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100 YEARS OF JOHN DEWEY AND EDUCATION IN CHINA

Only a few years following the publication of *Democracy and Education*, from May 1919 to July 1921, John Dewey traveled and lectured in China. He arrived an already famous American psychologist, philosopher, and educator; but over the course of the years after his departure, that fame diminished, turning to infamy in the 1950s and 1960s, only to be somewhat restored in recent decades. The changing attitudes of the Chinese to Dewey and his ideas are associated with the changing, and often tumultuous, cultural and political context for education in China from the time of his visit through the following century. Hu Shi and Tao Xingzhi, PhD students of Dewey at Columbia University, were prominent Chinese educators who adapted Dewey's educational concepts to the Chinese environment, and their work continues to influence educational debate in China today. While there is desire among many contemporary educators for educational reforms that would be in line with Dewey's principles, there are equal or greater pressures for maintaining systems focused on examinations and memorization.

One hundred years ago, John Dewey's best-known work, *Democracy and Education*, was published and immediately received worldwide attention. Three years later, Dewey set foot for the first time onto the land of China, one of the oldest cultures in the world, only a few days prior to the May Fourth demonstrations of 1919. Originating with university students in Beijing, the protests against the Versailles Peace Conference decision to transfer German concessions in China to Japan spread rapidly. The May Fourth Movement gave a political dimension to the already active New Culture Movement, which sought to modernize China through cultural ideas borrowed from other countries, particularly Western ones.

Prominent within the New Culture Movement was Hu Shi (*胡适*, 1891–1962), who had completed his PhD at Columbia University with Dewey as his supervisor. It was from Hu Shi and another former student, Tao Xingzhi (*陶行知*, 1891–1946), that Dewey received the invitation to visit and lecture in China. He arrived in China with his wife, Alice Dewey, and his daughter, Lucy Dewey, from Japan, where he had been traveling and lecturing at the time he received the invitation. In the subsequent two years and two months, Dewey gave approximately two hundred lectures across China. Through his lectures, Dewey systematically introduced the Chinese people to pragmatism, a principle or method for estimating the practicality and actual results carried out in real life of philosophical conceptions; in the words of William

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James—"the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts."[1]

Hu Shi prepared the ground well for Dewey's visit, speaking and writing often about what he termed Dewey's "experimentalism" and its fit with the New Culture Movement's emphasis on science and democracy. During the time that Dewey stayed in China, he became well known and highly regarded as an educator among China's elites, attaining something akin to superstar status. Thousands of people attended his lectures; numerous newspapers carried his speeches; and a book series of his lectures was published and sold over ten thousand copies.[2]

In 1921, with blessings and warm wishes from his admirers in China, Dewey returned to the United States. Though no longer physically present in Chinese society, his ideas continued to carry significant weight in intellectual circles. His disciples Hu Shi, Tao Xingzhi, Jiang Menglin, and others, continued to actively promote his ideas and theories, in particular within the educational system. However, in the late 1930s, the brilliance associated with Dewey's name began to fade, and his ideas lost their prominence within intellectual circles. From the mid-1950s, Dewey's philosophy and theories were condemned instead of praised. Suddenly, Dewey's educational philosophy was labeled "poisonous," "reactionary," and "subjective-idealistic." Dewey himself became a "great fraud and deceiver in the modern history of education."[3] This condemnation of Dewey continued through the late 1970s and early 1980s until the death of Mao Zedong (then leader of the Chinese Communist Party and the founding father of the People's Republic of China) and the end of the Cultural Revolution—a "complex social upheaval that began as a struggle between Mao Zedong and other top party leaders for dominance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and went on to affect all of China with its call for 'continuing revolution.'"[4] Subsequently, China changed its policies toward the Western world, and a revival of interest in John Dewey as well as in American pragmatism took place. This interest led to a reevaluation and a rehabilitation of Dewey's ideas and theories.[5]

JOHN DEWEY IN CHINA: PAST

During his two-year stay in China, Dewey's theories were very well received across the country. Numerous Chinese were enthusiastic about his lectures and eager to learn more about his theories. The newspapers reported that when Dewey was in Guangdong Province, people were so interested in his lectures that they blocked the roads when he was leaving, with the goal of prolonging his stay so that he would give more lectures. Almost all of the major newspapers and youth magazines at the time published Dewey's lectures. Through this widespread and comprehensive publicity, Dewey quickly gained many followers, students, scholars, educators, activists, and politicians who were inspired by his ideas. Mao Zedong was an assistant librarian at Beijing University at the time that Dewey was lecturing and when the May Fourth demonstrations broke out. Though it is unlikely that he met Dewey personally, Mao was very engaged with intellectuals such as Hu Shi and others involved in the New Cultural Movement and would have been aware of Dewey's ideas. Mao believed strongly in the power of pragmatism and suggested that pragmatism should be the guide for developing ideologies. Why were Dewey and his ideas so popular? What made him a Western scholarly superstar in China?[6]

Yuan argues that Dewey's popularity was closely tied to the social and political atmosphere of China at that time. Many educators joined/contributed to the May Fourth Movement, and Dewey's theories fit with the movement's goal of ideological emancipation, as well as with the general public's desire for economic development and educational reform in China.[7] The May Fourth Movement promoted democracy and science, and Dewey's call for education based in the free exchange of ideas—empirically tested in the service of solving public problems—closely matched this emphasis. Dewey's philosophy fit well, too, with the ideas of many Chinese scholars influenced by Dewey's students Hu Shi and Tao Xingzhi, who had become prominent educational leaders following their return from the United States. China and the United States had a good relationship at that time, and the two countries were actively exchanging cultural and political ideas with many American scholars touring in China in the same period. May Fourth Movement supporters believed that China should learn from the Western world and its school system, which they considered more advanced.

Dewey's relation to the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius was also a factor in Dewey's influence. Wang and Liu argue that Confucius and Dewey shared some beliefs about education.[8] First of all, both Dewey and Confucius promoted equal education. Confucius believed that education should be offered to all without discrimination. All children, regardless of class, deserved to be equally educated. Also, both Dewey and Confucius emphasized the importance of reflection upon experience to enhance the learning process. Furthermore, similar to Dewey's belief that a child's interests should be the guidance to the child's learning, Confucius also suggested that education should derive from students' interests. Dewey and Confucius certainly shared a belief in the need for education as well as in various ideas about learning. Chinese scholars embraced "apply what one's learned," for example, well before the Dewey's visit. However, many Chinese educators of the time located the country's misfortunes in its rigid adherence to a model of education rooted in Confucian tradition. This tradition emphasized a philosophical study of the virtues of the ideal man, a study oriented toward the very small chance of entering elite society through high performance on a civil service examination focused on the Confucian ideals. While having important benefits for the efficient governance of the society, many saw these examinations as a way for emperors to keep the people in check by holding out the hope of a vastly improved life to those who worked diligently. Dewey's experimentalism and his emphasis on education of the common man were certainly counter to that tradition. Some touted Dewey as "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy" to replace "Mr. Confucius." Cai Yuanpei, president of Beijing University (1916–1927) and founder of the Academia Sinica (中央研究院, Central Research Academy of China), referred to Dewey as the "Western Confucius" in his speech at Dewey's sixtieth birthday celebration.[9]

Dewey's theories were regarded as the primary inspiration for the reformation of the school system in China from the 1920s to the 1930s. Dewey and his students played a crucial role in the process of the educational reformation, and they strongly influenced the standards and content of the new school system. Dewey's theories helped to establish the structure of the Chinese school system; primary school consisted of six years of learning while middle school and high school each consisted of three years of learning. These changes were unlikely to have happened without the efforts and influence of Dewey and his students. His book *Democracy and Education* was translated into Chinese and served

as a textbook for higher education during the May Fourth Movement. Core principles such as "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself" and "learning by doing" were adopted by the government and incorporated into the regulations and policies published by the Education Department.[10]

In 1927, Dewey's former student Tao Xingzhi established Xiao Zhuang School in Nanjing as a site for the training of teachers based upon the philosophy of education that he developed under Dewey's influence. The Kuomingtang government closed Xiao Zhuang School in 1930. According to Chuankao, there is no reliable source identifying the reason for the school's closing; however, there was speculation that the Kuomintang believed Xiao Zhuang School to be secretly associated with their adversary, the Communist Party.[11] Xiao Zhuang School did reopen, however, in 1949 and has recently evolved into present-day Nanjing Xiaozhuang University with several thousand students studying education in the spirit of its founder.[12]

Dewey's trip to China marks an important milestone in the history of Chinese education, and Dewey continued to influence China for decades after his departure. Nonetheless, in the 1950s, with the movement of "Criticism of Hu Shi," Dewey's popularity suffered a notable decline. In contrast to the previous generation's widespread praise of Dewey's philosophies, more negative voices arose. Ironically, Mao Zedong was behind the outbreak of the Criticism of Hu Shi. Why did China turn its back on Dewey?

First and most significantly, instead of studying and following the West, China had turned to the Soviet Union, and Dewey had become an enemy rather than friend to the latter, leading the 1937 American Preliminary Commission of Inquiry's investigation of the charges Joseph Stalin levied against Leon Trotsky under the Moscow Trials. The Dewey Commission announced its conclusion that Trotsky and his son were innocent and that the Moscow Trials were a sham. This event marked the end of the friendship between Dewey and the Soviet Union. Dewey was condemned strongly by the Soviet Union, and China soon adopted the Soviet Union's attitude as well. Secondly, "from 1950s–1970s, extreme Leftism ruled China and all academic activities were politicized."[13] Pragmatism suffered heavy criticism for political purposes and many people abandoned their belief in pragmatism and passion for pragmatism-centered educational reform, in part because pragmatism was considered a Western idea. Dewey and many other Western scholars were condemned. Furthermore, China had adopted the Soviet-style philosophies of Marxism and Leninism, whereas, Dewey strongly opposed the concepts of "class struggle" and "revolution" as well as dialectical materialism, all of which were advocated in China at the time of the Cold War.[14]

Although Mao's criticism was directed at Hu Shi, Dewey's influence on Hu Shi and their close personal relationship drew Dewey into the debate. Unfortunately, the majority of the articles with negative comments are no longer accessible to the general public in relation to the official clearing of Hu Shi's name in the 1980s. Many scholars and educators point out that it is unfortunate that limited research and studies are done on Dewey's works in China due to the Criticism Movement of the 1950s.[15] However, this does not mean that Dewey has had no continuing impact on Chinese educational psychology and philosophy. In fact, Dewey's influence has permeated Chinese society over the years and remains visible. For instance, Dewey's ideas were incorporated into the education curriculums in the 1920s. During the education reform in the 1990s, Chinese scholars and educators stated that China should take the essence of Dewey's

educational ideas and use them to benefit its own students.[16] Cheng also illustrates that the current administrative setting in Chinese universities, especially emphasis on "self-governing" by the students is also a product of Dewey's influence.[17] And the influence went both ways, too. Dewey's daughter Lucy, who journeyed with Dewey into China, said that both her parents and she enjoyed the incredible journey. Dewey even wanted to visit China again when he was 86 years old. Jane, Dewey's other daughter, claimed that to Dewey, China was the country "nearest to his heart after his own."[18]

DEWEYAN SCHOOL IN CHINA: XIAO ZHUANG SCHOOL

Tao Xingzhi, who founded the Nanjing Xiao Zhuang School (also referred to as Morning Village Normal School) to implement teacher training based on Dewey's theories, is regarded as one of the most prominent figures in the modern history of China and Chinese education. Xiao Zhuang School was founded in 1927 during a period of political disunity in China, also known as the Chinese Civil War between the Communist Party and Kuomintang. Among the students in Xiao Zhuang, there were members of both groups. Tao did not interfere with students' political beliefs, nor did he display interest in fawning on political leaders. Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Kuomintang during this period, and his wife Soong Mei-ling, were upset upon discovering that the school had named a building "Feng Village" after his political rival within Kuomintang, Feng Yuxiang. Feng had actively supported Xiao Zhuang School. The situation for the school took a turn for the worse when Tao refused Chiang's request to expel the students who had taken part in a political demonstration against imperialism. In 1930, the Kuomintang Party shut it down by force. In this process, over thirty students were jailed and ten died. The youngest victim was only sixteen. Tao escaped to Japan in April 1930 and returned to China the following year, continuing to devote himself to the cause of education.[19]

Tao modified and extended principles from *Democracy and Education* to better fit the Chinese social context. Dewey wrote, "Education is Life, School is Society," but Tao reversed this idea to "Life is Education, Society is School." Dewey's "learning by doing" became the "unity of three—teaching, learning and reflective acting."[20] Tao suggested that children could learn in school, literacy for example, and teach their parents. Villages could become like schools. Tao encouraged children to act as "little teachers" and teach their parents what they had learned in school so that their parents could learn the written words while simultaneously the children reinforced their learning.

Tao was eager to make changes not just in the schools but also in the society as a whole. He argued that the notion of "Education is Life" was like grabbing a bird from the sky and putting it into a cage; it suggested absorbing every aspect of the society and combining these into the smaller community of a school. However, "Society is Education" sought to expand features of the school into the larger society. "Life is Education" promoted learning outside of regular classrooms and schools, a form of education that would be affordable for the poor families in China at the time. Following Tao's innovations, other scholars also began to develop their own adaptations of Dewey's theories in order for the theories to better apply to the unique context of Chinese society.[21]

Tao was highly committed to the Xiao Zhuang School and through it to improving the quality of education in China. He used it as an experimental ground for implementing

Deweyan ideas into the practical aspects of people's lives.[22] Teachers-in-training were expected to manage schools and classrooms during their training in courses such as "Teaching—Learning—Doing the activities of the central elementary school," while simultaneously learning skills such as farming and cooking in the service of becoming a part of local village society. Cong argues that Tao "sought to eliminate the boundary between education and life" by having his student teachers learn to live the life of the common people in communities like those they were being prepared to lead.[23] According to Su, the school served as "both a base for preparing rural teachers and a center for village renewal … the whole village became a learning community."[24] Though the conditions under which he was working were very different, Tao's emphasis on learning by doing, learning as a collaborative endeavor, and on the inseparability of labor and culture were shared by numerous American progressive educators of the same time period who sought to create Deweyan schools both in practice and in the imagination.[25]

Even though the original Xiao Zhuang School lasted only three years due to the political pressures and unstable social environment at the time, it was considered a great innovation and success. Su writes:

> At the Morning Village Normal School, faculty, staff and students integrated themselves into the village community and attempted to promote democratic meetings in cases of disputes. They also created a network of village schools connecting hundreds of families. The schools offered not only basic education to children, but also literacy classes to adults. In addition, they ran hospitals and established a self-defense league for villagers to protect themselves against bandits. For a while at Morning Village, the school and society were effectively joined for the purpose of educating everyone in democratic community, a goal that Dewey had advocated but had not been able to achieve in the United States.[26]

Tao passed away in 1946, but his legacy continues to this day. Xiao Zhuang School reopened in 1951, two years after the founding year of People's Republic of China, and followed Tao's and Dewey's theories on education. However, the reopening was not the end of Xiao Zhuang School's struggle. Like Dewey and Hu Shi, Tao was severely criticized during the 1950s. He was called a "bourgeois education reformer" and Xiao Zhuang School suffered immensely during this period of time. In the 1960s and 1970s, the school continued to be a target of members of the left wing during the Cultural Revolution. With Deng Xiaoping's rise to power in the 1980s, Xiao Zhuang School's fortunes improved. In 1996, Su wrote, "The school has thrived with renewed commitment to Tao's educational philosophy, a creative and critical development of Dewey's theories in China."[27]

DEWEY IN CHINA: PRESENT

In December 1978, China initiated its Open Door Policy, the first time since the founding of the new country that China had opened its door to the outside world, in particular, the Western world. The Open Door Policy led to a revival of interest in John Dewey and other Western academics. Chinese scholars reevaluated Dewey and his philosophy, and some began to advocate for the idea that Dewey had been misinterpreted and misunderstood in the period beginning in the late 1950s. Sun argues that Dewey had been wronged in three ways: "first, Dewey was usually regarded as a subjective idealist opposing materialism, therefore unscientific."[28] But Dewey did not deny the existence of

material things; he emphasized the importance of interactions between people and the society, he believed in the power of growth and practice.[29] Second, Dewey had always strongly advocated for democracy and freedom, but China was a communist country. Nevertheless, the democracy that Dewey was promoting was not solely related to the realm of politics. Dewey's concept of democracy included joint learning, an open classroom environment, and the opportunity for all to be educated.[30] In addition, Dewey was attacked for his ideas about truth; he was labeled as "egotistic." However, instead of being overly subjective, Dewey was suggesting that truth is determined by whether anticipated results are produced and whether it can "stand the test of practice."[31]

Chinese education has developed enormously in the past three decades, and attitudes toward John Dewey have come nearly full circle as his ideas have been adopted again after being attacked for three decades. Dewey's reputation and influence are gradually being restored. With the renewal of Dewey's influence in China come questions regarding his current place in Chinese society. What are some of the Deweyan ideas that are still relevant today in the Chinese society? Is there a place for Dewey in the current Chinese education system or is he just a part of its history?

Zhang surveyed and interviewed graduates of Chinese high schools who were currently studying in university degree programs. A comparison of those studying in Chinese universities with those studying in North American universities showed that those in China were interested in Deweyan practices such as collaborative work and critical, reflective thinking exercises. However, they reported being asked by their professors to work in these ways much less often than were the Chinese students studying at North American universities.[32] Su compared principals from Chinese and American schools with respect to their view of ideal schools for the twenty-first century.[33] The Chinese principals, like the students Zhang studied, professed a strong interest in values that have a definite Deweyan quality. For example, with respect to the purpose of education, they gave higher ratings to a "progressive view" (focused on developing the interests of individual children to their full potential) over other ones, including a "conservative view" (focused on educating students in a way "to help maintain order and stability in the social, political, and economic fabric of society"). From a list of potential school goals, they gave a high rating to "Critical and independent thinking." They spoke of a desire to move students away from their contemporary situation of "test-taking machines" and "slaves to learning"—the latter a term that Dewey, too, uses in *Democracy and Education* to describe traditional American students at his time forced to spend their days memorizing other people's knowledge rather than reflectively pursuing individual interests.[34]

Su's principals recognized that contemporary Chinese education is still dominated by the elements of Confucian tradition that emphasize examinations and memorization. The principals and Zhang's students wish to move away, but Zhao argues that doing so has been a near impossible task. He recognizes the benefits for international testing that come from such an orientation, but decries the calls in the United States for emulation of the high-scoring Chinese schools and movement in the direction of more accountability through examinations. His analysis of Chinese society and education suggests a need for change of the sort desired by students and principals in the studies described here, and he warns Americans away from the current traditional educational practices in China. The difficulty of achieving such change, he says, lies in the strength of the

Confucian tradition. Dewey and his students in China have provided a counter narrative from which to resist this tradition, and many Chinese educators continue to develop that discourse. Thus, *Democracy and Education* seems likely to remain influential in Chinese educational debate for some time to come.[35]

NOTES

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[8]Yuan, "John Dewey and China," 130–69.

[9]Keqin Wang and Xiuhua; Liu, "John Dewey's Thoughts on Democratic Education and Its Enlightment on Vocational and Technical Colleges," *Journal of Ningbo University* (*Education Edition*) 31:4 (2009): 30–32.

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[11]Chuankao, "John Dewey and the Education World in China after May Fourth Movement," 146–49; Yuan, "John Dewey and China," 133–40.

[12]Chuankao, "John Dewey and the Education World in China after May Fourth Movement," 144–45.

[13]Jiangsu Education, "Nanjing Xiaozhuang University."

[14]Sun, "John Dewey in China: Today and Yesterday," 83.

[15]Chuankao, "John Dewey and the Education World in China after May Fourth Movement," 144; Fang Liu, "Pragmatism and Its Influence on Old Chinese Education," *Jiao Yu Ping Lun* 2 (1998): 47–49; Sun, "John Dewey in China: Today and Yesterday," 77–82; Yuan, "John Dewey and China," 145–50.

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[27]Su, "Teaching, Learning, and Reflective Acting: A Dewey Experiment in Chinese Teacher Education," 127.

[28]Su, "Teaching, Learning, and Reflective Acting: A Dewey Experiment in Chinese Teacher Education," 128.

[29]Sun, "John Dewey in China: Today and Yesterday," 84.

[30]Dewey, *Democracy and Education*.

[31]John Dewey, "Democracy in Education," *The Elementary School Teacher* 4:4 (1903): 193–204.

[32]Sun, "John Dewey in China: Today and Yesterday," 85.

[33]Grace Xinfu Zhang, "John Dewey and Education in China: Past and Present" (Toronto, Canada: York University, 2016).

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