

Robert Kho-Seng Lim and the Meandering Path for the Localization of Peking Union Medical College

By Yan Shi

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Chinese Studies
National University of Singapore

julysiy@gmail.com

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At the Peking Union Medical College's (PUMC) dedication ceremony in 1921, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. said,

“Clearly, whatever Western medical science may have to offer China, it will be of little avail to the Chinese people until it is taken over by them and becomes a part of the national life. So we must look forward to the day when most, if not all, of the positions on the Faculty of the Peking Union Medical College will be held by Chinese; when the Board of Trustees, while embracing appointees of those bodies which founded the institution, as well as other representatives of Western civilization in China, will include leading Chinese; and when such current support as the institution may need beyond that derived from tuition fees and such endowment as may be set aside by its founders, shall be derived from Chinese gifts and governmental subsidies, as is the case with medical institutions of similar rank in other countries of the world. Let us then go forward with one accord towards the attainment of this objective which will make permanent the establishment on Chinese soil of the best in scientific medicine that the world can offer.”¹

To localize the PUMC in China was one of the primary objectives since the College was founded. Many researchers have mentioned this topic,² while few have discussed it from a personal case. Robert Kho-Seng Lim was the first Chinese professor and Department Head in PUMC history. Securing and promoting Lim can be considered an important stage in the localization of the PUMC. From his case, it can be seen that the process of localization was not a smooth one.

In 1922, Roger S. Greene, the director of the China Medical Board (CMB), received Robert Lim's application for a CMB scholarship and learned about this Singapore-born Chinese

physiologist.³ Greene was impressed by the young man's research experience and publications. At the same time, it was necessary for the PUMC to secure a proper man in the department of physiology in view of the lack of research assistants in the department because of the department head, Dr. E.W.H. Cruickshank's strict demands,⁴ and the uncertainty about the future of the department due to Cruickshank's dissatisfaction with the conditions of his appointment.⁵

The CMB granted Lim a one year scholarship for study in the United States and Europe, and he received his promise to work in China when he finished his studies.⁶ After one year's research, Lim received very high praise from A.J. Carlson, Chairman of the Physiology Department at the University of Chicago. As a result, Greene wanted Lim to be the acting head of the Physiology Department of PUMC for one year while Cruickshank, associate professor in charge of the department, was absent on furlough in London from 1924-1925.⁷

Lim asked for an appointment as a full professor since Amoy University had already offered him to be Director of Medical School and a full professorship.⁸ In order to secure Lim, the Executive Committee of the PUMC Trustees appointed him as a visiting professor, instead of associate professor, for one year, beginning July 1, 1924, as Greene recommended.⁹ Houghton, the Director of PUMC, also felt excited in securing Lim and reported that: "During the year, the Department of Physiology was the only one of the teaching departments without at least one Chinese member under appointment. And I am glad to record the appointment of Dr. Robert K. S. Lim as visiting professor in Physiology for the academic year 1924-1925."¹⁰ Apparently, as a highly promising Chinese, Lim was regarded as one of "the biggest assets" in the development of the CMB program in China. Early on Green started to think a good deal about offering a special grant to help Lim's career get started in China even if he left the PUMC.¹¹

After a half year's work at the PUMC, Lim felt comfortably settled and satisfied with the start of his work in Peking. He hoped to obtain a permanent PUMC appointment especially since there was little prospect that a medical school would be developed in the near future at Amoy University due to its insufficient funds.¹² Lim's success in research and teaching also greatly impressed other members of the PUMC faculty. After a series of conferences, which Houghton had with senior staff members and related advisers, the PUMC invited Lim to remain on the staff as an associate professor and to head the Department of Physiology for a two-year period beginning March 1925, with the expectation that if both sides were satisfied, Lim would be recommended for a full professorship at the end of that period as Lim requested. This decision meant that the department would be under Lim's leadership instead of Cruickshanks. It also implied that the avenue to a full professorship was closed to Cruickshank, because the College could not retain more than one full professorship in the department according to budgetary arrangements.¹³

Houghton informed Cruickshank of the decision and explained to him that the main reason for the College's choice was Lim's race. He wrote: "Above all, he (Lim) is Chinese, and has returned to China with the expectation of spending his life here. We are in hearty accord with the general policy laid down by the Trustees for gathering, as opportunity offers, Chinese of promise for responsible staff posts." Houghton assumed Cruickshank did not care to return to work under Lim; therefore, he suggested an extension of Cruickshank's leave of absence with salary, during 1925-1926, which would provide him with an opportunity to look for another position.¹⁴

However, this explanation was not accepted by either Cruickshank or Lim. Cruickshank felt surprised at first, for he was expecting his promotion at that time. More than half a year

earlier, before leaving on furlough, Cruickshank was told that senior staff members unanimously regarded him as the man to develop physiology in the PUMC. In a meeting of department heads it was agreed that if all went as harmoniously as it had in the past he would be considered for the full professorship in 1926.¹⁵ He turned very indignant at this matter and emphasized that he was senior both in age and professional experience to Lim. All his scientific publications had appeared in the recognized journals of physiology and biochemistry published in London, which were more severe in their criticism of submitted papers than was Edinburgh, where most of Lim's work appeared. It was unacceptable that "after four years of strenuous work and one year of intensive study in London" he should be cast aside. However, physiologists in England were very abundant at that time.

It was impossible for Cruickshank to find a position in England which would be compatible with his seniority and professional qualifications. Cruickshank thought the whole matter was due to the PUMC's "localization" policy, thus he wrote to Houghton saying that he would accept Lim as head of the department, but asked for the status of a professor without increase in salary, but with the security of a position at PUMC.¹⁶ He also told Greene: "my scientific career and my interest in research are more to me than the headship of a department ... I am rather pleased that the practical demonstration of the policy of the PUMC has fallen to me." He even suggested that the Trustees let Lim fulfill the duty of Dean of the Medical College, a difficult position to fill, which he thought must be filled by a Chinese.¹⁷

At the same time, Cruickshank complained to many people and evidently gave them the impression that the College had not treated him squarely. His supervisor at University College London, the famous physiologist Ernest H. Starling, said on first hearing about it that he would never recommend another man to the PUMC.¹⁸ The British members raised the question in a

meeting of the Trustees of the College; and one even intimated that the treatment given to Cruickshank would make it impossible to recruit any more teachers from Great Britain to Peking.¹⁹ John Preston Maxwell and Archibald B. Macallum also wrote to inquire about the affair.²⁰

The questions about Lim displacing Cruickshank due to his Chinese identity placed a lot of stress on Lim as well. His supervisor at the University of Edinburgh, Sir Edward Schafer, told him about some criticism in Great Britain and suggested he try to have Cruickshank retained at Peking.²¹ Lim came to Houghton and pointed out that he did not desire to accept the appointment unless there was a clear understanding that he was being offered the post not because he was Chinese, but on the grounds of suitability for the post and academic worth. He even indicated that he would “accept the appointment conditional on Cruickshank being retained, as Cruickshank wished to return.”²²

Both Greene and Houghton were bothered deeply by this appointment. In order to solve this problem, on the one hand, they assured Lim that “the recommendation to the Trustees of his appointment was made upon the basis of his scientific and academic suitability for the post and that, while we all felt a clear obligation to build up as rapidly as possible the Chinese staff, that was a secondary criterion.”²³ On the other hand, they explained to some inquirers that Cruickshank had little prior teaching experience and contributed little original work at Peking. To retain Cruickshank would place an indefinite burden on the college budget and hamper Lim as well, for their teaching methods were somewhat different.²⁴ However, they continued to persuade Cruickshank to accept another post by stressing the “localization” policy of the college to avoid embarrassing him.²⁵ Consequently, Cruickshank returned to Peking and insisted that the college was under a certain moral obligation due to his five constructive years of service in

building up the department aboard; during which he had cut himself off from certain home connections without which he could not return to England and resume a position which his experience and seniority demanded.²⁶

In order to save Cruickshank's feelings, Houghton frankly stated to Cruickshank: "While the fact that he (Lim) is Chinese weighed heavily with the Executive Committee in calling him to the Department, there was no thought in our mind of sacrificing standards of academic training or scientific worth in doing so."²⁷ Greene was blunter, "The letters which have been written about you by our office and by members of our staff in New York and by some of your scientific friends impressed the authorities of our university very favorably. This favorable impression was somewhat impaired by the judgment which they received on your published work from other sources."²⁸

In conclusion, Lim's appointment cannot be considered simply as a result or an important stage of PUMC's "localization" process. In fact, the college placed a higher value on "standards of academic training or scientific worth" than on their "localization" policy. Houghton's final explanation to Cruickshank illuminated this attitude of the PUMC authorities on this personnel appointment. Securing Lim to the PUMC and choosing Lim to replace Cruickshank were both based on personal scientific attainment and teaching ability rather than race. Actually, the PUMC was not ready to open many senior posts to Chinese at that time. In 1924, Houghton gladly reported that there had been a steady increase of young Chinese appointed to assistantships.²⁹ Greene agreed and thought it was more urgent that junior posts were kept open for Chinese at that time rather than the chairmanships of departments. Cruickshank's suggestion that Lim be appointed dean did not appeal to Greene either, who felt it would be a waste to take even a part of the time of a young scientist like Lim for administrative duties. Secondly, the path for the

localization of the PUMC was a meandering one. Both Cruickshank and Lim refused to accept that the personnel decision was based on localization. A transnational controversy was initiated when the authorities of the college tried to convince Cruickshank to give up his post by using racial policy so as not to embarrass him.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ John D. Rockefeller, Jr., "Response for the Rockefeller Foundation," *Addresses & Papers: Dedication Ceremonies and Medical Conference, Peking Union Medical College, September 15-22, 1921*. Peking, China, 1922, p. 65.

² For example, Raymond B. Fosdick, *The Story of the Rockefeller Foundation*. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1952; John Z. Bowers, *Western Medicine in a Chinese Palace: Peking Union Medical College, 1917-1951*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation, 1972; Mary Brown Bullock, *An American Transplant: The Rockefeller Foundation and Peking Union Medical College*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

³ Robert K.S. Lim to Roger S. Greene, October 7, 1922, Folder 890, Box 123, China Medical Board (CMB) Inc., Rockefeller Foundation Archives (RF), RAC.

⁴ Roger S. Greene to Edwin R. Embree, October 31, 1922, Folder 886, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.

⁵ Roger S. Greene to H. S. Houghton, December 12, 1922, Folder 890, Box 123, CMB, RF, RAC.

⁶ Roger S. Greene to Lim, January 2, 1923, Folder 890, Box 123, CMB, RF, RAC.

⁷ Roger S. Greene to Lim, February 7, 1924, Folder 890, Box 123, CMB, RF, RAC.

⁸ Robert K.S. Lim to Roger S. Greene, February 11, 1924, Folder 890, Box 123, CMB, RF, RAC.

⁹ Roger S. Greene to Lim, February 14, 1924; Roger S. Greene to Lim, March 22, 1923, Folder 890, Box 123, CMB, RF, RAC.

¹⁰ Peking Union Medical College Annual Report of the Director for the academic year 1923-1924, Folder 337, Box 48, CMB, RF, RAC.

¹¹ Roger S. Greene to Henry S. Houghton, October 16, 1924, Folder 890, Box 123, CMB, RF, RAC.

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- ¹² Roger S. Greene to Lim, December 17, 1924; Roger S. Greene to Henry S. Houghton, February 19, 1925, Folder 890, Box 123, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ¹³ Henry S. Houghton to Roger S. Greene, February 19, 1925, Folder 890, Box 123; Henry S. Houghton to M. K. Eggleston, April 23, 1925, Folder 886, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ¹⁴ Henry S. Houghton to E. W. H. Cruickshank, February 28, 1925, Folder 888, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ¹⁵ E. W. H. Cruickshank to Henry S. Houghton, March 19, 1925, Folder 888, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ¹⁶ E. W. H. Cruickshank to Hawkins, March 24, 1925; E.W.H. Cruickshank to Henry S. Houghton, March 24, 1925, Folder 888, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ¹⁷ E. W. H. Cruickshank to Roger S. Greene, March 24, 1925, Folder 888, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ¹⁸ E.W.H. Cruickshank to Henry S. Houghton, March 19, 1925, Folder 888, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ¹⁹ Roger S. Greene to Henry S. Houghton, April 13, 1925, Folder 886, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ²⁰ Macallum to Roger S. Greene, April 3, 1925, Folder 888, Box 122; Henry S. Houghton to J. Preston Maxwell, April 14, 1925, Folder 886, Box 122, CMB, RR, RAC.
- ²¹ Roger S. Greene to Henry S. Houghton, April 13, 1925, Folder 886, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ²² Henry S. Houghton to M. K. Eggleston, April 23, Folder 886, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ²³ Henry S. Houghton to M. K. Eggleston, April 23, Folder 886, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ²⁴ Roger S. Greene to Macallum, April 7, 1925, Folder 888, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ²⁵ Roger S. Greene to E. W. H. Cruickshank, April 10, 1925, Folder 888, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ²⁶ E. W. H. Cruickshank to Roger S. Greene, May 4, 1925, Folder 888, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ²⁷ Henry S. Houghton to E. W. H. Cruickshank, July 16, 1925, Folder 888, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ²⁸ Roger S. Greene to E. W. H. Cruickshank, June 19, 1925, Folder 888, Box 122, CMB, RF, RAC.
- ²⁹ Peking Union Medical College Annual Report of the Director for the academic year 1923-1924, Folder 337, Box 48, CMB, RF, RAC.