**Women’s status at the turn of the Republican Period in China**

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Abstract

At the end of Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China, the Chinese society has gone through drastic changes. One of the significant changes was women’s education. This paper discusses Chinese women who studied abroad in the U.S., Japan or Europe during this era of transition. These women studied in education, economics, and medicine. Many of them were also involved in political movements and helped the establishment of the Republic of China (ROC). They not only raised the awareness of women’s rights in the Chinese society but also served as positive role models for women to contribute their talent and expertise to the society. The contributions of these Chinese women who studied abroad helped to pave the road for women’s rights movements and shape the lives of Chinese women today.

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1. **Introduction**

After the Boxer Movement and the Allied Expedition attacked Beijing, the Empress Dowager was embarrassed by the fact that Qing dynasty was under foreign attack and could not defend the nation. She felt that institutional reform was absolutely necessary to ensure survival of the dynasty. One of the important reforms she endorsed was women’s education. Traditionally, women did not receive any formal education. The educational reform included changing the Provincial academies (Shu-Yuan) into colleges. However, the government school system was based on the Japanese model. Japanese textbooks were imported and translated for use and Japanese teachers were employed. The curricula, on the other hand, used both modern Western subjects and traditional Chinese Classics. The significant impact to scholars is in government examination the Eight-legged essay was replaced by current topics.

The policy of sending students abroad was another important reform that was instituted. Chinese women and men sent to study abroad started about the same time during this era even though males were outnumbered females. Students were selected from provinces to study in foreign countries with the aims to cultivate citizens to rebuild a better China and in hope that they will stay away from turning over the dynasty (Chau, 2005). According to the reports from the book “Hundred Years of Studying Overseas” (Hong Kong Radio Station, 2007), Chinese women’s formal education started as early as 1844 when the English missionary woman Miss Alderser established a Girl’ school in NinPo. This was the first girls’ school established by foreigners in China. In 1897, the first girls’ school was established by the Chinese in Shanghai. In 1870, China began sending ambassadors and their wives overseas. Sun Shi-Li (1858-1945) was the first documented Chinese woman to accompany her husband to Japan. In 1901, the first group of women sponsored by the government was sent to Japan to study (See table 1). By 1905, there were at least 8,000 Chinese women in Japan to further their studies. The spread of political-consciousness provided the background to the New Culture’s Movement of the May Fourth period. The new schools established between 1901 and 1911 opened more opportunities for people to further their education. Western-style education attracted a modern intellectual class in China. This class of modern intellectuals was not satisfied with the Qing dynasty. As a result, many of them either joined the revolutionary causes under Sun Yat-Sen, or were sympathetic to Sun’s causes.

After the one-hundred –day reform, a class of intellects made the connection between the importance of women’s education and the prosperity of the nation. Many schools were established for women. In addition, many women were sent overseas for their education. Most of them were sent to Japan due to its proximity to China and its established educational system.

Table 1. Chinese Women’s Education at the End of Qing dynasty and the Beginning of the ROC

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| Year | Event |
| 1844 | Ms. Aldersey established the first girls’ school in NinPo |
| 1864 | The British established a girl’s school in Beijing and one in Tianjin |
| 1872 | The first group of 30 Chinese students went to the US to study |
| 1897 | The first girl’s school established by Chinese in Shanghai |
| 1901 | Chinese government sponsored the first group of women to study in Japan |
| 1902 | Japan Shi-Gen women’s school established Chinese Women Division |
| 1907 | Qing government publicized “Women’s Normal College Amendment” and “Girls’ Elementary Education Act” |

1. **Christian Influence in Chinese Women’s Education**

Christian missionaries were influential to Chinese education. By 1889, they had educated more than 16,000 Chinese men and women. They promoted Western civilization through Chinese translations. Christian missionaries emphasized the role and importance of women in society. They brought about emancipation and empowerment to the Chinese women. The overall message of Christianity was the equality between the genders, inasmuch as God was seen as a Father and a Mother figure. Since God loves His creation, so both man and woman should have equal opportunities. This goal has drawn many rural, illiterate, young and old women to Christianity. In order to have knowledge of the Bible, many were taught to read. This helped to raise the literacy rate among women. In addition, segregated religious meetings also encouraged women into leadership. In 1874, the anti-footbinding movement was started by 60 Christian Chinese women in Xiamen (Kwok, 1992). In 1872, Mary Porter and Maria Brown opened a school in Beijing where only girls who agreed to unbinding their feet were accepted. Another reform initiated by women was the temperance movement. In 1883, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union opened centers in China, which openly advocated against the use of opium, cigarettes and alcohol. The other important movement was the establishment of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA). It was introduced in 1890 where vocational trainings, boarding houses, recreations for students, and prayer groups were provided. This organization and the activities served as a means of distributing various social services, especially for working and urban women.

One of the by-products of missionary activity was the overseas training of Chinese women in medicine. Some women even received formal medical education and became doctors. Among them Jin YuMei (1864-1934) and He Jinying (1865-1929) were trained in the US (Kwok, 1992). They proposed the reforms for the improvement of women’s health.

1. **Chinese Women Studies in the US at the turn of the Qing dynasty and the ROC**

The earliest group of women who studied overseas was not all from rich or noble families. Most of them were sponsored or sent by missionaries. For example, Jim Yumei, an orphan, was sent to New York Women’s Medical College in 1881. She was the first Chinese woman to receive medical training and earn a medical degree in the US. In 1884, He JinYing was sponsored by Fu-Jo missionary hospital and in 1894 she finished her medical training in Philadelphia. In 1892, Con Eye-Tae and Shi Mei-Yu went to the US with missionaries and finished medical training. By 1905, there were 19 Chinese women studied who in secondary schools, the number increased to 36 women studied on the East coast of the US by 1910.

1. **Chinese Women Studied in Japan at the turn of the Qing dynasty and the ROC**

Chinese women being sent by the government to study in Japan happened three years later than their male counterparts. Different from the group of women who studied in the US, women who studied in Japan normally were from rich or noble families. While they accompanied their husbands or brothers to Japan they took the time to study. However, when their husbands or brothers returned to China, they had to go along. Therefore, most of them did not finish their studies. By 1902, more than ten Chinese women studied in Japan.

In 1905 Hunan province sent twenty women to study in Japan. This was the first time in Chinese history that the government had sponsored women to study overseas. It inspired other women to study in Japan. In 1908, there were 126 women who studied in Japan; by 1909 the number increased to 149 Chinese women who studied in Japan.

In 1910 the Qing region publicized regulations for women studying in Japan. This is the only official document regarding women studying in Japan. However, it emphasizes the importance of women being trained as good mothers (Chau, 2005).

1. **Chinese Women Studies in Europe at the turn of the Qing dynasty and the ROC**

In contrast with the number of Chinese women who studied in Japan or in the U.S., there were not as many who studied in Europe. By 1919, there were at least 28 Chinese women in Europe. Eight were in the UK, 18 were in France, one in Belgian, one was in Swissland, and two were not reported. However, there were a few women who made significant impact on French society as well as Chinese society. In the earlier twentieth century, France offered a work study program for Chinese students. They could work for one year and study for two years. Chen Ye Sho was the first Chinese woman to earn a doctoral degree in Law in France. Shun Gin-Yu went to France because of this program. She joined the Chinese Young Communist Party in 1919 there. The students were sent home when the France-Sino Education Association could no longer sponsor the work-study program. Shun and other students protested for “the right to live” and “the right to study”. It caused the “28 movement” riot. Most women in this program studied diligently but some women in the work-study program were used by Soviet Communist (Wang, 1980).

1. **Chinese Women’s Contribution after They Studied Overseas and Returned to China**

The Chinese women who studied abroad have made many important contributions to Chinese society after their return to China. Areas such as education, politics, medicine, and revolution to turn over the Qing dynasty all have their input and effort. The following is some of the representatives in each area:

Education: They put their efforts in teaching, printing newspapers, and writing. Con Eye-Tae and

Shi Mei-Yu were active in spreading the news to promote the concepts of women’s hygiene and health.

Politics: Tong Chun-ying and Chang Zao-Han requested to meet with Shen Yat-sen and urged

women to be involved in politics. Tong and He Shane-ni and other women in Japan were

involved in making firearms and bombs to support Dr. Shen’s revolution. The most

decorated one is Cho-jin. She was in Shi-gen women’s normal school in 1904 and 1905. She did not finish her study in Japan but returned to China and joined the revolution. She sacrificed her life during the revolution.

Medicine: Chinese women who studied in the US and Japan had training and formal education

in medicine. They had worked in the hospitals and clinics to make direct impact on local

Chinese people. Among them the most famous ones are, Jin Yumei (1888) who worked in Xiamen and Chen-du; He yinying (1895) worked in a women and children hospital

established by missionaries; Con Eye-Tae and Shi Mei-yu (1876) worked in Jo-jiang

hospital. These women returned from the US after completing their studies; Tsai Huey (1911) returned from Japan and she established the Red Cross in Jo-jiang.

In addition, Chinese women who studied in Europe contributed in other areas. For example, Lin Huey-ying became the first woman architect, E. S. Lin was the first government- sponsored Chinese woman to study Nursing in England. She later published the first handbook of nursing in China (Wong, 2000).

1. **Conclusion**

At the turn of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republican period in China, many changes took place on daily. Traditionally, the Chinese women suffered from foot-binding and were deprived of education. The invasion of foreign countries served as a wake- up call to every level of people in China and resulted in subsequent movements and riots from people who demanded changes in the nation. The success of reform from Japan and the influence of the West created a new class of Chinese intellect. They saw the need to educate women so they can shoulder the responsibility of establishing a new China.

Sending Chinese women to study overseas not only allowed individual women to use their talents and reach their potential but also give them the opportunities to contribute their expertise in helping people they have encountered.

Chinese women who studied overseas served as good models for the modern Chinese society. Their contributions in medicine, education, and the establishment of the Republic of China are invaluable. The accomplishments of those Chinese women who studied in Japan, the U. S. and Europe varied but were noticeable, and have been inspired and empowered from their study abroad. Further, they have inspired many women.

However, for the most part, these women still relied on male counterparts to give them their voice and a chance to thrive as human beings. They might have had the chance to be overseas to further their education, but they also carried the burden of expectations to be obedient and be good mothers from the society. Those male intellectuals or understanding fathers made their study overseas possible. Yet, many of those women have never married. Is it because they were too busy to find a suitable husband? Is it because they have the profession that served as a threat to other males? Or, is it their free choice? More studies in the areas such as women’s roles under the republican era of China; the society’s recognition of successful career women at the turn of the Republic of China; how did the society perceive successful career single women during that time, etc. needs to be done to find answers. Some possible ways to find answers may be through ethnographic studies to ascertain their relatives or friends, or investigate archives of women who studied oversea.

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