Universal Calling versus Nationalist/Imperialist Pressures
--Notes on CAI Yuanpei and Traveling Ideas in China, 1890-1930

Chaohua WANG
Fellow of IEA Nantes, 2012-13

I Some General Points

Modern Chinese history has been conventionally dated with the Opium War (1839-42) as its beginning. Thereupon, China entered a long modernization period. Ideas introduced to China from abroad – from the West and Japan – in the following decades are often regarded as passing through a one-way journey to reach the Chinese end. Narratives like this is, of course, not unique to China. Most colonized peoples around the world used to narrate their modern national history in this way. The one-way traveling narrative is perhaps particularly true in the field of modern national intellectual histories. Recent scholarship, especially post-colonial studies, aiming at changing this fixed perspective, emphasizes the appropriation, adoption, and adapting efforts on the receiving side of the supposed one-way journey. In so doing, the subjective sovereignty of the colonialized peoples is to be recognized more fully than before, and so to gain greater voices as well. On the other hand, if focusing merely on repudiating Western-centric views, such studies sometime could risk narrowing, instead of broadening, our historical horizon. It is in this sense that intellectual exchange between scholars of varied national backgrounds is most urgently needed, to avoid provincializing our respective national narrative and to gain better understanding of our global co-existence.

In my study on CAI Yuanpei (1868-1940), a leading cultural figure in modern China, I have dealt with the question of traveling ideas constantly. The connectedness of China’s modern experience to that in other places around the world presents itself again and again, sometimes in unexpected manners. World history interplays with national trajectory and individual decisions at various historical intersections. Below I will first recount briefly three examples that demonstrate the multi-directional traveling of ideas in connection to modern Chinese intellectual history in general. Then I shall offer a closer look at CAI Yuanpei’s life story, examining in particular the socio-political and economic circumstances surrounding his effort in founding Academia Sinica, the top scholarly research institution in the country, in 1928-32.

1. China-study scholars generally recognize that there was a boom of intellectual interest in Buddhism at the turn of the twentieth century. It is also well understood that the revival of intellectual Buddhism was to a considerable extent fed by modern Japanese Buddhism at the time (e.g. Ji, 2009; Ip, 2009). What have not been fully investigated are related phenomena outside China. On one hand, Japanese Buddhism in late nineteenth century was itself part of a heightened interest in religion in Japan’s state-building process (e.g. Josephson, 2012). On the other hand, the tendency to explain the West’s rising power in
religious terms was resulted partly from intensified cultural encounters between East and West, best represented perhaps by Max Weber’s study of Protestant spirit and Chinese religions. The global context conditioned the timing and manner of the revival of intellectual Buddhism in the late Qing China.

Buddhism gained general recognition as a great religion in the West in the nineteenth century (it arrived much earlier but was considered dubious for a long time before then). The understanding that several great religions co-existed in human history led to the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, alongside the Chicago World Expo, in 1893-94. An active American Protestant missionary in China, Timothy Richard (1845-1919) attended the parliament conference. His friendship with leading Chinese intellectual reformers, such as Liang Qichao (1873-1929), developed after he returned to China from Chicago (Scott, 2012). At the same time, Thomas Huxley (1825-1895) published in England his lecture-based book, Evolution and Ethics, which was translated into Chinese and published in early 1898 with sensational popularity among leading Chinese intellectuals (Schwartz, 1964). Noticeably, about one-third of Huxley’s lecture is devoted to the origins and philosophical implications of Buddhism, in comparison to intellectual traditions in ancient Greece. Although Chinese Buddhist activists had been promoting “higher Buddhism” since the mid nineteenth century, historical documents show that general intellectual interest in Buddhism did not become an influential trend until well after 1895, when the above-mentioned events had taken place.

2.
A similar and closely related issue is the wide-spread utopian imaginations in many countries at the time. Outside Western Europe and the Americans, the global expansion of capitalism took mainly the form of neo-colonialism. Western imperial Powers competed in grabbing ever more shares of colonized land (resources) and people (market), when the colonized could not industrialize their own economy locally and at the same time local elite/regime tended to cooperate with the colonizers. The upheavals brought about by the neo-colonialism, thereupon, often provided the opportunity for the colonized to imagine social alternatives, within or beyond the anti-colonial goals of national liberation. In China, “nationalist” movement calling for political revolutions was not so much against the Western Powers as against the Manchu court of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). The most striking case would be the 1900 Boxer Rebellion. When an allied army of Western Powers plundered Beijing, forcing the Manchu court to flee to the provinces, literati activists and revolutionaries alike stayed calm and clear in central and south China, without issuing any explicit protests against the Powers.

In the common belief of the time, that socio-political reform must precede anti-colonial struggles, anarchism became one of the appealing strands in the social imaginations, in China as in many other non-Western countries (Dirlik, 1991; B Anderson, 2005). In Tokyo and Paris, Chinese anarchist activists published their own journals and tried to link up with like-minded foreign comrades from 1900s onwards. It is safe to say, at least in the Chinese case, that anarchism provided greater inspiration in social reforms than modern nationalism before the 1911
Republic Revolution, and so than Marxism in the years before the Leninist
October Revolution in Russia in 1917. Although anarchists remained a minority
among Chinese intellectuals, the general interest in anarchism in the non-
Western countries in this period requires continued attention from scholars
around the world.

3.
The third and last example in this section concerns the rising nationalism in the
post-World War I period. In the China-study field, this is usually viewed as an
issue concerning mainly colonized or semi-colonized countries. In the
Washington Conference in 1921, and later during the Canton-Hong Kong Strike
of 1925-26, China demands in her relation to foreign Powers were well noted
already at the time (Fox, 1925[?]; Watson, 1995). The Northern Expedition,
launched from Guangdong in 1926, targeted both the warlords in Beijing and the
unequal treaties with foreign Powers. The successful military campaign (ensuing
complicated political maneuvers and bloody purges that would be beyond the
scope of the current jottings) resulted in the founding of a new government,
controlled by the KMT, in Nanjing in 1928.

Yet, it would be misleading to see the rise of nationalism as merely a non-
Western phenomenon or, as some English commentaries in the 1920s, in
negative light. It would also be wrong to assume that opinions coming from the
West tend to push China onto the road of ever-faster Westernization. In 1931,
the Nanjing government appealed to the League of Nations for advice on
educational reforms. A four-member mission arrived in China for a three-month
field investigation. A report with detailed reform proposals was published the
next year (C. H. Becker, et al, 1932). Here are some key passages from their
“general remarks” at the beginning of the report:

The chief danger lies in the purely formal imitation of the methods and substance
of foreign civilizations. ... It is in its literature, whether it be philosophical,
historical or poetical, that the spirit of a nation is expressed. To replace these
traditions by the products of a foreign civilisation would be to disregard the
spontaneous relation between the mentality of a people and its cultural
manifestation. (p. 24)

The fundamental problem which arises in regard to education in China is not a
question of imitation but of creation and adaptation. European and American
civilisation should play a no more important part in the education of China—if
that education is to be really national and creative—than was played, for example,
by the cultural wealth of antiquity in the formation of Europe, which used the
ancient civilisations to discover itself. (p. 28; emphasis in the original)

We merely wish to emphasise our belief that no form of civilisation which has
developed in another land, and in different conditions, can become the cultural
tradition of the China that is now entering upon an era of reform. New China must
mobilise its forces, and from its own history, from its own literature, from all that
is truly indigenous, extract the materials for a new civilisation that will be neither
American nor European but Chinese. (p. 29)
In other words, in the aftermath of the Great War, there could well be shared concerns among intellectuals from different countries, Western or non-Western, to critically reflect about the pressure and need to modernize local/national cultures around the world. The case also reminds us that, even if there are Western-centric views scattered in the report, the historical situation at the time shall not be read simplistically under a strongly contrasting light between West and East. We always need to attend to the much richer gray shadow covering many layers of our shared past.

II      Cai Yuanpei: His Life Story

1. Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940; biographical information all taken from Collected Works of Cai Yuanpei) was born into an urban lower-middle class family in Shaoxing, a densely populated and commercially developed city in China’s southeast Zhejiang Province. Settling down in Shaoxing for several generations, the Cai family had integrated itself into a locally based managerial class successfully. For Yuanpei’s father’s generation, five of the six Cai brothers were working as managers for traditional-styled banks or shops trading silk products, firms that often had connections with Shanghai or even overseas (e.g. Southeast Asia) businesses. Yuanpei and his own brothers were trained from early teenage years to do accounting jobs for the trading firms. The Cais had marriage arrangement with fellow traders in the city’s business district for at least two generations, including Yuanpei and his brothers (getting married in the 1880s). In the social setting of the nineteenth century, two features marked out the Cais. On the one hand, there had not been a known family member who was successful in the civil-service examination system, the major upward social ladder in pre-twentieth century China. On the other hand, the family had lost all its private connections to the Chinese rural society, a situation peculiar to the trader class of urban areas.

The middle one of three brothers (very little record about their two sisters), Cai Yuanpei proved to be the most talented; and the most talented in their whole neighborhood. Starting as a 17-year-old boy and with some testing failures, he was able to reach the highest possible rung of the extremely competitive examination system to become a royal Hanlin scholar at the young age of 26 in 1894 (Ho, 1962; Elman, 2000). This was an unusual achievement at the time, due to the strictly controlled quota despite rapid population growth in the country. Cai’s success was envied and looked up by millions of others. It also lent him considerable “cultural capital” in later years. Yet, his family background gave him little preparation for the typical “scholar-official” life of the old Confucian China.

It so happened that Cai entered the Hanlin Academy at the time when China’s miserable defeat in the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese War provoked the ruling elite into serious moves of cultural-political reform. The young Hanlin scholar soon found inspiration in anti-Manchu revolutionary movement. He left the court life in Beijing in exchange for rebellious activities in Shanghai, China’s most energetic city at the time. When the authorities came to crack down a few years later, most revolutionaries went to Japan or Southeast Asia as exiles. Cai decided
to go to study in Germany. He stayed there for four years, mostly in Leipzig after an initial stint in Berlin. In the next twenty years, he was to live alternately between Europe and China. This would also be the period when Cai established himself as a leading intellectual figure in modern China.

Briefly speaking, Cai Yuanpei went back to China after the 1911 Revolution overthrew the Manchu rule, when he became the first Education Minister of the newly-established Republic of China in early 1912. Due to changing political situations, he resigned together with other KMT ministers later that year. He then went to live in France in 1913-16, returning to China when he was to be appointed Chancellor of Peking University at the beginning of 1917. His campus reform there contributed directly to the New Culture Movement of those years in general, and to the May Fourth protest of 1919 in particular (Chow, 1960; Schwarcz, 1986). When higher education fell victim of budgetary difficulty under the Beijing warlord government, he resigned from his post (but not accepted nor granted) to go to Europe again, this time with his family and moved between France, Belgium, and Switzerland in 1923-26. Coming back to China again to serve in the Nanjing government, he was firstly the de facto Education Minister, before resigning from the post a year later. He was the founding President of Academia Sinica from 1928 to the end of his life.

2.
Like most of his contemporaries, Cai Yuanpei was affected by the general intellectual trends mentioned in the first section of this paper. For example, as a Hanlin scholar, he followed closely the writings and talks given by Yan Fu (1854-1921), who was responsible for translating Thomas Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* (Schwartz, 1964). After leaving Beijing, Cai met Japanese Buddhist scholars with great enthusiasm in 1899. His first exercises on modern ideas include a short treaties on utilizing Buddhism to save China from her peril in 1899-1900 (never published in his lifetime). His first translation work (done in 1901 and published in 1906) was a multi-volume book on human knowledge by a Japanese Buddhist philosopher.

But, Cai’s interest in Buddhism did not stay for very long. What stayed with him from this detour was his fascination—or, anxiety—towards typology of human knowledge in our modern time. Unlike the other leading intellectuals of his time, most of whom had literati background and received special tutoring in private schools from early age on, Cai’s attention to typology came largely from his earlier self-learning experience that helped him to broaden what was taught at his hometown schools. Another feature distinguishing him from the others was his Confucian belief in moral self-cultivation that had been pushed to the backburner by a lasting trend of philological studies among leading scholars for more than two centuries (Elman, 1984). Again, it was largely thanks to his lack of literati family background. Moreover, coming from an urban trader’s family, he was comparatively less constrained by hierarchical orders and more open to social equality. These three features—attention to typology of human knowledge; belief in moral self-cultivation; and susceptibility to social equality—were further nurtured in European environment during his sojourns there.
3. Leipzig University gave Cai Yuanpei the opportunity to learn not only many subjects in social sciences and humanities, but also how learning might be conducted in an open-minded manner and how new fields might be developed, such as that of psychological anthropology. Most of all, his belief in self-cultivation found echoes in the neo-Kantian ideal that education should take human being’s development as the end, not the means that serves other purposes. In his short tenure as Education Minister in early 1912, Cai insisted on this educational ideal for the new Republic and explained European Enlightenment ideal in the language of Mencius’s moral teachings. The mission of education was set at nurturing human characters that are the healthiest and fullest developed (peiyang jianquan renge). He gave it the highest priority, above patriotism and citizenry education, which might be affected by racial or national interest.

Although Cai was already attracted to anarchist ideas in Shanghai in the first years of the twentieth century, and he kept contact with the anarchist group in Paris when he was in Leipzig, anarchism did not figure explicitly in his ideas until the time when he stayed with his anarchist friends in southern France in the first years of WWI. He was especially convinced by the idea of “mutual aid,” advocated by the Russian thinker Prince Kropotkin. It was the opposite of social Darwinism of perpetual competition between human beings, which was popularized in China by the Huxley book mentioned earlier.

Taking up the Chancellorship at Peking University in 1917, Cai brought with him the neo-Kantian ideal towards knowledge and human development on the one hand and on the other, the anarchist principle of equality and mutual aid. With the former, he expanded the university’s curricula into fields that had not been explored in Chinese higher education, such as Western Classical studies of the Greek civilization, Indian philosophy and culture, studies in Chinese folklores as well as in news media. As for the latter, he reorganized the administrative apparatus to give the faculty total autonomy in teaching and research. Similarly, students were mobilized to run their own affairs on campus. They were also encouraged to participate in public life outside the university, debating international issues, donating to flood victims in the provinces, and running charity night school for janitors of the university—in the same way as Cai and his comrades did to Chinese laborers in France years earlier.

In the traveling of ideas, institution of higher learning is always an important site. It is partly due to the impact of Enlightenment thinking about “knowledge” in human being’s becoming “mature,” and partly due to material-technological development that did not, like the Apple products today, always directly lead to consumer market. Cai Yuanpei’s program of campus reform greatly energized the academic community. The university became a beacon of enlightenment ideal in the country. Naturally, it was also the central base of the New Culture Movement at the time and the anti-imperial demonstrations of the May Fourth Movement in 1919 (Chow, 1960).

However, it also raises questions as to why he gave up the programs there later.
My current research project on Cai Yuanpei mainly focuses on his trajectory in the 1920s and 1930s, up to the time when he eventually concentrated his attention on Academia Sinica alone. Several questions are asked about his political positions and his changing ideas over higher learning. For example, what was his reaction to the report by the education mission of the League of the Nations in 1932, when he had withdrawn from most of educational policy-making involvement? But, most of all, my research has led me to examine the rising nationalism in the aftermath of the WWI, especially the economic and socio-political aspects as the immediate context that conditioned Cai Yuanpei’s changing ideas.

When Cai Yuanpei arrived back in China in late 1916, the Chinese were heatedly debating whether to join the Allies side in the war that was taking place mainly thousands of miles away from their country. An immediate cause was the Chinese city of Qingdao, a former German colony taken over by British and Japanese forces in 1914. Japan was demanding full possession of the city after the war. Cai joined the debate, but his arguments were not about political issues concerning China. Instead, he portrayed the war as a battle between national spirits. While the Russian cultural spirit was the most religious but undisciplined and easy to be corrupt and the German spirit was upbeat and strictly disciplined, only the French culture provided the best possible combination of measured Reason and Beauty in human life, supported by the principles of the French Revolution: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Aiming at reviving her own spirit based on national culture, China should join the French side of the Allies that ought to win the final victory. It may be no surprise, therefore, when the war ended he encouraged students to the celebration rallies in central Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in late 1918, declaring it to be an victory of “General Right over Might” (gongli zhansheng qiangquan) and taking Woodrow Wilson’s diction of self-determination very dearly. Therefore, the Powers’ refusal at the Versailles Conference to let Japan to return Qingdao to China became the trigger of the May Fourth protest. Under public pressure, the Chinese delegation to the conference abstained from signing the final treaty there.

This was only the beginning of a series of disappointment to Cai. The even greater blow came from France and concerning the Boxer Indemnity.

1. Economic-political factors:

a.) The Beijing government under the northern warlords had been running on loans from foreign banks since the 1911 Revolution. In the early 1920s it was under huge pressure of debts, to the point that salary to college faculty was several months in rear for the eight national universities and colleges in Beijing. Cai, with all his prestige, was unable to negotiate with the warlord effectively and left Beijing for Europe in 1923.
b.) As soon as China declared war on Germany and Austria in spring 1917, she was able to terminate the required monthly payments of the Boxer Indemnity to the latter two governments. Half a year later, all the other powers agreed to suspend the payments for a five-year period for China’s joining in the war. When the October Revolution happened in Russia, Lenin’s government announced it would cancel all the unpaid Boxer Indemnity. However, under pressure from other Powers that did not recognize the Soviet government for many years, China had to continue to pay the Tsar’s ambassador to Beijing at the time.

The Boxer Indemnity was scheduled to be paid over 39 years from 1902 to 1940. Starting from late 1911, the payments were withdrawn from tariffs and transferred to designated foreign banks, all managed by the Chinese Maritime Customs controlled by Westerners. It crippled the ability of China’s central government by cut short of its revenue income in large portions.

The U.S. government decided the amount it received exceeded the damage it sustained during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. It decided to “return” the extra part in 1908. The money was then repaid to the Chinese government on a monthly basis, to be spent exclusively on educational affairs. This became a model for financing education in the difficult decades.

c.) Cai and other leading Chinese figures had hoped that all the Powers, supposedly fighting for justice in the war, would “return” the huge amount of the payments after the war ended. Of course they were disappointed. But the situation was worse than they expected, especially in connection to the payments to France.

French franc fell sharply after the war, prompting the French government to put forth a proposal, demanding the Chinese to pay the Boxer Indemnity by “gold franc” instead of the paper one as it had been the case for the previous two decades. Belgium and Italy watched closely and ready to raise their own demands in the same manner. The issue was not resolved at the post-war Washington Conference, as the Chinese refused to comply and was even prepared to bring the case to the International Court in Hague. Thereupon, the corps diplomatique of the Powers in Beijing issued a collective blockade to Chinese effort to convene a long-planned Customs Conference to return tariff autonomy to China (Fox, 1925[?]).

The “gold franc incident” lasted for five years in 1921-25 and led to sharp conflict in China’s domestic politics, too, causing the collapse of at least one cabinet under parliament pressure. In this period, Cai visited France in 1921 and came to stay again in 1923. During the whole time, he worked on appealing to European cultural figures and politicians to return the Boxer Indemnity for China’s cultural and educational affairs.

d.) The Boxer Indemnity disputes were resolved eventually, thanks most of all to the initiative of the USSR. Without informing the Powers, the Chinese government went into secret negotiations with Moscow. It announced the formal diplomatic relationship between the two countries in early 1924, to the surprise of the Western Powers.
Thereupon, a joint commission was set up to handle the large amount of the Russian part of the Boxer Indemnity (about 29% of the total payments to all Powers by China). Cai Yuanpei was nominated to be one of the two Chinese representatives to the commission while he was still in France. Within a year, the U.S. congress, under intense lobbies by liberal intellectuals on China’s behalf, passed its own resolution to “return” the indemnity in total and to set up a seven-member commission to guarantee the spending of the money on cultural matters. These early examples put pressure on the remaining powers. By 1925-26, all the Powers had found their own ways to set up a “returning” scheme with the Chinese government. In the case of France, it was to help a joint bank that had collapsed in 1921 (the French government owned 80% majority and the Chinese side 20%, when the bank was revived in 1925).

e.) As mentioned earlier, the 1920s was also a period of political upheavals and civil wars in China. Cai Yuanpei played an instrumental role in helping Chiang Kai-shek to crush the Communists in Chiang's bloody purge of early 1927. Cai supported the Chiang regime to the extent that when the government infringed the Russian fund to finance military budget, Cai did not raise any voice. The only protest came from the British official at the Maritime Customs.

In return to Cai’s support, (we might imagine it as a return on Chiang's part, while Cai kept silent on the question throughout his life), it became a fixed rule that Academia Sinica, together with the Palace Museum on the basis of the former Forbidden City in central Beijing, would be given budgetary guarantee as ministerial level units. The rule is still followed in Taiwan today, long after the Boxer paying schedule ended in the 1940s.

2. Changing Environment for Educational Reform

In the Constitutional Movement in the last years of the Manchu rule in the 1900s, and in the first year of the Republic, educational reformers usually had local basis in their home provinces. The central government set up a model of “national conference on education” similar to what was taking place in Germany at the same time. Most policy proposals would be put forward during these conferences and debated among elite activists coming from the provinces and gathering in Beijing for the conferences. The nearly two decades of weak government and continued wars among the warlords or between the ideologically led political parties, local activism of the late Qing time had all disappeared.

In addition to this general situation, Cai himself had been seriously alienated from younger generations in the 1920s. He retained his idealistic feature, but it was no longer capable of linking up with idealistic youngsters. For twice, in Paris in 1921 and in Nanjing in 1931, he was surrounded by angry young students and even attacked physically. It was an important factor in our interpretation of Cai's changing attitude towards education—namely, his decision to turn away from educational affairs and concentrate on Academia Sinica in the last decade of his life.

3. The Establishing Effort of Academia Sinica
Academia Sinica was the sole remain of an educational reform plan Cai attempted to install in China when he assumed the role of the de facto Education Minister in 1928. The system he envisaged was modeled after the French one, dividing the whole country into several educational districts, with a national university on top of each to guide the programs in primary and middle schools, with Academia Sinica sitting on top of the whole national system, pointing to the principal importance of research in all national educational matters. The plan was forcefully put into place, due to Chiang Kai-shek's backing with military might. However, it encountered sustained protests from both students and cultural elites around the country. It was eventually given up in late 1929, leaving Academia Sinica to stand alone with its conferred cultural prestige.

The report by the education mission of the League of the Nations in one way supported Cai's position, criticizing the Chinese higher education at the time as completely lack planning, leaving many provinces with no college or university at all while repetitive ones clustered in big cities like Shanghai and Beijing. But in another way, the report holds the opposite views from Cai's position. It believes the most important thing in our modern time should be public education, starting from the primary level up. By the report's judgment, primary education in China at the time was the weakest in the whole national program, especially in budgetary support. Higher standard and higher level schools sucked up most of the available funding, leaving the masses to themselves. This would not be helpful for the expected revival of national spirit.

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