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## **Learning from others: Japan's role in bringing psychology to China**

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## **Learning from others: Japan's role in bringing psychology to China**

### **Abstract**

Recent research by Chinese and Japanese historians of psychology and education suggests that it was educational reformers' copying of Japan's education system in the first decade of the twentieth century that provided the context for modern psychology in China to develop. Psychology, although not well understood by educationalists, was thought to be useful to teacher training. In 1902 Japanese psychology teachers came to China and some textbooks were translated. Chinese students studying in Japan also brought back psychological knowledge in translations. However, the attraction to Japan declined after 1906. As the United States opened new universities and provided opportunities for Chinese students to study in America, that country became a more attractive option for later generations who saw psychology become established as a separate discipline.

### **Learning from others: Japan's role in bringing psychology to China**

At the turn of the last century, 'psychology,' as understood in its modern western sense, was non-existent in China. Ideas about humanity, development, and appropriate forms of conduct had a long tradition in Chinese philosophy, from the time of Confucius, Mencius, Lao Tzi, and on. But, unlike their counterparts in the west, Chinese philosophers had not made a special study of problems in the relationship of mind to body, nor, therefore, sought an empirical analysis of them against a background of European Enlightenment science. To the extent that these ideas were of interest or value to the Chinese, they were imported through translations.

The earliest translations of western books including those devoted to psychology were brought into China initially by Church sponsored institutions. Teaching about the mind was thought to be useful in answering questions about what constituted a "healthy" mind and good conduct. The earliest psychology text – Y. K. Yen's translation of Joseph Haven's *Mental Philosophy* – appeared in 1899. However it was not until 1917 that the first psychology laboratory opened in Peking; and the first psychology department in 1921 (e.g., Ching, 1980; Kodama, 1991; Lee and Petzold, 1987; Pan, Chen, Wang and Chen, 1980). These developments occurred because Chinese students educated abroad, mainly in America, returned and became the country's pioneering psychologists. To this

day there are not many fully-fledged psychology departments but psychology is taught as an adjunct to education in many teacher colleges.

This latter point cannot be too strongly emphasized. As Chinese and Japanese historians of psychology and education have shown, psychology was being taught in China and to many Chinese students studying abroad long before it became an independent university discipline (e.g. Abe, 1987; Gao, Yin and Yang, 1985, Saneto, 1981; Zhou, 1992). What made this possible was the introduction of a system of compulsory education and the formation of teachers training colleges, or normal universities. This system was derived from the Japanese model, and consequently the earliest psychology coming into China was strongly influenced by the kind of psychology being taught in Japan.

This system did not come easily. Modern, that is to say, western schools were introduced after the second Opium War of 1860 when Government officials, for pragmatic reasons, felt the country needed strengthening in military and technical skills in order to cope with western incursions. This led to the formation of the *Tongwenguan* – the Government schools for learning foreign languages and customs -- in Peking, Shanghai and Canton, as well various military, technical and language schools in other regions. The students of these schools were taught special skills, but their education did not significantly encroach upon the traditional system whereby a privileged minority entered preparatory schools for the government's civil service examinations. But following its defeat by Japan in the first Sino-Japanese war in 1895, China gave

serious consideration to introducing a modern education system along the lines of the reforms introduced earlier into Japan following the Meiji restoration in 1868. This was to involve a form of compulsory education for a specified number of years, a de-emphasis on educating an elite for government service, the formation of an Imperial University in Peking, a National Bureau of Translation, and opportunities for large numbers of Chinese to study overseas.

Although these reforms were thwarted by a coup effected by the Empress Dowager in 1899, the crushing of the Boxer Uprising that same year by foreign powers occupying Peking made it even more pressing that they be enacted. As if further encouragement were necessary, the success of Japan in its war against Russia in 1904 made it clear to a China short of international bargaining power that it was in need of emulating the modernization of its militarily stronger opponent. It sought to strengthen the nation by massive educational reform. "Strengthening" was a commonly applied term in educational discourse at this time. Often expressed as the *ti-yong* idea, the understanding derived from the juxtaposing of two Chinese characters, *ti* ["essence"] and *yong* ["utility"] signifying an emphasis on adherence to traditional Chinese learning as a foundation, while using western learning for practical and technical development. As Spence (1990) says, this "reaffirmed that there was indeed a fundamental structure of Chinese moral and philosophical values that gave continuity and meaning to the civilization. Holding on to the belief, China could

then afford to adopt quickly and dramatically all sorts of Western practices and to hire western advisers" (p.225).

In 1904 the education reformer, Zhang Zhidong<sup>1</sup>, brought into place a set of School Regulations [*Zouding xuetang zhangcheng*] that ensured 21 years of education modeled on the Japanese system. This included six or seven of higher education into which the normal schools were incorporated. Teacher education rounded out graduate training, and helped to provide large numbers of suitably trained teachers for this newly created system. Psychology, now seen as an applied discipline, was thought useful in unspecified ways to teaching and learning, and became part of that curriculum.

One of the earliest and more significant teacher-educators was the polymath and translator, Wang Guowei. Wang had interests in philosophy, mathematics, literature and psychology and taught in several teachers colleges. His motive for translating psychology texts, seemingly, was born out of his desire to be a better teacher (Hsiao Ai, 1983, cited in Zhou, 1992).

In 1907 he translated Harold Hoffding's *Outlines of psychology*, which was popular in Japan at that time and was based on the 1891 English translation by Lowndes. In that first decade Wundt dominated the Japanese psychological scene and Hoffding's description of psychology as the science of mind, the basis for which was what "inner observation of our own consciousness teaches us" (1891, p.12) was in accord with this. The *Outlines* ran through ten editions in Chinese translation till 1935 and was enormously influential as a basic text. In

1910 Wang also translated from the Japanese the Swiss psychologist Eduoard Claparede's *Experimental pedagogy and the psychology of the child* (itself based upon an English translation by Mary Louch and Henry Holman). It combined psychological theory with practical examples in the classroom of how to apply the theory. It is especially noteworthy that Claparede, in his introduction, takes issue with James' critique in his *Talks to Teachers* of teachers becoming psychologically sophisticated, while extolling the value of Stanley Hall's experimental studies of children. Although some of James's psychological work was known in Japan (much less so in China)<sup>2</sup> it did not have the impact of Wundt. This may have contributed to both countries' preferences for experimental studies, and in continuing to see value in innovative teaching based upon sound psychological principles of development. Wang's terminology followed that of his Japanese translators. Aware of the limitations of the Chinese language for translating new concepts (the language had yet to undergo its modern reshaping whereby it represented most concepts in dyadic -- two character -- form), he was especially impressed by the Japanese habit of using several characters to represent a concept.

Wang was an exemplary teacher. But the expansion of the universities to accommodate intensive teacher training created a temporary shortage of those suitably qualified. It was also insufficiently accommodating to the growing numbers of applicants seeking places under the reforms. Japan cooperated in helping to meet both demands. It allowed large numbers of Chinese students to

enter its own universities. It also supplied teachers to the China universities and throughout the various levels of the school system, many of whom were serving in universities and schools in Japan. At its peak in 1905, 500-600 Japanese teachers were employed in China's schools, universities and military academies. Something like 7000-8000 China students were studying in Japan, most of them in programs of intensive teacher training, in which psychology would have been part of the curriculum (Abe, 1987).

As already mentioned, this psychology was essentially Wundtian in outlook. During the late Meiji period Japanese intellectuals leaned towards German learning especially in the psychological and psychiatric fields. But as hostilities between the two countries emerged in the advent of the Great War, many prospective students who might otherwise have gone to a German university for their postgraduate education headed to the America. The first psychologist in Japan, Motora Yujiro, had been a student of G. Stanley Hall. Motora's psychophysics laboratory, the first in Asia, was built in 1903. His own student, Matsumoto Matataro, had gone on to get a degree under Edward Scripture at Yale and subsequently studied under Wundt. Matsumoto succeeded his mentor as professor of psychology at the Imperial University in Tokyo.

In 1902 the Imperial University of Peking reopened with a newly added normal school for intensive teacher training, in compliance with the educational reforms. The sinologist, Hattori Unokichi, who was teaching at the Liberal Arts College of Tokyo, was invited to be its associate dean. He assumed this position



for 7 years and led a team of 9 Japanese teachers. He was the first Japanese to lecture on psychology in China, and a copy of his lectures, translated by his assistant, later chancellor, Fan Yuanlian, exists in a threadbound printed form to this day (Hattori, 1902). They contain a summary and chapters divided into the theory and function of cognition [*zhi*], emotion [*qing*] and will [*yi*]. Hattori also made use of Chinese classical sayings to illustrate psychological phenomena. For example, in drawing a distinction between sensation and attention, he cites the philosopher, Daxue, “If your mind is not there, you see nothing despite the fact you are looking; you hear nothing despite the fact that you are listening. You taste nothing despite the fact you are eating”. By combining western psychological science of the day with the sayings of the Ancients, Hattori’s book exemplified the Chinese *ti-yong* idea, mentioned earlier, of assimilating modern knowledge to traditional wisdom.

A number of Japanese psychology books were translated into Chinese in the first decade of the twentieth century. Many stressed a link to education. The first of these to appear in 1903 was Kubota Sadanori’s *Xinli jiaoyuxue* [Pedagogical Psychology], which applied basic western theory to problems of learning. It included chapters on the mind-body relationship, memory, and attention, as well as certain specific functions or “abilities” (to summarize, make decisions, and generate hypotheses). Another was Ohse Jintaro and Tachigara Noritoshi’s *Xinlixue jiaokeshu* [Textbook of Psychology]. Defining psychology as the “science of the study of mental phenomena,” the text offered comprehensive

coverage of a broad range of fields including research methods and a basic physiological knowledge of the nervous system. There was also a discussion of the relationship between general psychology and the nurturing and educating of children (Zhou, 1992).

Chinese students studying in Japan provided another route whereby psychological ideas could be brought into the country. While recovering from an illness, the student Chen Huang set about compiling Japanese articles on psychology. Although not a student of the subject, he was led to read and translate what interested him. A collection of his work appeared in 1905 as *Xinli Yijie* [Psychology Made Easy] under his pen name Leshu. It was published in Tokyo by the *Qingguo Liuxueshen Huiguan* [Qing student's Guildhall] a student-formed organization engaged in editing and translating works for distribution in China. It was by way of being an introductory text, not elaborate in either its descriptions of theory or its application of technical terms, but was easy to comprehend. Chen, clearly influenced by the Wundtian psychology he was reading, wrote approvingly in his introduction, of psychology developing into "spiritual physics" (Gao et al, 1985, p.345) as scholars adopted that subjects' experimental methods. He also introduced Ebbinghaus's experiments on memory.

From this time on, Japan's role in bringing psychology to China began to wane. There were several reasons for this. There was concern about the falling quality of returning students doing more poorly in the civil service examinations.

This led to a raising of the educational requirements of those who were eligible to go in the first place. Because the Japanese educational authorities encouraged a shift away from short-term intensive courses, fewer China students could afford to go. In China there were occasional problems with the quality of some of the Japanese teachers, some of whom had become unemployable after a 1902 textbook scandal in Japan in which many people in the educational administration had been accused of accepting bribes from publishers. But perhaps the most significant factor was the rise of the United States influence in Chinese education. Protestant missionaries had come and opened new universities. The U.S. deployed some of its moneys from the Boxer Indemnity to finance Qinghua College and to instigate a scheme to enable Chinese students to study in America. As Abe concluded, "The political and social confusion following the revolution of 1911 brought an end to the era of Japan's contributions to Chinese education". (p. 80).

However, the link of psychology to education was not to be broken. To this day, translation of western texts continues with a greater emphasis on those from the United States. Even though only about a dozen universities in China teach psychology as an independent discipline, its use there in teacher education, begun at the turn of the century after the Japan model, is widespread and popular.

## Notes

1. Following convention the family name appears first in all Chinese and Japanese names appearing in this article.
2. To this day no complete Chinese translation of James's *Principles of Psychology* has been published.

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