



Exploring Modern China's Attraction to American Vocational Education

Chen Cheng, Xingyu Shen and Yijun Yang*

School of Teacher Education, Jiangsu University, Zhenjiang, China

***Corresponding author:** Yijun Yang, School of Teacher Education, Jiangsu University, Zhenjiang, China

Received Date: April 13, 2026

Published Date: April 27, 2026

Abstract

This article utilizes the cross-national attraction phase of Phillips and Ochs's policy borrowing framework to analyse China's attraction to American vocational education from the late 19th century to the 1920s. It identifies three primary motivations: increasing internal discontent with the imperial examination system, adverse external assessments underscored by the post-1895 Sino-Japanese comparison, and political transformations following the Xinhai Revolution and deteriorating Sino-Japanese relations. These motivations prompted reformers to emphasize the externalizing capacity of U.S. vocational education, encompassing pragmatist philosophy, practical objectives, legislative approaches, cooperative structures, procedural methodologies, and experiential learning. China established knowledge foundations via study missions, international education, translations, and Dewey's visit. This study calls more scholars explore modern China's vocational education's borrowing history from various perspectives.

Keywords: Policy borrowing; Cross-national attraction; Vocational education; Modern China; America

Introduction

Modern China experienced significant educational reforms due to both internal and external crisis. In the imperial era, the Chinese education system focused on the imperial examination system, whereas practical skills were mostly neglected. The defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) was a pivotal moment: China was not only vanquished by Japan but was also profoundly astonished by Japan's swift modernization realized through the Meiji Restoration [1]. In this context, vocational education started to capture the attention of reformers.

Before 1910s, China initially opted to adopt the Japanese vocational education model [2]. However, in the second decade of the twentieth century, a growing number of reformers began to focus their attention on the United States. This transition prompts

a significant inquiry: why did China transition from the Japanese model to an increasing inclination towards the American model? What elements facilitated the establishment of this attraction?

Current research has analysed vocational education in modern China from various viewpoints; however, the majority has concentrated on its "internal" developmental path [3-6], with limited consideration given to it through the theoretical lens of educational policy borrowing, except for few works by Schulte [7,8] and Yang [9]. Nevertheless, these studies fail to elucidate why modern China aimed to adopt the American vocational education model.

This work seeks to address this deficiency. This study systematically examines the elements that contributed to China's

attraction to American vocational education from the 1890s to the 1920s, utilizing the “cross-national attraction” phase of the four-stage model developed by Phillips and Ochs [10-12]. The study employs historical document analysis, utilizing sources such as government records, educational periodicals, international study reports, diaries, and archival materials from educational groups.

Theoretical Framework

In the framework of Four Stages of Educational Policy Borrowing, Phillips and Ochs delineate the process of policy borrowing into four principal stages: cross-national attraction, decision, implementation, and internalization [11,12]. This study focuses on examining the motivations behind China’s interest in American vocational education, mostly employing the initial phase of the model, the “cross-national attraction” stage.

Phillips and Ochs argue that cross-national attraction initially emerges from a sequence of “impulses,” which serve as the prerequisites for policy borrowing [11,12]. These impulses encompass pervasive internal discontent, systemic failure, adverse external assessment, economic transformation/competition, political upheaval, advancements in knowledge and skills, and alterations in worldwide, regional, or local dynamics. Such urges may incite the exploration of alien paradigms to resolve current or prospective issues [11,12]. Phillips and Ochs succinctly categorize this “externalizing potential” into six focal points of attraction, which denote the elements of foreign education systems that policymakers may prioritize and seek to adopt: guiding philosophy or ideology, ambitions/goals, strategies, enabling structures, processes, and techniques [11,12].

This study employs the above theoretical framework as an analytical instrument to structure and elucidate the historical variables that contributed to China’s interest in American vocational education. This study is organized along two dimensions: impulses and externalizing potential.

Historical Context

Throughout China’s long imperial period, education mostly focused on the imperial examination system, while practical skills were largely neglected. The cultural conviction of prioritizing literary education over technical proficiency was profoundly ingrained [13]. The defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) marked a pivotal moment: China was not only vanquished by Japan—historically perceived as a “minor and inconsequential nation”—but was also astounded by Japan’s swift modernization realized through the Meiji Restoration [1].

Subsequently, China commenced a thorough examination of Japan’s modern education framework, instituting the Renyin School System in 1902 and the Guimao School System in 1904, therefore integrating vocational education into the national education system [5]. Nonetheless, the Japanese model exhibited certain limits. The vocational education system exhibited pronounced militaristic and bureaucratic traits, prioritizing the training of technical workers for the state over individual development [14]. Following the Xinhai Revolution, the political relations between

China and Japan deteriorated, with Japan’s expansionist aspirations toward China becoming increasingly apparent [15]. Furthermore, when implemented in China, the Japanese model faced issues of institutional incompatibility; for instance, the Renyin School System of 1902 was promptly terminated due to defects and structural dysfunction [16].

In this context, certain Chinese educators and reformers started to focus on the United States. In contrast to Japan, the evolution of vocational education in the United States seemed more democratic and pragmatic. In 1917, the U.S. Congress enacted the Smith–Hughes Act, creating a collaborative framework between the federal and local governments for the advancement of vocational education [17]. Simultaneously, John Dewey’s pragmatic educational philosophy promoted concepts like “education as life” and “school as society,” highlighting the amalgamation of education with practical experience [18].

Between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, educational exchanges between China and the United States progressively expanded. Facilitated by the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program, numerous Chinese students pursued their studies in the United States, many of whom subsequently emerged as crucial contributors to China’s educational reforms, including Hu Shih, Tao Xingzhi, and Huang Yanpei [19]. From 1919 to 1921, John Dewey visited China at the behest of Chinese academicians and presented several lectures in various regions, methodically disseminating his pragmatic educational concepts [20]. In 1917, the Chinese Vocational Education Association was founded in Shanghai, marking the inception of China’s inaugural national organization devoted to the advancement of vocational education [21].

Cross-national Attraction Analysis

According to the framework proposed by Phillips and Ochs, cross-national attraction arises from a series of “impulses.” In the Chinese context, these impulses mostly appeared in the following aspects.

Impulses

Creeping Internal Dissatisfaction

Discontent with China’s conventional schooling progressively disseminated throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1898, Kang Youwei articulated in many memorials to the throne that the principal deficiencies of the imperial examination system resided in its formalistic principles, inflexibility, and inability to confront the practical issues that officials needed to face [22]. He contended that if Chinese learners prioritized addressing China’s actual issues over vying for success in the imperial examinations, the nation would possess a enough number of competent personnel to govern state affairs [22].

Zhang Zhidong articulated such apprehensions in his renowned treatise *Exhortation to Learning*. He contended that traditional Chinese education was marked by the issue that “what is learned is not what is used, and what is used is not what is learned,” rendering it inadequate for developing the talents necessary to address

the difficulties of a modern state [23]. This discontent extended beyond intellectual elites, progressively encompassing authorities, educators, and students who possessed greater information and exposure to novel concepts.

Negative External Evaluation

Despite the absence of worldwide comparative assessments like PISA at that time, Japan's triumph in the First Sino-Japanese War was regarded in China as a manifestation of unfavourable external appraisal. Japan, first perceived as an Eastern nation influenced by China, underwent swift modernization, highlighting China's fragility and deterioration. This comparison served as a significant negative assessment, compelling China to contemplate the deficiencies of its educational system.

Furthermore, a succession of military and political triumphs by Western powers in China also represented adverse exterior assessments of China's traditional education. Zhang Zhidong stated that the power of Western nations resides not in their armaments, but in their education [23].

Political Change

Following the Xinhai Revolution in 1911, China's political system saw a profound shift. Upon taking office as Minister of Education of the Republic of China in 1912, Cai Yuanpei asserted that the Renzi Guichou School System of 1913, having been established by imperial decree, was congruent with an autocratic regime but incompatible with a republican framework, necessitating its abolition [24]. This remark unequivocally illustrates the impact of political change on the trajectory of educational policy borrowing.

The decline of Sino-Japanese political relations, particularly due to the Twenty-One Demands proposal in 1915, rendered it politically unsuitable to regard Japan as a model [15]. In contrast, the portrayal of the United States as a growing democratic society strongly aligned with the burgeoning intellectual movements of democracy and science in China.

Externalizing Potential

The above impulses prompted Chinese reformers to diligently pursue American models. Phillips and Ochs elucidate that this "externalizing potential" can be comprehended through six key elements.

First, Chinese reformers were primarily drawn to the foundational theory of American vocational education—pragmatism as expounded by John Dewey. Dewey championed the concepts that "education is life" and "school is society [18]," highlighting the fusion of teaching with experiential learning. Tao Xingzhi considered these concepts as revolutionary for Chinese education [25].

Second, at the level of goals, Huang Yanpei's articulation of "empowering the unemployed to secure employment and the employed to derive satisfaction from their work [26]" mirrored vocational objectives influenced by American ideals.

Third, the American strategy of advancing vocational education via law garnered significant interest inside Chinese educational circles. The passage of the Smith–Hughes Act in 1917 signified the formal establishment of vocational education in the United States. The Chinese Vocational Education Association elaborated on the law in its journal, *Education and Vocation*, considering it a significant reference for the development of vocational education laws in China [27].

Fourth, the cooperative model between federal and local governments in American vocational education caught the attention of Chinese reformers at the level of enabling structures. Huang Yanpei underscored the significance of collaboration among government, educational institutions, and businesses in his examination of vocational education in the United States [26].

Fifth, the teaching regulations and oversight mechanisms of American vocational education have also garnered continuous attention at the process level. The journal *Education and Vocation* consistently published papers on the curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and evaluation systems of American vocational education.

Finally, the American "learning by doing" technique significantly impacted and was embodied in Tao Xingzhi's notion of "unity of teaching, learning, and doing [25]." Chinese involvement in American vocational education encompassed both intellectual foundations and practical approaches, with pragmatism and experience learning as the predominant factors.

China's efforts to borrow from American Vocational Education

In the early twentieth century, China started a systematic dispatch of officials and students to Japan and the United States to examine their educational systems. Huang Yanpei made multiple visits to the United States to examine vocational education and subsequently published various essays detailing American practices upon his return to China [5]. In 1917, the Chinese Vocational Education Association established the journal *Education and Vocation*, which offered a comprehensive overview of the substance and importance of the Smith–Hughes Act in the United States [27]. These rigorous examinations and studies established a significant knowledge foundation for the creation of cross-national attraction.

Chinese reformers often advocated for educational reform by contrasting the educational systems of China, Japan, and the United States. In his comparison of vocational education across three nations, Huang Yanpei contended that the Japanese approach epitomized education of the state, whereas the American model exemplified education of the people [26]. Tao Xingzhi also stated: "The issue with education in our nation is the excessive emphasis on books while experience is undervalued." Mr. John Dewey's concept of 'learning by doing' is the optimal solution. Tao [25]. This comparative technique exemplifies the pursuit of political impetus for reform by making explicit comparisons with foreign contexts.

Conclusion

This paper utilizes Phillips and Ochs's cross-national attraction model to examine the determinants of China's interest in American vocational education in the contemporary era. Three principal factors collectively influenced this attraction at the level of impulses: first, a pervasive internal discontent, evidenced by Kang Youwei and Zhang Zhidong's critiques of the imperial examination system as "formalistic and rigid"; second, unfavourable external assessments, as Japan's swift modernization following the First Sino-Japanese War starkly contrasted with China's frailty; and third, political transformations, including Cai Yuanpei's post-1911 declaration that the Renxi Guichou School System was incongruous with the republic, alongside the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations that diminished the allure of the Japanese model.

Chinese reformers concentrated on five aspects of American vocational education at the level of externalizing potential: Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, the objective of facilitating employment for the unemployed, legislative strategies, procedural teaching arrangements, and the "learning by doing" approach. Furthermore, China established the foundation for policy borrowing via inspection trips, international study, and the translation of educational literature.

This study's theoretical contribution is the application of Phillips and Ochs's cross-national attraction model to modern Chinese vocational education, illustrating the model's relevance in a non-Western historical context and providing a significant non-Western example for research on education policy borrowing. The study elucidates the intricacies of policy borrowing, revealing it as a multifaceted phenomenon rather than a mere "input-output" process, shaped by various interacting factors such as internal discontent, external assessment, political transformation, and international scrutiny.

This research possesses multiple limitations. The original sources predominantly consist of official records and publications by educational elites, with insufficient consideration of the viewpoints of ordinary instructors, students, and craftsmen. In addition, the analysis predominantly relies on Chinese sources, with insufficient attention given to the aims of American officials and educators during the corresponding period.

In addition to learning from Japan and the United States, China also adopted vocational education theories and experiences from nations like Germany and France. It is anticipated that scholars will undertake comprehensive analyses of China's policy borrowing in vocational education from various theoretical frameworks, and, considering the contemporary practical challenges in the advancement of China's vocational education, extract historical lessons to foster both theoretical innovation and practical reform.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Jiangsu Academy of Educational Sciences (Grant No. C/2024/01/77, Grant Program Name: A Study on the Transmission of U.S. Vocational Education in Modern China

from a Policy Transfer Perspective) for providing financial support.

Conflict of Interest

No Conflict of interest.

References

1. Qian M, Jin L (1996) *Zhongguo jindai xuezhi bijiao yanjiu* (A Comparative Study of Modern Chinese School Systems). Guangdong Education Publisher.
2. Yang Y (2024) *Exploring Educational Policy Transfer: China's Vocational Education under Japanese Influences*. Palgrave Macmillan.
3. Gao Y, Zhou H (2020) *Jindai zhongguo zhiye jiaoyu 'rukou' yu 'chukou' wenti fenxi—Jiyu zhonghua zhiye xuexiao de kaocha* (Analysis on the Problem of 'Entrance' and 'Export' of Vocational Education in Modern China—A Case Study of Zhonghua Vocational School). *Zhiye jishu jiaoyu* 41(16): 56–61.
4. Wu G (2015) *Qingmo minchu zhiye jiaoyu yanjiu* (Vocational Education in the Late Qing and Early Republican Periods). *Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe*.
5. Xie C (2011) *Zhongguo zhiye jiaoyushi* [A History of Vocational Education in China]. Shanxi Education Press.
6. Zhang L (2020) *Huang Yanpei yu jindai jiangsu zhiye jiaoyu de fazhan* (Huang Yanpei and the Development of Vocational education in Jiangsu Province in Modern China). *Dang'an yu jianshe* 09: 82–84.
7. Schulte B (2012) *Webs of Borrowing and Lending: Social Networks in Vocational Education in Republican China*. *World Yearbook of Education* 2012: Policy Borrowing and Lending in Education pp. 95–117.
8. Schulte B (2013) *Unwelcome Stranger to the System: Vocational Education in Early Twentieth-century China*. *Comparative Education* 49(2): 226–241.
9. Yang Y, Chia Y (2024) *Understanding Educational Policy Transfer: An Analysis of the Japanese Influence on China's Vocational Education*. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 54(8): 1271–1289.
10. Ochs K, Phillips D (2002) *Comparative Studies and 'Cross-National Attraction' in Education: A typology for the Analysis of English Interest in Educational Policy and Provision in Germany*. *Educational Studies* 28(4): 325–339.
11. Phillips D, Ochs K (2003) *Processes of Policy Borrowing in Education: Some explanatory and analytical devices*. *Comparative Education* 39(4): 451–461.
12. Phillips D, Ochs K (2004) *Researching Policy Borrowing: Some Methodological Challenges in Comparative Education*. *British Educational Research Journal* 30(6): 773–784.
13. Wang G (2022) *'A Cultured Man is not a Tool': The Impact of Confucian Legacies on the Standing of Vocational Education in China*. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* pp.1–18.
14. Zhu W (1999) *Riben jindai zhiye jiaoyu fazhan yanjiu* (A Study of the Development of Vocational Education in Japan in Modern Times). Hebei daxue chubanshe.
15. Vogel EF (2019) *China and Japan: Facing History*. Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press.
16. Wang W (2006) *Zhongguo jindai zhiye jiaoyu fazhi yanjiu* (A Study of the Legal System of Modern Chinese Vocational Education) [Ph.D., Zhongguo Zhengfa Daxue].
17. Kantor H (1986) *Work, Education, and Vocational Reform: The Ideological Origins of Vocational Education, 1890-1920*. *American Journal of Education* 94(4): 401–426.

18. Dewy J (1916) *Democracy and Education*. Macmillan.
19. Sciences NA, Affairs P, G Affairs O, Orleans LA (1988) *Chinese Students in America: Policies, Issues, and Numbers*. National Academy Press.
20. Yuan Q (2001) *Duwei yu zhongguo (Dewey and China)*. Renmin chubanshe.
21. Zhu Y (Ed.) (1993) *Zhongguo jindai jiaoyushi ziliao huibian: Jiaoyu xingzheng jigou ji jiaoyu tuanti (Collected Corpus of Documents in the History of Modern Education in China: Educational Administrative Bodies and Educational Associations)*. Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe.
22. Zhu Y (Ed.) (1986) *Zhongguo jindai xuezhi shiliao (Historical Documents of the Modern Chinese School System) (Vol. 1b)*. Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe.
23. Qu X, Tong F (Eds). (2007) *Zhongguo jindai jiaoyushi ziliao huibian: Jiaoyu sixiang (Collected Corpus of Documents in the History of Modern Education in China: Educational Thought) (Vol. 10)*. Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe.
24. Tao Y (1976) *Caiyuanpei Nianpu (A Chronological Biography of Cai Yuanpei)*. Taiwan zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo.
25. Tao X (1921) *Shenghuo jiaoyu (Life Education)*. Xinjiaoyu 3(2).
26. Huang Y (1917) *Zhonghua zhiye jiaoyushe chengli xuanyan (The Founding Declaration of the Chinese Vocational Education Association)*. Jiaoyu Yu Zhiye (1): 1-6.
27. *Zhonghua Zhiye Jiaoyu She (1917 Meiguo Shimisixiusi zhiye jiaoyu fa'an (The Smith-Hughes Act)*. Jiaoyu Yu Zhiye (1): 1-14.