

A Study on the Influence of Hubei Military Students Studying in Japan in the Late Qing Dynasty on Modern Chinese Military Affairs (1896-1912)

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Abstract: *The dispatch of military students to study abroad constituted an important part of the overseas-education movement in the late Qing Dynasty and stood as one of the crucial symbols of the transformation and development of modern Chinese military affairs. Following China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, the Qing government turned its eyes eastward and sought to learn from Japan. During Zhang Zhidong's governorship of Hubei, military study in Japan became a popular choice among Hubei students. This phenomenon stemmed from shifts in domestic and international circumstances as well as Zhang Zhidong's admiration for Japanese military education. Concerning Hubei military students pursuing studies in Japan, the Qing government guaranteed their overseas training through a mechanism combining government-funded and self-funded enrollment and by negotiating with Japan to establish military schools. After returning home, these students devoted themselves to military service and advanced the modernization of Hubei's military establishment and even the military modernization of the whole nation.*

Keywords: Late Qing Dynasty, Zhang Zhidong, Modern military overseas study, Military students studying in Japan.

1. Introduction

China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War shattered the last illusion of late-Qing intellectuals regarding China's status as a "celestial empire". They began to reflect and learn from foreign countries in pursuit of self-strengthening and national survival. Since then, a wave of overseas study swept across the late Qing Dynasty, and Japan soon became the primary destination for Chinese students. Meanwhile, frequent wars pushed military overseas study into greater prominence and turned it into a new academic pursuit for students in Japan. At present, academic research mainly focuses on the total number, native places and post-return careers of Chinese military students in Japan, while studies concerning military students from individual provinces and their overseas experience and impacts remain insufficient. The emergence of new historical materials and diversified research perspectives render investigations into regional military overseas students of the late Qing Dynasty academically valuable. Building on existing scholarship, this paper takes Hubei military students studying in Japan in the late Qing Dynasty as a case to explore the influences exerted by returned military students upon the development of modern Chinese military affairs.

2. Causes of Military Overseas Study in Japan in the Late Qing Dynasty

2.1 A Paradigm Shift in the Qing Government's Perception of Overseas Study

In the 1870s, enthusiasm for learning from foreign lands was weak and the public had limited access to outside information. The late Qing government underestimated the identity, status and functions of overseas students. Prince Qing Yikuang argued that "the jinshi title carries extraordinary dignity and ought only to be conferred upon 'scholars'" [1]. Coupled with public indifference toward overseas students, such attitudes

rendered overseas education in the late Qing Dynasty extremely difficult.

China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War deeply shocked late-Qing officials and intellectuals and triggered widespread reflection, which also stirred Zhang Zhidong. In his telegram to the Zongli Yamen, he wrote, "On hearing the terms of the peace treaty, I feel overwhelmed with anxiety, grief and indignation." [2] At this juncture, official attitudes toward overseas students underwent further transformation. In 1901, Zhang Zhidong and Liu Kunyi jointly submitted Memorial Proposing Institutional Reforms and Prioritizing Talent Cultivation in Compliance with the Imperial Edict. The memorial maintained that China's predicament arose not from poverty but from a shortage of talented personnel, and that its officers lacked resolve rather than physical fitness. It is evident that the state was in urgent need of overseas-educated talents, and the solution lay in encouraging overseas study and importing Western science and technology. Zhang Zhidong subsequently drafted Regulations for Encouraging Students to Study Abroad, which stipulated that "official ranks and rewards shall be granted to overseas students according to the academic level they attain" [3], providing strong impetus for overseas education. The political shift in the Qing government's stance toward overseas study gave powerful momentum to the subsequent wave of military study in Japan.

2.2 Zhang Zhidong's Pro-Japan Diplomatic Inclination

The choice of Japan as the overseas destination for Hubei military students was closely tied to Zhang Zhidong, governor-general of Hubei at that time. Unlike Li Hongzhang, who leaned toward Russia, and Liu Kunyi, who favored Britain, Zhang Zhidong harbored pro-Japan sympathies [4]. He held that "Japan understands China's situation thoroughly, shares common interests and dangers with us, and belongs to the same race within the same continent. It will surely

comprehend our internal turmoil and relieve us of external perils.” [5] In addition, tense Sino-German and Sino-British relations as well as severe financial constraints pushed Zhang Zhidong closer to Japan.

After the First Sino-Japanese War, Japan sought to meddle in China’s military reforms and expand its interests in China. Starting in 1897, Japanese envoys visited China repeatedly to publicize the merits of receiving Chinese military students. Japan highlighted four major advantages: first, geographic proximity cut down expenses; second, its crash courses delivered remarkable results and matched China’s immediate demands; third, linguistic barriers were relatively low; fourth, similar customs enabled Chinese students to adapt easily. Japan’s proposals drew the attention of the Qing government. In a 1898 diplomatic note addressed to Japan, the Qing court stated, “Your government previously wrote to the Zongli Yamen, explaining that your imperial court recognizes China’s acute shortage of capable personnel and is willing to accept Chinese students into your schools for various disciplines. We greatly admire the sincere friendship of your emperor, who shares weal and woe with China.” [6] The two sides then agreed that a Chinese delegation would visit Japan for military inspection. The weapons and military drills displayed by Japan greatly impressed China’s traditional officers, broadened their horizons and consolidated their resolve to send students abroad, laying a solid foundation for subsequent Sino-Japanese cooperation on military education. It is clear that military overseas study in Japan did not take shape overnight but emerged from the dynamic interplay of multiple factors.

2.3 The Imperative of Enhancing Military Strength in the Late Qing Dynasty

The armies of the late Qing suffered from corruption, indiscipline and opium addiction, which undermined the combat effectiveness of the early Eight Banners and Green Standard Troops. The Xiang and Huai Armies, formed to suppress the Taiping Rebellion, also declined in fighting capacity. These flaws were fully exposed in the First Sino-Japanese War. The fact that Japan, a small island nation, defeated the Qing troops repeatedly delivered a heavy blow to the complacent imperial court and disturbed Zhang Zhidong, who again lamented in his telegram to the Zongli Yamen, “On hearing the terms of the peace treaty, I feel overwhelmed with anxiety, grief and indignation.” [7] Led by Zhang Zhidong, senior officials submitted memorials advocating the disbandment of outdated garrisons, dispatch of military students overseas and formation of the New Army following Western methods to strengthen national defense against foreign invasions.

The New Policies of the late Qing Dynasty created new opportunities for sending military students to Japan. “Zhang Zhidong successively presented two military memorials, Plans for Military Training and Proposals on Garrison Organization and Military Pay and Draft Regulations for Establishing the Standing Army of Hubei, elaborating detailed schemes to pilot the New Army in Hubei for nationwide popularization.” [8] The two memorials attracted wide attention from the Qing court, most of their provisions gained imperial approval, and Zhang Zhidong was authorized

to experiment with New Army training in Hubei. The training of the Hubei New Army relied heavily on military instructors. Apart from foreign instructors, returned Hubei military students educated in Japan played a prominent role in building the Hubei New Army.

3. Modes of Overseas Study and Institutional Background of Hubei Military Students in Japan

3.1 Modes of Overseas Study for Hubei Military Students in Japan

The Qing government began dispatching students to Japan in 1896, and their numbers grew steadily, forming a massive overseas-study wave. Hubei military students initiated their Japanese military training in 1898. “Zhejiang Governor first sent four students including Wu Xiyong and Chen Qicai. Then Zhang Zhidong dispatched twenty-four students including Tan Xingpei, Xu Fanglian and Duan Lanfang in two batches. Additional provincial governments sent twenty students and Zhejiang dispatched eight more, bringing the total to over seventy.” [9] This marked the beginning of Hubei military students’ pursuit of military education in Japan and accumulated experience for later Chinese military overseas study in Japan.

During the late-Qing military-study boom in Japan, Hubei military students adopted two major enrollment patterns: government-funded study and self-funded study. Government-funded programs selected outstanding students with all expenses covered by the government. Given the central government’s financial difficulties, it could not afford a large number of sponsored students, so most funds came from local sending agencies, resulting in provincial allocations, university sponsorship, the Army Training Department’s funding, enrollment from the Metropolitan Graduate School, noble youths’ overseas tours and ministerial sponsorship. Government-sponsored students came from diverse social backgrounds, offering promising yet impoverished young people access to overseas education.

Self-funded students bore their own expenses, with partial government subsidies available under strict selection criteria. Since the Qing government lacked full confidence in self-funded students, it later issued Regulations for Army Students Studying Abroad, banning self-funded students nationwide from major army disciplines and imposing quotas on self-funded military trainees. “Private students already enrolled in military academies must pass examinations conducted by the Chinese minister in Japan and overseas-student supervisors. Those proven diligent in studies shall be reported to the Army Training Department and converted into government-sponsored students with state funding to continue their education.” [10] This demonstrates the Qing government’s cautious attitude toward self-funded military overseas study. Nevertheless, the regulations were never fully enforced. The actual number of self-funded military students frequently exceeded official quotas, sometimes several times over. Consequently, government funding and self-funding became the dominant overseas-study modes for Hubei military students.

3.2 Principal Japanese Military Schools and Curricula Attended by Hubei Students

3.2.1 The Japanese Imperial Army Academy

Founded in 1874, the Japanese Imperial Army Academy was an influential military institution with a long history. It adopted an 18-month curriculum designed to train officers rapidly and ease the severe shortage of military commanders. Its disciplines covered infantry, cavalry, artillery, engineering and logistics, and aviation was added later. The curriculum was comprehensive, embracing tactics, military administration, armament and ballistics.

At the academy's founding ceremony in June 1878, Emperor Meiji delivered an imperial rescript on site, stating, "I recognize that the strength of an army hinges on the proficiency of its non-commissioned officers, hence the establishment of this academy. Today the construction is completed and I attend the inauguration in person. Henceforth, I place high expectations on this academy to cultivate outstanding non-commissioned officers for the further development of our army." [11] The academy enjoyed high prestige in Japan and became the top choice for Hubei military students.

Hubei military students received an 18-month training program divided into three phases: early, intermediate and late. "The early course commenced on December 1 and ended in late May of the following year. The late course began in mid-November and concluded in late May of the next year." [12] The short training cycle aimed to produce officers quickly to remedy troop shortages. Disciplines included

infantry, cavalry, artillery, engineering and logistics, each with distinctive training schedules. All majors underwent foot drills and machine-gun training, reflecting the academy's emphasis on physical fitness and machine-gun operation. Specialized courses were offered according to disciplinary characteristics to improve officers' overall competence.

3.2.2 Other Military Schools

Apart from the Japanese Imperial Army Academy, Hubei military students also studied at institutions such as the Shobu Gakko and the Tobin School. The origin of the Tobin School was distinctive. In 1902, Chinese Minister Cai Jun in Japan blocked Chinese students from entering the Seijo School for military training. In 1903, the Qing government prohibited self-funded students from receiving military education. As Japanese military academies hesitated to admit students with revolutionary leanings, the Tobin School was established. It recruited exclusively self-funded students and aimed to provide military training for patriotic young enthusiasts. The school operated merely five years, from 1903 to 1907.

The Shobu Gakko, a preparatory military school founded by Japan in 1903, mainly taught Chinese students Japanese and elementary military knowledge. Qualified graduates could proceed to the Japanese Imperial Army Academy for advanced military studies. It also launched crash courses to attract Chinese military trainees.

The following presents the study of Hubei military students in Japan at the Tobin School, Seibu Gakuen and other military academies:

Table 1: Statistical Table of Hubei Military Students in Japan Studying at Other Military Schools

Name	Arrival Time in Japan	School Attended	Name	Arrival Time in Japan	School Attended
Tie Liu (Self-funded)	1905	Tobin School	Yiqiao JI (Government-funded)	1906	Seibu Gakuen
Shaoliang Zhang (Self-funded)	1905	Tobin School	Mingjing JIANG (Government-funded)	1906	Seibu Gakuen
Rucui Ran (Self-funded)	1906	Tobin School	Kangui JI (Government-funded)	1908	Seibu Gakuen
Rurui Ran (Self-funded)	1906	Tobin School	Wu SUN (Self-funded)	1904	Seisei School
Ruzhang Dong (Self-funded)	1907	Tobin School	Guangxiong LENG (Self-funded)	1905	Seisei School
Geng Kong (Government-funded)	1903	Seibu Gakuen	Tengxiao FAN (Government-funded)	1906	Yokosuka Naval Gunnery School
Xuehuang Yin (Government-funded)	1905	Seibu Gakuen	Hanjun LI (Government-funded)	1902	Higher School of Japan
Daonan Xia (Government-funded)	1905	Seibu Gakuen			

Sources of the Table: Shen Yunlong, *Continued Series of Modern Chinese Historical Materials*, Taipei: Wenhai Press, 1937.

Zhou Mian, *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Overseas Students*, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1999.

Liu Zhen, *Overseas Education*, Vol.1, Taipei: National Institute for Compilation and Translation, 1980.

Statistics show that fifteen Hubei military students studied at other Japanese military schools. Six government-funded students enrolled at the Shobu Gakko, accounting for 40 percent of the total. The Shobu Gakko thus emerged as the primary destination for self-funded Hubei military students. The Tobin School ranked second with five self-funded Hubei enrollees, making up 33 percent of the total, which reveals that Hubei self-funded students favored the Tobin School. The curricula of these institutions were largely modeled on that of the Japanese Imperial Army Academy with partial revisions.

To sum up, the Japanese Imperial Army Academy possessed obvious advantages over other military schools. In terms of founding date, it had a longer history and solid teaching

foundation, whereas rival schools were established much later with inadequate preparations. In terms of state investment, it garnered great attention from the Japanese government and received more abundant funding and teaching staff. For these reasons, Hubei students preferred to pursue military training at the Japanese Imperial Army Academy.

4. Impacts of Hubei Military Students Studying in Japan on the Transformation of the Late-Qing Military System

4.1 Promoting the Modernization of Military Equipment in the Late Qing Dynasty

Through knowledge transformation and technology

importation, Hubei returned military students studying in Japan promoted creative breakthroughs in the late-Qing military equipment system and enriched the varieties of modern weapons. For instance, in 1906, acting on suggestions from returned Japanese-trained students, Zhang Zhidong spent 23,000 taels of silver purchasing two Yamada-type reconnaissance balloons from Japan. Equipped with an oval airbag, barometers and anemometers, these balloons adopted a winch system for vertical ascent and descent below 500 meters. Each balloon measured three meters in diameter and more than ten meters in height, tethered by heavy cables connected to large winches operated by soldiers [13].

At the Zhangde Grand Military Maneuvers, the Eighth Division of the Hubei New Army first deployed a balloon reconnaissance unit equipped with Yamada-type balloons, marking China's debut of aerial reconnaissance. Before the 1911 Revolution, the Hubei New Army had built a three-dimensional reconnaissance system consisting of balloon reconnaissance troops and field artillery observation squads. Its equipment level ranked first in the national military equipment survey of 1910. Such technological upgrades directly enhanced combat capacity and laid an institutional foundation for the birth of China's air force. Furthermore, returned students introduced Japanese Murata

rifles and established standardized military-armament maintenance regulations, raising the serviceability and combat effectiveness of the Hubei New Army. The advanced military equipment imported by Hubei overseas students accelerated the modernization of late-Qing military hardware, greatly boosted the fighting power of the Hubei New Army and became an important factor for subsequent military victories.

4.2 Advancing the Modernization of Late-Qing Chinese Military Education

With the widespread adoption of firearms, China's traditional military knowledge fell out of step with newly imported modern weaponry. Western weapons could realize their full combat potential only when matched by compatible modern military theories. Many returned Hubei military students took leadership or teaching posts at late-Qing military academies to fill this gap, improved military training programs and raised troop combat efficiency. For instance, Hubei military students returning from Japan served on the faculty of the Wuchang Military General Secondary School founded in Wuchang, Hubei Province. When the school was established in 1903, the employment of these returnees at the Wuchang Military General Secondary School is shown as follows:

Table 2: Statistical Table of Returnee Hubei Military Students from Japan Teaching at Wuchang Military General Secondary School

Name	Position	Native Place	Name	Position	Native Place
Yuanhong LI	School Superintendent	Huangpi, Hubei	Hanzhang HA	School Instructor	Hanyang, Hubei
Daoren LIU	School Inspector and Instructor	Mianyang, Hubei	Tingxian WAN	School Instructor	Ezhou, Hubei
Naiqian YI	School Inspector and Instructor	Hanyang, Hubei	Longxiang YING	School Instructor	Huangpi, Hubei
Jingyuan LU	School Inspector and Instructor	Zhuxi, Hubei	Luzhen WU	School Instructor	Yunmeng, Hubei

Sources of This Table: Wen Wen, Secret Archives of Military Academies in Old China, Beijing: China Literature and History Press, 2006.

Statistics indicate that Hubei returned military students constituted the backbone of teaching staff at the Hubei Military Middle School and delivered daily military instruction. The modernization of military education was also embodied in the introduction of new Japanese-style military drills. Military students from Hubei and other provinces imported Japanese drill routines, leading to the Japanization of Chinese military exercises. Alongside the drills, modern military terminology was introduced. Operational commands were translated from Japanese works such as *Bugle Signals*. Terms including "grand military maneuvers", "outpost", "ground arms", and "mobilization" were imported from Japan. These innovations greatly improved the quality and standard of military training in backward late-Qing China. Supported by returned Hubei military students, Zhang Zhidong enriched modern military curricula for the New Army and fueled the construction of the Hubei New Army, whose Japanese-inspired training system became a model emulated by other provinces.

Upon returning home, Hubei military graduates from Japan quickly became core builders of the New Army thanks to their systematic modern military education. Confronted with domestic and foreign crises, the Qing government urgently demanded commanders with modern military literacy and entrusted these returned students with important posts. Most were commissioned as New Army officers and delivered lectures on modern training and assumed command. A typical example is Wu Luzhen, a graduate of the sixth cohort of the Japanese Imperial Army Academy. After his return, he was

appointed commander of the 11th Mixed Brigade under the Eighth Division of the Hubei New Army at the age of thirty-one. Such exceptional promotions broke the traditional seniority-based advancement system of the old army and enabled young officers with modern military expertise to seize real power. These returned students localized the garrison-command training system of the Japanese Imperial Army Academy and established coordinated training for infantry, cavalry, artillery, engineering and logistics units, triggering structural changes in New Army training patterns and further pushing forward the modernization of late-Qing military education.

4.3 Enhancing the Combat Effectiveness of the Hubei New Army

The Qing court and local authorities dispatched military students to Japan because the Eight Banners and Green Standard Troops suffered from serious corruption and relied on antiquated training methods, resulting in rigid battlefield coordination and low combat capacity in wartime. The government hoped that overseas-educated military students would inject new vitality into the troops.

After the First Sino-Japanese War, China turned gradually toward Japan to build the New Army and experienced an acute demand for modern officers. Therefore, Hubei students trained at the Japanese Imperial Army Academy, the Shobu Gakko and the Tobin School attracted great official attention and received important appointments. For example, Li

Yuanhong, divisional commander of the Eighth Division of the Hubei New Army, and Lan Tianwei, its chief of staff, were both Hubei military students educated in Japan. Under their influence, Japanese military drills were introduced and modern weapon types multiplied. The integration of imported drills and new weapons remarkably lifted the combat capacity of the Hubei New Army and constituted a crucial advantage in later wars.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, under domestic turmoil and foreign aggression after the First Sino-Japanese War, the outdated Eight Banners and Green Standard Troops were incapable of resisting foreign invaders. Against this backdrop, the dispatch of military students overseas was put on the agenda, and Hubei military students departed for Japan for professional training. After returning, under the governance of Hubei officials including Zhang Zhidong, Duanfang and Chen Kuilong, they exerted a profound influence on modern military education, New Army construction and military transformation. Fundamentally, however, the policy aimed to preserve the rule of the late-Qing dynasty. Unexpectedly, these returned Hubei military students disseminated revolutionary ideas and contributed to revolutionary uprisings, and the newly established New Army later evolved into a source of warlord separatist power, a consequence never anticipated by the Qing authorities.

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