

RESEARCH ON THE REFORM OF LANZHOU ACADEMIES IN GANSU IN THE LATE QING DYNASTY, 1840-1911

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Abstract:

Since the middle of the 19th century, the late Qing Dynasty suffered from a formidable invasion of Western power, and national sovereignty was destroyed severely. With the deepening of social crisis, advanced Chinese actively explored the road to save the country and the people. Reform programs such as the Westernization Movement, the Hundred Days Reform, and the New Deal in the late Qing Dynasty were implemented one after another. Among them, a significant change in the field of education was that traditional educational institutions and systems were replaced by modern schools and schooling systems, which played a vital role in promoting the development of modern Chinese society. As an important city in northwest China, Lanzhou in Gansu province also experienced tremendous difference—traditional educational forms represented by academies underwent great changes.

Keywords: The Late Qing Dynasty; Lanzhou Academies; Gansu; New-style Schools; Reform

Introduction

As a major cultural and educational institution, Gansu academies played an irreplaceable role in the development of Northwest China. However, in the late Qing Dynasty, Gansu academies had to reform because of in a state of decay, which was thought-provoking. At present, the academic circles have achieved certain results on the reform of Lanzhou academies in Gansu, such as Li Yan's article "New Deal in the Late Qing Dynasty and the Modernization of Education in Gansu" (2005), Hu Fangyan's article "The Investigation of Sanlong Academies in the Late Qing Dynasty and the Early Republic of China" (2010), Li Jianhong's article "An Overview of Lanzhou's Educational Development During the New Deal Period in the Late Qing Dynasty" (2015) and so on. These articles are mainly centred on the research of academic system transformation, so there is still a lot of room for expansion. Based on historical materials, this article traces the background of Lanzhou academies' reform in the late Qing Dynasty, excavates characteristics and contents of Lanzhou academies' transformation, objectively analyzes the significance of academies' reformation, and tries to provide some useful perspectives and experience for the development of education in Gansu today.

The Background of the Reform of Lanzhou Academies in Gansu

The academy was an important educational institution that combined teaching activities with academic research in ancient China. It had been developing continuously for thousands of years from the Tang Dynasty to Ming and Qing dynasties. The academy had made a great contribution to “the blossom of Chinese education, the cultivation of folk customs and the evolution of ordinary people’s ethical concepts.” [1] However, since the Opium War broke out in 1840, Chinese people had gradually woken up from the dream of the Celestial Empire, and began to think deeply and actively explore the way to rescue the country.

From the 1860s, upper officials and intellectuals of the ruling class set off “the first large-scale modernization movement in Chinese history” [2], that was known as the Westernization Movement in history, which started a prelude of China’s modernization. In 1901, the Qing government began to implement the New Deal, guided by the concept of “talents are the highest priority”[3], the effects of education reform were quite obvious. Chinese schooling patterns also entered a stage of innovation, namely abolishing the traditional educational system converged on the imperial examination and creating a new educational system and a new form of educational organization. In 1904, the Qing government promulgated Guimao School System, which stipulated training objectives and curriculum of schools at all levels. It was the first national legal system promulgated and implemented by central government in modern Chinese. Under the background of implementing new national school system, the education cause of Gansu province had also undergone a momentous transformation.

Gansu province is located in the hinterland of northwest China with a long history and profound cultural resources. It is “the golden section of Silk Road in Han and Tang dynasties”[4], and an important link connecting northwest China, Central Asia and West Asia. Lanzhou, the provincial capital of Gansu, has a good tradition of paying great attention to education. In the Qing Dynasty, there were many academies in Lanzhou. Lanshan Academy, Qiugu Academy, Wuquan Academy and Gaolan Academy were recognized as four major academies in Gansu, which exerted an enormous function on motivating the blossom of regional political, economic and cultural undertakings.

However, in the complicated social background, the training mode of academies in Lanzhou could not meet the need of society ever since the late Qing Dynasty, and its drawbacks gradually exposed. On the one hand, accompanied by gradual deepening of the degree of bureaucratization, teaching contents and forms of regional academies became more and more rigid, and went astray from reality. At this time, many academies in Lanzhou, such as Peifeng Academy in Jingyuan county, Guanlan Academy in Weiyuan county all taught Confucian classics as the main contents. Under this circumstance, it was necessary to reform academies through external forces.

On the other hand, “many administrators of academies are incompetent.” [5] In the late Qing Dynasty, although there were brilliant and disinterested scholars like Zhang Shu and Liu

Guangzu who served as administrators or engaged in lecturing activities in Gansu academies, there were also many principals behaved vulgarly and focused on seeking private interests. What is worse, they failed to manage the academy effectively. Facing the situation of academies' accumulated demerits, the transformation of academies in Gansu Province was imminent.

The Characteristics of the Reform of Lanzhou Academies in Gansu

In the Qing Dynasty, Lanzhou—the capital of Gansu province, had jurisdiction over Gaolan county, Jin county, Weiyuan county, Jingyuan county, Didao and Hezhou prefectures. There were more than one hundred academies in Gansu and about twenty academies in Lanzhou. With the changes in domestic and external situations as well as the adjustment of education policy, many academies, including Lanzhou four major academies, reformed one after another, which was characterized by the following three aspects.

It reflected the traditional concept of attaching importance to education. In 1904, Emperor Guangxu stressed a new regulation that “the present situation is severe, and it is urgent to develop education and cultivate talents.” [6] After abolition of the imperial examination in 1905, the establishment of new-style schools had become the consensus of many intelligent people. The Gansu region paid much attention to basic education and cultivate talents in various disciplines, scientifically transforming academies into plenty new-style schools, increasing investment in the field of education, and constructing scores of new buildings to meet the needs of the masses.

It reflected the consciousness of facing the world. Gansu region showed a clear sense of global participation in the formulation of the educational system and the reform of educational institutions. For example, after Wuquan Academy was rebuilt into Lanzhou Middle School in 1905, and its curriculum settings reflected strong characteristics of the time. On the basis of massive cut the courses of Confucian classics, the proportion of foreign languages, western law and other courses had been increased. In the meantime, Gansu also developed overseas education to encourage students to go abroad. In 1906, the Qing government sent five Gansu scholars Yang Si, Fan Zhenxu and others to study at Hosei University in Japan, which was the beginning of Gansu students to study abroad.

It reflected the characteristics of flexibility and diversification. In order to promote new-style education better, Gansu government adopted different supportive policies for different areas. For example, Lanzhou was rich in mineral resources, so in 1907, local official Peng Yingjia founded the Mining School on the basis of an academy at Cuiyingmen in Lanzhou. He hired two Belgian engineers with a high salary to teach mining, metallurgy and other specialized courses to cultivate numerous practical professionals.

Contents of the Reform of Lanzhou Academies in Gansu

Primary education is the basic part of the education system. Depending on the regulations of Guimao School System, primary education was separated into three levels: nursery schools, primary schools and higher primary schools. Nursing schools were preschool education institutions, generally “attach to women’s normal schools and primary schools” [7], offering courses such as manual training and general knowledge, etc. The purpose of recruiting preschool children from three to seven years old to foster children’s physical and mental health and assist family education.

Students between the ages of seven and twelve enrolled in primary schools, those aged from thirteen to sixteen were enrolled in higher primary schools. Most of the higher primary schools were rebuilt from academies in Lanzhou prefecture, offering courses such as Chinese, arithmetic, gymnastics and so on. For example, Gaolan Academy transformed into a higher primary school in 1905, and Fuwen Academy transformed into a primary school affiliated with Jingyuan Normal School. Based on the statistics, from 1907 to 1909, the amount of primary schools in Gansu province had increased from 385 to 977, and the number of students also increased substantially.

Secondary education played a crucial role in the whole process of education, and in the late Qing Dynasty, Gansu government vigorously developed secondary education. In the year of 1904, Gongchang prefecture turned Nan’an Academy into Gongchang Middle School, which was a pioneering work in Gansu. Soon after, many academies in Lanzhou and other affiliated areas were successively converted into secondary schools.

In 1905, Wuquan Academy transformed into Lanzhou Prefecture Middle School, the funds mainly came from government grants and donations from society. Teachers were generally selected and employed from well-known scholars and graduates of normal schools, while students were selected from all parts of Gansu province. These schools had classes six days a week and offered more than a dozen courses such as Chinese, mathematics, history, etc.

Higher education is a kind of professional and vocational education on the basis of completion of secondary education and is responsible for training high-level specialized talents. Before 1911, there were two colleges in Lanzhou, namely Gansu College and Gansu Politics and Law School. The predecessor of Gansu College was founded at Changjia Lane, Lanzhou City in 1902 by official Yang Zengxin.

At the beginning of the establishment of Gansu College, Yang Zengxin sent staff to buy experimental instruments and books in other provinces, and openly recruited English, Russian, French teachers and local scholars. Liu Guyu, an eminent scholar, served as the first general instructor. Higher schools of Gansu could separate into three kinds: undergraduate, normal and preparatory, offering many practical courses such as mathematics, science, chemistry and military science, with more than 100 undergraduate students.

In 1909, Ginsu Politics and Law School was established, and Gansu province “initially formed a complete system from primary schools, middle schools to higher schools.”[8] The school introduced into new courses totally different from previous Confucian classics, such as national law, ethics, criminal law, public finance and economics, which had trained a number of eminent talents to speed up the modernization process of Gansu province. Especially during the Revolution of 1911, students of Ginsu Politics and Law School became the main disseminators of democratic revolutionary ideas in Gansu.

Normal education was a professional education for training teachers. Gansu’s normal schools separated two parts: superior level and junior level, and there was another study center, “which made normal schooling an independent system for training teachers at all levels.”[9] Among them, junior normal schools were parallel to the secondary school, which mainly trained teachers for primary schools.

Lanzhou Normal School founded in 1904, was one of secondary normal schools with a long history in Gansu province and even the entire country. When Lanzhou Normal School was established, it was annexed to normal school of Gansu College, and Yang Zengxin was the general director. In 1905, Gansu Academic Affairs Office decided to set up Gansu Superior Normal School. In 1906, Gansu government changed Lanshan Academy into Superior Normal School.

In the same year, the government changed Qiugu Academy into an accelerated normal school, later turned into a normal junior school. It was a five-year regular normal school, offering twelve courses including literature, history, geography, arithmetic, physics, chemistry and gymnastics, etc. In the development process of Lanzhou normal schools, although teaching conditions were not perfect, those remarkable talents had made indelible achievements in disseminating advanced knowledge and giving back to the society.

In addition, Lanzhou also energetically set up industrial education. In 1891, under the initiative of governor Yang Changjun, Shaanxi and Gansu Telegraph School, also known as Lanzhou Telegraph School, was founded in Lanzhou. In 1907, Peng Yingjia zealously responded to new educational decrees, established Gansu Provincial Agriculture and Forestry School as well as Mining School on the basis of summarizing precious experience of running old-style academies, which making an important contribution to the modernization of Gansu.

The Significance of the Reform of Lanzhou Academies in Gansu

Lanzhou academies in the late Qing Dynasty provided indispensable material and financial guarantee for the reform of modern new-style education. Specifically speaking, many schools were rebuilt by using some academies’ ground and facilities, such as Hezhou Higher Primary School was expanded on the basis of Fenglin Academy. While some schools made full use of original houses of academies. Baiquan Primary School in Jingyuan county, which directly used old houses of Baiquan Academy and just replaced it with new names. Objectively speaking,

new-style schools transformed from academies had laid a solid foundation for the progress of new education undertaking in Gansu, changed the conservative atmosphere and improved the backward situation of Gansu.

The transformation of Lanzhou academies in Gansu province in the late Qing Dynasty trained a large number of new talents. Under the background of educational system reform in this period, Lanzhou initially established an advanced modern education system and management organizations, and sent some students to the United States, Western Europe and other developed countries or regions for further study. Moreover, Lanzhou also increased capital investment, introduced practical natural as well as social disciplines such as mining, metallurgy, law and foreign languages, “restructures the knowledge structure of the educated students.” [10]

In terms of teaching methods, Lanzhou’s new-style schools respected the humanity, followed objective laws and focused on cultivating students’ multiple abilities. It was especially important that the majority of students gradually got rid of shackle about feudal ideology in the new school, and generally accepted advanced ideas of democracy and equality. These contemporary intellectuals were distributed in various regions of Gansu, and had made imperative contributions to promoting social change.

Reform of academies promoted the overall progress of Gansu society. The unique cultural development function of education made a big difference to the course of Gansu’s modernization. In this drastic reform movement, the old imperial examination system and traditional academies were abolished, many obstacles were also cleared up. Almost all academies in Lanzhou were undergoing a process of evolution, not only academies’ names and forms were changed, but their essence and contents were different from the old-style education. What is more, the minds of Lanzhou people had been liberated with far-reaching influence. There was no doubt that the modernization of Lanzhou education was a breakthrough of modernization in the whole Gansu region.

Conclusion

Academies were the most influential educational institutions in China before the emergence of modern schools. However, with the progress of history, it was the general trend for academies to modify. In 1901, the Qing government issued a series of decrees for the reform of academies during the implementation of the New Deal, which made academies existed in China for thousands of years became a thing of the past. Under the backdrop of changing circumstances, although Lanzhou academies gradually retired from the stage of history, the new modern education that took its place appeared in front of people, which effectively promoted the overall development of Gansu society.

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