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Democracy education

The radical teaching, learning, and doing of Tao Xingzhi

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The apex of China's 1911 Republican Revolution, the election in Nanjing of native son Dr. Sun Yat-sen, heralded an historic break with autocracy. Tragically, Sun Yat-Sen's democracy did not last long. A bitter period of feudal strife followed as warlords sought to carve fiefdoms out of the young republic. Humiliating concessions to Japan under the Versailles Treaty added to the new republic's problems. Continuing violation of China's sovereignty spawned the May 4th, 1919 student movement in Peking. Reverberations from May 4th helped launch a small communist party cell in Shanghai and a larger democracy movement across the country.

Trenchant feudalism, aspiring nationalism, and revolutionary communism together serve as the spectacular backdrop to progressive education reform and the journey of a public education missionary named Tao Xingzhi. Born to Christian parents, Tao Xingzhi would move from humble beginnings into the world of the Western-educated elite and would be both revered as a national hero and reviled as a dissident. At one of the pivotal turning points in his adult life, Tao Xingzhi donned the robes of a traditional peasant and, in the highly contested space between budding democracy and revolutionary communism, set out to preach to the common people the values of progressivism. Unwaveringly, with humility and pragmatism, his goal was simply to remake Chinese society through education, to develop "the union of teaching, learning and doing."

Life education

I approach this research with some background in education under communism, having received a diploma for an independent study in Cuba: The Stages of Education and Revolution. Over several trips and during an extended stay in Havana, I became interested in the work of the Cuban revolutionary educator, Raúl Ferrer. Only later did I come across the subject of this study, the equally revolutionary educator from China, Tao Xingzhi.

My journey to China began with the International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies (IAACS) in 2003, and continued with the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) in 2004 (where I presented a paper, “Classrooms with and without walls” . . . and met my future wife, a Chinese English teacher). Then in 2005, I returned again to China, discussing the No Child Left Behind act at the International Conference on Teacher Education at East China Normal University in Shanghai.

In 2010, my family and I spent my sabbatical visiting our Chinese family, several of whom are teachers. I spent many joyful hours observing classrooms in Chifeng Middle School #8, Huai’rou Middle School #1 and #2, and middle and elementary schools in Qingdao. I had the opportunity to interview several teachers and principals from these schools, and learned that too much homework was a significant problem. In contrast (arguably) with American education, truancy and tardiness were not.

Upon returning to the states, I came across the fascinating story of Tao Xingzhi, a “student of Dewey,” told by Wang Wejia and Zhang Kaiyuan in David Hansen’s *Ethical visions of education: Philosophies in practice* (2007). Having read several books on Chinese philosophy while living in China, I wondered why Tao Xingzhi had not featured prominently in Chinese curricular texts.

On one occasion several of our Chinese friends, teachers hailing from my wife’s university in Huai’rou, visited our local college in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Most were unaware of Tao Xingzhi or his impact, yet one Chinese faculty member shared that he did indeed believe Tao Xingzhi to be a person of great importance. On his return to China, this teacher graciously forwarded to me a book of letters entitled *Tao Xingzhi Educational Collection*. Upon receiving the book, I set about to do translation work with my wife and a Chinese colleague from my own university. I also made contact with a scholar in Beijing to discuss in teleconference sessions some of the implications of Tao Xingzhi’s work.

Over the next few years, I was pleased to locate other English versions on Tao Xingzhi to compare and contrast with the Chinese text that had been provided to me: a non-Mandarin speaker and reader. Texts by Yao Yusheng entitled “The making of a national hero: Tao Xingzhi’s legacies in the People’s Republic of China” in the *Review of education, pedagogy, and cultural studies* and a few others, notably by Hubert Brown, Cong Xiaoping, and Philip A. Kuhn, provided a rich context for this translation work. I appreciated learning about Tao from both the English biographies and the Mandarin original letters, Tao’s own words. Still I wondered, who was this vague historical figure, unnoticed by some and yet to others a national hero?

Who was Tao Xingzhi?

Knowing education . . . is life education. Life education exists in the life world where humans can feel it: the purpose of life is the purpose of education. Tao Xingzhi

To study the work of the Chinese practitioner Tao Xingzhi is to cross a footbridge from East to West, West to East, and East to West again. Born in 1891 to poor peasants¹ in Huang Tan Yuan, Anhui Province, he was first schooled in Confucianism, thoroughly memorizing the Analects and other traditional texts. This schooling was followed shortly² thereafter by attendance at a private religious school, where he would have a more differentiated curriculum. Biographers note the significance that Tao Xingzhi himself ascribed to his taking of the name “Xingzhi” which means doing precedes knowing. Tao Xingzhi could scarcely imagine at the time how these early experiences would relate to his lifetime achievement: raising awareness of China’s educational level, and working toward meeting the educational goals required of a modern nation-state.

In 1913, when many in China felt the nation to be lagging behind the others, Tao Xingzhi started up a newspaper, *JingLing Light*, in order to help enlighten China based on modern findings in psychology. Tao Xingzhi claimed (consistent with his educated peers of the time) that the spirit of a republic is freedom, fraternity, equality and love. Subsequently, he and his generation looked with introspection deep inside the country and found new answers by traveling abroad and trying on the lens of the other; his travels culminated in engaging in doctoral study with the American philosopher John Dewey. Tao Xingzhi’s study occurred during a turbulent time inside of mainland China, amidst a breakdown in civil order, with feudal warlords ravaging the land. This led Tao Xingzhi to constantly imagine and reimagine a new China and a better world.

Graduate study inspired Tao Xingzhi to place his skills, steadfast vision and eloquent words into deeds. Tao Xingzhi’s work in creating a new alphabet, co-launching (with James Wen) a massive literacy campaign, and managing an experimental school anticipated the great mass education struggles to come. These included the Kuomintang’s efforts toward nationalization and militarization in order to liberate the country from Japan (Tao Xingzhi played a role) as well as the long march and the consciousness-raising that would enable the Communist Party to mold a citizenry out of the Chinese rural proletariat (similar to Tao Xingzhi’s democracy education campaigns).

Given the educational scholars who have examined the historical period in which Tao Xingzhi lived, several compelling but also divergent stories emerge concerning this influential figure’s role. Xiaoping Cong, a contemporary Sino-American historian identifies a few authors who use different historical frames: Philip A. Kuhn, Barry Keenan and Yusheng Yao. Keenan wrote a detailed, arguably definitive, account of John Dewey’s tour of China. Kuhn and Yao wrote about the Columbia-educated, Chinese students of Dewey, a story in which Tao Xingzhi played a considerable part. Cong describes their differing depictions of Tao Xingzhi:

Kuhn believes that Tao adopted Dewey’s idea [society is school] but radicalized it to meet the needs of the social environment of 1920s Chinese society. Keenan describes Tao’s experiment as an effort to realize American democratic principles: if Dewey’s pedagogic precepts were not followed to the letter, this was because of the need to modify them to suit the social conditions

of 1920s China. Yusheng Yao put Tao into the intellectual context of the 1920s, highlighting the influence of Marxism and anarchism on Tao's form of educational radicalism. (Xiaoping, 2007)

Yet Hubert Brown takes a decidedly different view of Tao Xingzhi and takes some issue with the research that suggests a strong scholarly alignment between Tao Xingzhi and Dewey, as well as questioning whether Tao Xingzhi's curricular philosophy was really influenced by the Progressive Education Movement. As such, Brown provides a fairly sober and cogent balance to the reviews of Tao Xingzhi's work and life: Tao Xingzhi meant different things to different peoples and his legacy remains subject to great politicization.

First and foremost, Brown argues that Tao Xingzhi was part of the wave of educators who, having witnessed the "quashing of Sun Yat-sen's second revolution" turned from direct social and cultural change to "indirect efforts at the same goal" (Brown, 1987, p. 121). Much of this mission is attributed to Tao Xingzhi's study at Teachers College. Yet Brown also casts aspersion on the simple assertion that Tao was a Dewey student. Brown notes "he only took two introductory courses in educational philosophy" and "never finished his dissertation" and so argues that "Tao's formal brush with Dewey's philosophy was minimal" (p. 126). Brown believes that if Tao Xingzhi owes some debt to progressive educators, it would have been to another progressive era instructor, Paul Monroe, who while "friendly" to the Progressive Education Movement, was more "skeptical and pluralistic" than the Dewey camp of that time (p. 126).

Paul Monroe advanced practical methods for Chinese education. Interestingly, Brown appears to be the only biographer who argues that Monroe's work was more influential than Dewey's on Tao Xingzhi, and was arguably at least as influential as Dewey's on other Chinese luminaries: Guo Bingwen, Chen Heqin, Jiang Menglin, Wang Tso-Yan (Zhuoran) and Zhang Boling. Furthermore, in *Patterns of education for the developing nations: Tao's work in China 1917-1946*, Don Chean Chu points out "in 1922, Tao edited the book entitled Monroe's comments on the Chinese Education which introduced Monroe's viewpoints to the Chinese people" (Chu, 1966). Tao Xingzhi's intellectual relationship to Dewey, then, bears further study.

It is evident that Tao, like his Republican era peers, Hu Shi and Zhu Jingnong, drank from what they viewed as the cup of Progressivism. In this way, Tao was associated with the ardent followers of Dewey³ and organizationally aligned with Kuo Pen-Wen, Huang Yen-pei, Chu Chin-nein in creating the Chinese National Association for the Advancement of Education (CNAAE), where Tao Xingzhi was elected the Director General, and both Dewey and Monroe were honorary trustees (Chu, 1966). Enamored by Western science and technology, Tao and the aforementioned Chinese scholars from Teachers College placed their American university credentials in the service of experimentalism and student-centered pedagogical practices. With the 1922 Education Decree, they pushed the "new educational" reform.

Doing before knowing

A poet, popular educator, and sociologist named Xiao Feng Hu performs a great service in helping researchers better understand the character of Tao Xingzhi. In a collection of Tao Xingzhi letters, Hu provides a picture of a man who devotes his entire life (1891-1946) to striving to help China—perceived at the time to be a backwards society—progress and take a seat among the League of Nations.

Tao Xingzhi's intellectual development dated to his study and work abroad, while his enthusiasm as a teacher, student, and agent for change was nurtured earlier. It was during Tao Xingzhi's schooling in America that he claimed, "my only goal in life is to create a democratic country through education, but not through military revolution." Following his American education, he returned to China in 1919 where he sought to spread peace through democracy and creativity. He devoted his entire life to exploration and inquiry in the pursuit of Chinese modernization.

Tao Xingzhi's writings reflect an interesting mixture of Eastern philosophy and the Western scientific method and empiricism:

What I write is what I believe; it is also what I am doing.
If I write, it must come from my harmonious thought system.
This system is based on the facts.
Fact is my only compass. (Hu, 2010, p. 1)

Hu provides a powerful grasp of Tao Xingzhi's expressed and enacted motifs and argues that in order to understand 'knowing by doing' there are several basic principles one needs to grasp (embedded quotes are the words of Tao Xingzhi):

Education's basic meaning is life change. "Life is changing all the time. That is the meaning of education." Life is changing so that is why problems and difficulties occur. The purpose of education is to solve problems . . . so if an education can't solve problems, that education is not true education.

Education creates power. "Education can produce life power and creativity." Education is an activity but only the knowledge from the activity can turn into true power. (Hu, 2010, p. 2)

Hu cites a 1923 letter from Tao Xingzhi to his sister, wherein Tao Xingzhi wrote, "we were born in a certain time, and we have a certain mission. This mission is to use our full spirit to save our country from tragedy . . . to create a happy and healthy society for our next generation" (Hu, 2010, p. 3). Tao Xingzhi would spend his entire life working to create that society, to invent and cultivate a theory of life education which would bring new life to post-imperial Chinese society.

Teaching toward democracy

Even a little boy can be “little master” - Tao Xingzhi, March 15th, 1936

Tao Xingzhi returned to China with a sense of purpose and a zealous faith in the new science of psychology and the principles of democracy. Here he relays his practical ideas for the education of a society torn between feudal battles, with much of the population caught up in them or existing on their margins:

The old education system makes it hard for the Chinese to learn; thus 80% of the people remain illiterate. In order to bring the new education system to everyone, a labor and farm school system has been set up. This school has no salary for teachers. Students and intellectuals spend one or two hours in training people. Then after a short while, there will be new teacher emerging from these people. Almost every class has four or five people who have teaching talent. Within a few months of training, they can organize a class or a group. So in the rural area, farmers will teach farmers; in urban area workers teach workers.

The principle of the mass education campaign is: everybody, even with only several months learning, can teach others what he had learnt. This is the basis of “little master” system. Even a little boy can be “little master.” (Hu, 2010, p. 392)

Tao Xingzhi reflects a modernistic way of thinking, referring to the toiling “masses.” He engages his followers, positioning himself as a thought leader, with the rhetorical question, “what is mass education?” and proceeds, as a rhetorician, to answer:

- 1) First, mass education means tell the people the truth, do not lie.
- 2) Second, the [farmer/peasantry] needs mass education; the people need to know how to build up the countryside without being falsely treated.
- 3) Third, [workers] must be conscious of mass production while receiving mass education. (Hu, 2010, p. 399)

Tao Xingzhi was keen on expressing not only the what, when and where of the new education, but also the why. “We educate people not only to tell them what [they should know] but to tell them why they should know it. There are a several ideas which come to mind.” Tao Xingzhi was also keen on outlining, in his zeal, how to bring about the new society:

Education under democracy should have the following conditions:

- 1) The whole world is for the public, education is for the public; education is not for any party profit or any organization profit because education is for the public.
- 2) Respect the teacher, emphasize morality, should not spy on the teacher, nor should the teacher spy on you. (If you don’t trust the teacher and always spy on them it shows that you do not respect them.)
- 3) No misunderstandings between the teachers and the students

- 4) Concerning politics, society and economics: students have free access (a right) to read, discuss, or criticize.
- 5) There should be democratic organization(s) to help students make progress on the campus.
- 6) Motivate the masses so they will learn what is real democracy (Hu, 1944, p. 514).

School to the countryside

In January 1926, Tao Xingzhi developed the “Teacher education goes to the village” movement. His ambitious blueprint included raising and collecting one million Yuan in funds and, with the proceeds, setting up one million schools in order to raise the level of education for one million villages. With this dream in mind, in January of the following year, Tao Xingzhi chose Xiaozhuang, located at the foot of the Lao Shan Mountain of Nanjing as the prospective campus. One short month later, on February 5th, Tao Xingzhi convened the ceremony for the opening of Xiaozhuang Normal School. The dream began with a humble start; a small cadre of thirteen students and a couple of hundred guests were in attendance. Before long, the school set up eight elementary schools and five kindergartens; several tea centers and the Xiaozhuang hospital, theater, and village grounds were also designated for education purposes, as “school.” Within a short period of time, Tao Xingzhi would set up even more schools in the Zhe Jiang province.

Tao Xingzhi’s auspicious start was set against a backdrop of political turbulence, criticism, struggle, and resistance. On April 5th, 1930, his schools joined a protest—led by the Communist Party—against Nanjing businessmen who were exploiting their workers. The students and faculty joined the parade to support the workers going on strike. When an incident at a Japanese Warship park along Nanjing River on April 5th turned violent, students and faculty were beaten, and the school ultimately suffered the consequence. On April 7th, Chiang Kai-shek demanded the closing of the school. The Kuomintang National Army shut the school down and arrested many of the students; some students were even killed. Tao Xingzhi became public enemy number one; he was forced to flee abroad. In 1937-1945, the Sino-Japan War occurred, and the school remained closed.

Yet in the years after the 1945-49 War for Independence, the school started up again, renamed the Xiaozhuang Elementary School. In 1952, the school adopted a more formal teacher education mission, and the name was changed to Nanjing Normal School. In 1955, the name was changed once again to the Jiang Su Xiaozhuang Normal School, only to be changed back to Nanjing Normal School during the infamous Cultural Revolution in 1971. In 2000, the various missions of the school were combined into what came to be known as the Nanjing Xiaozhuang College.

The danger of the market school

In the early 20th century, Tao Xingzhi had warned of the emerging “dysfunctional” development in education, which “materializes” students (Hu, 2010, p. 5) and “makes students isolated from society . . . desirous of materials, leading them [away from] work or creative activity” (p. 5). In a critical article that Hu recovered, Tao Xingzhi labeled this “mammonism, diploma-ism, and formalism” (p. 5), decrying the “bad phenomenology” that leads education down the wrong path. Tao Xingzhi

had remarkable insight concerning the “bubble” education; the modern day standardized test. His clarion call was to stop these “dry” tests, and in their place, develop for students “the creative test” (p. 5). The creative test would evaluate the “nature of life, not dry knowledge from the textbook” (p. 5).

In the 21st century, China’s education system is wed to a culture that lauds tremendous amounts of homework, extensive in-class seat time (6-7 days a week for the high school student), constant test preparation, and incessant parental pressure on the students to compete for increasingly exclusive spots in premiere institutions. But it is also being decentralized:

Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Chinese government initiated massive educational reforms to make secondary schools more efficient and more responsive to economic development. While the central government maintained its control over the purpose of education, system reforms, textbooks, and teaching guidelines, a series of policies were implemented to shift the responsibility for funding and managing schools to lower levels of government and to open schools in response to market forces. (Zhao, 2014)

Discussion

China has experienced a remarkable climb from humiliation and dependency at the close of the nineteenth century to national pride and independence. From her hard fought independence post WWII, to the social catastrophe of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the future was never predictable. Despite having overcome several challenges, this dynamic economic leader and military force must nonetheless contend with its own people, many of whom suffer as commoners and remain restless. Labor strikes in factories cascade across the country, as do simmering protests in Tibet and the Western provinces. In spite of the military crackdown on the Tiananmen Square freedom movement, the repression of the Falun Gong religion, and the ongoing harassment of human rights activists, a democratic movement retains a pulse.

New forms of democratic political activity—the New Citizen’s Movement for example—continue to grow. Calls for freedom of speech, the right of assembly, religious tolerance, redress of grievance (largely concerning the rampant political corruption, graft, bribery and fraud) and equal justice before the law all argue that the people and movement will not remain underground. Aligning with these movements is an equally critical vision: “quality education for all,” extending to the furthest reaches of society—including the rural areas, where the Communist Revolution itself first made its start.

What would Tao Xingzhi (1894-1947) say or do if he were alive today, in an age where China has emerged as the global economic power, leading the 21st century? How would he square communist, one-party rule with loosely regulated “socialist marketization” and the practices of neoliberalism? How relevant would he believe his democracy education to be when faced with parental choice and the privatization of schooling? And what would he make of 21st century students and teachers, learning and teaching under the pressures and influences of globalization?

To answer these questions, we need to explicate more fully the implications of the internationalization of standards, testing and curriculum and the condition of education in China and beyond. The aim here is to consider whether Tao Xingzhi, student of Confucius and Dewey, can offer a meaningful contribution to this conversation.

Yao Yusheng argues that Tao Xingzhi's "theory of life education" and "unity of teaching, learning and doing" is very relevant to modern China where education still privileges the standardized examination and not yet the spirit of "quality education for all" (p. 274). Yusheng notes some positive developments such as in the Jiangyin area, for example, where the local education leadership is adopting a "cosmopolitan attitude" and "a more practical approach to reform" (p. 274). Educational leaders embrace "quality" in a moral and psychological sense rather than a political or ideological one (although it is certainly an ideological construction to align morality with psychology). Yusheng believes that the teachers aim to "stimulate" the student's interest in being creative and that education is becoming more student-centered. Finally, there is a critical move toward collaboration with pedagogy and psychology experts in building a science-based curriculum (Yusheng, 2002).

Xingzhi, as a student, would cultivate his own moral and ethical virtue. As a teacher of the impoverished and illiterate, he would sound a call for mass education, for "life as education" and "society as school". Finally, as a scholar, he would write poems and letters, edit articles and books, and create reports. Yet he was primarily a practitioner. Regardless of the role he played, he was always on ambivalent terms with the state. Regardless of the party in control, he belonged to none of them, yet he created and co-sponsored several educational organizations. He was then and remains now a visionary . . . a selfless educator and a citizen of the world.

Conclusion

Yusheng Yao supports the idea of researching Tao Xingzhi, as well as Dewey, because in doing so a better understanding of progressive education becomes possible. Even more importantly, he argues, searching for "models of rural educational reform, rural reconstruction, and 'quality education' . . . will keep Tao's legacy and [that of his followers] relevant to China's educational reform and national reconstruction" (p. 277).

There are followers who are pushing to make Tao's educational reform efforts and ideas even more relevant for today. Because of his prominence and potential influence, the state and government in China has taken great pains to use what officials see as advantageous parts of the Tao Xingzhi legacy and deny other parts as they see fit. This critical scrutiny of Tao Xingzhi's life and works generates some fairly interesting historical issues regarding the relationships between Tao Xingzhi, John Dewey and the Progressive Education Movement. Indeed Hubert Brown's close attention to the historical record suggests that Tao Xingzhi is much more complicated as an historical actor than one might initially believe. Xiaoping concurs that his work reflects a more complex blend of influences than Deweyan theory, noting that "he had little exposure to progressivism before being chosen to serve as Dewey's interpreter" (Xiaoping, 2007).

It has been the purpose of the internationalization of curriculum studies translation project to search for such figures, review classic texts, and re-translate in order to draw greater understandings of how these figures, texts, and translations speak to one another in a rapidly globalizing world. That Tao Xingzhi is not a mere offspring, or a Chinese version of, Dewey is eminently clear. Indeed, while some may think of Tao as “Dr. John Dewey’s most creative student” (Zhou, 1991, p. 397), even this preliminary look at his life’s work suggests that there is a richer story to tell.

This only makes Tao Xingzhi more interesting as a historical figure and educational theorist. Tao’s story demonstrates that with closer scrutiny of their germinal works, curricularists and critical educators, educational reformers and revolutionaries are likely to appear less one-dimensional, and become more compelling characters. In honoring the complexity of curriculum work and the subjectivity of curricular canons, and in problematizing the relationships between reformers and their enacted reforms, democracy and revolution are rendered less polemical and diametrically opposed. The implausibility of affecting societal change in so complex and contested a world makes the efforts of figures such as Tao Xingzhi to change the world seem all the more admirable.

Endnotes

¹ His parents were Christian and while his mother was illiterate, his father was a man of letters; see Brown, H. O. (1987). American Progressivism in Chinese education: The case of Tao Xingzhi. In R. Hayhoe & M. Bastid (Eds.), *China’s education and the industrialized world: Studies in cultural transfer*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.

² Imperial examinations were antiquated and were terminated officially in 1905. Confucianism began to be seen as less relevant.

³ Tao was more or less aligned with the ideas of “experimentation” and “science” over monastic study as is evident in his rhetorical flourish and early tirade against “book learning” and his interest in practice over philosophizing.

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