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Chinese Students in France: Pedagogy and Politics

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This paper examines two cases of the choice between the role of the intellectual and that of the revolutionary within the context of the New Culture politics of the 1920s. It explores the politicization of Nie Rongzhen, who later served as the Chairman of the Scientific and Technological Commission and held major responsibility for the development of China’s atomic program, in contrast to Dr. Yang Kun who has helped pioneer the area of Minority Studies in China.

The first half of the paper (not presented here) discussed the development of the Work-Study Movement, which between 1919 and 1920 sent over 1600 youths to work in French factories to earn money for their studies in Western universities. The Work-Study Movement organizations, and organizers such as Li Shizeng were discussed in detail, with particular attention paid to the difficulties involved in placing so many worker-students in French factories and schools. Also discussed were the Three Struggles of 1921, which attempted to obtain aid or to mobilize the worker-students around the issue of their own plight. The culmination of the Three Struggles was the Lyon Incident, in which the destitute worker-students hoped that the newly established Sino-French Institute at the University of Lyon would give them a chance to remain in France and study. Over one hundred students went to appeal to Wu Zhishui, who was escorting a group of Chinese youth directly from China to be the first to matriculate at the new institute. Refusing to budge from a dormitory, these hundred worker-students were imprisoned in an abandoned barracks and then extradited back to China. This dramatic conclusion to the Work-Study Movement resulted in an important segment of worker-students deciding to abandon educational routes and to form political parties ranging from Communist to anti-Communist parties. All this transpired on foreign soil.

Nie Rongzhen and the Revolutionary Path

Born in Jiangjin, Sichuan in 1899, Nie Rongzhen, like many of his generation, was influenced by the political momentum of the 1911 Revolution and the New Cultural Movement. Initially educated in the Classics by an uncle, Nie Rongzhen attended a new style school after the 1911 Revolution where he studied Western subjects, and was drawn to the values of the New Culture Movement. Nie Rongzhen became attracted to the Work-Study Movement for two reasons. The first was that he wanted to escape possible official punishment for his participation in the May Fourth Movement. Secondly, he believed that Western technology could save China—his most important reason for going to France.

Arriving in France in 1919, Nie Rongzhen went to school briefly at Montargis, where he met many Chinese worker-students from Hunan, as well as fellow Sichuanese, Chen Yi. After Montargis, Nie alternated periods of study with factory labor. Like many worker-students, Nie Rongzhen was not prepared for the factory experience, nor for the distinction of having to begin as an unskilled labourer. Moreover, the pay was often too low to allow concentrated periods of study. In his longest factory phase, Nie worked in the Creusot-Schneider factory system from January until September 1921.

In October 1921, Nie Rongzhen moved to Belgium to attend the Charleroi Toilers University to study engineering. Living expenses were less costly, and technical courses were emphasized. Besides, as fellow Jiangjin native, Jiang Zemin remarked, Belgians were “particularly friendly to the Chinese ... whereas the French were not as warm as the Belgians.” Finally, a feeling of regional affinity may also have been involved, since among the Sichuanese students at Charleroi there were as many from Jiangjin as there were from the two major cities of Chengdu and Chongqing.

By the summer of 1922, Nie Rongzhen had earned enough money to give him a solid space of time to study. He moved to the congenial, less expensive environs of Charleroi University. It was at this point, while he had the capacity to pursue his technical studies in earnest, that he decided to abandon his college career and devote his full attention to the revolutionary politics of the ECCO (European Branches of the Chinese Communist Organization), formed in mid-1922. For almost four years, Nie Rongzhen had suffered for his view of the need to modernize China through industrialization. He experienced the sadness of leaving his family, the physical deprivations of poverty, and the stress of working in factories and learning a new language and culture. Why did he turn his back on his earlier ambitions?

There were several factors that, according to his own testimony, induced Nie Rongzhen to abandon his technical studies. These factors include the experiential history of the Chinese community in France, the importance of ideological transformation, and the influence of relationships and organizations within the Chinese community. First, the Three Struggles of 1921 aroused Nie Rongzhen, just as they had provoked anger in other worker-students. Confidence in the viability of the Work-Study Movement was undermined by the Three Struggles of 1921. Though on a personal level, Nie Rongzhen was overcoming tremendous obstacles, he was certainly swayed by the disillusionment and hardships of his compatriots.

Secondly, there was an ideological transition that gave Nie Rongzhen an important new vocabulary and a new series of questions. The issues which Marxism raised about the distribution of power and the impact of imperialism gained in persuasive value through Nie’s own observation of the West and the Three Struggles of 1921 (which, for a segment of the Chinese worker-students, took on the dimensions of a class struggle). He finally asked himself the
question, “How could [China] industrialize while control was in the hands of imperialists?” Nie decided that engineering was not as important as changing the power structure in China.

Thirdly, the role of personal relationships and the formation of radical groups played an acknowledged part in Nie Rongzhen’s political commitment. In particular, it was after his arrival at Charleroi that Nie Rongzhen began extended Marxist study with Liu Bojian and Xiong Weigeng. They read and discussed a wide list of Marxist works ranging from the Communist Manifesto to the ABC’s of Communism. Group discussions and the moral leadership of people like Liu Bojian, Zhao Shiyian, and Zhou Enlai were very persuasive in a difficult time of transition.

In addition to the influence of new relationships and mentors in the firming of ideology, the burgeoning organizational impetus was a further factor impelling Nie to abandon technical studies as an ineffective route to modernization. During the summer of 1922 the European Branch of the Chinese Communist Youth Corps (ECYC) was organized, with Zhao Shiyian as the first General Secretary. Nie did not attend the first meeting, but he did join the ECYC in August 1922, introduced by Xiong Weigeng and Liu Bojian. After deciding to give up his technical studies he moved back to Paris, where he began propaganda work in the factories and youth groups for the ECCO. In February 1923, he attended the second ECYC meeting and, during the same period entered the European Branch of the Chinese Communist party (ECCP), introduced by Zhao Shiyian and Liu Bojian. Besides his recruitment work for the ECCO, and a growing stature in United Front work with the Guomindang, Nie Rongzhen attended the night school established by the French Communist Party paper, L’Humanité, where he refined his knowledge of propaganda/ agitation techniques. Leaving Paris in September 1924, Nie received additional training in Moscow.

The case of Nie Rongzhen is particularly significant because his career was so multifaceted. Throughout each phase of pre-1949 CCP history he was at many key incidents (including the founding of the People’s Liberation Army at the Nanchang Uprising and the Long March) and also was privy to the successful military tactics of the Civil War. Furthermore, during the post-1949 phase, Nie Rongzhen played a significant role in defining China’s modernization policy, along with other ECCO cohort members such as Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai, and Li Fuchun. As Chairman of the Science and Technological Commission, it was under Nie Rongzhen’s leadership that the atomic bomb was developed, in addition to other programs of technological advancement. One might ask: to what extent did Nie’s earlier factory experience, training in engineering, and technical orientation inform modernization policies? But given the dramatic intensity of this commitment process during the early 1920s, perhaps the really important question is: did Nie Rongzhen’s overwhelming commitment to political change overshadow possible technological progress in the post-1949 era? It might be too easy to assume that revolutionaries who went abroad had a more sophisticated perception of the West, in contrast to Mao Zedong, who was more parochial. Yet, the very fact that they committed themselves to the ideal of revolutionary change rather than industrial change, might argue a more secure entrenchment of the political perspective than one might have imagined. In Nie’s words, “The beginning point of the revolution is eternally unforgettable.”

Yang Kun and the Role of the Intellectual

Born in Daming, Hebei in 1901, Yang Kun was a precocious child, an only son in a poor family who succeeded in attending several Western-oriented schools. According to Yang, he recognized that, “under the influence of... the New Culture Movement, I perceived in the end that only New Learning [i.e., Western learning] could save China.” The renaissance of China could only be stimulated by those who studied abroad. Like Nie Rongzhen, Yang Kun was also influenced by New Culture values and May Fourth activities. In 1921, Yang Kun’s high scholastic performance allowed him to obtain a scholarship and join the first contingent of Chinese students to matriculate at the Sino-French Institute in Lyon. Thus, while Nie Rongzhen’s close friends were sitting in the Saint Irene military barracks, Yang Kun was one of the hundred students about to land in Marseilles with Wu Zhihui.

Although they crossed the same line in joining the ECCO, the factors of experiential history, ideological transition and influence of relationships and organizations within the Chinese community were different for Yang Kun and Nie Rongzhen. First, Yang Kun arrived after the Three Struggles of 1921, and was indeed part of the hundred students brought to the Sino-French Institute. Matriculating as student number eighteen, Yang pursued his studies throughout any political involvement. His view of the Lyon Incident lacked the genuine anger and alienation that other ECCO members had felt. Yang was impressed, for example, by the fact that Wu Zhihui travelled fourth class with the students he was escorting. Moreover, Yang Kun did not work in a factory. Although he entered the ECCO, he did not have the work-study orientation, nor was he assigned the task of mobilizing the workers.

Secondly, the ideological transformation of Yang Kun lacked the depth of Marxist-Leninist training that many in the ECCO pursued. In part, this was because of the isolation at Lyon, and also because he was attending three classes a day, pursuing his degree. Finally, although the Chinese community in Lyon was divided into several political factions, the strongest political force was the left Guomindang.

In another sense, for Yang Kun, there was also an implicit ideological process that accompanied his exposure, during his studies, to increasingly sophisticated Western theories of political science, anthropology, and sociology. The traditional Confucian penchant for learning as transformation coalesced with his increasing comprehension of the broader contours of theories that went beyond Marxist study.
Yang Kun into the ECCO. It was his close friend and Daming compatriot, Guo Longzheng, or “Big Sister Gu,” who introduced him to Zhou Enlai and the ECCO, which he joined in 1923. Other than testimony to the personal persuasiveness of Guo Longzheng and Zhou Enlai, Yang does not detail other rationales for joining the ECCO. Another personal relationship that probably influenced Yang Kun was his meeting with Zhang Ruoming, who, nine years later, would become his wife.

Yang Kun’s ECCO work in Lyon centred around propaganda, distributed in factories where Chinese labourers from the First World War were working. During the United Front with the Guomindang, Yang’s duties included joining the GMD and becoming the head of propaganda for the party. During the May Thirtieth Incident, Yang also accompanied a contingent of Chinese to Geneva to speak at a League of Nations Conference in 1926.

In 1927, after the April 12th Coup, Yang Kun decided to withdraw from the ECCO. The most direct reason, according to his own testimony, was that he caved in under the pressure of the Western Hills Faction, who controlled Sun Yat-sen University in Canton, and distributed enough stipends at the Sino-French Institute to have students expelled.

There were perhaps other reasons for quitting politics at this stage that Yang’s later pursuits and relationships seem to suggest. First, Yang may have been influenced by Zhang Ruoming, who quit the party in 1924 due to disagreements with Zhou Enlai’s successor, Ren Zhuxian. If personal relations could impel Yang to join the ECCO, they could also do the opposite. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Yang Kun was becoming increasingly involved in his studies. In 1926, he obtained his Master of Science degree, and began work on his doctoral degree in Arts and Letters, with a specialization in sociology. Not only had Yang Kun become increasingly interested in his studies, moving to Paris for the purpose of researching his dissertation, but French professors such as Granet, Mauss and Courant were very impressed him. In 1930, he completed his thesis, “Recherches sur la Cuite des Ancêtres comme principe ordonnateur de la famille chinoise.” The same year, after almost a decade in France, he returned to China with his bride, Zhang Ruoming. He was to fill the first of several academic positions in his career. Clearly, Yang Kun had chosen the route of the intellectual.

Yang Kun was a major pioneer in promoting the study of Chinese minorities. Although he had peripheral connections with Democratic Movements, and mobilized groups sympathetic to the CCP toward the end of the Civil War, the life task of Yang Kun has been to develop the study of Chinese minorities. To this end he has studied their customs and languages, developed several programs and conferences, edited journals, written numerous books and articles, and conducted field surveys. If the CCP lived the life of factory workers, Yang lived the life of the minorities in his field work. Teaching at Yenching University, and chairing the social sciences and later the history department at Yunnan University for thirty years. Yang Kun promoted a Western-style social science, and an educational model of modernization. In the post-1949 period, Yang Kun has suffered several personal and professional wounds as an intellectual, but he also received a well-celebrated visit from Zhou Enlai in 1955, and in 1984 he again entered the CCP. Vigorous at the age of 89, he is still guiding students and conducting research, and is affiliated with the Graduate School of Social Sciences. In the end it is pedagogy, the lure of scholarship, the yearning to develop and share knowledge that still animates Yang Kun.

Conclusion: Modernization—Pedagogy and Politics

The case studies of Nie Rongzhen and Yang Kun illustrate several dimensions of the political dilemma faced by Chinese youth during the New Culture era. Both Nie and Yang participated in the May Fourth Movement, and both testify to the impact of the New Learning, the values of the New Culture Movement, and the ambition to study in the West as a way of obtaining national salvation.

However, once they were in France, their paths diverged. Nie Rongzhen alternated factory work with studies, while Yang Kun was a full-time student. Both came to turning points at which they had to decide whether to pursue revolutionary activity or education as a future. For Nie Rongzhen, who by 1923 had acceded to a full-time student position at Charlevois University, the decision was to abandon technical studies totally for ECCO activities. Yang Kun’s turning point came after participation in party politics. By 1927, he was well on the track to his doctorate in arts and letters, and he consciously withdrew from the ECCO and political activities. Both Nie Rongzhen and Yang Kun had successful careers—Nie as a revolutionary and Yang as an intellectual.

The French experience, and the conscious choice of what role to assume, what career to choose, contain several implications for the relationship between the CCP and the intellectuals, and also for the overall Chinese attitude toward modernization. First, the bifurcation of the Chinese student community in France between the two roles of intellectual and revolutionary had a profoundly divisive political effect on potential allies that has lasted beyond 1949. Chinese intellectuals had long constituted a class which, as it was recruited for government service, provided not only the thinkers, but also the “politicians” of China. These intellectuals had been the major political actors in the past, thus constituting a type of natural competitor for the Chinese revolutionary.

Secondly, because of this deep ideological rift between the revolutionary and the intellectual, it is not inconceivable that real resentment built up within the breasts of the revolutionaries against the seemingly passive role of the intellectuals. They may have considered that the revolutionary lifestyle was one of greater personal sacrifice, and ascribed selfish motives to the intellectuals.
have to ask: how has the lasting predominance of their political identity suffused their attitudes toward modernization? Bolstered by ideological study and the support given by their experiences in the Three Struggles of 1921, the ECCO leaders became imbued with the Leninist concept of the Party as vanguard and the necessity for loyalty and discipline to the party. We must understand that the profound nature of the decision to pursue the revolution meant that they abandoned the traditional intellectual role and at the same time rejected the model of Western industrialization as the primary key to national salvation. This is important because the ECCO cohort included several of the key architects of China's post-1949 modernization, such as Nie Rongzhen, Deng Xiaoping and Li Fuchun. In campaign after campaign, the dominance of politics over pragmatism has retarded modernization in China.

Perhaps by understanding the ideological transformation that took place for a significant portion of the CCP leaders in Europe—this crucial commitment to the revolution—we can better see in the repeating patterns of their political behavior a reaffirmation of their identity as revolutionaries and a rejection of the intellectual vision of an educational/social revolution. In some part this explains the outright hostility and competitive attitude of the revolutionaries vis-à-vis the intellectuals as leaders; and it also gives some insight into the emphasis on politics during the post-1949 path toward modernization in China, as well as the recent hard-line attitude displayed during the Tiananmen Incident.

Thus, the tracks are still deeply rooted in two paths toward social change: the intellectuals, traditional leaders, walk toward the cultural and social transformation of China; and the revolutionaries follow the political path party organization and ideology. As Yang Kun recounted from a discussion with Deng Xiaoping (who did not accept Yang's decision to leave the ECCO to not participate in the revolution) was to be against the revolution. There was only one road to the revolution; certainly there was no third road.