

## **Emulating or Integrating? Modern Transformations of Chinese Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

Western models of the university have fundamentally shaped Chinese universities over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, bringing together aspects of the Chinese and Western philosophical heritages in higher education has turned out to be an arduous task. The striking differences between the two value systems have led to cultural tensions. Chinese universities have not figured out how to wed the standard norms of Western higher education with their traditions. The Western concept of a university has been taken only for its practicality. Chinese higher learning traditions have had strong impact on contemporary higher education development. While China's history of the educational institutions called university today is long and their changes have been drastic, the transformation of China's higher education has been surprisingly little documented in the English literature. Without a good grasp of the nature of Chinese traditional higher education and institutions, it is almost impossible to truly understand modern Chinese higher education. Tracing the historical roots of Chinese higher education, this article examines how traditional Chinese higher education and its institutions have been transformed under the influence of their Western counterparts. It attempts to capture the interactions between indigenous Chinese and imported Western traditions in higher education.

### **Introduction**

In the field of higher education research, Clark Kerr (1992, p. 150) famously counted that of seventy-five institutions founded before 1520, "which are [still] doing much the same things in much the same places, in much the same ways and under the same names," about sixty are universities, putting some universities in such company as the Catholic Church, the Bank of Siena or the Royal Mint. This does not mean universities have remained the same. Indeed, since their establishment in Europe in the twelfth-century, the core missions and roles of a university have changed dramatically. Universities have become more and more national institutions and serve many purposes in contemporary society (Altbach, 2008). In the case of China, the history of the educational institutions called university today is longer and their changes have been far more drastic. This, however, has been surprisingly little documented at least in the English literature. Without a good grasp of the nature of Chinese traditional higher education and institutions, it is almost impossible to truly understand modern Chinese higher education. This chapter lends itself to how traditional Chinese higher education and institutions have been transformed under the influence of their Western counterparts. It attempts to capture the interactions between indigenous Chinese and imported (to a great extent imposed) Western traditions in higher education, and to prepare for the future development of modern Chinese higher education system. As a historical research, this work interprets past events and involves synthesizing data from various sources.

### **The historical Legacy of Dong Zhongshu in Higher Education**

Confucian ethics has had a tremendous effect on government, education, and Chinese society, and the influence has gone far beyond China. However people do not always realize that

Confucius was not always influential during his own time. Some people in history who made Confucius influential deserve our attention. One of such people was Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, 179-104 B.C.).<sup>1</sup> A scholar in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 C.E.), Dong was one of China's most influential thinkers who responsible for establishing Confucianism as the theoretical foundation of the inchoate imperial state in 136 B.C. and thus greatly shaped the Chinese culture, particularly in politics and education. He accomplished a theological justification for the emperor as the "son of heaven" by developing an elaborate worldview integrating Confucian ethics with naturalistic cosmology. His theory of mutual responsiveness between heaven and humanity provided the Confucian scholars with a higher law by which to judge the conduct of the ruler. To the theme of this article, Dong is most significant because it was under his suggestion that the Emperor Wu of Han (c. 140-87 B.C.), the seventh emperor of the Han Dynasty established Taixue - China's earliest higher learning institution. As one of the greatest emperors in Chinese history, Emperor Wu vastly expanded China's territorial domain and organized a strong and centralized Confucian state. However, Dong Zhongshu has been little documented in the English literature, and even less in the field of higher education.

Born probably around 179 B.C. in Guangchuan (in modern Hebei), Dong Zhongshu was a scholar well-versed in Chinese literature. Attempted to achieve a coherent system of thought that would provide a rational explanation for the entirety of human experience, he made the theory of the interaction between heaven and humanity his central theme. Put another way, his ultimate goal was to discover universal causative principles that would both explain the past and provide a sound foundation for the future, particularly in the socio-political sphere. His thought integrated yin-yang cosmology into a Confucian ethical framework. In his system the ruler has the central position as heaven's ambassador on earth. Natural catastrophes such as floods and droughts are heaven's way of warning the ruler to examine his personal conduct and correct his mistakes. The ruler therefore has the duty to preserve harmony between yang (light, positive, male) and yin (dark, negative, female) elements. He must prevent disturbances by caring for and educating his people. He may reform institutions when necessary but may never alter or destroy the basic moral principles of heaven.

According to Dong, earth, heaven and man have complementary roles in the universe. In an ideal state they work together in harmony. Heaven desires the welfare of mankind, man is endowed with a natural tendency to obey the dictates of heaven, and the earth provides nourishment in response to man's cultivation. Heaven is at work in worldly events, mandating certain outcomes in the course of human affairs. To him, the world is not a field of self-contained natural processes, but rather a field in which human life is of central importance and heaven acts. The authority of the ruler should be solidly grounded in the authority of heaven, which was codified in the classics that the Confucians had always treasured and promoted. Although his philosophy merged Confucianism with elements of Daoism, yin-yang cosmology, Mohism, Legalism, shamanism, and geomancy, he believed that Confucius had come to understand the relationship between man and heaven and was able to interpret omens and portents. Confucian scholars occupied an important role in government, interpreting the meaning of events and omens, and maintaining a check on the activities of the ruler, "rectifying rightness without scheming for profit; enlightening his Way without calculating efficaciousness" (Ban, 1962, p. 2525).<sup>2</sup> Dong's philosophy provided a theological justification for regarding the emperor as the

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<sup>1</sup> In the literature the name was previously Tung Chung-shu in Wade-Giles. There are also debates over his birth and death dates.

<sup>2</sup> The Chinese original is "正其誼不謀其利, 明其道不計其功".

“Son of Heaven.” Such political thought was undoubtedly one of the major reasons that Confucianism was accepted by Emperor Wu.

Dong’s teachings deeply influenced generations of Han thinkers. His understanding of the world as an interactive cosmos eventually permeated most of Chinese society, and became a fundamental element of the general Chinese worldview (Kirkland, 1995). While he was among the most influential thinkers in Chinese history, his most important scholarly and political success was achieved during his early career. He entered the imperial service during the reign of the Emperor Jing of Han and rose to high office under the Emperor Wu of Han (c. 140-87 B.C.). According to his biography included in the *Book of Han* (《漢書》), by 158 B.C. (Ban, 1962) he had already become the most learned person of his time. In 135 B.C., Emperor Wu was troubled by a number of questions about governance, and solicited explanations from the best scholars nationwide. In three undatable memorials, Dong proposed to revere only Confucianism and dismiss all the Hundred Schools of Thoughts.<sup>3</sup> He recommended Taixue (太學) as the best place to restore talents with its essential task to influence (教化) (Meng, 1996), a place not only to train talents, but also to exert influence and select political personnel. Meanwhile, Gongsun Hong (公孫弘, 200-121 B.C.), the then prime minister, suggested the government establish a system of scholars with disciples so that local communities would be positively influenced while talents were rewarded.<sup>4</sup> Emperor Wu took their advices, and ordered to establish Taixue in 124 B.C. to host scholars and their students, with a hope that they would set a good example for the entire society.

The historical significance of Dong’s proposals needs to be located in the context. In 221 B.C., the state of Qin had instituted a ruthless new centralized state. It banned private schooling, allowed only to study from officials, and made imperial power supreme. In 206 B.C. the Qin was overthrown, but meanwhile the Chinese had seen their civilization ransacked. Rulers of the subsequent Han period struggled to understand what had happened, and why. The collapse of the Qin offered a clear moral and historical lesson: there is justice in the world. But if so, why had the ruthless Qin come to power in the first place? These were the questions to which Emperor Wu went to the best minds for answers. Dong thus left his extraordinary marks in Chinese history of politics and education for: (1) authorizing and institutionalizing Confucian ethics and social mores; (2) establishing China’s formal higher education institutions; and (3) starting the strong Chinese tradition of marrying state with education centered on cultivation (教化) and officials as teachers (以吏為師). Dong helped to shape the character and mode of Chinese higher education for more than two thousand years. With a combined effect of Taixue and domination of Confucianism, all public schools in China offered regular sacrifices to Confucius who came to be perceived as the patron saint of education. Eventually, a Confucian temple was built in every one of China’s two thousand counties. His legacy even moved beyond China. Confucian ethics and governmental organization spread later to neighboring counties including Korea, Japan, and Vietnam (Queen, 1996).

### **Historical Roots of Chinese Higher Education**

As Hayhoe (1996) rightfully points out, the term “university” is used in the Chinese literature to denote an entirely different constellation of scholarly institutions in China. There was no institution in the Chinese tradition that could be called a university throughout China’s history

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<sup>3</sup> The Chinese original is “罷黜百家, 獨尊儒術”.

<sup>4</sup> The Chinese expression of the system Gongsun Hong suggested is 博士弟子員制度.

until the late nineteenth century. This is evident in the history of Chinese higher education. Ancient Chinese education system was established during the Yu period (2257-2208 B.C.). Activities of higher learning were recorded during Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 B.C.), and some early higher learning institutions appeared during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (771-221 B.C.). China predated the development of higher learning institutions in the West by centuries. The famous Jixia Academy was established twenty years before the Platonic Academy in Greece (Hartnett, 2011). Literally meaning Greatest Study or Learning, Taixue was China's earliest higher learning institution founded at Dong Zhong-shu's suggestion. It was the highest rank of educational establishment with a "Confucian" curriculum for the high level civil service. Toward the end of the Han Dynasty, as many as 30,000 students attended Taixue (Queen, 1996).

Taixue taught Confucianism (Ebrey, 1999). Even after one year of study at Taixue with mastery of one classic, students were eligible to be chosen by the government to become officials. By so doing, the government directly controlled their political future. This was the beginning of China's strong tradition for more than two thousand years, higher education aiming at preparing would-be officials for the state. Taixue thus became a subsidiary body of the bureaucratic system (Zhang, 2009). As part of the ruling system, Taixue neither could nor attempted to go beyond the imperial framework. The first nationwide government school system in China was established in 3 C.E. under Emperor Ping of Han, with the Taixue on the top located in the capital of Chang'an (Yuan, 1994). Later, it was replaced by the Guozijian (國子監) as the top level of educational institutions and as the highest organization to oversee national government school system. The development of Taixue and Guozhijian was thus confined to the limited range allowed by Confucian ideologies.

Two key elements of ancient Chinese higher learning were the imperial examination system (科舉) and the academies (書院) (Hayhoe, 1996). The imperial examination was a civil service examination system in imperial China to select candidates for the state bureaucracy. It began to take form around 400 C.E. Taixue gave rise to it during the Sui Dynasty (589-618 C.E.). The system reached its full institutional development in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 C.E.). During the Song (960-1279 C.E.), it crystallized into patterns that were to last right up to 1905. The system shaped China's intellectual, cultural, and political life and helped to unify the empire to an extraordinary extent. As a means of entering the government bureaucracy, it allowed men of humble birth who had ability the possibility of rising to positions of power and influence. The ideal of achievement by merit gave legitimacy to imperial rule. The increased reliance on the exam system contributed to Tang Dynasty's shift from a military aristocracy to a gentry class of scholar-bureaucracy.

The academies emerged in late Tang Dynasty, thrived from Song to Qing Dynasties. They provided a structured learning environment that was separate from yet interacting with state institutions associated with the civil service examination system. They took their definitive forms in the Song Dynasty. Their private nature and freethinking atmosphere are seen by some as essential elements of traditional Chinese higher education (Hayhoe, 1989). However, such features were not maintained. Sitting somewhere between the private and the official, their long historical developments bore a marked brand of ideological and financial control by the government. Initially they focused on exploring Confucianism and personal intellectual cultivation than training government officials, with operation fund mainly from private sources. They became prosperous through winning recognition and financial support from government in Song Dynasty. The government extended its control via donations of books and lands. With gradual loss of independence from the government, the academies reached their peak during

Southern Song, became a major part of government education system, and trained many officials. They were integrated into the government school system from Yuan to Qing Dynasties, from the appointment of lecturers to examinations, admissions and the whereabouts of the students. By Qing Dynasty, their major aim had turned to be preparing for the imperial examination in the hope of winning an official rank (Zhang, 2009).

Chinese higher education has its unique historical roots. By the eighteenth century, China had developed a highly sophisticated set of scholarly values over its 2,000 years of imperial history. Along the Confucian scholarly tradition as advocated by Dong Zhongshu, traditional Chinese higher education lacked an interest in seeking truth. It focused on knowledge of human society, with its central emphasis on connectedness and integration “between theory and practice, fact and value, individual and community, institution and political-social-natural context” (Hayhoe, 2001). Such an approach to scholarship was centered on utility in the terms of the ruling classes. Characterized by close integration within a meritocratic bureaucracy that entrusted governance to those who could demonstrate their knowledge through written examinations, higher learning institutions were loyal servants of the emperor. Higher education was to prepare would-be officials for the state. Higher education institutions were a subsidiary body of the bureaucratic system. They had no attention to go beyond the imperial framework. Even private higher learning institutions set their eye at the imperial examination in the hope of winning an official rank.

China started its higher learning system with a fundamentally different relationship between the state and educational institutions from that of medieval universities, leading to a strong tradition of the alliance between education and politics in Chinese history. Ancient Chinese educational institutions have been far too reliant on their relations with the ruling elites. Modern universities were only established in China according to Western experiences in the late nineteenth-century. Indigenous Chinese highest learning institutions only shared superficial resemblances with medieval universities in Europe. Ancient Chinese rulers controlled scholarship development via education. Education was long treated as a path to the bureaucracy. To those who governed, it was the way to select people for office, while for individuals and families the ultimate goal was always to become an official. Such officialdom-centered education was subsidiary to the government (Han, 2013), taking the form of “A good scholar would make an official” (學而優則仕). The orientation toward officialdom privileged the political function of higher education. Traditional ways of thinking have survived dramatic social and cultural changes in China’s modern history, and their impact on contemporary Chinese higher education remains profound.

This is in stark comparison with medieval universities that were a collection of individuals banded together as a *universitas*. They were autonomous corporations of students and masters governed by internal rules set by the academic community itself and protected from the outset by Pope Gregory IX’s bull. Being self-financing, depending either on their properties or on contributions from students for their income, they were independent institutions governed by their own members, who elected a rector (Mora, 2001). More specifically, a few features distinguished traditional Chinese higher education institutions from their counterparts in Europe: (1) their teaching staff received government salary; (2) they took major classical texts of the Confucian school as their curricular content; (3) their teaching approaches included mainly lectures and self-study. Questions and answers were used only within a range that was limited by their relevance to Confucianism. Reciting Confucian classics was the main learning approach,

and scepticism was generally lacking. The education showed clear signs of what Weber termed as political pragmatism (Hall & Ames, 2003).

### **China's Encounter with the West in Higher Education**

China adopted Western university system in the 1890s. Early Western-styled Chinese universities included Beiyang gongxue (the forerunner of Tianjin University) in 1895, Nanyang gongxue (later Jiaotong University) in 1896, and the Imperial University (Peking University) in 1898 (Hayhoe, 1996, p. 3). Since then, there have been great changes in China's attitude toward Western knowledge. As Samuel Huntington (1995) claimed, culture becomes more relevant in analyzing global issues in the present era of intensified globalization. This is the case to non-Western societies especially in the case China (Yu, 2005). It is even more so in the analysis of China's higher education. China's attitudinal differences between its various historical periods of time and between itself and its neighboring Confucian societies such as Japan and Korea set us thinking.

#### ***Initial Knowledge of Western Universities***

The establishment of modern universities in late nineteenth-century China was much related to the broader eastward spread of Western learning starting symbolically from Matteo Ricci's (利瑪竇, 1552-1610) entry into China in 1582. After some observation in Guangdong, Ricci (1983) found that the most respected people in the Chinese society were scholar-officials (士大夫) who had succeeded in imperial examinations, instead of Buddhist monks as he had previously thought. He also realized that reading materials could penetrate much deeper into many places in China than missionaries could. He decided to find an approach to engage with Confucianism and scholar-officials. Missionaries started to translate a great deal of Western works into Chinese. Among those two pieces by Giulio Aleni<sup>5</sup> (1582-1649) were the first scholarly works on Western universities introduced into China. Such books served as a window for the Chinese to access to a knowledge system that was entirely different from their traditional one. When the Society of Jesus first came to China in the seventeenth century, China was powerful and prosperous with world's best GDP and did not rely on imported commodities. Culturally, it was generally agreed that the Chinese way of thinking was the most sophisticated in the world (Zuo, 2004).

Ricci noticed the deep Sino-centralism which remained strong until it was smashed in the 1860s. He then adopted an approach that built their missionary work strategically upon respect for Chinese culture. By so doing Western knowledge, although in a rather fragmentary way (Tian, 2001, p. 12), was introduced into China. However, the West represented by missionaries was not on the equal footing with the Chinese. It was confined to some geographical areas and to certain Chinese population. Therefore, although information about Western universities was brought into China between Ming and Qing Dynasties, it attracted few Chinese thinkers. Such a mindset continued for another century. For instance, when Ji Yun (紀昀), the editor-in-chief of the *Summary of the Catalogue of Imperial Collection of Four* (四庫全書總目), commented on *Summary of Western Learning* (西學凡)<sup>6</sup> and decided not to include it. After assessing its introduction of knowledge organization and education systems in the West, he remarked that

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<sup>5</sup> The name is often spelled Giulio Aleni. His Chinese name is 艾儒略.

<sup>6</sup> The work was written by Giulio Aleni to systematically introduce literature, philosophy, science, medicine, law, and theology in Europe into China. It was the first to introduce Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas into China.

Western knowledge focused only on practical and technical details with its main interest in the weird rarity, and was thus heretical and unorthodox.<sup>7</sup> Most Chinese intellectuals would rather than not to have good calendars than having Westerners on the Chinese land.<sup>8</sup>

Such blind opposition to everything Western and deep entrenchment in Chinese traditions were tellingly displayed by the meeting between George Macartney (1737-1806) and the Qianlong Emperor (1711-1799) on 14 September 1793. The Chinese ruler declined arrogantly the request from George III of England to trade with China on the basis that “Our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its borders” (Gentzler, 1977).<sup>9</sup> Even after the Opium Wars, still very few Chinese realized the real gap between China and Western powers, with only a handful of exceptions such as Wei Yuan (魏源, 1794-1857) and Xu Jiyu (徐繼畲, 1795-1873). The society showed incredible insularity. Liang Qichao once complained that he looked for a world map for two months at bookshops in Beijing and failed to find one at last. *The Church News* (教會新報, 1868-1874) was founded and sold 494 copies in 1868. It changed into *The Global Magazine* (萬國公報) in 1874 with an annual sale of 1,000. Its sale increased to 4,000 in 1894, 5,000 in 1897, and 38,400 during the Reform Movement of 1898 (Gu, 2005, p. 287).

Books about Western societies did not sell either. Jiangnan Manufacturing Bureau (江南製造局), for instance, printed a series of such books, and sold no more than 13,000 volumes within 30 years with an annual average sale of fewer than 500 volumes. In sharp contrast, Wei Yuan’s *Illustrated Annals of Overseas Countries* had 21 editions in Japan from 1854 to 1856. A book on Western culture by Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) sold 250,000 copies in 1866. Considering China’s population was twelve times larger than the Japanese, such an attitudinal contrast calls for deep thought (Xiao, 2004, p. 7). Another indicator of the attitudinal difference between China and Japan was noted by China’s first ambassador Guo Songtao (郭嵩燾, 1818-1891) when he interacted with his Japanese counterparts in the United Kingdom. He found that unlike China who only sent students to the United Kingdom to study military science, Japan sent its students there to study a wide range of subjects including politics, economics, law, science, education, military science, manufacturing, history, and archeology and museology (Fan, 2002).

With the diffusion of the European model of the university throughout much of the world under conditions of imperialism and colonialism in the nineteenth century, Chinese higher education could have taken the lead in introducing and assimilating advanced culture, science and technology to promote social and economic developments. Instead, due to its exclusivity, Chinese higher education continued to train traditional Confucian scholars with little knowledge of the outside world. Although Western higher education models had already demonstrated their strength, China’s communication with the West was intentionally hindered. Chinese higher education within the period laid stress solely on the training of scholars with an encyclopedic knowledge based on Confucian values, which in practice served only the aristocracy (Yang, 2002). The Confucian scholars acquired the cultivation that symbolized their social status. The need for reforming Chinese traditional education was not widely agreed upon until China’s humiliating defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894.

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<sup>7</sup> The Chinese original is “特所格之物皆器數之末，而所窮之理又支離神怪而不可詰，是所以為異學耳” (Wu, 2002, p. 126).

<sup>8</sup> The original saying in Chinese is “寧可使中國無好曆法，不可使中國有西洋人” (Zhang, 2009, p. 41).

<sup>9</sup> The Chinese original reads “其實天朝德威遠被，萬國來王，種種貴重之物，梯航畢集，無所下有”.

Looking back, a prosperous China during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was exactly what Western countries wanted to trade with. When their request for trade was rejected by the Chinese, Western powers chose wars to force the still isolated China to open its doors leading to violence and unequal treaties. However, the dominant status of Confucianism in Chinese ideological sphere had remained. Associated with it was the strong Sino-centrism which could only be seriously challenged by the late Qing Dynasty when China was in a crisis of survival. Gradually, more Chinese came to realize the critical role of universities in nation-building and educational structure in Europe and Japan. To facilitate higher education reforms, missionaries increased their content on Western universities.<sup>10</sup> Feng Guifen (馮桂芬, 1809-1874), Guo Songtao, Wang Tao (王韜, 1828-1897), Xue Fucheng (薛福成, 1838-1894) and Ma Jianzhong (馬建忠, 1845-1900) followed Western universities with interest. Their observation, however, stopped at the surface of Western universities, without delving deep into their ideas and spirits. Those introducing Western universities into China also changed from missionaries initially to the Chinese intellectuals who had chances to be overseas. Knowledge of Western universities was part of the process of China's importing Western learning and its forced opening to the world in a superficial, fragmentary and passive manner.

### *The German Influence via Cai Yuanpei*

China's humiliating defeat in the war against Japan in 1894 shocked the entire nation (Liang, 1954, p. 133).<sup>11</sup> The debate now went beyond Western modernization and Chinese traditions. Thirty years ago, both China and Japan were forced to manage their traditions and modernity. The Meiji Restoration (1860s-1880s) in Japan and the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1895) in China were featured respectively by "Japanese spirit combined with Western learning" (和魂洋才) and "Chinese body (ideology) and Western use (technology)" (中體西用) had shown strikingly different results. Schools rather than soldiers were widely seen as the reason for China's loss in the war. Those with an open mind reflected on China's attitude toward Western social and knowledge systems. Understanding the West began to move from material level to institutional and even value layers. While most Chinese influential thinkers at the time agreed that China needed to go beyond mere Western technology, they believed that learning from the West should be done within the framework of Chinese cultural traditions. The Chinese body-Western use schema was their favorite. Even radical reformers such as Tan Sitong (譚嗣同, 1865-1898) based his interpretation of Western learning on Chinese learning (Wang, 2009). Yan Fu (嚴復, 1854-1921), however, criticized the dominant mindset strongly. He remarked:

Substance (body) and function (use) are two aspects of the same thing. The body of an ox has the function to carry a load; the body of a horse has the function of long-distance racing. I never heard that one took ox's body and horse's function. Chinese Learning and Western Learning are not homogenous, just like the difference of the appearance between Chinese and Westerners. We cannot force their resemblance. Therefore, Chinese Learning as well as Western Learning

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<sup>10</sup> Such as Ernst Friedrich Ludwig Faber (1839-1899), Timothy Richard (1845-1919), William Alexander Parsons Martin (1827-1916) and Young John Allen (1836-1907)

<sup>11</sup> Liang's original was "喚起吾國四千年之大夢，實自甲午一役始也".



owns its proper substance and function. Their division allows their coexistence and a union of two leads to their mutual disappearing (Yan, 1986, pp. 558-559).<sup>12</sup>

Although Yan's seminal view was unfairly little noticed, education became hotly debated. Some Chinese thinkers, including Xue Fucheng, Zheng Guanying (鄭觀應, 1842-1922), Kang Youwei (康有為, 1858-1927) and even senior officials like Zhang Zhidong (張之洞, 1837-1909) and Liu Kunyi (劉坤一, 1830-1902), turned their attention to Western universities. Echoing Yan Fu and Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873-1929), they began to pay more attention to Western social institutions. At first, British universities attracted much attention (Cheung & Fan, 2009). Soon German experience was noticed. Starting with the University of Berlin founded in 1810 the 'Humboldtian' university became a model for the rest of Europe. By 1914 German universities were generally admired as the best in the world. With an awareness of the social role of and a nationwide zeal for education, the Chinese thinkers became more interested in German universities which were featured by Wilhelm von Humboldt's concept of a university (Scott, 1959). They were particularly fascinated by the role German universities played in the fact that Germany came from behind to win its war against Napoleon's France. Among them was Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培, 1868-1940) who believed strongly in education's role in training new people for China's survival.

At the age of 22, Cai earned his title of *jinsi* (進士) and became a member of the Hanlin Academy (翰林院), the highest honor accorded to a scholar in feudal China. Like many pioneering thinkers at his time, Cai realized Germany's educational success. However, compared with those who had already succeeded in the Chinese system, Cai was almost the only exception to give up his fame and comfort to travel to Qingdao to learn the German language and then travel overseas to study at the age of 40 (Kang, 1985, p. 15). His determined decision was based on his appreciation of the reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt in Prussia. While he was similarly attracted by the critical role of universities in Germany's nation-building, his exploration of Western universities had moved beyond technical and organizational levels. He delved deeper than his contemporaries to understand the visible and invisible socio-cultural conditions for German universities to succeed. This included knowledge pursued 'for its own sake' and how Germany intellectuals differed from their Chinese counterparts. Even before he arrived in Germany, he had realized the huge differences between Chinese traditional higher institutions and Western universities, although arguably it was difficult for him to theorize such differences at that stage. Therefore, he declined an offer by the government to study in Japan, and decided to go to Germany at his own expense (Gao, 1984).

Cai enrolled in Leipzig University and took courses in a wide range of subjects including philosophy, aesthetics, anthropology and psychology. While he was studying in Germany, he frequently published in China introducing what he had learned to Chinese audience. His work contributed to broadening research scope in China to institutional development of a university and the classical European idea of a university. For Cai Yuanpei, selecting the German model was highly rational. For China's history of higher education, it was fortunately accidental. Assuming Cai had chosen Newman's idea of a university, his historical impact would have been very different. Although Newman believed that knowledge should be pursued 'for its own sake,'

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<sup>12</sup> The original goes: “體用者，即一物而言之也。有牛之體，則有負重之用；有馬之體，則有致遠之用。未聞以牛為體，以馬為用者也。中西學之為異也，如其種人之面目然，不可強謂似也。故中學有中學之體用，西學有西學之體用，分之則並立，合之則兩亡。

he did not mean pure research (Anderson, 2010). For Newman, the search for truth was part of an educational ideal which shaped the personality of the cultivated man, and was inseparable from moral and religious education. While knowledge for knowledge's sake was absent in the Chinese tradition, Newman's ideal was somewhat similar to those held by Confucian scholars,<sup>13</sup> in terms of both educational purpose and to some extent approaches to learning and teaching.

Cai's contribution was substantial. He remade Chinese universities starting from the transformation of the idea of a university, especially from the status of pure research based on curiosity. To the officialdom-oriented traditional Chinese higher learning, this was revolutionary. The idea of a university in which teaching and research were combined in the search for impartial truth reached classic form in nineteenth-century Germany and eventually became the dominant model (Mora, 2001). The Humboldtian model shaped the research universities of the United States, which head the international league today. Other features of the model included intellectual freedom in research and teaching, university autonomy, the growth of independent disciplines with their own standards and priorities, and internationalism (Anderson, 2010). Cai's efforts introduced China's higher education onto the correct track, and therefore made a great impact on its later development. Due to his advocacy, within a relatively short period of time the central Humboldtian principle that lay at the 'union of teaching and research' in the work of the individual scholar or scientist and the function of the university to advance knowledge by original and critical investigation became widely respected in the Chinese higher education circle (Gao, 1984).

Cai Yuanpei's extraordinary legacy in China's modern higher education is more due to his practice modelled on the German experience. Believing that education was the only way to rejuvenate China (Cai, 1997), he made courageous experiment when he was appointed Minister of Education by the government in 1911 and Chancellor of Peking University in 1917. His momentous years transformed the university from an official institution of the Qing Dynasty, already rotten in thought and action despite the fact it had been established only recently, into a modern institution (Yang, 2009). At Peking University, he strongly advocated free thinking principles and an all-embracing approach. His efforts focused mainly on typifying the transformation of Chinese education from ancient to modern form, giving expression to conflicts and integration between traditional and modern, and remolding Peking University into a Western-model institution. He attempted to combine the Chinese educational spirit, especially Confucian and Mohist character building, with Western systems. His success as a leader of a university was unprecedented and still without parallel nearly a century later. John Dewey set a higher value on his remarkable leadership in comparison with the presidents of the most prestigious American and British universities (Feng, 1996). Cai was joined by a few like-minded others including his successor Hu Shi (胡適), Mei Yiqi (梅貽琦, president of Tsinghua University) and Zhu Kezhen (竺可楨, president of Zhejiang University). However, none of the followers could achieve as highly.

### ***The American Influence since the 1920s***

The introduction of the German idea of a university was, although highly influential, limited to Cai Yuanpei and Peking University. Overall, modern Chinese universities were much more

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, the purpose of education in the Confucian tradition was beautifully expressed by Zhang Zai (1020-1077), a Chinese Neo-Confucian moral philosopher, as "Make a mind for Heaven and Earth, set up the Tao for human beings, restore the lost teachings of the past sages, and build a peaceful world for all future generations" (為天地立心，為生民立命，為往聖繼絕學，為萬世開太平).

influenced by American experience, while various Western academic models have all exerted their impact on selected Chinese universities mainly via missionary links (Hayhoe, 1989). It has been generally agreed that the significance of American impact was a combined effect of a number of factors: returnees sent to the United States on “Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program” (庚子賠款獎學金) who held positions of influence in educational administration and universities upon their return; visits to China by prominent American educators such as John Dewey (1859-1952) and Paul Monroe (1869-1947); large amount of publications advocating the American experience; rise of the American-styled Central University (中央大學) after the Nationalist government’s decision on Nanjing as capital; and the American growing influence in global affairs after WWI. While such factors all had their role, a fundamental reason is the misperceived correspondence of pragmatism in Chinese and American cultures.

The United States was the first country for the Chinese government to send students to. During 1872-1875, 120 young Chinese students were sent. In 1906, when the then President of the University of Illinois, Edmund James James (1855-1925) saw large numbers of Chinese studying in Japan, he wrote to President Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) proposing a plan to establish scholarships for Chinese students to come to the United States, later known as the “Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program”.<sup>14</sup> His suggestion was adopted. During 1909-1929, at least 1,800 Chinese students were on the scholarship to study in the United States. They held became influential in various positions after they returned, and brought with them American experience of higher education development. They advocated American higher education mainly via scholarly works, professional associations, and university management. Their promotion of American higher education focused much on introducing American experience at practical level, with little on the idea of a university. Most commentators observed the ‘contrasting differences’ between American and European higher education, considering the former to be ‘practical’ while the latter ‘theoretical’.<sup>15</sup>

Seeing the American higher education as entirely pragmatically oriented and thus to locating American higher education in opposite position to the European classical idea of a university is indeed misleading. Most of those in the then Chinese higher education circle, even many of them with substantial study and living experience in the United States, failed to understand the essence of the highly diversified American higher education system consisting of Ivy League institutions, state universities and communities colleges as well as liberal arts colleges. Their perception had much to do with China’s strong tradition and an extended long history of pragmatism (Jiang, 2006). Confucianism was only interested in the human world (Li, 1999).<sup>16</sup> The ontological status of knowledge in the classical idea of a university has always been lacking in the Chinese tradition.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the Chinese pragmatism that conflicts almost squarely with the tradition

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<sup>14</sup> In his letter, James noted: “China is upon the verge of a revolution... The nation which succeeds in educating the young Chinese of the present generation will be the nation which for a given expenditure of effort will reap the largest possible returns in moral, intellectual and commercial influence (Timmins, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Relatively, Meng Xiancheng’s (孟憲承, 1933, p. 7) analysis was more accurate. He posited that American universities had successfully integrated British liberal college education with German universities.

<sup>16</sup> When commenting on Han Fei (韓非, c.280-233 B.C.), Li Zehou (1999) says: “這種知識在韓非子看來比知識本身更重要，也就是後人講的‘世事洞明皆學問，人情練達即文章’”(p.107).

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Jiang (2006, p. 279) made the following comments on why China failed to develop modern science: “我們不像希臘人那樣肯在原理原則上探討，也不像現代歐洲人那樣設法從個別的發現中歸納出普遍的定律。中國人一旦達到一件新發明的實用目的，就會止步不前。因此中國科學的發展是孤立無援的，也沒有科學思想足以導向的明燈。科學發展在中國停滯不進，就是因為我們太重實際”。

of knowledge for knowledge's sake in classical European idea of a university, the American pragmatism builds itself on the classical European tradition. The seemingly resemblance in American and Chinese societies led to misinterpretation of American higher education in China.

Another contributing factor to the spread of American influence was the dramatic increase of visitors between the two nations during the 1910s-1920s (Luo, 1919). To search for guidance, Chinese educators and officials including Liang Qichao, Huang Yanpei (黃炎培, 1878-1965) and Cai Yuanpei frequently visited the United States. From the American side, the then president of Harvard University Charles William Eliot (1834-1926) visited China in 1913 and delivered a series of talks. Thomas Henry Powers Sailer from Columbia University was invited by Jiangsu province to speak on his comparisons of education in China and in the world. Similarly, Chinese organizations and universities invited speakers from the United States. Amadeus William Grabau (1870-1946), for example, was invited by Peking University to speak on the future of China's science. The most influential American visitors, as noted above, were Dewey and Monroe. These exchanges provided Chinese people with more and easier access to American practice in higher education. The Chinese circle noticed quickly the practical aspect of American higher education, without truly understanding its inherent linkage to the tradition of knowledge for knowledge's sake in the classical European idea of a university.

American influence was clearly expressed in the educational legislations made during the Republican government (1912-1949) (Hayhoe, 1989). Under its influence, major shifts were also evident in Chinese universities including applied academic programs and research, board of trustees and presidential authority, credit system, and professional schools. American influence was also highly visible on many campuses, including Peking University which had previously been modelled on German experience. According to a survey in 1933, 54 (42%) of Peking University's 128 faculty members graduated from American universities, while 31 (24%) had Japanese degrees and 27 (21%) had studied in Germany and France (Zhang, 2009, p. 255). Universities presidents overwhelmingly obtained their highest degrees from the United States, including Jiang Menglin (蔣夢麟) and Hu Shi (Peking University), Guo Binwen (郭秉文) (Southeast University), Zhang Boling (張伯苓) (Nankai University), Lei Peihong (雷沛鴻) (Guangxi University), Deng Cuiying (鄧萃英) and Li Jianxun (李建勳) (Beijing Advanced Teachers' College), Ren Hongjun (任鴻雋) (Sichuan University), Mei Yiqi and Luo Jialun (羅家倫) (Tsinghua University), and Zhu Kezhen (Zhejiang University).

There were some Chinese who criticized the American system for its over-focus on practical and applied training and the corresponding neglect of social, cultural and moral education of individuals. Some of the critics graduated from American universities. Prominent commentators included Luo Jialun, Liu Boming (劉伯明), Hu Xiansu (胡先驌), Hu Shi, and Pan Guangdan (潘光旦). However, no matter for or against the perceived American model of higher education, few of them could understand the US higher education accurately. In comparison, Zhu Kezhen had a much better grasp of the American experience. He realized the link between the classical European idea of a university and American higher education. During his presidency at Zhejiang University, he endeavored to put such educational ideal into practice (Zhu, 2004).

After China's imitation of Soviet patterns in the 1950s and the higher education disasters in the 1960s and the 1970s due to domestic political turbulences,<sup>18</sup> Chinese universities now look to the most elite American counterparts for standards, policy innovation and solutions to their own

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<sup>18</sup> Ruth Hayhoe (1989) rightfully points out that "For China, Soviet model of the university was as much as a "Western model" as had been the American and European patterns introduced at earlier periods" (p. 52).

development problems. Most of the international models for reform used by Chinese universities are based on the American experience and gained through educational exchange. This is particularly the case for the most prestigious universities. For example, the proposed personnel reform at Peking University was based almost entirely on the perceived US experience (Yang, 2009), while the grafting of American policies onto Chinese university structure has not always been built on sound understanding of the cultural differences involved (Mohrman, 2008). Like other reformers at Peking University such as Min Weifang (2004) who cited almost exclusively Harvard and Stanford Universities to legitimize their policy moves and stated repeatedly that US higher education was the best in the world, Zhang Weiyang (2004) borrowed the American practice to argue for his reform measures at Peking University. However, arguably the Chinese still have not grasped the essence of the American model. American pragmatism has been measured by China's traditional yardstick, while the classical European idea of a university is sifted through the Chinese chink.

### **End Remarks**

Chinese higher education has its distinctive historical roots. Throughout the modern era, Western and Chinese learning have contended for hegemony. Modern universities were established based mainly on Western experiences. The consequential reality is always a combined effect of both forces as Hawkins (2015) has consistently argued. Yet, the reality has rarely been built upon an integration of both traditions. A major task for China's modern higher education has thus been to combine Chinese and Western elements to bring together aspects of both philosophical heritages. This, however, has not been achieved. The essence of Western civilization has been much lacking. As a result, the spirit of the Western concept of a university has not been well implemented. For the Chinese, the emphasis has always been on use, with corresponding ignorance of body. This seemed even more natural when China was pressured by Western ships and armament. The development of Chinese modern universities has been confronted with the absence of both classical and modern ideas of a university. While Chinese longstanding traditions never attempted to seek the ontological significance of knowledge, practical demands, consciously and unconsciously, have always been the highest priority.

This was why Cai Yuanpei's success at Peking University was short-lived. Indeed, his success was largely because of his most senior status within the ruling party as one of the founders and his personal relationship with the highest officials. He failed to create a mechanism to delink university operation from the government. His successful stories could hardly be replicated by others. Since then, government control over universities has become even tighter. The conflict between traditional Chinese emphasis on political pragmatism and the classical persistence in ontological significance of knowledge from the West was never blended well. The ideal to integrate Chinese and Western ideas was never materialized. Dominated by a mentality of catching up since the nineteenth century, the search for such integration has been, consciously and unconsciously, left aside and overshadowed by urgent practical demands. Although there have been repeated attempts to indigenize the Western idea of a university (Yang, 2013), the classical Western idea of a university has never taken roots in the Chinese society. Consequently, the long-desired institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and independence of intellectuals cannot be fulfilled. Instead, misconducts are rampant, institutions are an organ of the government, and academics are either a hanger-on of high officials or unmindful of their duties (Ren, 2011).

All of the universities in the world today, with the partial exception of the Al-Azhar University in Cairo, stem from the same historical roots, the medieval European university and

especially the faculty-dominated University of Paris (Altbach, 2004, p. 4). Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are their definitive scholarly values. Although such values are essential ingredients of the workings of the university, they have been absent in the Chinese tradition. Chinese universities have not yet figured out how to wed the standard norms of Western higher education with their traditional values. China's modern universities are based institutionally on Western cultural values that are fundamentally different from the Chinese traditions. The strikingly differences between the two value systems have led to cultural conflicts. China has its institutional establishments based on Western values and another less formal yet powerful system supported by traditional culture. The two systems do not always support each other. Instead, constant tensions between them reduce the efficiency of university operation. In a context of dominant Western models (Jaschik, 2011), the coexistence of two powerful value systems is an extremely tough challenge for China. China's strong traditions in higher learning have long been a negative asset in the development of modern Chinese higher education system. Only when their function is turned to be positive, can Chinese higher education lead in the world.

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