WU Mi's Education and Thoughts

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In China, WU Mi is a well-known poet, educator, and classical scholar. Honored as the father of the study on China's comparative literature, he was one of the earliest scholars who systematically applied the theories of Western literature and the method of comparative literature to research *A Dream in Red Mansions*. In his early life, he was enlightened by the Guan school (a school of Neo-Confucianism), and later he studied in the U.S. where he was deeply influenced by Irving Babbitt's new humanistic thought. Throughout his lifetime, he advocated the thought of having a thorough knowledge of both China and the West, and devoted himself to the cultivation of "well-informed and refined" qualities. In fact, WU Mi's thoughts owes greatly to the education he received in his childhood. This paper focuses on the investigation of the study life of WU Mi so as to find out the reasons behind his achievement of having a thorough knowledge of both China and the West.

Keywords: WU Mi, education, influence, comparative

Introduction

With a solid academic foundation and broad vision, WU Mi (1894-1978) was very knowledgeable and had a thorough knowledge of both China and the West, the ancient and the modern. He had not only profound foundation of Chinese classics but also systematic attainment of Western classics. He taught in 12 universities successively such as Southeast University, Northeast University, Tsinghua University, and Southwest Normal University. Well admired and respected by his students and colleagues, he was quite capable of teaching different courses at departments of Foreign Languages, History, Chinese Language and Literature. He pondered deeply over the development of China's higher education, and formed his own educational thoughts in teaching practices. In Tsinghua University, for instance, he put forward the educational goal of training national qualities of Chinese ancient civilization at the Institute of Chinese Studies, and the educational thought of cultivating "well-informed and refined" qualities at the Foreign Languages Department. His educational thoughts were inclusive, both conservative and open, which is inseparable with his colorful study life.

Education in Early Years

WU Mi was a native of Sanyuan County, Shanxi, characterized by simple folkway and profound Chinese accumulation of traditional culture. The friends and teachers of WU Mi's family were mostly disciples or grand-disciples of LIU Gu-yu, who was a successor of Shanxi Guan School and once taught at Weijing Academy

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of the area, such as his biological father, WU Jian-yin, learned from LIU Gu-yu in his childhood, and his heir father WU Jian-chang (ZHONG Qi-gong) studied at Weijing Academy. However, WU Mi was relatively late in receiving his enlightenment education. "Establishing a tradition of moral and ethical spirit with honesty", education in Guan school "has played an important role in WU Mi's cultural belief and his choosing life path" (XU, 1998, p. 6).

It was not until the winter of 1900 after they moved to Shanghai that his heir father ZHONG Qi-gong taught him how to read. Being smart, well-informed, and having a good memory, coupled with the special teaching methods adopted by ZHONG Qi-gong (such as emphasizing on the shape (stroke) and Yi (meaning) of Chinese characters), WU Mi was able to know more than 3,000 Chinese characters after 10 months' learning. He could not only read dramas, novels, Tanci (storytelling to the accompaniment of stringed instruments), and legends, but also read freely newspapers, magazines, advertisements, textbooks, basically with no reading disorder in all of the vernacular and simple classical Chinese books. In the winter of 1901, WU Mi accompanied his grandma to go back to his hometown. During the trip he read to her some novels and plays bought at Shanghai in order to relieve boredom and grief. In 1902, while returning home, WU Mi continued his study under the instruction of his stepmother LEI Ru-ren who taught WU Mi a few poems of Tang Dynasty. He also read books and journals such as *History of the Nineteenth Century*, *Rhyming Words on the Earth*, and *Miscellany for New Citizens* sent by ZHONG Qi-gong from Shanghai.

WU Mi's reading in his childhood played a great role in his thoughts through his whole life: "All my whole life, my thoughts were influenced by Mr. LIANG Ren-gong (Qi-chao) and Sein Min Choong Bou, most deeply and extensively" (WU, 1995, p. 12). In 1903, WU Mi studied at a private school where WU Mi finished reading such books as *Outline of History* and *On Mencius*. By 1904, he had finished reading all *The Four Books*, and began to read *Spring and Autumn Annals*. In 1905, WU Mi finished reading *General Secrets to Learning Songs* compiled by ZHANG Yi-peng, which contained a lot of knowledge in the history origins of economy and history, Neo-Confucianism philosophy, geography at home and abroad. He also read *The Concise Orient History* and *General History of China* compiled by KE Tong-shi, from which he benefited a lot, especially *General History of China*, which was particularly valuable due to its record of the original text of ancient books in China's economy and history. In addition, WU Mi continued reading newspapers, journals, and novels sent from ZHONG Qi-gong. Indeed, WU Mi's extensive reading at this period had reserved huge resources for his writing in his later life.

In 1906, WU Mi attended a "Jingye School", which was actually a higher primary school of new system. In addition to the traditional *The Four Books*, the school also set new courses such as foreign language, geometry, algebra, physics, chemistry, music, and painting. At the school, WU Mi not only gained a solid foundation of Chinese traditional culture; but also got a lot of nutrition in western natural science and humanities, which laid a foundation for his future inclusive cultural ideal.

In December of 1906, WU Mi was admitted by Sanyuan Hongdao Institute of Higher Learning, and studied at Grade Four. He received four years of new-style school education until his graduation in 1910 and this year could be regarded as the first turning point of his destiny: Office of Student Affairs (America-oriented) announced to recruit the second group of students to study in America. WU Mi and all the students had the opportunity to take a make-up exam, and he was admitted with the highest grades.

In a word, WU Mi was late to receive his enlightenment education, but it was consistent. He loved Chinese

traditional culture and would devote himself to cultural heritage under a long immersion in Confucian culture, which caused WU Mi's "passion of nationalism" (LE, 2011) reflected in most of his works. Hence, when facing the New Culture Movement, he had made a radical idea that it is "heretical for those scholars of the new culture to choose naturalism and experientialism" (WU, 1922). What he desired to do was to realize an infusion of fresh blood to China by "national characters which the traditional virtue have provided" (WU, 2011, p. 32).

Study Life at Tsinghua University

Ranking the second among around 300 candidates, WU Mi passed the secondary examination organized by Office of Student Affairs (America-oriented) and then registered at Tsinghua University under the company of his father ZHI Jing-gong. In Tsinghua, he received a systematic preparatory training for studying abroad, and set up his own ideal of life.

WU Mi had demonstrated his dependable and earnest qualities during his study period. On his early days at Tsinghua University, under the guidance of Dean HU Dun-fu, the school practiced an elective system, which did not separate students into regular classes, but divided the courses into several levels according to different degrees. Then the school curriculum was issued. "A student usually had many Chinese classes but a few English classes. Thus study schedules varied from person to person" (WU, 1998a, p. 45) and the intension was to "meet students' personal needs for different skills, thus there were no division of classes in the Higher Department and the Medium Department, and no grades" (WU, 1995, p. 102). As a result, students could select courses freely according to their specific needs, knowledge, and competence. However, when HU Dun-fu resigned from his post, the elective system and the course curriculum were abolished and the elective system was changed into the class system. The school allowed "any student who claimed to be in a different level with those of the same grade into which he had been divided could sign up immediately for the promoted or demoted test" (WU, 1998b, p. 121). Despite WU Mi had an excellent entrance score, he believed that "learning lied in practical use, and it's not wise to haste" (WU, 1998b, p. 121). Considering that he may fail to catch up with the teaching speed of the American professors in geometric and English courses, he gave up the qualification to skip grades, and followed the prescribed order to study at the fourth grade of the Medium Department (also known as Great Bing Chen). Among his classmates were the poet WU Fang-ji, HONG Shen, a modern drama pioneer, and TANG Yong-tong, expert of Chinese ancient civilization.

WU Mi spent six years studying at Tsinghua. Actively grasping any opportunity to learn and absorbing knowledge attentively, he always got the best scores. In fact, compared to the students from the coastal areas, WU Mi was relatively poorer in English. For fear of falling behind, he made full use of the excellent teaching facilities provided by Tsinghua University, and read a lot of foreign language books, which opened up his knowledge range. He was so surprised to find some correspondence between the Chinese culture and the Western culture that he could not help exclaiming in his diary: "The Greek philosophy emphasizes on morals over profits, takes light in talking while forgets about sorrow, knows their own destiny without fearing ghosts, which are in accordance with the Confucianism of our nation" (WU, 1998b, p. 156).

In the autumn of 1913, WU Mi entered the Higher Department of Tsinghua. At that time, Tsinghua had just recruited RAO Lu-qiao who had a solid foundation in Chinese ancient civilization and served as a professor of literature and history in Imperial University of Peking. He had both profound knowledge and effective teaching

methods, and thus WU Mi had an admiration and worship for him. After his first assignment *On Poetry and Quatrain* was praised by Mr. RAO, WU Mi usually went with his classmates TANG Yong-tong, CHEN Da, TONG Xi-xiang to consult Mr. Rao for knowledge, which benefited WU Mi a great deal in his creation and understanding of archaic poetry. The teacher's advice inspired WU Mi's talents in literary creation. During his study at Tsinghua, WU Mi wrote a large number of articles, including prefaces and postscripts, remarks, comments on poems, novels and many classical Chinese poems. He gave an authentic account of the individual perceptions in his personal growth in his works, which was not only a record of his life, but also a preliminary demonstration on his conception of his life, moral principle and ambition.

In Tsinghua University, WU Mi gained a solid foundation of English knowledge which provided a great convenience for his graduation and study in America. However, very soon WU Mi would find that Tsinghua University was "just like an American university in China" (QIU, 1991, p. 272), for young students going abroad shortly after graduation was "ignorant of national conditions and easy to lose patriotic feelings" (CAO, 1926, p. 42). Under the circumstances, WU Mi had realized the significance of traditional education to education of sovereign rights.

Study Life in America

On August 18th of 1917, WU Mi finally boarded the "Venezuela" ship for America, escorted personally by the headmaster ZHOU Yi-chun. Early in the summer of 1916 when WU Mi was about to graduate, ZHOU Yi-chun had discussed with him and other preparatory students on affairs such as their majors and schools when they studied in America. WU Mi originally wanted to study journalism or chemical engineering at Columbia University, but the headmaster did not think him suitable to be a journalist owing to his unsociability, unfamiliarity with the actual transaction and social human character. On the ship, the headmaster once again suggested WU Mi to give up his idea of learning journalism, and shift to the literature major, which was more consistent with his character. Anyway, the headmaster managed to send WU Mi to study literature at the University of Virginia. Over the years, WU Mi believed that he had made a wrong decision in choosing his major, arguing that it was not necessary to travel far abroad to America to learn literature, which only needed to be done at home. For a long time he had regretted that

Mr. ZHOU (a man of the outdated culture and academic of China and of shallow knowledge) had never understood and recognized me, regarding me as "useless", "unpromising", despising me, and was unhappy with me... This was my big mistake. I was aware of the error in my later years. (WU, 1995, pp. 148-149)

It was not until his recall in the later years did he find that "the headmaster is in fact a true friend of mine" (WU, 1995, pp. 148-149).

In mid-September of 1917, WU Mi arrived at the University of Virginia, where he began his official study life in America. In the first school year, WU Mi elected five courses: English Literature, Economics, Modern World History, Philosophy, and French. He did not "fail to catch up with the process of courses fearfully because of his unfamiliarity of English" (WU, 1995, p. 164), but also obtained excellent achievements. For WU Mi, this was a critical year. In particular, the English Literature course provided WU Mi with substantial knowledge and treasure, as he put it, "my basic knowledge of literature had been learned in this year" (WU, 1995, p. 164). Also within this year, he could be regarded to have really integrated himself into American life and came to have a

general understanding of American customs and social situation, which the Chinese students who study at Harvard University failed to experience.

In June, 1918, having completed a one-year study in University of Virginia, WU Mi went north alone and arrived at Harvard University in Massachusetts, where he began the most important learning phase in his life. It was in this phase that he felt into the instruction of Irving Babbitt at Harvard and started to adhere to new humanism, and that he had met a large number of like-minded friends (MEI Guang-di, YU Da-wei, CHEN Yin-que, ZHANG Xin-hai, etc.) who had very deep influence on him. They talked about books, discussed academic study and exchanged ideas. For him, this was a happy school life, as he had said, "the pleasure coming from the school life can only be enjoyed by myself, not worthy enough to let others know" (WU, 1998b, p. 180). Even he himself would not expect how important roles these people would play in his future life, and how they would influence his life step by step. Particularly MEI Guang-di, who had been opposed to the New Culture Movement, had led WU Mi to a different kind of "rough" journey. As WU Mi said, if he had not met MEI Guang-di, "his life would be totally different in his career, fame, success and failure, happiness and sorrow, and he would be at loss" (WU, 1995, p. 216).

In Harvard University, WU Mi enjoyed himself as much as he liked the guidance of masters, the ocean of knowledge, which provided him extraordinary progress and benefits in knowledge, spirit, and personality. When the term officially began at Harvard, WU Mi selected two courses opened by Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and His Influence* and *Modern Literary Criticism*. He finished reading all the works of Irving Babbitt and the new humanism master Moore under the guidance of his tutor. His contact with new humanism provided a theoretical basis for his later Chinese Literature education and international business. He was enthusiastic in researching on Western literature. He took *Outline of French Literature History* by professor C. H. Grandgent and *Study on British Romantic Poets* by professor J.L. Lowes J. and he also often sat in on courses given by the English literature experts Bliss Perry and Dr. K·Howard Mainardi at Department of Comparative Literature of Harvard. Influenced by Irving Babbitt, WU Mi also paid special attention to the learning of Western classical tradition. From all his homework it would not be hard to discover that, while learning the knowledge of Western culture, he did not forget his native traditional culture, and seek for the universal values between Western and Chinese traditional culture from the perspective of comparative culture. The study life at Harvard had allowed him a taste of the spiritual origin of the Western knowledge, and deepened his understanding and comprehension of new humanism.

Conclusion

While the Confucian education received in childhood leads WU Mi to a deep understanding of the essence of Chinese traditional culture, the earnest instruction of Irving Babbitt guides him to a more clear comprehension of the essence of new humanist spirit. More than 10 years of education enables him to understand profoundly the ancient and the modern, China and the West, and inspires him to have the idea of integrating China and the West, connecting the ancient and the modern. His deep love in Chinese traditional culture and his belief in new humanism have brought him to an awareness of the importance of Chinese traditional culture in the society of China which is dominated by Confucianism and Buddhism. It can be said that WU Mi's study experience plays a spiritual role in paving the way for his active initiate of Chinese Literature education on the basic of Chinese traditional culture later his life.

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