

# The 1922 School System Conference and the Reform of Higher Occupational Education System in China

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**Abstract.** In October 1922, the Ministry of Education of China held the School System Conference in Beijing. Before the conference, the educational circles had different guesses about the reform of higher education system and their focus was on the preservation or abolition of specialized schools and higher normal schools. After a contentious debate, the School System Conference passed a reform plan of school system and the reform of higher occupational education system was an important part of it.

## 1. Reasons for the School System Conference's Convening

In October 1921, the National Federation of Education Associations held its seventh annual meeting in Guangdong and adopted a reform draft of school system. The National Federation of Education Associations' seventh annual meeting was hosted by the Education Association of Guangdong Province, and the Guangdong Government was in the hands of the Kuomintang which was headed by Sun Yat-sen and fought against the Beijing Government.

During this period, Guangdong's education developed rapidly. From 1920 to 1921, Sun Yat-sen, Chen Chiung-ming and Wang Ching-wei gathered in Guangdong to carry out the new deals, and immediately created a new Guangdong. Everything was in full bloom, especially in education, and all of them actively moved towards new and appropriate aspects. [1] Everyone had a good impression on Guangdong's education. After visiting Guangdong, Dewey, a famous American educator, once said, "If we want to have a slight development in the future of Chinese education, we can only hope for the Guangdong Government." [2]

The Guangdong Government and the Ministry of Education were not in a good mood, and the seventh annual meeting of the National Federation of Education Associations was held in Guangdong, so the resolution of this annual meeting was not sent to the Ministry of Education. This was unprecedented in the past, and the Ministry of Education was very angry about it. The Ministry of Education did not have much enthusiasm for the reform of the school system. Guangdong Government and Beijing Government were not unified, so they had little communication with each other. There were many famous and experienced people in the educational circles who were trying to advocate a new school system so that the new school system came into being. [3]

Nowadays, the strong response to the reform draft of school system of the National Federation of Education Associations had made the Ministry of Education feel tremendous pressure. The current school system made by the Ministry of Education had been promulgated for a long time and needed to be corrected urgently due to the changes of the times. In October 1921, when the National Federation of Education Associations held its seventh annual meeting in Guangdong, most members proposed to amend the school system. In the summer of 1922, when the China Education Improvement Society held its first annual meeting in Jinan, there were as many as 78 cases concerning the reform of school system. [4] The Ministry of Education was the so-called supreme administrative organ of education, so it used ingenious methods to convene the School System Conference on 15 September 1922, before the National Federation of Education Associations' eighth annual meeting.

On 1 July 1922, the Ministry of Education declared that there were many obstacles in the current school system which resulted in inconsistencies, and decided to convene the School System Conference to solicit opinions as the standard for the improvement of school system. Under the leadership of Teng Tsui-ying, a counselor of the Ministry of Education, the relevant departments quickly drafted a reform plan of school system as the proposal which would be submitted to the School System Conference by the Ministry of Education. [5]

For a time, people from all sectors of society had hoped for the convening of the School System Conference. However, when they were full of expectations for the School System Conference, there were rumors that there would be conflicts in it.

## **2. Disputes Before the School System Conference**

At the end of the Qing Dynasty, the Renyin-Guimao School System was promulgated, which imitated Japan's classification of higher education schools with three categories: universities, higher industrial schools and higher normal schools. At the beginning of the Republic of China, the Renzi-Guichou School System was also implemented in the higher education sector as a tripartite model of universities, specialized schools and higher normal schools.

According to the regulations of the Renzi-Guichou School System, universities adopted the system of coexistence of liberal arts, science, industry, agriculture, medicine, law and commerce. Specialized schools were single disciplinary schools, which could be divided into legal, medicine, pharmacy, agriculture, industry, commerce, fine arts, music, merchant ship and foreign language. Higher normal schools still focused on liberal arts and science. Although the level of specialized schools and higher normal schools was slightly lower than that of universities, and their graduates were only equivalent to the level at the end of second year in universities, there were many similarities in the major establishment and curriculum arrangement between universities and the former two.

In early 1917, Tsai Yuen-pei took up the post of president of Peking University. His experience of studying in Germany twice made him deeply influenced by the German education system. In Germany, the disciplines of law and medicine were offered in universities, so they were not offered in high specialized schools. Likewise, the disciplines of sciences and engineering, commerce, and agriculture were offered in high specialized schools, so they were not offered in universities. Those graduates of high specialized schools, who engaged in academic research, would receive the same degree as graduates of universities. Deeply aware of the drawbacks of imitating Japanese model, Tsai Yuen-pei decided to follow the most advanced German model in his mind to reform Peking University. At his insistence, the commerce discipline of Peking University was incorporated into the law discipline, while the industry discipline was assigned to Peiyang University. At the same time, he was preparing to establish a law university independently from Peking University, which had merged the law discipline of Peiyang University and the law discipline of China University.

In January 1917, the Seminar of National Colleges and Universities' School Affairs in Beijing adopted a proposal of Tsai Yuen-pei, advocating the abolition of specialized schools and that all specialized schools should be ready to be upgraded to specialized universities. The proposal was approved by the Ministry of Education, and was promulgated by the Amendment of the University Ordinance. [7] However, although the tripartite model of higher education had shown its drawbacks in Japan, its drawbacks in China were still not obvious because it had not been implemented for a long time. Therefore, besides some private specialized schools took the opportunity to change the name of their schools, the vast majority of state and public specialized schools and higher normal schools had not taken action.

While Tsai Yuen-pei transformed Peking University into a university of liberal arts and sciences according to his own intention, Kuo Ping-wen also made an attempt to establish a comprehensive university in Nanking Higher Normal School. Kuo Ping-wen was the first Chinese to receive a doctorate from Teachers College, Columbia University, and he had a special preference for American education system. After returning to China, he served as the education director, acting president and

president of Nanking Higher Normal School. Under the leadership of Kuo Ping-wen, Nanking Higher Normal School had carried out its reform following Columbia University's model of incorporating normal education into university. By 1920, Nanking Higher Normal School had established eight departments in liberal arts and science, seven specialties in agriculture, commerce, education, sports, technology, English and Chinese, and was transformed into National Southeast University. The establishment of National Southeast University was not only an attempt to transform normal education from an independent setting to a comprehensive university, but also a challenge to the mode of Peking University, which was located in a university of liberal arts and sciences.

In order to carry out the reform in Peking University smoothly, Tsai Yuen-pei decided to cooperate with the American-studying faction and accepted the idea of a comprehensive university. The reform draft of school system adopted by the National Federation of Education Associations in October 1921 decided to abandon specialized schools and higher normal schools. However, the forces of the Japanese-studying faction in China's educational circles were still quite strong. They hoped that specialized schools and higher normal schools could improve their level and become single disciplinary universities. Tsai Yuen-pei and others' request to abolish specialized schools and higher normal schools would inevitably affect their interests, thus triggering disputes between dissidents.

### **3. Results of the School System Conference**

In the expectation of all social circles, the School System Conference was officially opened on 20 September 1922. At the conference, Tsai Yuen-pei was elected as Chairman and Wong ka-kui was elected as Vice-Chairman. The key point of the School System Conference was, of course, to discuss the school system. Discussions at the School System Conference were biased towards higher education, with the focus on whether specialized schools should be abolished or not. The School System Conference adopted the method of simultaneous review of the proposals. First, the proposer explained the reasons and contents of his proposal, and then the conference would carry on the sectional examination.

Li Shang-jen, the representative of Shanxi Province, proposed that universities should be divided into single disciplinary universities and comprehensive universities, from three to five years; higher specialized schools should be limited to the vocational education, with recruitment of junior high schools' graduates for five years. Fu Ting-chun and Wong I-chou, the representatives of Hubei Province, proposed that universities' period of schooling should be four to six years, higher specialized schools' period of schooling should be two or three years. Wu Shu-nan, the representative of Jiangxi Province, proposed that specialized schools should be abolished. Tai Kuan-ying, the representative of Zhejiang Province, proposed that universities should be divided into established universities and reformed universities, national specialized schools should be eliminated and upgrade to universities. Li Chien-hsun, the president of Peking Higher Normal School, proposed to change the national higher normal school into a normal university. He believed that normal education should be set up separately rather than jointly with other universities, and higher normal schools should be renamed as normal universities. Besides setting up education discipline, he also thought that normal universities should also set up various disciplines which students would teach after graduation. [8]

As a result, the prediction before the conference became a reality in the course of the review. All factions of universities, specialized schools and higher normal schools contended quietly and fairly, and the results were mutually perfunctory. After a heated debate, the School System Conference finally passed the reform plan of school system. The plan had made a careful arrangement for the higher occupational education system. First, specialized schools' period of schooling was four or five years with recruitment of junior high schools' graduates, and graduates of junior high schools for three years should take one year of remedial study. Second, higher normal schools' period of schooling was four years with recruitment of junior high schools' graduates, and graduates of junior high schools for three years should take one year of remedial study. Third, universities' period of schooling was four to six years and normal universities' period of schooling was four years. Fourth, a

university could set up a number of disciplines or a single discipline, and it should be called a certain disciplinary university if it had a single discipline; If a specialized school improved its degree and enrolled senior high schools' graduates and its period of schooling was limited to more than four years, it may be changed to a certain disciplinary university; If a higher normal school improved its level and enrolled senior high schools' graduates, its period of schooling was limited to four years, it may be changed to a normal university. Fifth, post secondary schools may have specialized subjects attached to them, with an indefinite number of years, and enrolled senior high schools' graduates. Sixth, specialized schools and certain disciplinary universities, higher normal schools and normal universities, may be co-located in the same school. Seventh, graduate schools were the place for graduates of universities and those with the same degree to study, and their period of schooling were uncertain. [9]

The results of the School System Conference were sent to the eighth annual meeting of the National Federation of Education Associations for discussion. At this annual meeting, the contents on higher occupational education of the School System Conference were largely preserved. In November 1922, Li Yuen-hung, president of the Republic of China, announced the Reform Plan of School System. In this plan, the spirit of the School System Conference on higher occupational education system still played an important role.

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