Micro histories of intercultural knowledge exchange: Tao Xingzhi’s educational poetry

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a micro historical account of the work of a key Chinese educational reformer, Tao Xingzhi (1891–1946), who transformed educational ideas from John Dewey to effect social and cultural change in 1920s–1940s China.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper examines English and Chinese language sources, including Tao’s poetry, to present a fresh analysis of Tao’s epistemological life history. It draws upon transnational historical approaches to chart the multidirectional circulation of progressive education philosophies around the globe. It also explores some conceptual dimensions of Chinese historical thinking and historiographical strategies.

Findings – Tao Xingzhi engaged in critical intercultural knowledge exchange in implementing educational reforms in China. He blended and critiqued Chinese and Deweyian educational philosophies to create unique educational reform, which involved reversing some of Dewey’s approaches as well as adapting others.

Originality/value – This paper foregrounds Tao Xingzhi’s agency in transforming some of Dewey’s ideas in the Chinese context and challenges studies that adopt an “impact-response” approach to Tao’s contribution, which suggest a one-way flow of knowledge from a “modern” West to a “traditional” China. It brings hitherto unexplored Chinese language sources to an English-speaking audience, particularly Tao’s poetry, to gain new historical insights into Tao’s educational reforms. It contributes to transnational understandings of the multidirectional flows of knowledge about Progressive educational philosophies around the world.

Keywords Transnational education, Chinese historical thinking, Intercultural knowledge, Micro history, Tao Xingzhi

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper presents a fresh analysis of the epistemological life history of Tao Xingzhi, who was an important educational figure in Chinese national reconstruction from the 1920s to 1940s, drawing upon primary and secondary sources in English and Chinese languages[1]. This paper reads Tao’s educational reforms in China from the lens of intercultural knowledge exchange, rather than a unilateral knowledge transfer, which presumes an unproblematic implementation of Dewey’s educational ideals in China by Tao upon his return in 1917, and especially after Dewey’s academic tour between 1911 and 1921 (e.g. Kuhn, 1959; Zou, 2010). We argue that Tao’s universal (mass)[2] education movement in China involved “critique-based knowledge co-construction” (Qi, 2015) that included profound conceptual change and reversal of Dewey’s ideas arising from his careful analysis of the contextual particularities in China. The unilateral knowledge transfer approach reflects common misconceptions of modern international knowledge flows as originating in the modernised and superior West moving to an “essentialised, backward and static”
China (Wang, 2009; Chia, 2013, p. 199). These flawed assumptions draw upon two of the conceptual frameworks Cohen (2003) identified as constructing Orientalist approaches to the Chinese history. These include an “impact-response” approach and a “tradition-modernity” dichotomy. In this paper, we explain how Tao engaged in a co-construction of educational understanding that deeply critiqued Deweyian educational theories in response to domestic Chinese conditions.

This paper contributes to debates about the multidirectional flows of intercultural “knowledge transfer” (Collins and Allender, 2013, p. 112) of progressive educational philosophies. These are transnational histories that seek to chart the multiple flows of ideas and people around the globe (Fitzgerald, 2010). The focus of transnational historical research is to trace “the provenance of ideas […] conceptions of citizenship, colonial/metropole constituency or of ethnic identity in different national domains” (Collins and Allender, 2013, p. 112). Therefore, this paper extends the work of Schriewer and Martinez (2004) and Shulte (2011) in exploring the journeys of Dewey’s educational philosophies around the globe.

Transnational histories often draw upon micro histories of marginalised groups in Indigenous, Eastern and Southern settings (e.g. Allen, 2009) to demonstrate the “way intimate biographical traces […] shed light on the transnational nature of localised colonial histories” (Hughes, 2012, p. 269). Informed by feminist and Indigenous standpoint theory, these neglected histories work with evidence from “the margins in order to critique, disrupt and displace the “centre” (Hughes, 2012, p. 270). Life history methodologies illustrate Tamboukou’s (2010, p. 124) argument that “not only do individual human lives enter the discourse of history […] but actually their life stories are creating conditions of possibility for history itself”. This paper focusses on historical evidence of the contributions, critiques and reinterpretations Eastern individuals made to the development of progressive educational philosophies. Because this is an epistemological biography of Tao, this paper focusses on Tao’s work in particular. Tao was, of course, entangled with other agents and organisations at the time (both in and outside China – such as the rural education movement) throughout his career. Where possible, we have sought to situate Tao’s story within these broader movements, but space does not allow us to fully develop all of these details.

The paper draws upon recent theorising about Chinese historical thinking and understandings of time (Huang, 2007; Wang, 2007). In the next section, we make a case for the need for multilingual sources that can be used to reconstruct the narratives of Chinese educational figures. We argue that poetry written by these figures can provide additional, rich insights into their epistemological journeys. Then we begin our analysis, first with a focus on Tao’s perception of poetry as a major instrument to illustrate transnational developments in his educational thoughts. Here, we also provide a brief biographical outline of Tao Xingzhi’s life and educational contributions. Then we trace Tao’s quest for educational ideas from the West that would assist in China’s national reconstruction. Specifically, through examining more of Tao’s poems, we illustrate the ways in which Tao recognised that Dewey’s formulations were unable to respond to Chinese conditions, which resulted in his critique and complete reversal of Dewey’s key theories around the relationship between life and education, school and society, and his intercultural co-construction of educational theories around teaching, learning and doing.

**Chinese historical theorising and multilingual sources**

This paper is enriched by multilingual intellectual resources, including Chinese understandings of history, metaphors, images and poetry in historical theorising. Although the idea of Chinese historical theorising continues to be debated (Ghosh, 2007; Rüsen, 2007), it provides an important theoretical underpinning to our (re)interpretation of
Tao Xingzhi’s contribution to Chinese educational reform Chinese historical theorising is intrinsically linked with moral reasoning drawing upon Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist philosophies (Huang, 2007). In China, writing history is “an act of political and moral criticism” (Huang, 2007, p. 184) with a focus on “the acts of the people of the past” (Sato, 2007, p. 228) rather than deities. Chinese historical thinking also includes a sense of being in time. This means that Chinese intellectuals believe that historians are capable of shuttling “between the past and the present for mutual enrichment” and that people exist within the flows of time that “flow from what has passed through [to] what is now to what is coming” (Huang, 2007, pp. 188 and 185). This provides Chinese historians with a sense of purpose that comes from contributing to circular flows of time. All of this enables Chinese historians to suggest that they can “communicate with the past and [...] extrapolate meanings from history” (Huang, 2007, p. 180). Chinese historical thinking also seeks to account for the processes of micro and macro histories. The 

Li (principle) or the Dao (way) approach provides for the holistic study of historical processes involving both accounts of “the daily comportment of each individual on the one hand and the vast cosmic activities of the entire world on the other” (Huang, 2007, p. 184). The Chinese historiographic strategy of jìzhuàn (annals-and-biographies) illustrates this proposition (Sato, 2007). First created by the Han Dynasty historian Sima Qian in his Records of the Grand Historian, the strategy of jìzhuàn encompasses five historiographic genres. Bēnji (basic annals) chronicles the rise and fall of dynasties and emperors. Bìao (tables) are chronological and genealogical tables of dynasties, royal lineages, reigns and events. Shū (treatises) documents the evolution of social and cultural systems including rites, music, harmony and measurements, calendar, astronomy, sacrifices, rivers and canals, and agronomics. Shìjīa (hereditary houses) includes accounts of famous feudal houses. Lièzhuàn (biographies) are biographical accounts of eminent individuals with high morals (Lü, 2011). In this paper, the genre of lièzhuàn is used by (re)creating Tao’s epistemological biography and linking his individual life history with broader historical shifts in Chinese educational policy just prior to the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949.

Chinese historical theorising is premised on the use of metaphor as a key conceptual tool rather than an “embellishment” (Huang, 2007, p. 187). Huang (2007) argued that Chinese historical analysis and logic cannot function without the use of these analogies. These metaphors are regarded as capable of providing moral lessons about historical events. Chinese historical theorising is built upon metaphors which are perceived as “systematic, open-ended and comprehensive” tools that can be employed in contemporary meaning making (Huang, 2007, p. 187). Cao (2008) argued that the Chinese literary theory was based upon a belief that written and spoken texts were inadequate to capture thoughts and that this could only be achieved using images. These images sought to convey “meaning beyond words, schematisation beyond images and intention beyond tones” and was embodied in Chinese literary categories like “miàowù (enlightenment), xìngqù (interest or taste), bìxīng (comparison and affective images), shényùn (spirit and tone) and yìjìng (artistic ideals)” (Cao, 2008, p. 2). This ensures that sources like poetry, which are built around the use of metaphors and images (Shapiro, 2004; Vansina, 1985), becomes an especially important primary source in the (re)construction of Chinese epistemological biographies.

There has also been a general turn to poetry as a source of evidence in historical and social science research (Vansina, 1985; Cahmann, 2003; Shapiro, 2004). For example, Vansina (1985, p. 11) argues that “poetry, song, sayings, proverbs and tales” are all “verbal arts” that can provide historical evidence. They provide accounts of the experience of contemporary events, recreate the emotions these situations generated and suggest meanings (Vansina, 1985). In many Indigenous and Eastern cultures, poetry, proverbs and songs were used to teach and construct history (Vansina, 1985). For example, Stephenson (2008) describes the ways in which whakatauki (proverbs and poetic allusions) and waiata
(songs) were used in Māori culture to learn and retell history. Cahnmann (2003) suggests that understanding more about the literary devices poets employ can enrich research into education and provide additional perspectives about the work educational researchers do and its impact upon public and political communities. Shapiro (2004) argues that poetry and qualitative research share key characteristics such as providing opportunities to explore and construct meaning, trace multiple realities and perspectives and provide local, specific and vivid evidence. In China, a rich and time-honoured tradition of classical poetry is characterised by its “age-old entanglement” with politics (van Crevel, 2008, p. 2). Historically, the social value of Chinese literature was to convey the Dao, or the cosmic “Way” that governs the order of the natural and social worlds[3]. The value of poetry was seen as verbalising aspirations and ideals and expressing emotions[4] (Cao, 2008; Shankman and Durrant, 2000). For these reasons, the poetic texts in Chinese are a powerful source to examine the intellectual development of the poets in relation to the political, social and cultural contexts. From the next section, we began our analysis of Tao’s transnational educational thoughts through a close reading (DuBois, 2003) of a selection of his poems. We selected poems that either relate to Tao’s educational notions such as action and knowledge, life education and teaching-learning-doing, or reflect Tao’s views about poetry.

Tao Xingzhi’s action, knowledge and poetry

Tao Xingzhi (1891–1946) was born as Tao Wenjun in a small village in mainland China’s Anhui Province. His father was a small business owner and farmer who assisted with managing official village documents. Tao studied Chinese classics with local Chinese teachers before attending an Inland Mission Station where he received Western education until 1908 when the school closed down upon the departure of its British principal. Tao studied literature and philosophy between 1909 and 1913 at the Jinling University and was also involved in local political activities in his home province after the collapse of the Qing dynasty. In 1914, Tao travelled to the USA to study government/municipal administration at the University of Illinois and obtained a Master’s degree. Inspired by courses in educational administration and Progressive philosophy, Tao transferred to Columbia Teachers College to pursue a PhD in education, where, working with John Dewey, he explored, among other areas, educational administration and the social and historical foundations of education.

Tao returned to China in 1917 and commenced his educational career lecturing in Nanking Higher Normal College. Between then and 1946, Tao was one of the most active educational figures in modern Chinese history. His enthusiasm and resilience played a leading role in the May Fourth movement, rural education, universal education, science education, wartime education, anti-Japanese invasion and anti-civil war movements, and peasants’ and workers’ universities. In 1927, he established the Nanjing Xiaozhuang Teachers College, where he developed and implemented his theories of rural education and life education. In July 1946, he died of cerebral haemorrhage in Shanghai at the age of 55. Tao worked unremittingly to organise schools, education societies and universities, as well as edit and write a large volume of texts to inspire the public. His reputation has suffered a chequered history where he was hailed as a hero by Mao from 1946 to 1951, denounced from 1951 to 1981, and gradually rehabilitated as a patriotic educationalist since the 1980s through the establishment of provincial and national societies for Tao Xingzhi’s studies (Yao, 2002b).

Tao’s name changing reflects a transnational influence on his educational ideas. Throughout his life, Tao was reflective about knowledge and action in relation to each other. Tao’s original first name was Wenjun, meaning “connectedness and depth of knowledge”. During his study at Jinling University, Tao was influenced by the philosophy of Wang Yangming (1472–1829), a Confucian idealist scholar in the Ming Dynasty and a leading figure in the School of Mind. Tao shared Wang Yangming’s rejection of the pure investigation of knowledge and emphasised the integration of scholarly reflection and action. Tao engaged
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with Wang’s notion that “knowledge is the beginning of action, and action is the outcome of knowledge” (Wang, 2014, p. 13). In 1912, Tao changed his name to Zhixing, or knowledge-action, to express his belief in Wang Yangming’s ideas. During his study in the USA and Dewey’s Chinese academic tour, Tao was influenced by Dewey’s notion of “learning through doing”. The failure of some of Tao’s educational endeavours in China drawing on Dewey’s theories further changed his understanding of knowledge and action. He undertook a further formal name change in 1934 to Tao Xingzhi (action-knowledge), and illustrated this with some of his most well-known poetic lines:

action is the beginning of knowledge, and
knowledge is the outcome of action. (Tao, 1934)

These lines reflected his belief that only through actions in the Chinese social context would it be possible to produce knowledge that is most relevant to the problems in China. Later, he changed his first name again, using a character he invented to indicate his understanding about knowledge and action. The invented Chinese character integrates the two Chinese characters for action and knowledge:

行 (action) + 知 (knowledge) = 知 (action-knowledge-action)

This new character refers to the ongoing, spiralling structure of action-knowledge-action, which is very similar to the action research model. Despite the last name change, Tao kept the name of Xingzhi and has been best known by this name. Just as Tao annotates his name change with poetic lines, his commitment to poetry as a key vehicle of expression was evident through his argument for a poetic world in “the School of Poetry”:

Is this world not good?
Why don’t we cast it in the kiln of poetry to forge a poetic world?
Is China not good?
Why don’t we cast it in the kiln of poetry to forge a poetic China?
What is this kiln of poetry?
It is a school of poetry!
In this school of poetry,
we can forge a China through poetry,
and a world through poetry. (Tao, 2005, p. 92)

Rather than resorting to the romanticising effect of poetry, what Tao intended here and practiced throughout his career was to turn poetry into a tool for Chinese educational change. Zhao (2012) argues that Tao’s preference for poetry was consistent with his earlier notion that “when transforming the environment, we need an artistic mind” (p. 42, Tao 2005, cited in p. 36, Zhao, 2012). Over 800 poems in the Tao Xingzhi Oeuvre show how Tao transformed his social and educational thoughts into poetry to create a world of vitality for China’s national reconstruction.

Tao Xingzhi’s poems were written in the Literacy Revolution era after 1911 and were in the genre of New Poetry, which was championed by intellectuals such as Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu in the avant-garde New Youth journal[5]. The New Poetry movement promotes the “breaking of the shackles that constraint the spirit” through replacing rigid, elitist classical Chinese language, which traditionally was the exclusive medium of high literature, with the use of vernacular free verse. It was a “poetic liberation” for “rich materials, precise
observation, high and profound ideals, complex emotions to enter poetry” (Hu, 1919, n.d.). Like other practitioners of the New Poetry, Tao used the new literary form to convey his social and educational ideals. Zhong (2015) describes Tao’s poetry as the educational texts, battle bugles (an analogy Tao used in *The Poet*) and video cameras of his era. He believed that the content and style of poetry need to “reach” people, emphasising the social and education values of poetry over the aesthetic value of traditional Chinese poetry. Commended as the People’s Poet (Zhong, 2015), Tao conveyed his educational notions in poems that were comprehensible and memorable to people in China’s semi-literate society. San Xiao (1896–1983), Chinese poet and translator, and fellow student and revolutionary with Mao, commented that “every one of Tao’s poems addresses current social situations, and people’s needs” (Xiao, 1936). Shuipai Yuan (1916–1982), poet and editor of several influential Chinese newspapers including *Ta Kung Bao*, said Tao’s poems “resemble folk songs, chants, and rhymes, with a readership far beyond the narrow circle of poets that included the general public, his students, and the audience in his speeches” (Yuan, 1946, p. 132). In the next sections, we will argue that the New Poetry provided Tao Xingzhi with a powerful instrument to facilitate his universal education movement in the 1930–1940s.

**Critique-based knowledge co-construction for national reconstruction**

Historians have adopted a range of interpretations about Tao’s educational philosophy and contribution to Chinese national reconstruction through education. We argue that rather than merely blending Chinese and Deweyian thinking, Tao was critical of both the traditional Chinese education model, and the relevance of Western educational concepts in China. In some cases, Tao transformed Dewey’s ideas by reversing them completely in order to make a significant impact upon Chinese educational reform.

Kuhn’s (1959) study framed the intercultural interaction between Tao and Dewey in terms of the liberal-bourgeois project of modernisation characterised by charting a US impact and a Chinese response. Framed as a binary scheme and narrowly concentrating on the intellectual relationship between Tao and Dewey, Kuhn (1959) excluded the influence of other intellectual sources and socio-historical forces on Tao’s intellectual labour. Zou (2010, p. 58) also argued that Tao along with other former students of Dewey in the Southern province of Jiangnan “followed Deweyan philosophy closely. In a sense, they almost copied Dewey’s thoughts”. Zou (2010) also emphasised Tao’s role in working as Dewey’s interpreter during his visit to Nanjing.

A second key interpretation of Tao’s educational philosophy presents a concurrence between Tao and Dewey’s educational ideas, rather than seeing Dewey as simply influencing Tao (e.g. Brown, 1987). Shulte (2011) describes Tao as not an imitator, but an important “mediator” of the acceptance and rejection of Dewey’s thoughts in China. Recent scholarship has also emphasised the extent to which Dewey considered local traditions important and sought to persuade his Chinese colleagues to contextualise his ideas within Chinese intellectual traditions. Not all of his Chinese followers agreed and many Chinese Deweyans sought to dispose of Chinese traditions entirely (Shulte, 2011). However, Hayhoe (2014) suggests that other key Chinese educators like Li Bingde concluded that Tao’s experiment represented an integration of Chinese and Deweyan pedagogical approaches. Tan and Chua (2014) also argue that Tao engaged in what Johnson (2006, p. 684) calls the “politics of gelling”, whereby indigenous and borrowed educational theories and reforms are combined into a new form of knowledge. Ming (2002, p. 94) argues that Tao provides “one of the best examples of combining indigenisation and internationalisation in educational sociology”. Therefore, scholars have highlighted the complex interactions between Tao’s Chinese and Western intellectual sources and China’s historical environment. They acknowledge his exposure to Dewey’s ideas as a key influence on his educational policies and practices as well as highlighting the correspondences and divergences between these ideas.
Tao was also critical of elitist, impractical education in China, especially about how schooling alienated the poor and had proven to be ineffective in contributing to Chinese national reconstruction (Yao, 2002b). Tao’s critiques were influenced by two important ideas that required intense emotional and ideological change: the intelligence and capability of Chinese peasants and their lack of opportunities for education; and the ignorance of Chinese intellectuals who were unaware of their poor brothers’ “pain” and “power” (Yao, 2002a, p. 94). Tao believed that socio-political inequality, which reproduced divisions through separating those who use their minds and hands, led to stagnation. Tao worked to change the focus of teacher-centred methods of didactic instruction to a student-centred approach (Tan and Chua, 2014). Tao declared “I have had only one central object in mind, that is, how to make education universal, or how to provide those deprived of their opportunity of education with the education they need” (Guo, 2009, p. 523). Tao’s universal education aimed to break the social labour division of the mind and the body to promote education among Chinese peasants and workers.

Tao was keen to interrogate Western educational and philosophical ideas in his quest for methods of national reconstruction of Chinese agricultural society. He was inspired by Dewey’s educational philosophies about “education means life”, “school means society” and the ways in which education occurred through “learning by doing” (Yao, 2002b; Ming, 2002). Tao returned to China in 1917 and set about implementing his fusion of Chinese and Deweyian educational ideas. He focussed his work in rural areas and on educating the common people where there were high proportions of illiteracy (Guo, 2009). However, he rapidly found that Dewey’s theories were inadequate in grappling with the issues of poverty, internal chaos and political instability that gripped the country (Brown, 1990). As Tao explained in late 1920s, “after returning to China I tried in vain to put Dewey’s theory into practice. Now I am at the end of my rope and must find another way” (cited in Zong, 2008, p. 10). During Dewey’s academic tour around in China, Dewey “portrayed the West as offering a living model of Progressive values, suitable for imitation by the rest of the world, including the Chinese” (Brown, 1990, p. 31). However, Tao expressed concerns about duplicating Western models and argued for approaches that dealt with the contextual particularities in China. The failure of the Deweyian experimentalism in China is attributed by Keenan (1977, cited in Buck, 1978, p. 783) to “the gradualist nature of Dewey’s approach, coupled with his inability to develop a means for dealing with the politicization of education in warlord China”.

Building upon the arguments of other scholars (Yao, 2002b; Ming, 2002; Singh and Harreveld, 2014) and drawing upon English and Chinese language sources, we argue that Tao’s experimentation with his combined Chinese and Deweyian philosophical approaches resulted in Tao completely reversing several of Dewey’s key principles. Tao reworked Dewey’s formulae “education means life” to “life means education, and “school means society” to “society means school” (Yao, 2002b; Ming, 2002). Tao’s theory also changed Dewey’s formula of “learning by doing” to “combining teaching, learning, and doing” because he believed that worthwhile knowledge can be derived from conscientious activities that involve working with one’s mind while working with one’s hand.

*LIFE MEANS EDUCATION, AND SOCIETY MEANS SCHOOL*

Instead of putting schools at the centre as promoted by Dewey, Tao reversed the notion into society is school and life is education (Buck, 1978; Zong, 2008). He questioned the universal applicability of the liberal-bourgeois modernisation theory, especially its lack of intercultural interactions with China’s intellectual culture. Dewey was interested in making US educational models and principles prevail over Marxist ideas among China’s intellectuals. Tao moved beyond Dewey’s agenda reorienting his educational ideals around egalitarianism and re-connecting with his “commoner identity” (pingmin xing) (Yao, 2002b).
We believe that Tao argued that the reasons why Deweyan approaches failed in China went beyond arguments that China was not a capitalist country at this point, however. Instead, we suggest that Tao felt the failure of Deweyan approaches related to a complex amalgam of economic, social, cultural and intellectual factors. As a result, he saw flaws in both Deweyan and Marxist thinking because both of these philosophies derived from the West and did not acknowledge Chinese intellectual and cultural values.

In response to the problem of the disconnection between schooling and life, Dewey included in the curriculum selected social experiences to make school into a miniature society. In one of the speeches he delivered in China, Dewey said “the school is a community; school is society. Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself”. In his speech, “the School and Society”, Dewey said that “teaching materials in all subjects should best reflect the status of the current world, instead of focusing only on ancient times” (Zou, 2010, p. 53). Dewey’s classroom-centric schooling may have suited capitalism and US society, but not China. Tao believed that requiring schools to draw in all that is society was very artificial. Instead, he applied his theory from the China National Society for Promoting Education among Common People that he had established with Hu Qihui and Yan Yangchu in 1923. He applied his key notion that “life means education” in rural education for the poor. In his Ode to the University of Society (Tao, 2005, p. 59), Tao wrote:

The blue sky is our dome,
the ground is our floor,
the sun and the moon are our study lamps,
the twenty-eight (lunar) mansions are our walls[6].
People create society. Society becomes the school.

[...] […]
Farms, factories, conferences, malls, squares,
battlefields, playgrounds, all is our countless classrooms.
Everyone will do his/her best, learn what he/she needs, teach what he/she knows, and fulfil his/her role.

[...] […]
Students come from all walks of life.
As long as they learn with humility, and perseverance;
Without travelling out of the village
Villagers know far and wide.

Tao’s poem also promoted the establishment of evening universities, and correspondence colleges. He discussed the educational utility of news, educational and patriotic movies, and travelling. He enacted an approach where “society means school”, turning rural schools into community centres where teachers were trained to become community leaders and school students were trained to become activists and “little teachers” who taught illiterate adults to read (Yao, 2002b). His famous Xiaozhuang Teachers’ College established programmes in literacy, scientific farming, healthy entertainment and public and environmental hygiene and helped peasants to become economically independent (zili), self-governing (zizhi) and self-protecting (ziwei) (Yao, 2002b). Xiaozhuang became a centre for village management, defence against bandits, agricultural research and economic planning, as well as literacy
and traditional school subjects. It was, in Tao’s view, expanding education to encompass all of life (Brown, 1990).

As one can see in the Ode, Tao used everyday concepts and images in his poems to communicate his ideas about life education to the public. In addition, in promoting the roles of speech, song, dance and drama groups, he drew upon images from everyday social life to teach agricultural and life skills: “Sister Zhu delivers eggs, Aunty Wang repairs vats”. Other unassuming images such as chicken, lamb, wheat, cotton, car and steel frequently appear in his poems. His plain language poems played a key role in helping the illiterate public to reconceptualise the notion of education. Education ceases to be the privilege of the rich and elites. Life education was positioned in opposition to the traditional Chinese education favouring the rich. For Tao, these realistic everyday images convey a simple and true “Dao”, that is, the way of Chinese peoples’ lives at the time.

His other notion that “society means school” had the same equity concern. Guo (2009, p. 517) argues that:

[...] for most Chinese people society was their only school and life their only education. The reason why the ruling class, literati and officials had refused to admit this fact was that they had been in a position to offer their children elite education in elite schools. Tao was opposed to such elite, unequal schools; his proposal of life education was an attempt to promote universal education to the public.

Tao’s action/knowledge orientation to life education contributed to debates in the twentieth-century China about the co-joining of educational modernisation and national reconstruction. Tao extended education into the natural and social world, taking nature and society as the sites for teaching and learning activities. This meant breaking through efforts to construct an artificial “life” environment at school, as Dewey had promoted, and going directly into the real world. For Tao, solving the problem of alienation between life and education involved the seamless merging of schooling and living.

**Teaching, learning and doing**

Tao’s idea of combining teaching, learning and doing was a critique of the traditional Chinese teaching method that catered only to the privileged. To change the conservative education system and universalise education to include the poor and disadvantaged in a largely agricultural country with 340m peasants, he argued that intellectual elites were not the source of enlightenment for the masses. Tao argued that direct experience provided a necessary condition for education and was a key source of knowledge, which could be supplemented by inferential knowledge and knowledge gained from indirect sources. His educational theory and method focussed on the “unity of teaching-learning-doing”. This idea he took from Wang Yangming’s conservative politics of cultivating individual’s morals to rebuild society (Yao, 2002b). The first-hand experiences of doing, teaching and learning are no longer concerned with mere abstractions, but connected to life experience and thus able to produce worthwhile knowledge. Here “doing” is defined as conscientious activities that involved working with one’s mind and hands. In his poem entitled To Book Fools (Tao, 2005, p. 32), Tao wrote:

No instructions?

No doing?

Columbus, when exploring the New Continent, Did he say so?

No instructions?

No doing?

Robinson Crusoe, in surviving the uninhabited island, Did he say so?
No instructions?
No doing?
In the garden in the Xiaozhuang College, How many more carrots are to be grown?
No instructions?
No doing?
Earth-shattering opportunities, Will be missed in saying so!

The juxtaposition of the adventures of Columbus and Crusoe with students’ gardening in the Xiaozhuang College reflected Tao’s belief in the pioneering significance and challenges of teacher education for Chinese national reconstruction. Tao named the library at the Nanjing Xiaozhuang Teachers’ College, which featured books about applied education, the “No Book Fools Admitted Library”. Book fools who learn simply through reading books, especially those who read for rote learning, was not the learner profile desired at Xiaozhuang College (Chen and Sheng, 2004). Xiaozhuang was to be a school for training teachers that would prepare them for the whole range of problems that plagued China’s impoverished countryside. By “doing”, Tao also encouraged the self-making spirit, as exemplified through his rhymes about learning to be a true man:

Drop your sweats; eat your rice.
Your work is by yourself to finish.
A true man is hardly made
by Heaven, ancestry and others. (From Learn to be a true man; collected in Fang, 2005)

Tao experimented with vocational education programmes, improvement in science teaching, women’s enrolment and experimental changes in students’ autonomy. Tao’s methods aimed to bring about the synthesis of teaching, study and work, to cultivate new talent which combined brains with skill, and to overcome the strange phenomenon of intellectuals not doing labour while traditional Chinese education insisted that the masses lacked knowledge and the capacity for its creation (Lin, 1995). For example, Tao (2005) designed an examination during which candidates were asked to write an essay to criticise the Mencian motto, “those who work with their minds govern and those who work with their hands are governed”. Their answers, produced over several days, require the candidates to combine theory and practice by cultivating a block of land. Tao also incorporated manual labour into school entrance examinations.

The transformation of teachers was a precondition for Tao’s agenda for the transformation of society. Tao worked to produce teachers who would have “a farmer’s physique and skills, a scientist’s mind and a spirit for social transformation” (Yao, 2002a, p. 98). They became skilled in “teaching-learning-doing” activities involving self-study, group discussions, school construction and management, farm work, cooking, instrument-making, curriculum development and teaching in schools. The aim was to form teachers with the knowledge, skills and capabilities for building and running a school that would directly contribute to improving farm production and rural life.

**Conclusion**

This paper is a contribution to transnational history about the transfer and transformation of Progressive educational philosophies. We examined how these ideas transform through different cultural landscapes and histories. Transnational histories need to account for the travelling of ideas and people and the complexity and nuances of how ideas blend and transform.
We explain how, in his attempt to reconstruct China through universal education, Tao engaged in a co-construction of educational knowledge that critiqued both traditional Chinese education that catered for the privileged and Deweyian educational theories in relation to Chinese domestic conditions. Tao not only blended, but also reversed and extended Dewey’s ideas. Tao’s educational philosophy went beyond conventional elitist, book-centred and classroom-centric schooling. Tao worked for a coordinated educational network that linked workers in various institutions such as scientific farming, the credit system and medical and transport industries. His approach went far beyond conventional understanding of what education was to integrate the reform of classroom-centric schooling into industries contributing to China’s reconstruction.

This paper also demonstrated the importance of drawing upon English and Chinese language sources, especially poetry and metaphors, to interrogate Chinese historical and educational theorising. The birth of vernacular free verse in Tao’s era served to reach the masses in its promotion of education for national reconstruction. We illustrate the importance of developing micro histories and epistemological biographies from non-western perspectives to document multidirectional, intercultural knowledge exchange. This paper interprets Tao’s biography through the lens of Chinese understandings of time as circular and as a creative dialogue with historical figures which have important moral lessons for the present and the future. Tao’s life story has created “conditions of possibility for history itself” (Tamboukou, 2010, p. 124), and, in a significant way, his poetry gave life and colour to these possibilities.

Notes
1. All references have been translated into English in the reference list.
2. According to Guo (2009), Tao used the term “universal” education rather than “mass” education so we have used this term throughout the paper.
3. See, for example, Zhou Danyi’s The All-Embracing Book.
4. See, for example, Commentary of Zuo.
5. The well-known practitioners of the New Poetry include Xu Zhimo, Bing Xin, Wen Yiduo, Guo Moruo, Li Jinfa, He Qifang, Feng Zhi, Bian Zhihao, Ai Qing, Zang Kejia, Dai Wangshu, Tian Jian, Zheng Min, Chen Jingrong and others.
6. In ancient Chinese astronomy, there are 28 lunar mansions.

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