

# CHINESE STUDENTS AT COLUMBIA AND TEACHERS COLLEGE

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## I.

Those familiar with modern American intellectual history and modern Chinese history know that the prominent philosopher of pragmatism at Columbia University and Teachers College, John Dewey, once travelled and lectured in China. Few, however, are aware of the transnational transmission of knowledge, and intellectual exchange network, between New York and Chinese educational institutions during the Republican Period.

John Dewey's arrival in 1919 triggered immediate attention in China. Diverse Chinese audiences paid attention to Dewey's speeches. Ovations followed Dewey's footprints. Bankers and editors frequented his residences. Teachers and students flocked to his classrooms. Newspapers vied with each other in translating his latest utterances. His speeches and lectures were eagerly read, his biography elaborately written. People gathered to listen to his lectures all over China even on rainy days. <sup>1</sup>A report in *Millard's Review* noted:

“Professor Dewey, by means of his lectures which are interpreted as they are given, has reached thousands of Chinese. These lectures are translated into Chinese and published in the leading magazines and newspapers of the country. These printed lectures are carefully studied by many. It may be guessed that by means of the spoken and the written, or printed word, Professor Dewey has said his say to several hundred thousand Chinese.”<sup>2</sup>

Upon his arrival in Shanghai, John Dewey immediately found himself surrounded by these former students. Walking with him in the busy metropolitan area of Shanghai, these Chinese students who once studied in New York City brought him to fancy hotels and showed Dewey the busy streets of Shanghai, and compared this urban section to “the corner of Broadway and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street” of New York City. Impressed by the American educational impact on China demonstrated in the culture and worldview of these Chinese elites, Dewey commented that “the

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<sup>1</sup> THK, “Confucius and John Dewey: The Bankruptcy of the East and the West”, *The Chinese Students' Monthly*, June 1, 1921, American Periodicals, p. 539; Jun Yu, “Educational Philosophy: Dr. Dewey's Second Speech in the Ministry of Education”, *Guangming Educational Monthly*, Vol. 3, No.7.

<sup>2</sup> C. F. Remer, “John Dewey in China”, *Millard's Review of the Far East* (1919-1921): July 3, 1920.

‘returned student’ is a definite category here”, and that “when China gets on its feet, the American university will have a fair share of the glory to its credit”.<sup>3</sup> With that in mind, Dewey wrote to the Nicholas Murray Butler to assure him of the significance of the work he committed himself, that was, to help recruit more Chinese students: “Many persons have assured me that the present influence of Columbia men in China is greater than that of the graduates of any other American or European University.”<sup>4</sup>

When Dewey finally headed back for New York City in 1921, his disciple, the renowned leader of China’s New Cultural Movement, Hu Shi, commented that since China encountered with the West, hardly any scholar from the West would in the upcoming decades generate a comparable influence as John Dewey did in China.<sup>5</sup> A precondition that made this cross-cultural transmission of knowledge and the assiduous introduction of Deweyan philosophy to China possible, was the networks of Chinese and American intellectuals, woven by the Sino-American educational exchanges. Several months before Dewey came to China, preparations to promote Dewey’s teachings in China had been eagerly planned and assiduously advanced by former Chinese students at Columbia University, like Tao Xingzhi, Hu Shi, Guo Bingwen and Jiang Menglin, who returned to China and served in positions at leading academic institutions. The returned students hosted Dewey in China, and productively contributed to the enormous popularity the American pragmatist consequently received.

How, then, did Dewey meet with so many Chinese students in New York City, at Columbia University and Teachers College, who later served in influential posts of China? The 1916 photograph below of members of the “Teachers College Chinese Student Club” includes the Chinese intellectuals who later invited John Dewey to China in 1919, Hu Shi, Jiang Menglin and Tao Xingzhi. They all sat in the rows and the man who sat in the middle was the leading educational scholar at Teachers College, Paul Monroe.

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<sup>3</sup> John Dewey and Alice Chipman Dewey, Letter from Shanghai, May 2, 1919, enclosed in Letters from China and Japan, New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1920, p.150.

<sup>4</sup> John Dewey’s Letter to Nicholas Murray Butler, No. 04068, May 3, 1919, Shanghai, enclosed in The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1871-1952, Vol.2, available in the database of Past Masters.

<sup>5</sup> Hu Shih, “John Dewey in China”, enclosed in Charles A. Moore ed., *Philosophy and Culture, East and West*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1962, p.762.



[Teachers College Chinese Student Club, 1916, Teachers College Archive, Special Collections]

## II.

Indeed, when John Dewey lectured in China, his colleague at Teachers College, Paul Monroe, had been observing the educational conditions in China for quite a while. Monroe first came to China as early as in 1913, when, as a leading American educational expert, he was tasked by the Teachers College and the Rockefeller Foundation to investigate the educational conditions in China. They expected that Monroe would provide a detailed report on educational conditions in China, to bring its information “with regard to educational matters in China down to date”. However, this report should be kept “entirely confidential”, and “should not be known that you are in any way associated with us or that we are in any way interested in the Chinese situation”,

as Monroe was informed.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the trip, Monroe submitted a long report, in which he stated the belief that Americans should seize the opportunity to “enlighten” China and supply it with “a new moral and religious ideal”. Seeing education as the linchpin to social and economic reform, Monroe secured the American and Chinese support for the establishment of the China Foundation, to promote science and education in China.<sup>7</sup>

Monroe later became the director of the School of Education at Teachers College and the head of its International Institute. In order to develop the International Institute program to train more international students at Teachers College, Monroe further approached John D. Rockefeller, to establish a professional training center for foreign students at Teachers College and ease the social and personal adjustments of foreign students to the American environment. Monroe saw the education of international students in the United States as a means of spreading American democracy to the world. The international students were deemed by Monroe as “the intermediaries of cultural transfer when they travelled to different societies”, who could potentially transfer American science and democracy to their country of origin.<sup>8</sup>

With Rockefeller funding, the International Institute was established in 1923 as an integral part of Teachers College. It took the expansion of American democratic education to other countries through foreign students, and the assistance of the development of “backward” countries via education, as its mission.<sup>9</sup> This was in line with Paul Monroe’s pedagogical philosophies. For Monroe, education was designed to raise “retarded”, “backward” culture to “the common level” of civilization, and to help uncivilized people for a transition to modernization. Modern education was a means for “racially” and culturally “backward” people

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<sup>6</sup> Rockefeller records, Friends and Services, Series H, Friends and Relations, FA317, Boxer 93, Folder 703, Starr Murphy to Professor Paul Monroe, Confidential, Jan. 7, 1913. RAC, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller records, Friends and Services, Series H, Friends and Relations, FA317, Boxer 93, Folder 703, Starr J. Murphy’s letter to Paul Monroe, Teachers College, January 16, 1913.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Monroe, “A Report on Educational Conditions in China” (1913-1914), Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Monroe Faculty File, Paul Monroe papers, Special Collections, Teachers College Library; Paul Monroe, *The Institute of International Education: A Report on Education in China (For American Educational Authorities)*, New York, 1922.

<sup>9</sup> “Educational Assistance for World Progress: Teachers College, Columbia University”, enclosed in Bu Liping, *Making the World More Like US: Education, Cultural Expansion and the American Century*, Praeger: 2003, pp. 120-121.

to be “uplifted” to higher levels of civilization. As a means to bring peoples of “retarded culture” to common levels of civilization, education could help weak nations become strong and secure.<sup>10</sup>

Since the establishment of the International Institute, Teachers College has spearheaded the international activism efforts of American educators. Faculty at Teachers College, like Paul Monroe, believed that there was a worldwide demand for democracy and that the US could make a great contribution to it because of its lengthy experience in democratic education. They hence expected that foreign students, upon completing their studies, would effectively carry home their American experience and apply it to their own countries.

Many foreign students at Teachers College received financial aid through scholarships and grants from the Institute. The selection of promising students was not necessarily based on scholarly merits but on the potential influence these candidates might have on the governments and the educational development of their home countries once they finished their training. The policy to award scholarships to international students was made on the basis of strategic considerations of expanding American influence to foreign countries and the need for American educators to have personal contact with educational leaders in these countries. Most of the international students granted with scholarships were from China, Czechoslovakia, India, Germany, Scotland and Russia. In the 1920s, 25 percent of the international students came from China. By the end of the 1920s, more than 200 Chinese graduates of Teachers College had taken positions in Chinese higher educational institutions.<sup>11</sup> Chinese students also willingly went to study at Teachers College. Between 1909 and 1930, 16% of the international students in this program were from China, and over half of the Chinese students who pursued educational studies in the United States chose to study at Teachers College.<sup>12</sup> Most would return to teach in China after graduation

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<sup>10</sup> Democracy and Nationalism in Education: Syllabus and Readings for a Course in History of Education from the French Revolution to the Present Time by Edward Reisner, with an introduction by Paul Monroe, 1919, Teachers College, p.6.

<sup>11</sup> Bu Liping, *Making the World More Like US: Education, Cultural Expansion and the American Century*, pp. 125-127.

<sup>12</sup> Hiroshi Abe, “Paul Monroe and Modern Chinese Education”, translated by Zhong Qiquan, *Waiguo Jiaoyu Ziliao (Foreign Educational Materials)*, Vol. 1, 1996. 【日】阿部洋, 钟启泉译, 《保尔·孟禄与中国的近代教育》, 《外国教育资料》, 1996年第一期。

### III.

However, as historians like Bu Liping and Keita Takayama point out, the education offered at Teachers College remained colonial and imperial, ideologically problematic from today's perspective. Teachers College endeavored to extend the racial and colonial dynamic within the United States to an international scale. The faculty at Teachers College also drew an analogy between their program of assisting foreign countries and the reconstruction of the South after the Civil War. For William Russel, the dean of Teachers College, for example, many "backward" countries in the world "curiously resembled the South of a generation ago". The institute saw itself as an educational base to extend American cultural and educational influence to other countries and applied the practical lessons drawn from the rehabilitation of the American South in such an international endeavor. Aside from that, students from international backgrounds were further encouraged to "learn from the experience" of the US South, that might be applicable to the situation of their homelands. As part of the required course curriculum, the students took field trips to American schools to learn about school organization, curriculum, and teaching methods of the "Hampton-Tuskegee model".<sup>13</sup>

"Education 227-228" Course of Teachers College, for instance, aimed to offer the foreign students an opportunity to conduct field trips to the American schools, and help them obtain firsthand experience with the American curriculum, teaching methods and educational system.<sup>14</sup> Another chosen destination of the trip was the Hampton Institute, an institution deeply embedded in the post-emancipation politics of race in the South. Established in 1868, the Hampton Institute trained African American teachers in the context of the racially segregated schooling of the South. During the Reconstruction period, the Southern industrialists were keen to maintain the same socioeconomic structure as in the slavery era, predicated on the subservient Black labor. They

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<sup>13</sup> Takayama, Keita. "Beyond Comforting Histories: The Colonial/Imperial Entanglements of the International Institute, Paul Monroe and Isaac L. Kandel at Teachers College, Columbia University", *Comparative Educational Review*, 62, no.4 (November 2018): 459-481.

<sup>14</sup> Bu Liping, *Making the World More Like US: Education, Cultural Expansion and the American Century*, pp. 122-123.

embraced universal education as key to economic success, but this notion of universal was undercut by the ideology of racial hierarchy.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly, the international students were not unaware of the limits of their American education at Teachers College. The renowned Chinese child psychologist and Father of China's childhood education, Chen Heqin, used to be a MA student of education at Teachers College between 1917 and 1918. Chen participated in the field trips led by Paul Monroe to observe Black education at Hampton Institute in Virginia, and Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, together with other thirty international students at Teachers College. It was not clear how the students reacted to the various components of the school programs, but like other international students, Chen was encouraged to learn from the Southern experience that might apply to the situation of their homeland.<sup>16</sup>In 1881, a graduate of the Hampton Institute, Booker T. Washington, replicated the Hampton model in Alabama and established Tuskegee Institute. Chen noted in his memoir how he was impressed by the example of Booker T. Washington, who used to be a slave but later graduated from the Hampton College and established Tuskegee Institute. Back in 1917, as an educated elite of color, from a “backward country”, Chen was obviously inspired:

“A black slave who didn’t start learning till 19 years old could strive hard, teach the people and contribute to the glory of the society and his race. How can us, the highly educated elites [of color], not work hard and strive for our nation?”<sup>17</sup>

In the 1930s, when another black intellectual, W. E. B. Du Bois, visited China for the first time, he recognized colonial settings in cities like Shanghai as “an epitome of the racial strife”, where the lands of China were “owned, governed and policed by foreign nations.” Du Bois found the city to be racially segregated as harsh as segregation in the Jim Crow South. On the streets in Shanghai, he observed how Chinese coolies were kicked on the street and how little white kids bullied local Chinese children, in a manner no different from homeland in Mississippi. He was so eager to learn about how the Chinese elites think about these ongoing inequalities and

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<sup>15</sup> Takayama, “Beyond Comforting Histories: The Colonial/Imperial Entanglements of the International Institute, Paul Monroe and Isaac L. Kandel at Teachers College, Columbia University”.

<sup>16</sup> Bu Liping, *Making the World More Like US: Education, Cultural Expansion and the American Century*, pp. 120-123.

<sup>17</sup> 陈鹤琴, “考察黑人教育”, 《我的半生》, enclosed in 《陈鹤琴全集》, 南京: 江苏教育出版社, 2008年版, 第539-541页。

struggles, that he reached out to an American-supported University and expressed his aspiration to talk to the Chinese frankly about “racial and social matters”. A luncheon was consequently arranged, and it lasted for about three hours. Du Bois “plunged in recklessly”, sharing stories of his slave ancestors and “the Negro problem” in the United States. However, embarrassing silence followed after his discussion of American colonialism and racism. When W. E. B. Du Bois visited China again in 1959, and met with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, he became aware that in the 1937 Shanghai luncheon with the Chinese elites, “we mentioned America only for its benefactions and scarcely for its exploitation.”<sup>18</sup>

Chen Heqin’s attitudes towards Paul Monroe and John Dewey also significantly changed after 1949, though he had self-consciously endorsed the teachings of Monroe and Dewey at Columbia and Teachers College. The International Institute of Teachers College was founded in the time when American industrialists like the Rockefeller Foundation began using their unprecedented corporate wealth to shape the nature of knowledge used to address social and educational issues within and beyond the US, and the leaders of the International Institute closely aligned with its politics.<sup>19</sup> Underpinning the work of the Institute’s international development work was the prevailing racial hierarchy, as well as the elitist and imperialistic features of the American progressive era, that Chen later found to be ideologically problematic after 1949. In 1956, Chen drafted an anti-Dewey pamphlet against Deweyan philosophy entitled *My War against the Capitalistic Liar John Dewey*, claiming that “John Dewey, the old folk, is a thorough liar of idealism in the studies of education.” Though he was also influenced by pragmatism pedagogically, Chen then believed that Dewey’s pragmatism was a philosophy that aimed to serve “the predominant control of US dollars” and “spread the American way of life” to every corner of the world. He further wrote:

“John Dewey was a most ferocious enemy of the Socialist Revolution. He worried that Socialism and Marxism would spread to other countries, especially the colonial and semi-colonial countries under the exploitation of American imperialism. Hence, when Dewey was invited by his Chinese disciple, the loyal servant of American imperialism Hu Shi, to China,

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<sup>18</sup> *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois, A Soliloquy on Viewing my Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, International Publishers, 1968, pp.44-49.

<sup>19</sup> Takayama, “Beyond Comforting Histories: The Colonial/Imperial Entanglements of the International Institute, Paul Monroe and Isaac L. Kandel at Teachers College, Columbia University”.



he came three days before the eruption of the May Fourth Movement, and ran over eleven provinces in China pretending as a “philosopher”, “revolutionist” and “educator”.<sup>20</sup>



[Chen Heqin with two children, 1960, Special Collections, Teachers College]

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<sup>20</sup> 陈鹤琴, 《批判杜威反动教育学的哲学基础——我向资产阶级大骗子杜威回击三枪》, 上海: 新知识出版社, 1956年版.