

## Histories of education in China and beyond

Histories of education in China have attracted rapidly growing interest, not only among historians but also among education scholars broadly, particularly in comparative education and education policy. For reasons both scholarly and strategic, educationists around the world have taken a keen interest in China's educational history and development. Indeed, recent conference proceedings of the History of Education Society-US and the American Educational Research Association have included an increasing number of papers in this area; so too have the programs of the History of Education Society-UK, the International Standing Committee on the History of Education, and other education conferences around the world.

This special issue marks the first time a group of Chinese historians of education have contributed a set of articles to a major journal *outside China*. No history-of-education journal in the Americas, Europe, Asia, or elsewhere has published a special issue of this kind. While stand-alone essays on Chinese education are increasingly common in non-Chinese history-of-education journals, this collection is the first to bring multiple articles together in a non-Chinese journal. A product of the first biennial University of Wisconsin-Zhejiang University Workshop on the History of Education, held in Hangzhou, China, in May 2019, it begins to fill a hole in the comparative historiography of education—and, crucially, does so with contributions from Chinese historians themselves.

This special issue has three aims. First, it seeks to foster the dissemination of research on the history of education in China, a subject of growing interest for education scholars around the world. The articles in this issue reflect the insights and interpretations of a rising generation of Chinese historians, not just on Chinese education but also on education in other places. Second, this issue emphasizes the important connections between China and “the West” that have shaped Chinese education over time, particularly since the late 19th century. A close (and critical) look at these connections—both intellectual and institutional—from Chinese scholars sheds light on contemporary debates about transnational history, the exchange of ideas, and various forms of cultural imperialism and intellectual cosmopolitanism that have shaped recent scholarship in the history of education.

Third, and importantly, the English-language articles in this special issue aim to provide instructors a much-needed resource to incorporate comparative perspectives on the history of education in China into courses on the history of education in other parts of the world. In an era when the field of history in general is becoming more internationalized, course instructors stand in urgent need of high-quality teaching materials on China. While some excellent publications on the history of Chinese education have come from scholars who are not Chinese, this special issue aims to introduce non-Chinese scholars to work that is currently underway in China itself: a way to build networks and encourage communication and, possibly, future research and teaching collaborations.

With these aims in mind, the contents of this special issue seek to familiarize non-Chinese scholars first and foremost with “the history of the history of education” in China, that is, the broad historiographical arcs that have shaped the field in that country over the last century or so. With the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the emergence of the Republic of China and Nationalist Government, the experience of Japanese imperialism during the 1930s and 1940s and the rise of the People's Republic, the devastations of the “Cultural Revolution” during the 1960s and 1970s and the “Opening Up” of Deng Xiaoping's regime, and the extraordinary modernization of China during the past three decades, China's recent past has been nothing if not eventful, and the effects of these events on *education* have been equally dramatic.



In the first essay, “Western Educational Historiography and the Institutionalization of Normal Schools in Modern China, 1901–1944,” Wang Chen, Luo Wei, and Wu Yuefei consider the emergence of the field of “history of education” in China during the early 20th century. As imperial officials in the late Qing dynasty took steps to “modernize” education systems—in an effort to “catch up” with the West—they built normal schools that included required courses on the comparative history of education. At first, these courses made use of translated Japanese textbooks, which had introduced “western” educational thought a generation earlier. Later, after the rise of the Republic of China, as domestic historians began to produce textbooks of their own, normal-school courses were shaped increasingly by American textbooks. Wang, Luo, and Wu employ network and cluster analyses to chart this shift in transnational influence.

The move from Japanese to American models of scholarship in history of education had a profound effect on the intellectual formation and professionalization of the field. This change, for example, helped to shape four major education reform initiatives during the first half of the 20th century: the *Guimao School System* (1904), the *Renzi-Guichou School System* (1912), the *Renxu School System* (1922), and the *Wuchen School System* (1928). Promulgated through normal-school curricula—including courses in the comparative history of education—each of these “systems” represented a new stage in the “westernization” of Chinese education. Often controversial, these reforms divided modernizers and traditionalists and raised questions about the applicability of foreign ideas to domestic education as well as the geopolitics of education reform, particularly after the “Anti-Japanese War” as China pivoted to American influence.

In the second essay, “The reception and use of John Dewey’s educational ideas by Hu Shi in the Early Republic of China,” Zhao Kang examines the work of one key “modernizer,” Hu Shi, who had studied under John Dewey at Columbia University in New York and then invited Dewey to visit Beijing and other cities soon after the Republic of China was founded [1]. While prior scholars have suggested that Dewey’s influence on Hu was purely intellectual, Zhao demonstrates that Hu (arguably the most influential thinker in republican China) sought to put Dewey’s theories into practice in a series of major educational reforms, from the codification of a Simplified Chinese script to the republican government’s implementation of the *Renxu School System*. Here was a specific case of transnational intellectual transfer in which Zhao finds an outspoken advocate for “western” (Deweyan) principles to advance “Chinese” (i.e., modernist Republican) aims.

The question, of course, was not only how Hu *understood* Dewey’s ideas (Zhao carefully avoids the sort of cultural essentialism that might preclude the possibility of transnational learning) but also how Hu *applied* Dewey’s ideas within a strongly politicized Chinese education context, one marked by sharp differences over the relevance of “western” ideas to “Chinese” schools as well as the meaning of mass (“scientific” and “democratic”) education for the sake of “social reconstruction.” Hu and his colleagues in the New Culture Movement embraced Deweyan (and, more broadly, American) ideals, but his translation of Dewey’s ideas (Dewey delivered a series of important lectures on the philosophy of education in Beijing and other cities) were not always well received, *either* among traditionalists *or* among youthful activists who demanded a quicker pace of social change. Zhao asks: did Hu’s attempt to put foreign principles into practice succeed?

In the third essay, “The Fate of Traditional Schools in a Context of Educational Modernization: The Case of *Si-shu* in China,” Jiang Chunjiao and Mao Pengcheng consider another side of the story: the enduring role of private traditional schools in China under post-imperial governments that were increasingly determined to establish public “new-style” (western) schools. For hundreds of years, *Si-shu* had prepared students for local imperial exams, but with the implementation of the *Guimao School System* in 1904 and the abolition of imperial exams a year later, the still-popular *Si-shu* faced a struggle for survival. Widespread

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across the country, the privately run *Si-shu* at first voluntarily adopted characteristics of “new-style” primary schools in order to maintain a share of the education market, but later, under the *Renzi-Guichou*, *Renxu*, and *Wuchen* school systems, the republican government took a more interventionist role and closed “unreformed” *Si-shu*.

A tale of both cultural tradition and institutional tenaciousness, the story of *Si-shu* was a story of the political economy of educational reform, but it was also a story of local resistance to allegedly “imported” or “imposed” educational styles (imported from abroad and imposed from the center of political power). Despite the forces organized against them, *Si-shu* were amazingly resilient, in part because the modern Chinese state did not have the material resources to achieve total school consolidation and thus depended on *Si-shu* to fill gaps in capacity (especially in rural areas). Jiang and Mao examine the complex social and cultural “obstacles” to educational reform. Even after the Communist Party of China brought schools under the firm control of the state, *Si-shu* endured in some places, and their legacy continues today.

In the fourth essay, “Whose Books? The Harvard-Yenching Institute’s Library and the Question of Academic Imperialism,” by Liu Qing, the question of transnational intellectual exchange takes a different turn. When the Harvard-Yenching Institute began to buy rare books and manuscripts in China during the early 1930s, many Chinese scholars reacted with dismay and, in the context of a new Nationalist Government, called these purchases a form of academic imperialism. Yet, as Liu shows, these purchases hinged on the help of a broad network of local Chinese scholars, bibliographers, and book-dealers, both in China and the United States, who collaborated with Harvard and, like their counterparts in the Institute, convinced themselves that such purchases represented the ideals of scholarly internationalism.

The politics of cultural, intellectual, and educational “trade” in books reflected broader geopolitical forces. In the late 1930s and 1940s, as the Japanese army occupied China and outlawed the exportation of books, Chinese scholars increasingly embraced US assistance in the safe-keeping of their cultural heritage. The National Peiping Library in Beijing and the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, pursued a well-known project to ship rare books out of war-torn China, a collaboration that continued until new tensions associated with the Cold War once again cast a pall over Sino-American intellectual exchange. In concert with other essays in this collection, Liu offers a narrative in which claims of academic nationalism, internationalism, and imperialism ebb and flow in light of broader geopolitical events.

In the fifth essay, “The National Defense Education Act, the American Association of University Professors, and the Dilemma of Academic Freedom in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” Wang Huimin offers a Chinese scholar’s take on a key moment in the history of American higher education: the debate over academic freedom that surrounded the anti-Communist “loyalty oath” required of all recipients of federal scholarships or loans under the National Defense Education Act of 1958. This oath elicited intense debate among students, faculty, and leaders in American colleges and universities who argued that it violated the basic freedoms of thought, speech, and association that were presumed to guide US higher education. Some called for the repeal of the loyalty-oath provision on grounds that it unfairly discriminated against students who depended on federal aid to pursue their academic degrees.

While the American Association of University Professors coordinated the “repeal” effort, this effort ultimately failed. Wang explains why. First, many in the university hesitated to speak out against the oath, because they feared they might be suspected of pro-Communist sympathies. Second, most students did not object to the oath; rather, after the end of the G.I. Bill and other forms of government aid, they signed the oath “willingly” in order to secure much-needed federal scholarships. Third, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, US colleges and universities had become increasingly dependent on federal support and were thus reluctant

to reject a source of tuition subsidies. In the end, Wang concludes, the principled defense of academic freedom wavered in the face of structural reliance on the state's largesse. By the mid-20th century, as the Cold War drew scholars more tightly into a military-industrial-university complex, it was difficult for American scholars to separate questions of intellectual autonomy from questions of financial need—a dilemma that only intensified in the decades thereafter.

In the final essay, "A political history of Chinese historiography on "foreign education"," scholars Chen Luxi and Su Yiqing note how changes in China's political culture affected the study of comparative educational history. They explain that historians of education in China—like their counterparts elsewhere in the world—often felt a strong push to use their historical scholarship to serve the educational (or more broadly developmental) interests of the state. As in the first essay in this collection, their work offers a "history of the history of education" in China, with an eye on the risks of "extreme utilitarianism" in history-of-education research. Against the backdrop of strongly ideologized historiographies during the late Qing dynasty, the Republican and Nationalist eras, the Communist Party's triumph, the Cultural Revolution, the Open-Door era, and China's rise to global power, Chen and Su review the *institutionalization* of Chinese educational historiography.

When should historians of education use their research to advance the particular reform agendas or partisan interests of the state? Chen and Su focus on the period after 1950 to give their own gloss on questions of political "relevance" in historical scholarship, the links between "history" and "theory," and the evolving role of Marxist historical-materialism in comparative interpretations of the educational past. With the gradual rejuvenation of the post-Mao era came revitalization of history of education as a field, with new academic organizations, new scholarly journals, and new debates about whether foreign educational models were applicable to China, whether historians of education in China should expand their comparative range to non-Western contexts, and whether "globalized" norms associated with English-language publications were driving a new set of professional standards among historians of education, for better or worse.

Taken together, these six essays follow the dramatic transformation of Chinese education wrought by competing theories of modernity and modernization since the late 19th century. They explore myriad connections—sometimes cooperative, sometimes competitive—between China and "the West," including the critical reception of western textbooks and new ideas about curriculum and pedagogy. They consider the historical mechanisms of transnational "influence" in education, that is, how educational ideas move between places and change in transit. In each case, they provide Chinese scholars' perspectives on the history of "non-Chinese" education, a contribution rare in English-language journals. In these and other ways, this special issue makes an original contribution.

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#### Note

1. In this special issue, all Chinese names have been transliterated with "surnames first."