreign teachers and significantly bolstered the indigenous impetus for modernizing education in China.

4.3. Engaged in the formulation of educational policies within an educational administrative agency

Educational policies formulated by Japanese-trained educators while serving in administrative roles within China's education sector were pivotal in shaping its modern educational framework. In 1903, under Qing governance, came forth "Guimao School Regulations", marking its status as China's first formally nationwide pedagogical structure. Its fundamental tenets encompass academic goals, curricular content, and institutional management, which included substantial influence from Japan's established model of education.

It is noteworthy that during the late Qing Dynasty, China still exhibited a deeply ingrained preference for male offspring, and the "Guimao School Regulations" placed female education under the purview of family-based instruction. Nevertheless, female education gradually gained traction in the later years of the Qing Dynasty as women who had pursued studies in Japan returned to China and actively contributed to advancing women's movements and intellectual emancipation. They published periodicals and established educational institutions for women to exert influence on the formulation of pertinent educational policies. In 1905, the Ministry of Education included female education under its jurisdiction.

The dispatch of Chinese students to study in Japan during the late Qing Dynasty had a generally favorable impact on the government's endeavors in educational reform. In the late Qing Dynasty, Chinese educators who had studied in Japan introduced Western modern educational theories and concepts, which were widely disseminated upon their return to China. They were deeply committed to reforming the traditional education system and established a modern educational system in China based on the Japanese model. Furthermore, they actively engaged in educational practices with a comprehensive understanding of innovative education. These endeavors significantly contributed to the vigorous development of new-style schools in their home country and led to innovative changes in traditional teaching contents and methods. The attempts and explorations made by them had a profound impact on the traditional educational system. Their efforts hastened its decline and significantly propelled the modernization of education in China. These educators were pivotal in driving the advancement of innovative education during the late Qing Dynasty, thus deserving

recognition as pioneers and guiding figures in China's educational modernization.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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