

**Research Article**

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The Renzi–Guichou School System as a Transitional School System: Path Dependence and Transformation in China’s Vocational Education

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The Renzi-Guichou school system marked a pivotal transitional phase in which China’s vocational education transitioned from borrowing from Japan to borrowing from the United States. This paper examines the transitional features of the Renzi-Guichou school system’s industrial education design, utilizing the concepts of path dependence and critical junctures from institutional change theory, alongside the paradigm shift perspective from policy transfer theory. The analysis reveals that the Renzi-Guichou school system has a twin characteristic of leveraging historical foundations and embracing future opportunities. It adopted the institutional foundation of the Japanese model from the Guimao school system while abolishing feudal relics, like loyalty to the emperor and veneration for Confucius. Cai Yuanpei’s utilitarian education facilitated the ideological groundwork for the adoption of John Dewey’s pragmatism, while the advent of vocational equality established the basis for the conceptual transition from industrial education to vocational education. Nevertheless, owing to institutional inertia, path dependence in faculty and curricula, and political instability, the Renzi-Guichou school system did not successfully move from the Japanese model to the American model. This research elucidates a significant characteristic of paradigm shifts in educational policy: a paradigm shift is not a sudden change but rather a gradual change—the nascent elements of the new paradigm emerge prior to the complete dissolution of the old paradigm.

Keywords: Renzi–Guichou school system; Vocational education; Modern China; Transitional period; Japanese model; American model

Introduction

Educational policy transfer constitutes a fundamental concern in the field of international comparative education research [1,2]. Academics have long been preoccupied with the dynamics involved when a nation opts to implement educational frameworks from other nations. Current research predominantly emphasizes Western situations and contemporary cases, with insufficient attention given to non-Western countries and historical processes of policy transfer. Nonetheless, the modernization of vocational education in modern China presents a unique historical instance: during a brief period of three decades (1895–1922), China’s

paradigm for vocational education transitioned from Japan to the United States [3]. What prompted this paradigm shift? Examining this subject enhances the theoretical comprehension of model selection and paradigm shift mechanisms in the transmission of educational policy.

This article examines the transition period of the Renzi–Guichou school system (1912–1913) within this paradigm shift. This system was established following the 1911 Revolution and before to the New Culture Movement, marking a pivotal transition in China’s approach from learning from Japan to learning from the

United States. The 1911 Revolution dismantled the Qing Dynasty, compelling the newly formed Republic of China to urgently develop a school system aligned with republican principles. Cai Yuanpei spearheaded the development of the Renzi–Guichou school system, supplanting the Qing Dynasty’s Guimao System in 1904 [4].

Subsequent to the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, China significantly embraced the Japanese educational framework. By the 1910s, the intellectual esteem of the Japanese model in China began to wane, whilst the allure of the American model progressively rose. The founding of the China Vocational Education Association in 1917 and John Dewey’s visit to China from 1919 to 1921 signified the onset of China’s transition to the American vocational education paradigm. The Renzi–Guichou System occupied a transitional role within this greater paradigm shift.

The Renzi–Guichou school system holds a significant place in the history of Chinese education. However current analysis reveals notable deficiencies. A substantial amount of study has concentrated on the adoption of the Japanese model by the Guimao school system [5,6] and the transition of the Renxu school system in 1922 towards the American model [7]. Nonetheless, a thorough examination of the transitional attributes of the Renzi–Guichou System, situated between these two phases, is still inadequate. This article seeks to address the following inquiries: What transitional features are evident in the design of industrial education under the Renzi–Guichou System? What institutional legacies did it acquire from the Guimao System? What prerequisites were established for the transition to the Renxu System? What were the reasons for its failure to move from the Japanese model to the American model?

This research employs a historical document analysis methodology. The materials include the texts of the Renzi–Guichou school system, the educational writings of Cai Yuanpei, education magazines from the Republican era, and published documentary compilations.

Theoretical Framework

Path Dependence and Critical Junctures

Theory of institutional change posits that once institutions are formed, they create a system of self-reinforcement, so confining subsequent improvements to known paths. This concept is referred to as path dependence. Pierson [8] posits that political institutional change is marked by increasing returns, in which initial decisions are solidified over time, hence gradually limiting subsequent developmental trajectories. Nonetheless, critical junctures—including revolutions and regime transitions—generate opportunities for institutional transformation, facilitating path breakthroughs [9].

The Xinhai Revolution signifies a pivotal moment: the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the formation of the Republic of China provided an opportunity to devise a new school system. Nonetheless, route dependence indicated that the Renzi–Guichou school system could not entirely extricate itself from the institutional framework of the Japanese model.

Paradigm Shift in Policy Transfer

Policy transfer theory emphasizes that the choice of models is influenced by internal discontent and external factors. Phillips and Ochs [10] contend that cross-national attractiveness derives from discontent with national education systems and a focus on accomplishments overseas.

Following the Xinhai Revolution, the Japanese model encountered internal discontent due to political factors—Cai Yuanpei clearly asserted that the Guimao school system was congruent with an autocratic political framework but incompatible with a republican one [11]. Concurrently, the American model progressively surfaced as an external catalyst with increasing allure. A paradigm shift generally undergoes a transitional phase where the old paradigm is not entirely relinquished, and the new one has not yet been definitively established [12]. The Renzi–Guichou school system was situated distinctly within this transitional phase.

This study conceptualizes the Renzi–Guichou school system as a transitional school system and analyzes it from two dimensions: inheriting the past, referring to its inheritance and modification of the Guimao school system, and paving the way for the future, referring to its intellectual preparation for the transition.

Historical Context

The Guimao school system of 1904 was the inaugural modern school system formally established in China, based on a Japanese model. Regarding educational objectives, it mandated loyalty to the emperor, reverence for Confucius, enhancement of civic spirit, military ethos, and practical competencies, embodying the notion of “Chinese learning as essence, Western learning for utility” [13]. In vocational education, a three-tier structure was formed comprising elementary industrial schools, intermediate industrial schools, and advanced industrial schools. Abe [5] observes that the basic framework of the Guimao System was predominantly based on Japan’s 1872 Education System and the 1886 School Ordinance. Schulte [6] contends that its execution encountered significant contextual incompatibility, resulting in vocational education never attaining parity with general education.

Following the Xinhai Revolution in 1911, the Qing Dynasty was dismantled, opening a “window of opportunity” for educational reform. Upon assuming the role of Minister of Education of the Republic of China, Cai Yuanpei commenced the development of a new school system. In his “Opinions on New Education,” he strongly condemned the feudal characteristics of the Guimao System and urged for educational reform along with republican values [14].

Concurrently, the Japanese model encountered a legitimacy dilemma. The Guimao System was compatible with an autocratic political system but incompatible with a republican one [11] and had become politically obsolete. Conversely, Japan’s 1915 Twenty-One Demands exacerbated Sino-Japanese relations and diminished the attractiveness of the Japanese model [15]. Simultaneously, the American model begun to emerge within the purview of Chinese reformers. The establishment of the China Vocational Education Association in 1917 and John Dewey’s visit to China from 1919

to 1921 signified the commencement of China's transition to the American model of vocational education. The Renzi-Guichou school system was poised at the onset of this transitional phase: it needed to inherit the institutional underpinnings established by the Guimao System, adjust to the new republican political landscape, and concurrently allow for a future paradigm shift.

Inheritance and Transformation: Continuities and Revisions of the Guimao School System in the Renzi-Guichou System

The Renzi-Guichou school system retained Japan as its structural basis while implementing substantial de-feudalization in its content.

Structural Inheritance of the Japanese Model

The Renzi-Guichou System adopted the fundamental foundation of the Guimao school system in terms of its educational structure and vocational training organization. The Guimao System instituted a three-tier, six-level structure within the school hierarchy, whereas the Renzi-Guichou System modified it to a three-tier, four-level framework, maintaining the overarching structural logic [4]. In vocational education, the Guimao System instituted a three-tier system of industrial schools, which was then supplanted by the Renzi-Guichou System that introduced B-type industrial schools and A-type industrial schools, a categorization mirroring the Japanese model [16].

This structural consistency suggests that the Renzi-Guichou System did not entirely forsake the Japanese model—path dependence was evidently in effect. According to Pierson [8], once institutions are created, they create self-reinforcing mechanisms that limit future reform paths.

Removal of Feudal Remnants

Nevertheless, regarding substantive content, the Renzi-Guichou System thoroughly eliminated the feudal remnants inherent in the Guimao System.

The Guimao System delineated educational objectives as loyalty to the emperor, reverence for Confucius, advancement of civic spirit, martial spirit, and practical skills [13], while the Renzi-Guichou System articulated its aim as prioritizing moral education, complemented by utilitarian and military-citizenship education [16]. Cai Yuanpei articulated this transition by asserting: "Allegiance to the emperor is antithetical to a republican framework, and veneration of Confucius is incongruent with religious liberty" [14].

The Guimao System mandated the study and recitation of Confucian classics in its curriculum, whereas the Renzi-Guichou System eliminated this requirement altogether. The Guimao System predominantly marginalized female students, but the Renzi-Guichou System permitted coeducation at the primary level and instituted vocational schools for girls [16]. The transition from schoolhouse (xuetang) to school (xuexiao) in educational terminology signified a significant change from instructing imperial subjects to cultivating contemporary citizens [17].

Preparation for the Next Stage: Paradigm Shift at the Ideational Level

While the Renzi-Guichou school system officially adopted the Japanese model, it had already initiated a shift towards the American model in terms of educational concepts.

Cai Yuanpei's Utilitarian Education and Deweyan Pragmatism

Cai Yuanpei identified utilitarian education as a fundamental educational objective of the Republic of China. He asserted, "Utilitarian education prioritizes individuals' livelihoods within the framework of general education" [14]. This approach underscored that education must be intricately connected to the nation's economic activities.

Utilitarian education aligns closely with John Dewey's pragmatism theory of "education as life" and "learning by doing." Dewey [18] contended that education is life and school is society, highlighting the fusion of education with experiential reality. Wang Lunxin and Zhang Rong [19] observe that Cai Yuanpei's educational philosophy embodies the initial dissemination of Deweyan pragmatism in China. Dewey did not visit China until 1919, whereas the Renzi-Guichou school system was established in 1912, prior to his arrival. This signifies that utilitarian education was an autonomous adaptation by Cai Yuanpei of Western educational concepts, establishing significant conceptual foundations for the subsequent acceptance of the American model.

The Initial Formation of Vocational Equality

The Renzi-Guichou school system eliminated the hierarchical value structure inherent in the Guimao System. Within the Guimao System, industrial education was subordinated to the Institute for Advanced Confucian Studies (Tongru Yuan), indirectly illustrating the Confucian value hierarchy of intellectual achievement culminating in official status. Conversely, the Renzi-Guichou System ceased to expressly endorse occupational hierarchy [16]. The recognition of occupational equality established the conceptual basis for the subsequent shift from industrial education to vocational education.

Analysis of the Transitional Features of Institutional Design

The institutional framework of the Renzi-Guichou school system displays a clear transitional quality, marked by the simultaneous presence of traditional and modern elements, although the overall direction remains uncertain.

The Symbolic Significance of Replacing Schoolhouse with School

The transition from schoolhouse(xuetang) to school(xuexiao) represented not only a terminological alteration but also signified changes in educational governance and administrative power. This alteration established institutional opportunities for subsequent involvement of non-state entities in vocational education [20]. The hierarchical organization of industrial schools remained consistent

with the Japanese model, and the curriculum predominantly adhered to Japanese practices [16]. This paradox—"innovation in nomenclature yet continuity in substance"—is characteristic of a transitional school system.

The Dual-track Institutional Arrangement

The Renzi-Guichou System adopted the dual-track framework of vocational education and general education from the Guimao System [4]. This configuration is derived from the Japanese model. In contrast to the American approach of merging vocational and general education, the Japanese system prioritised a division into separate courses. Despite the 1922 Renxu school system's transition to the American model, the structural dualism persisted, but reinterpreted ideologically—from a hierarchy-based separation to a divide of functional categories.

The Utilitarian Orientation of Newly Added Educational Types

The Renzi-Guichou System established new educational institutions, like as marine schools and vocational schools for women [16]. These enhancements mirrored the pragmatic requirements of industrialisation and societal transition in China. The United States was one of the first nations to methodically establish marine education. Despite the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917 not being passed under the Renzi-Guichou System, the pragmatic focus of American vocational education had already been conveyed to China through alternative means [21].

Why the Renzi-Guichou School System Failed to Complete the Transition

The Renzi-Guichou school system established significant philosophical and institutional foundations for a possible transition to the American model, however it ultimately failed to achieve this transformation. This result can be elucidated by various interconnected structural and contextual elements.

First, the prevailing Japanese-oriented institutional framework had become strongly entrenched, resulting in significant path dependence and institutional inertia. By the early Republican era, the Guimao school system had been functioning for about a decade and had established a very stable institutional framework. In such circumstances, school systems often demonstrate robust self-reinforcing mechanisms. Therefore, a complete abandonment of the Japanese model would have required significant costs for institutional reorganization [8].

Second, the reliance on instructors trained in Japan and Japanese curricular resources significantly limited the potential for swift systemic change. In the late Qing dynasty, China trained a significant number of educators schooled in the Japanese system and translated an extensive array of Japanese educational resources. The human resources and curricular infrastructures represented a substantial type of institutional lock-in and could not be swiftly substituted without causing disruption to the education system [17].

Third, the political instability of the early Republic substantially constrained the state's ability to execute extensive educational reform. During the immediate post-revolutionary period (1912–1913), the political authority of the Republic of China was characterised by instability. Ongoing political strife and institutional instability severely restricted the state's ability to execute extensive educational reform, thereby hindering the practicality of a thorough system overhaul [11].

Fourth, The American vocational education model had not attained the institutional maturity to function as a completely transportable policy framework. Despite the establishment of a formal vocational education system in the United States after the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, the American model had not yet fully evolved into a coherent, standardised, and exportable institutional framework in the early 1910s. Consequently, it exhibited inadequate transferability as a policy model during the formulation of the Renzi-Guichou System [21].

Conclusion

This article employs theories of institutional change and policy transfer to examine the transitional features of the Renzi-Guichou school system in China's vocational education move from the Japanese model to the American model.

The Renzi-Guichou System, at the level of continuity with the past, adopted the institutional framework of the Japanese model as integrated into the Guimao school system, which encompasses the three-tier structure of industrial or vocational education and the dual-track structure of teacher education. Simultaneously, it abolished feudal vestiges such as "loyalty to the emperor and veneration for Confucius," redirecting educational objectives from loyalty to the emperor to utility and from schoolhouses (xuetang) to schools (xuexiao).

Cai Yuanpei's concept of utilitarian education established an intellectual basis for the subsequent incorporation of Deweyan pragmatism at the level of opening toward the future [14,18]. The establishment of the concept of occupational equality further established the theoretical foundation for the transition from industrial education to vocational education. The intellectual advancements jointly established the ideological prerequisites for the formal adoption of the American model in the 1922 Renxu school system.

Nevertheless, because to institutional inertia, path dependence in educators and instructional materials, political instability, and the still-unconsolidated transferability of the American model, the Renzi-Guichou System failed to fully shift from the Japanese model to the American model. The 1922 Renxu school system ultimately achieved this historical objective.

This study emphasises a significant attribute of paradigm shifts in educational policy: they are not sudden breaks but rather incremental modifications. New paradigms frequently arise while the existing paradigm remains in place. The transitional essence of the Renzi-Guichou System is encapsulated in its

progressive evolution; it assimilated the institutional framework of the previous paradigm (the Japanese model) while concurrently fostering the intellectual underpinnings of the emerging paradigm (the American model). This discovery provides theoretical insights into the dynamics of paradigm shifts in modern educational policy transfer.

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Conflict of Interest

No Conflict of interest.

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