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Chinese universities' social education: a historical perspective (1912–1945)

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During the Republican period, all fields of Chinese society were impacted by advanced Western ideas, society was exposed to numerous problems, and school education was incapable of assuming the responsibility of cultivating talents, so social education was highly emphasized. This study takes the policy decrees related to social education issued by the Ministry of Education from 1912 to 1945 as an entry point, and takes universities that promoted social education as a medium to explore the historical process of universities serving the society in the context of China's political change and cultural integration. During the Republican period, social education was carried out under four different concepts, namely, common education, Civilian education, mass education, and anti-Japanese War Education, and universities played an active role in promoting the cause of social education. Studying the whole process of university social education from a historical macro perspective, it is found that it provides the opportunity for the out-of-school group to relearn and improves the level of popular culture and knowledge. At the same time, it provides valuable Chinese experience in building a learning society and realizing lifelong education worldwide, and is of practical significance to countries with similar problems.

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Introduction

Social education is one of the important forms of education in modern China, and refers to social education activities that affect the physical and mental development of individuals, in parallel with school education and family education. The deepening of the national crisis in modern China has made the advanced Chinese realize that only by comprehensively improving the knowledge quality of the people and stimulating the strength of the people can they truly achieve salvation. In the old China with a declining economy and continuous wars, it was difficult to complete such tasks by relying solely on formal school education. Thus, social education came into the vision of Chinese people.

In the early 20th century, the term “social education” was gradually introduced to China with the translation of various foreign educational theories. The concept of social education first appeared in Germany in the 1830s, referring to the provision of education for the improvement of social life at all levels of society. (Wang, 2000, pp.37–41) Between 1892 and 1910, the term “social education” was widely used in Japanese educational circles. Japanese educational circles regard Yamana Jiro’s *Theory of Social Education* (*shehui jiaoyu lun*) of 1892 and Sato Yoshiharu’s “*Recent Social Education Methods*” (*zuijin shehui jiaoyu fa*) of 1899 as the period when the term “social education” and its concepts came into being. (Liang, 1994, p.15) During this period, *The World of Education*, the first educational journal in modern China, was founded in China (May 1901). In 1902, *The World of Education* (*jiaoyu shijie*) published *The Family Education Methods* (*jiating jiaoyu fa*) written by a Japanese, in which the term “social education” appeared. In the same year, *The World of Education* (*jiaoyu shijie*) translated Sato Yoshiharu’s “*Recent Social Education Methods*” (*zuijin shehui jiaoyu fa*) (1899). The term “social education” was first introduced to China by the Japanese educational circles, judging by the way it was mostly translated from Japanese sources. (Wang & Liu, 2022, pp.1–10) Since then, the term “social education” began to be understood, and the concept of social education developed in China with the spread of foreign social education ideas.

Social education is “a historical concept in the process of change.” (Yu, 2005, pp.18–25) The change of the concept is always accompanied by the change of the content. In different historical development stages, the content of social education presents different faces. This study presents the historical development and process of Chinese universities’ participation in social education from 1912 to 1945, according to the natural state of social education development and based on the successive decrees on social education issued by the government. During the Republic of China period, China’s social education system was more complete, with the Ministry of Education actively promulgating and promoting social education policies, and the content of social education was richer, leading to a diversification of the content of social education. Common education refers to the social education in the early years of the Republic of China that teaches the public about popular culture, science, current affairs, etiquette and civic morality, with the aim of promoting moral cultivation and inculcating common sense. Common education takes the form of popular lectures and popular museums. After the May Fourth Movement, with the emergence of the ideology of civilian education, social education centered around civilian education. Civil education refers to the elimination of irrational social phenomena by improving the literacy and knowledge of civilians, with the aim of emphasizing the improvement of social morality, national common sense, national responsibilities and rights, and so on. Civilian education takes the form of literacy and vocational education. Mass education emerged during the period of the Nanjing National Government,

and it had the political coloring of the Nationalist Party’s training and education. The Ministry of Education of the Nanjing National Government issued the Outline for the Issuance of Mass Schools, which defines popular education as literacy, the Three Principles of the People, general knowledge, numeracy, and music and song; in addition, it may be accompanied by light reading material such as history, geography, nature and hygiene, and it may be accompanied by additional subjects such as agriculture or commerce and industry, as appropriate to the local situation. (SHAC, 1994, p.683) Anti-Japanese war education is a unique form of social education in China, which arose during the Anti-Japanese War. During this period, social education was dominated by resistance education, which refers to the form of education implemented in the post-war bases during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, the content of which was changed from the pre-war popular lectures and civilian education aimed at improving the quality of the nationals to the purpose of social education in the “extraordinary period”, i.e., “to train the nation’s uneducated population to achieve international equality through the concepts of nationhood, popularity, national spirit, physical fitness and civic knowledge.” (Du, 1937, p.22).

This study will highlight how four different types of education in university social education in four different historical periods carried out educational activities on various cultural and life knowledge in the Republican period. Modern Chinese universities are important bearers of social education and have carried out a rich and varied range of practical social education activities. This study aims to address the following questions: why do universities’ involvement in social education in the Republican period present 4 stages? What were the specific contents of these 4 stages of social education? How did universities interact with the social and economic life of the time when implementing social education? What is the significance of university participation in social education in the Republican period, and what are the implications and impacts on contemporary university participation in social education?

This study mainly uses two research methods: textual analysis and data analysis. This study collects and organizes a large number of social education policies and decrees issued by the Ministry of Education during the Republic of China period, so as to study how universities implemented these policies. This study mainly refers to and uses a large number of primary historical data from the Republican period, which are mostly compilations of data. These data have not been recompiled by later generations, and they restore the real historical facts of China, which helps scholars understand the participation of Chinese universities in social education. Meanwhile, this study compiles the specifics of the establishment of popular libraries in some Chinese provincial universities in 1918. These data are from the compilation of Chinese Republican history archives organized by the Second Historical Archives of China. It aims to illustrate the positive impact of the universities’ establishment of popular libraries at that time, and to visualize the success of the universities in carrying out popular education. Although the table does not completely show the situation of universities founding popular libraries in each province of China, it is undeniable that, given the vastness of China and its uneven economic development, universities still achieved a better impact by founding popular libraries.

University participation in common education (1912–1919)

Common education began in 1912 when China ended more than two thousand years of feudal dictatorship and new systems and ideas were introduced into the country. Faced with the low level

of national quality, the government and educated people began to change their perspective on understanding Chinese education, and put forward a policy and model of developing national education outside the school sphere, with a focus on common education to advance the cause of social teaching. On 18 July 1915, the Ministry of Education's *Decree on the Establishment of the Society for the Study of Common Education 關於設立通俗教育研究會呈並大總統批令* was published, emphasizing that

our school education is far behind that of other countries, and most of the general population has no knowledge and no training. The majority of the people in our country have never studied and have no training, and the need for common education is particularly urgent in other countries..... Therefore, common education is an urgent task nowadays. (SHAC, 1991a, pp. 1643–1646).

Social education at this stage revolved around common education, including the improvement of novels, operas, and other entertainment and artistic activities. Universities were involved in common education through the creation of popular libraries and a series of lectures, to use the human and material resources of the university to provide people with the opportunity and conditions to learn and to improve the quality of the nation and its intellectual culture.

Creation of popular libraries. On 18 July 1915, the Ministry of Education promulgated a decree on the Research Association for Common Education, which was submitted to and approved by the President. Common education refers to the type of social education that imparted popular culture, science, current affairs, etiquette, and civic moral knowledge to the public in the early years of the Republic of China. According to the decree,

The former Governor's Department drew up 18 articles of the Constitution of the Research Association for Common Education, paying attention to the improvement of novels, operas, and lectures on various matters of interest to the general public, and now intends to select and gather members, meet regularly, study with strength, seek all investigations, and organize proper methods to redeem the decadent customs and correct the hearts of the people. It seems to be of great benefit to the future of social education. (SHAC, 1991b, p.104).

Considering that libraries are meant for the general public, the Ministry of Education again outlined social regulations on 23 October 1915, stating that libraries are “essential for the recognition of culture, promotion of national glory, expansion of knowledge, and revitalization of learning and art”, as well as “essential for the inculcation of general knowledge and the enlightenment of the nation”. (SHAC, 1991a, p.104) After the publication of the regulations, libraries were established in provinces and cities across the country to provide books for public reading. Table 1 presents the established libraries in universities in each province in March 1918.

As shown in Table 1, the number of popular libraries run by universities nationwide is small, considering the large and complex population of China, with countless people who are out of school. The establishment of popular libraries by universities is limited by financial and personnel constraints, resulting in a small number of popular libraries being established by universities. Most books are restricted to students, teachers, and affiliated schools, and other people cannot borrow them and have to pay for them, causing dissatisfaction among readers. Still, the creation of popular libraries has brought positive effects. The

basic bibliography is simple and easy to understand, and the language is plain, which helps to improve the basic knowledge and reading interest of the general public. Secondly, popular libraries were recognized and supported by many educators. Lu Xun highly praised the popular library in Beijing. He personally participated in the opening ceremony of the popular library in Beijing. In 1913, it was recorded in *Lu Xun's Diary* that “in the afternoon, the popular library opened and went there.” (Lu, 2022, p.319) The participation and support of educators greatly promoted the development of the popular library. The most prominent of these was the establishment of the Ministry of Education's *Study of Common Education* in 1915, which aimed at ‘studying matters of popular education, improving society, and popularizing education.’ (Yang, 2011a, p.3).

Participation in speaking engagements. Social education in the early Republic of China was most prominent in popular lectures. Lectures helped bring the speaker closer to the audience as well as speak face-to-face in a way that was more direct and easier to understand for the audience than learning from books, without limitations of place and time. Thus, popular speech effectively enhanced the quality of educational activities for the people.

In the early Republic of China, in response to revolutionary propaganda and the idea of nation-building, the Ministry of Education sent telegrams to all provinces to focus on popular propaganda and prepare for social education. Accordingly, the ministry stated that “social education is also an urgent task today. The way to start is to focus on preaching..... As for the standard of propaganda, it should generally focus on the facts of this innovation, the rights and duties of the people of the Republic, and the promotion of martial arts and industry, with particular emphasis on the morality of citizens.” (Qu & Tang, 1991a, p.601) This message was the first to be issued by the Ministry of Education on the significance of social education. The early Republic focused on preaching and proposed that strengthening the moral qualities of the people was a “fact of renewal”. Thereafter, the Ministry of Education issued several decrees and regulations such as the *Statutes of the Society for the Study of Common Education 通俗教育研究會章程* in July 1915, and *Methodology of the Institute of Common Education and Lectures 通俗教育講演傳習所方法* in April 1916. In the Regulations of the Institute of Lecturing and Training in Common Education, the *Methodology of the Institute of Common Education and Lectures 通俗教育講演傳習所方法* was stipulated, which suggested that “lecture practice shall constitute one-third of the total practice of lecturing”. Formulation of these regulations indicates that the activities of the social circles and university societies, with common education at the center of this period, were focused on lecture activities. The May Fourth Movement¹ represented the culmination of popular speech. “Once this trend started, whenever there were major political events or other matters that required general propaganda, open-air classes were always one of the important propaganda methods. The May Fourth Movement, in essence, brought a major change in the history of popular speech.” (Lv, 1927, p.275).

The Civilian Education Lecture Group is one of the most representative organizations that is run by Peking University. Since its inception, the mission of the group has been to ‘promote the intelligence of the common people and arouse their consciousness. The group appealed that: “Do you know that there is a lecture group for the education of the common people? The purpose of the group is to instill adequate knowledge among the common people..... Isn't the prerequisite for saving the country the conscious effort of the people?” (Zhang et al., 1979, p. 1832) The main contents of the lecture group's reports were: the analysis of the political situation in China and foreign countries;

Table 1 Overview of the establishment of libraries by universities in some provinces and cities in 1918.

Province	Library name	Book lending request	Book Catalogues	Library fees and coupons	Annual funding
Beijing	Higher Normal School Library	No books will be loaned out except for reference by faculty research departments and for student use as designated by the Director of Academic Affairs	A catalogue letter, modelled on the Imperial Library in Tokyo, Japan, in which the book plates are prepared in accordance with the De Witt's ten-point classification and stored for easy reference	One coin for reading magazines and newspapers, two coupons for ordinary books, half for students, five coupons for the Four Books, ten coupons for the Good Book, and one coupon for the Premium Book. Free coupons	15,000
Tientsin	National Peking University Library	Teachers and students	As catalogued in the US National Library	Free	1800
Shandong	Cheeloo University Library	No loan of dictionaries	Chinese Books by Confucian classics, history, philosophy and literature; Western language by decimal classification	Free	Uncertain
Jiangsu	Higher Normal School Library	No loan of Reference books	Decimal classification	Free	Uncertain
Jiangsu	St.John's University Library	All	Decimal classification	Free	Uncertain
Jiangsu	Nantong School Library	Lendable with permission of officer	Confucian classics, history, philosophy and literature, Book Series	Two copper dollars per volume	2000
Jiangsu	Nanking University Library	No more than 3 books at a time	Western language by decimal classification; Chinese by Si ku quan shu	Free	Uncertain
Hubei	Boone University Library	All	Decimal classification	Free	3500
Hubei	Wuchang Higher Normal School Library	Staff only	Chinese by Si ku quan shu	Free	Uncertain
Jiangxi	William Nast College Library	All	Subject Classification	Free	360
Hunan	College of Yale-in-China Library	All	Decimal classification	Free	158
Guangdong	Lingnan School Library	All	Uncertain	Free	500 Hong Kong Dollars

(Source: Shen Shaoqi, Education Bulletin, fifth year, March 1918; from the Second Historical Archives of China, Compilation of archival materials on the history of the Republic of China (Third Series Culture), Jiangsu Ancient Books Publishing House, 1991 edition, 118 pp.)

the promotion of science, democracy, patriotism, basic education, quality education, and basic general knowledge of life. The lecture groups before the May Fourth Movement focused on general knowledge and general enlightenment, whereas most lectures after the movement had an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal flavor.

During the Northern Expeditionary War² and Nanjing National Government³, popular lectures mainly focused on promoting patriotism and national salvation. The Civilian Education Lecture Group printed leaflets and slogans to arouse the people to struggle hard and support the Party and the army. (SHAC, 1991b, pp.1643–1646) Popular lectures were mainly in the form of street and radio speeches, thereby arousing the patriotic sentiment of the people. Popular lectures catered to the needs of the times to save the country and allowed people to seek enlightenment and new ideas. Thus, lectures promoted new ideas and knowledge among the people, and to a certain extent, contributed to the “opening up of the people’s wisdom” and inspired patriotic enthusiasm among the people. This form of oral education was more accessible than bookish knowledge and enabled a wider range of people to acquire knowledge.

University participation in civilian education (1919–1927)

The idea of populism had long been widespread in the democratic republics of Europe and America. The idea of populism education spread only during the May Fourth Movement. The outbreak of the May Fourth Movement was epoch-making in modern Chinese history, which brought advanced ideas from Europe and America to China; thus, the idea of populism education flourished.

In 1919, Dewey came to China and gave academic lectures in various places, and one of his lectures centered on the dissemination of his ideas on education for the common people. Dewey’s articles on education for the common people were published in a series of issues of *New Education* magazine. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey states: “The social environment exerts its educational and molding influence unconsciously and without any purpose. If the school is divorced from the conditions of effective education in its external environment, it is bound to replace the spirit of society with the spirit of bookishness and pseudo-rationalism. Education is a social process, education is a social function.” (Dewey, 1916, pp.246) Civilian education aims to inspire the consciousness and democratic consciousness of the vast majority of the common people through education. The education of society at this stage was centered on the “education of the common people”, advocating universal education, opposing the hierarchical and privileged nature of education and demanding respect for individual values and the development of individuality. This is reflected in the fact that, firstly to eradicate illiteracy through literacy education and to improve people’s basic ability to read, write and speak; secondly, the education of the people did not stop at the level of literacy, but taught them the knowledge and skills to earn a living. Therefore, at this stage, the university’s involvement in education for the common people was manifested in literacy education for the common people and education for vocational livelihoods.

During the May Fourth Movement, the Ministry of Education and educational scholars set up compulsory schools, which later became schools for the common people, to realize the desire to “open up the minds of the people”. In this period, some representative civilian education groups included the Peking University Civilian Education Lecture Group set up by students of Peking University in 1919 and the Peking High School Civilian Education Society set up by staff and students of the Beijing Higher Normal School (the predecessor of Beijing Normal University) in the same year. The Association for the Promotion of

Civilian Education, founded by educators Tao Xingchi and Yan Yangchu in 1923, has a well-established organizational structure and a systematic theoretical basis. The association has been active for the longest time and has had the most far-reaching influence.

Participation in civilian literacy education. The earliest decree on literacy education for the common people, *Recommend the Outline of the Constitution and the Election of the House of Representatives be Considered and That Preparations Be Made from Year to Year* 奏遵議憲法大綱暨議院選舉各發並逐年應行籌備事宜折, was proposed by the Constitutional Affairs Editorial Office in 1908. The decree proposed the outline of a plan to promote simple literacy. The most representative *decree of the Simple Literacy School* 簡易識字學塾章程 promulgated in 1909 stipulated that “those who are old and out of school and anxious to make a living may attend this school for either three years or two years or one year.” (Zhu, 1987, p.349) The 1910 *Regulations for Simple Literacy Schools* 奏改訂簡易識字學塾章程折 amplified the original decrees. These decrees and regulations indicate that the government attached importance to promoting literacy among the common people. Meanwhile, the university, which had always been an institution for “teaching profound scholarship and nurturing great learning” was naturally charged with the responsibility of popularizing literacy among the people.

According to the *Ministry of Education’s Administrative Records* 教育部行政輯要, many public tutorials, half-day, and simple literacy schools were set up in Beijing and other provinces under the ruling of the Republic of China. During the May Fourth period, many universities in Beijing established schools for the common people and compulsory schools specifically for the university staff and for the people in the neighborhood. This initiative in Beijing attracted universities and colleges throughout the country, which facilitated the opening of schools for the common people all over the country.

The most representative university is the Beijing Higher Normal University (BHHU) Civil Education Association, which is the oldest established. It founded the journal *Democracy and Education* on 10 October 1919. It was promoted to ensure that everyone knew “what happiness is and how to achieve it. Therefore, the civilian education we want to talk about is not limited to the scope of the school but all kinds of things in society are materials for education, which can be mentioned and criticized, and those who do not deviate from the civilian say so.” (BNUHL, 1984a, p. 437) How to achieve civilian education? The BHHU Civilian Education Association believed that “it is more important to focus on the aspect of common sense and phonetic alphabet.....I hope that you will focus on the aspect of common sense and enlighten those who do not have common sense, which is basic education”. (BNUHL, 1984b, p.38) From 1919 to 1925, the BHHU Civil Education Lecture Group repeatedly emphasized the importance of knowledge and the significance of simple literacy as important themes in its lectures: *The Usefulness of Knowledge* 知識的用處 and *Why Do We Need to Study* 為什麼要讀書 by Deng Kang; *People Need to Study* 人要讀書 by Song Jingui; *Knowledge and Literacy* 知識與幸福 by Huang Danchu and *Phonetic alphabets (I–VI)* 注音字 (一~六) by Liu Xiwu. This civilian literacy campaign does not offer a literacy curriculum or any learning opportunities, but simply the importance of literacy.

In 1920, Yan Yangchu’s return to China brought civilian education to a climax and resulted in the establishment of civilian schools in all areas. The National Government prioritized literacy education in the popular training agenda in 1927. In 1929, the Ministry of Education twice promulgated the *Outline of the Propaganda Plan for the Literacy Campaign* 識字運動宣傳計畫大綱 and the *Preliminary Plan for the Implementation of Adult Remedial Education* 實施成年補習教育初步計畫. The former

included seven propaganda methods such as holding lectures and posting banners, 13 propaganda locations such as playgrounds and cinemas, and 23 propaganda contents. The latter was “called Adult Remedial Education, but in fact, it was a specific program to promote literacy education.” (Yang, 2011b, p.251) This indicates the importance attached to literacy campaigns at all levels by the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, literacy education for the general public, in which the university associations were involved, had a markedly different level of implementation and effectiveness compared with the provisions of the decree issued by the Ministry of Education.

Participation in vocational education. The progress of vocational education was successful in the Republic of China. For instance, the *Industrial School Order* 實業學校令 and *Industrial School Regulations* 實業學校規程 issued by the Ministry of Education in 1913 stipulated the qualifications of teachers, types of schools, and the content of courses in industrial supplementary schools. The *Industrial School Order* stipulated that “industrial schools shall aim to teach the knowledge and skills necessary for agriculture, industry, and commerce” and that “the types of industrial schools shall be agricultural schools, industrial schools, commercial schools, merchant marine schools, industrial remedial schools, etc.” (Qu & Tang, 1991b, p.732) Vocational education advocated the establishment of vocational remedial schools and experimental zones throughout the country. Various vocational education schools were set up across all the provinces of the country during this period; however, the experimental zones were more active than some social groups and private individuals in providing vocational livelihood education.

In 1917, Huang Yanpei founded the Chinese Vocational Education Association (CVEA), while adhering to the principle of “enabling the jobless to have a job and those who have a job to enjoy it”. According to Huang Yanpei,

the shortcoming of education in our country today is that learning is not enough to make it useful, and the accumulated habits of students are especially in the disdain for labor and disdain for work, resulting in the graduation from school and unemployment in the society. As a result, many people have graduated from school but are unemployed in society. (Chinese Vocational Education Society (1983), pp.9–10).

Therefore, CVEA set up three special vocational schools in 1929: the Chinese Vocational Education Association Vocational Training School; the Chinese Vocational Education Association Staff Training School, and the Chinese Vocational Education Association Tongwen School.

Since the inception of the CVEA, the number of employees increased rapidly within five years, from 786 in the first year of its establishment to 4812 in 1922. Furthermore, 834 vocational schools were established nationwide. The number of vocational schools was 842 in 1916, 531 in 1918, 842 in 1921, 1209 in 1922, 1548 in 1925, and 1518 in 1926. (Tian & Li, 1993, p.249) This is a good example of private participation in vocational education. In the case of the vocational and specialized schools, 6 students were aged > 30 years, 2 were aged < 15 years, and the majority were aged between 20 and 22 years. In the case of staff remedial schools, the oldest student was aged 34 years, the youngest student was 14-year-old, and the majority was aged between 16 and 21 years. (Tian & Li, 1993, p.249) These numbers indicate that the students aged between 16 and 22 years accounted for the largest proportion in vocational schools. Moreover, the students who are unable to enter university chose to enter vocational schools as an option at the time. From another

perspective, it represents a form of participation in vocational remedial education, replacing university involvement in vocational remedial education.

In 1933, students from the Great China University (GCU) initiated the Shanghai Rural Livelihoods Education Programme, which was set up in the western countryside of Shanghai as an experimental area, and founded the Rural Nianer Association 農村念二社. The organization is an educational service group that aims to promote the revival of the nation and transformation of the society. In 1936, the GCU established the Education Experimental Zone and Popular Education Experimental Zone. The two zones were later merged to create the Minsheng Education Experimental Zone in Western Shanghai. In this zone, livelihood activities such as systematic education in various areas, carriage pulling activities, and a series of life skill educational activities such as education on laundry, cloth collection, mathematical calculation, and savings and selling, which lasted until after China’s victory in the war against Japan.

Vocational education is not a fundamental solution to China’s poverty and weakness, and the situation facing those who teach it is even more difficult as the recipients become suspicious of and lose confidence in vocational education institutions.

University participation in mass education (1927–1937)

Mass education is the minimum and most basic education required of young people and adults in general, as well as those who have had inadequate or insufficient education. (Zhou, 2006, p.19–23) Unlike common education and civilian education, mass education emerged with the establishment of the Nationalist government and was gradually given a political dimension based on the needs of the Kuomintang’s (KMT’s) political training. Mass education aimed at “Party Education”⁴ and “Education for the Three People’s Principles”⁵. Social education during this period was handled by the provincial party ministries, which taught literacy, public health, and general knowledge through remedial education, and set up popular remedial schools and evening schools. Social education in this period was centered on “mass education”. Thus, the university’s involvement in mass education was mainly manifested by shifting its perspective from the city to the countryside, gradually going there to give lectures and propaganda. They made use of rural facilities such as rural primary schools, temple fairs, temples, and open spaces in villages, and often prepared books and newspapers for the public to read.

Participation in remedial education for the population. On 22 January 1929, the Ministry of Education promulgated the *outline of the mass school system* 民眾學校辦法大綱, which clearly stated that “the purpose of the mass schools is to teach older school leavers simple knowledge and skills following the Three People’s Principles, so that they can adapt to social life” and that “all male and female school leavers aged over twelve and under fifty years old were to be provided with remedial education”. The curriculum in the mass schools mainly comprised “the Three People’s Principles, general knowledge, bead, and pencil arithmetic, and musical songs, in addition to such light reading as history, geography, nature, health, and other subjects such as agriculture or industry and commerce, at the discretion of the local community.” (SHAC, 1991c, p.693) During this period, mass education was mainly promoted through the establishment of mass schools by the Ministry of Education, which provided remedial education to people who could not complete formal education. Since the publication of the outline, in 1929, the number of mass schools in Hebei Province was the largest, amounting to 287, and the smallest one was only 6 in Chahar Province. Faced with the large number of illiterate groups in China, such achievements are far from enough. The Ministry of Education has once again issued a directive: “We hope that all provincial,



Fig. 1 A graduation certificate issued in July 1935 to a student, Wang Zhixia, at the University of China's Mass School. The student has passed the three-year junior high school education period and is granted a graduation certificate.

municipal, and county education administrative agencies, with the focus on mass education, will formulate their own promotion plans for this year in accordance with the outline of measures for mass schools previously issued by the Ministry, and will actively increase the number of mass schools within their jurisdiction.” (Department of General Affairs Ministry of Education (1930), p.22) Zhejiang Province responded positively to the call of the Ministry of Education and formulated a ten-year program of universal mass school education in 1923. Figure 1 shows the graduation certificate of Wang Zhixia, a student of the mass school in 1923. Mass schools have been established in large numbers with the support of the Ministry of Education, providing the out-of-school population with opportunities for remedial education, raising the level of education of the population and reducing the number of illiterates.

In 1928, Yu Qingtang established the Jiangsu University Mass Education School, which was merged with the Workers and Farmers School in 1930 to establish the Jiangsu Provincial Education College (JPEC), followed by the establishment of other schools and experimental areas of mass education. In 1931, she set up the Chinese Social Education Association and co-organized the Huaxi Rural Education Experimental Zone with the National Sun Yat-sen University and the Beixia Experimental Zone of Mass Education with the JPEC. Yu Qingtang tried “a basic education for children, youth and adults who had lost their schooling, and a continuing education and refresher course for those who had already received basic education.” (Mao, 1992, p.2) She observed that traditional school education was out of step with society and isolated from the realities of life. Thus, she promoted mass education to make the whole population the object of education and use life education as the teaching material so that education could better transform society and people's lives. In a sense, Yu Qingtang considered the people as an object of education, moving from mass education to “education for all”. Yu Qingtang's contribution to folk education allowed the university to act as a venue for the realization of mass education and allowed more university students, faculty members, and educators to realize that mass education could improve society and lives.

Participation in the work of the Mass Education Centre. In response to Sun Yat-sen's desire to “arouse the public”, educators realized that they could not guarantee the development of social education with their strength and had to use the power of the government to promote social education. In 1928, the Mass

Education Centre in Jiangsu Province issued the following statement:

All counties handle education for the public, some call it popular, some call it mass, and some call it expanded, but the intrinsic is the same, but the names are different, which is not the spirit of unity in education; moreover, the facilities of education were originally intended to be close to the public to achieve considerable results, but with the complicated names, it is easy to arouse suspicion among the public. Why not named it “mass education”? It is more appropriate to name them directly after the people so that the people will know at a glance where the intention is. (Huang, 1932, p.28).

In 1929, the Ministry of Education changed the name of the “Common Education Centre” to “Mass Education Centre”. According to the *First Yearbook of Education History*, 20 provinces established mass education centers. In August 1919, the Provincial Zhenjiang Common Education Centre was renamed as Nanjing Mass Education Centre in Jiangsu Province. Further, the Hebei Provincial Experimental Rural Mass Education Centre was set up in 1918 by the extensive education department of the Beijing University Academie and was finally established on 14 February 1920 at the former Jingzhao Career School.

Mass education centers were set up in schools or handled by one of the local universities, which was dominated by mass education centers, with lectures, publications, and reading as the main forms of education. To improve the quality of orators and ensure the quality of speeches, the lecturers were selected based on the following criteria: first, the staff who were mostly well educated, such as the lecturers of the Hunan Provincial Common Education Center, having an educational background of a specialist or above; second, conducting training courses for lecturers or organizing lecture competitions to recruit winners as lecturers. (Mao, 2006, p.29) In the course of their involvement in mass education, universities actively conducted folk lecture theaters with many quality speakers. University societies preached around throughout the Republic of China period, and the content of university lecture associations changed from themes such as literacy, general knowledge, life, and health for the common people to patriotism, freedom, and equality. University lecture associations had the spirit of the times to keep up with the times.

The mass education halls are one of the most important institutions of social education, meeting the aspirations and requirements of people of all ages and educational situations through a variety of means, such as lectures, publications, library readings, and bibliobuses⁶. The university was not as involved in the education of the people as it had been during the commoners' education period, but it still played an active role.

University participation in the Anti-Japanese War Education (1937-1945)

The 8-year war against Japan, from 1937 to 1945, was an ‘extraordinary period’ of great political, economic, and cultural devastation. The aim of social education shifted from the pre-war popular lectures and civilian education, for improving the quality of the nation, to “train the nation's out-of-school population to attain international equality with a national concept, a folk concept, a national spirit, a strong physical fitness, and civic knowledge” (Du, 1937, p.22), this is also a requirement for education during the Anti Japanese War. Therefore, the KMT's Central Committee and the provincial governments particularly focused on the promotion of social education during this period, promulgating a series of ordinances such as the *Measures for the*

Provision of Social Education in Schools at All Levels 各級學校兼辦社會教育辦法。Under the war of resistance against Japan, the value of and need for social education at university were mainly reflected in the wartime folk schools, career remedial schools, and vocational training courses.

Participation in the war of resistance against Japan's education and propaganda. Due to China's "extraordinary period", it is necessary to arouse the support of the people for the Party and the country, and actively play the role of social education in propaganda. Therefore, the core of social education during this period was rousing the people and propagating patriotic education. In 1938, the Ministry of Education promulgated the *Measures for Schools at All Levels to Provide Social Education* 各級學校兼辦社會教育辦法, which required universities and colleges to provide the following types of social education according to their expertise: academic lectures, remedial schools, correspondence schools, editor of popular reading, agricultural extension, collaborative guidance, folk legal counsel, guidance on local self-government, biography film and broadcasting science and technology, air and drug prevention knowledge, ambulance training, public health guidance, local water and civil engineering guidance, various exhibitions, other education relevant to the needs of society and that is the strength of each school. (Song & Zhang, 1990, pp. 582–583).

After promulgation of the *Measures for Schools at All Levels to Run Social Education* 各級學校兼辦社會教育辦法, the Ministry of Education successively promulgated the *Measures for Social Education Organisations to Assist Schools at All Levels to Run Social Education* 社會教育機關協助各級學校兼辦社會教育辦法, *Measures for Funding Schools at All Levels to Run Social Education* 各級學校兼辦社會教育經費支給辦法, and *Measures for Assessing Schools at All Levels to Run Social Education* 各省市縣各級學校兼辦社會教育考核辦法. Consequently, schools at all levels are closely working with social education organizations, and Some sense of the school's involvement in social education.

In July 1937, the Lugouqiao Incident⁷ emerged, which hit North China, Beijing, and Tianjin hard. As the fountainhead of Chinese war needs and the main rear-guard, universities in North China moved to the northwest to ensure the promotion of Chinese education. Among these North China universities, National Peking University, National Peiyang University College of Engineering, and National Peking Normal University were the first to go to Xi'an and merged into Xi'an Provisional University, which was later moved to Chenggu in southern Shaanxi and renamed as National Northwest United University (NNUU). In August 1938, NNUU was divided into the National Northwestern Medical College, National Northwestern Engineering College, National Northwestern University, and National Northwestern Agricultural College. and National Northwestern Teachers College. The NNUU played an important role in wartime propaganda and education, arousing national awareness, liberating the Chinese nation, and mobilizing the masses to participate in the war needs. The NNUU combines education with social education to serve war needs and with production to serve the people. The NNUU is one of the most outstanding representatives of the university's involvement in social education during the war, producing excellent warfighters for the country through military education and by providing life education to the people of the northwest. In addition to not altering the content of education at the school, the school is working with the people of the northwest region through the Teachers Training College and College of Education to provide courses that meet the needs of the times, such as counseling sessions in the teachers training

area to deal with and resolve social education issues, training the social education staff, compiling social education materials, and actively responding to and promoting resistance education to provide conditions for the practical social education activities of the NNUU at a later stage.

Conducting anti-Japanese war education activities. Under the early Republic of China, social education began with literacy education, and university social education focused on literacy education and general knowledge lectures, showing that the country was focusing specifically on literacy education. Under the Nanjing Nationalist Government period, literacy education was still important. It was not until the outbreak of the war that the focus of social education was replaced by education to arouse national patriotism, but literacy education was still present in social education.

Literacy in the Northwest Territories is weak. For example, the Department of Engineering and Mining in the NNUU conducted a study group of the alluvial gold mines in Ankang and the coal mines in Mianxian in conjunction with their teaching. The archaeological excavation of Zhang Qian's tomb in Chenggu was conducted by the Archaeological Committee of the Department of History. (Pang, 2014, p.56) Students and teachers provided basic cultural education such as literacy and general knowledge to the people of the northwest region, which enhanced the ability of students and teachers of the school and improved the cultural level of the local people.

The *Journal of Xi'an Temporary University* 西安臨大校刊 and the *Journal of the National Northwest United University* 西北聯大校刊, as important journals for the propagation of patriotic education by the then NNUU, published timely information promulgated by the National Government, the Ministry of Education, and the university. They organized speeches on patriotic declarations delivered by the university's invited military governors or university leaders and discussed the political and economic situation in the country. The NNUU believed that political education plays a key role in enabling the public to understand the relationship among the people, the state, and society, as well as support the party and the government and improve the quality of the people. In response to the call of the Ministry of Education, the university held a series of classroom activities such as drug drills and ambulance training, as well as used the holidays to allow students to go to the countryside to promote military training.

In *The Way of Social Education During the War of Resistance Against Japan* 在抗戰期間社會教育之途徑, the president of the School of Education in the NNUU, Li Zheng, clearly stated that social education is a prerequisite for the "modernization of the country". (Northwest United University History Writing Group (1938), p.1) On the military front, the College of Arts and Sciences at the NNUU promotes general knowledge concerning air and drug prevention to the people to help them attain basic treatment and various other military skills to meet their war needs. Moreover, students and teachers at the NNUU took interest in life and published farmers' newspapers, reporting local and national news to the people in real time. The content of the newspapers also included some basic general knowledge.

Conclusion and discussion

The rapid development of social education in the Republic of China is closely related to the clash and fusion of Chinese and Western politics, economics, and culture. Through the spread of Western ideas, social education flourished in China, but collided with local traditional culture. Social education was not only an

“imported product” but also had Chinese characteristics. Therefore, social education in the Republican era is one of the most worthwhile educational paradigms to study and learn from.

The development of social education in China changed with the political changes, the rise and fall of the economy, and the fusion of cultures in China. 1912 saw the founding of the Republic of China, and with the urgent need for an education system to improve the living standards of the people and to raise the quality of the nation, the establishment of the Department of Social Education by the Ministry of Education became a “lifesaving straw” to save China. The purpose of education is to improve the public’s cultural level of morality, this form of social education in China is called “common education”. The so-called “common” refers to the meaning of superficiality, simplicity, and general composure. It is a specific form of social education that is differentiated by the depth of its content. The Ministry of Education uses the university as a medium to disseminate knowledge to the public by establishing popular libraries and carrying out popular lectures, providing free or self-funded access to books and spoken public lectures. Once people had mastered the simple basics, social education began to enter the second stage in 1919. It was also the time when Dewey came to China and the idea of civilian education prevailed, and social education was carried out in the form of “civilian education”. The so-called “civilian” expressed the need for openness and equality in education. It is a specific form of social education that is differentiated by the breadth of its target audience. Universities were equally responsible for literacy and vocational education. However, in 1927, China’s politics changed dramatically, the Nanjing Ministry of Education became the highest administrative organ of the Republic of China, which promoted the “Three Principles of the People” with a strong political color. Social education also had to continue to develop in the form of “mass education”, which referred to a wider group of educated people, reflecting Sun Yat-sen’s characterization of “people can make the best use of their talents”. Universities were the gathering place of talents and played an important role in promoting social education. It was not until the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War in 1937 that China was hit hard. In order to protect the sustainable development of education in China, the improvement of national quality and cultural knowledge ceased to be the main content of social education in this period, and was transformed into “anti-Japanese education”, with patriotism education as the main content. College students are a very energetic group, and the promotion of anti-Japanese education by universities is even more encouraging.

Social education has never been interrupted throughout the Republic of China period, but exists under different names and with different contents. Re-examining the development of social education in the universities of the Republic of China from a historical perspective, it can be found that the field of social education is a huge reservoir of educational resources, which possesses a wide range of educational objects, rich educational content, diverse educational means and noble educational pursuits. The purpose of social education in universities is to provide the public with opportunities and venues for education and to seek equality of educational opportunities. Universities utilize their students and faculty and encourage them to actively participate in social education practices. At the same time, the university itself establishes various social education institutions, such as popular libraries and mass education centers; promotes various social education undertakings, such as vocational education and remedial education; and organizes various social education practices, such as literacy campaigns and literacy education. The social education

of the universities in the Republic of China period showed the world a colorful picture of education, which enriched the talents needed by all walks of life, solved the problems exposed by the society, improved the moral literacy and cultural level of the people, developed more social education undertakings, and exerted an all-around influence on the improvement and progress of the Chinese society.

In the history of the Republic of China, university social education has had a brilliant history, and has become a unique “educational attempt” in the development of modern education in China. In 1968, Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of The University of Chicago, first proposed the concept of “learning society” in his book *The Learning Society*. It pointed out that society should provide everyone with the opportunity to learn, and at the same time, everyone must learn in order to adapt to the requirements of society. This means that the existing education system cannot provide opportunities for all human beings to receive education, and this requirement requires the promotion of social education by universities. During the Republic of China, the promotion of social education through universities to build a learning society can be regarded as the starting point of China’s promotion of building a learning society. In countries that advocate the construction of a learning society worldwide, the educational potential of social education in the process of promoting comprehensive educational reform should be rediscovered by scholars, and the infinite vitality of the development of social education should be re-recognized. Therefore, grasping the development process of social education in universities during the Republic of China from a historical macro perspective is a meaningful and valuable academic research.

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Notes

- 1 The May Fourth Movement was a patriotic movement that took place in Beijing on 4 May 1919, involving mainly young students, the general public, businessmen and industrialists, through demonstrations, petitions, strikes, violent confrontations with the government and other forms. It was a patriotic movement that the Chinese people thoroughly opposed imperialism and feudalism, also known as the “May 4th Thunderstorm”.
- 2 The Northern Expeditionary War, a war of unification waged between 1926 and 1928 by the Nationalist Government under the leadership of the Chinese Nationalist Party with the National Revolutionary Army as the main force and Chiang Kai-shek as commander-in-chief.
- 3 Nanjing National Government: 18 April 1927–20 May 1948, was the highest administrative organ under the National Government of the Republic of China, the central government that governed all parts of the country, established by the Chinese Nationalist Party with Chiang Kai-shek as its core.
- 4 Party-oriented education refers to the educational policy proposed by the Chinese Nationalist Party in accordance with Chiang Kai-shek’s idea of “ruling the country by the party”.
- 5 The Three Principles of the People: A democratic revolutionary programme advocated by Sun Yat-sen, the Three Principles of the People consisted of the Principles of Nationalism, the Principles of Democracy and the Principles of People’s Livelihood.
- 6 The bibliobuses, with the vehicle as the carrier, puts all kinds of books in the vehicle and travels to and from the countryside so that farmers can borrow them without taking money, and if farmers want to borrow books that are not on the vehicle, they can tell the manager the name of the book and bring it next time.
- 7 The Lugouqiao Incident: On the night of July 7, 1937, the Japanese garrison in Lugouqiao held a so-called military exercise near the Chinese garrison position without informing the local authorities of China, and falsely claimed that a Japanese soldier was missing and asked to enter Wanping County (today’s Lugouqiao Town) in the southwest of Beijing for search. After being sternly refused by the Chinese garrison, the Japanese army immediately launched an attack on Wanping City and Lugouqiao. The Chinese garrison made a stubborn resistance. The “July 7th Incident” opened the prelude to the National Anti Japanese War.

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Author contributions

XW contributed to the conception of the study and wrote the manuscript. JL helped perform the analysis with constructive discussions and manuscript preparation and revisions. XW and JL contributed equally to this work and should be regarded as co-first authors.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human participants by any of the authors. This article uses mainly the case study method and the historical documentary research method. Our case subjects are universities; as such, experimental data and biological materials are not involved in the analysis of the cases, and none of the historical documents we have cited deal with ethical issues. Therefore, this study does not need to obtain ethical approval.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Additional information

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