

## John Dewey's legacy to China and the problems in Chinese society

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Eighty-seven years ago, John Dewey and his wife, Alice Dewey, visited China in response to an invitation from some of his Chinese former students at Columbia University. Dewey stayed in China for two years, traveling throughout the country to present lectures at universities and colleges, many of which were published or reported in various local newspapers. His educational philosophies were respected and valued, and were even taken as the theme for China's Educational Conference in 1922. His lectures included political science, social science, philosophy and education. In those lectures, Dewey clarified the democratic way of thinking, doing and living to the Chinese people. Through his speeches, he enlightened his Chinese listeners about the importance of reflective thinking and reasoning in constructing human intelligence, of lively inquiries, and of education rooted in science and democracy.

During Dewey's visit, China was in a state of political instability, economic sluggishness and vulnerable international relationships. In contrast, both culturally and intellectually, Chinese thinkers were dynamic and full of passion. Many Chinese intellectuals were disappointed with the political and economic situation of that period, and they admired the democracy and industrial development of Western countries. They wanted to learn from the West so as to save China from economic poverty, political chaos and diplomatic inferiority. Many attributed the genesis of these problems to traditional Confucianism's confinement of China's modernization. These leaders in Chinese thought wanted to break away from the old and construct a new way of conceptualizing China. Dewey's inspiring speeches and ideas brought hope to Chinese intellectuals that they might move China forward.

When in China, Dewey had a unique opportunity to advance his philosophy. At the same time, he was confronted with substantial challenges. Many Chinese intellectuals' ties to Confucianism were still strong, and their desire to find a Western counterpart to the humanistic and spiritual values of Confucianism was not successful. These intellectuals, such as Liang Shu-ming, a professor of Beijing University, and Liang Qichao<sup>1</sup> (known as Liang Ch'i-ch'ao in Taiwan), a well-known reformist, had no doubt about China's need for reform, but they also worried about the spiritual and humanistic values (or lack thereof) in Western democracy. Moreover, Dewey's democracy was not the only Western philosophy being studied in China at the time. For example, many of the Chinese who studied in Europe promoted European philosophy, especially Marxist theory, which was widely discussed among university professors and students. The success of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the Bolshevik socialistic government was a prominent (and apparently successful) model for budding Chinese Communists.

Dewey's achievements in the educational sphere were substantial, yet this significant impact was overshadowed by the pragmatism omnipresent in Western democracy. Also, after



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1927, Dewey's influence in China had been declining. The coupling of his pragmatism with his theories of democracy disturbed both Chinese Confucian intellectuals and Chinese Marxists. I argue that Dewey's influence might have been stronger if he had solely advocated educational philosophies. However, that was not possible because Dewey's understanding of education was inseparable from his notions of pragmatism and democracy. Consequently, the decline of his influence and his philosophies was due to many factors. This paper explores the strength of Dewey's democracy, traces these factors, and considers why Western democracy did not thrive in China. I do this from the standpoint of a person of Chinese origin who is especially about the problems that defer or deter the development of democracy and the construction of human intelligence in China.

## Dewey's democracy

To understand Dewey's legacy to China, and the decline of his influence on the Chinese, it is important to understand what Dewey meant by democracy and why those meanings were considered either adequate or conflicted at that period of time. Dewey's democracy, in general, had the following features, which I will discuss at greater length:

- democracy is more than a form
- step-by-step democracy
- associated democracy
- tolerant democracy
- pragmatism (cf. Marxism)

### *Democracy is more than a form*

Dewey (1916/1944) presented his democratic ways of teaching, learning and living in one of his best-known books, *Democracy and Education*, a work in which he integrated his democratic philosophy with his theories of education, to the extent that he saw education as the basis for seeking a democratic realization of self and society. Dewey also wrote books and gave lectures on political democracy, democratic rights, social democracy and economic democracy, all of which embodied and vigorously promoted the understandings of a democratic society that endured throughout his career.

When talking about democracy, many people connect it with egalitarian suffrage in the electoral process. Indeed, the democracy of political rights began with polling and was how the ancient Athenians governed their *polis* (condemning Socrates to death by democratic votes is a well-known example). But if democracy is equated with voting at polls, then it is only a "most votes" system and has nothing to do with being wise. The democracy that Dewey presented demanded democratic intelligence and wise individuality. Dewey (1916/1944) wrote: "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p.87). In other words, democracy should be carried out from the bottom to the top, not from the top to the bottom – a pervasive acceptance and practice of democracy by the general populace. Benjamin Schwartz reflected this important concept when he paraphrased Dewey:

Democracy must have a grass-roots social basis. It must be part of the fabric of the lives of people and begin in every village and in every city block. Discussions concerning cabinet organization, parliamentary organization, even about centralism versus federalism, are unreal so long as the people as a whole are not thoroughly imbued with democratic attitudes and do not participate in the processes of a democratic life (quoted in Berry, 1960, p.208)



There are numerous (so-called) democratic elites. For example, many democratic representatives of the June 4<sup>th</sup> movement in Beijing believe that only when political problems are resolved, that is, only when the government is changed, can social and cultural problems be fixed. This point of view takes politics to be omnipotent. But democracy is beyond a political concept or a power. The form of government democracy takes is only an external change. Dewey argued that external signs could not provide for internal beliefs, but that internal human intelligence would by necessity be both critical and influential. Only the people themselves have the wisdom to judge right from wrong; only they can adjust their thinking and behavior to build a truly democratic society. Democracy is the effect of intelligent decisions, which include voting in a democratic forum. Voting is an effect rather than the cause of democracy and voting alone does not necessarily produce democracy. In constructing human intelligence, practice is important. It should encourage undeveloped ideas and critical thinking for people to express and examine. Democracy, then, is much more than a form of government. In Dewey's lectures in China, he repeatedly reiterated this point. He called upon Chinese people to be willing to freely participate in political discussions and activities, to build up a government that would represent them but not control them. He said, "a fundamental tenet of democratic political theory is government by the consent of the governed" (Dewey, 1973, p.94). Here Dewey showed that democracy is not only a political concept but that it is also a concept important to daily life. It should not be defined stipulatively, but rather remain an open, questionable and critical dialogue or exploration among freethinking and freely acting people in their pursuit of human intelligence.

Many Chinese intellectual radicals in the 1920s lost trust in a corrupt warlord government. Also, the governments during the 1910s and 1920s were very unstable and, therefore, the desire for these intellectuals to set up a new order and a new government outgrew their tendency to simply acquiesce to unstable governments.

#### *A step-by-step democracy*

Dewey believed that true democracy demands a democratic life that needs to be built up and lived out bit-by-bit, even in China – an unstable nation in a state of disorder and national turmoil. In working for a democratic life, force or eagerness alone cannot accomplish the goal. Instead, in discussing intellectual freedom with his Chinese audience, Dewey (1973) suggested:

Ideally, of course, it is a good thing to have the people of a nation thinking about the same problems and moving in the direction of agreement. But---and this is especially true of a time like the present---this sort of consensus can be achieved only through gradual development, as the result of free discussion and evaluation of conflicting ideas and claims; it can never be achieved by force (p. 178).

To act by continuous and patient persuasion to gain consensus, rather than by force, was largely a Western rhetorical skill, which could be traced back to classical Greco-Roman education. Western self-expressive presentation, especially in front of an audience, was an experience that many Chinese lacked. Chinese people had previously focused on changing the views of the leader rather than the majority of the people, and the relationship between the leader and the followers was (most of the time) authoritative, but not persuasive. Dewey presented the Chinese people with a new mode of political action, a way that was different from Chinese habit.

Dewey was not a radical philosopher, and he did not believe in radical ways of achieving success. Many radicals wanted to replace bad governments with democratic ones, which would give voting rights to common people and people the freedom to talk freely and



publicly. It seems that this way seemed quickest and easiest, but might not ingrain democratic attitudes and ways of living into people's minds. Radicals emphasized less the construction of democratic attitudes by the populace than the form of governmental democracy itself. Radical ideas often sound reasonable and radical opinions often overcome conservative views, eventually gaining the necessary support from the masses. This result is not necessarily because radical action is imperative, but because social conditions cannot sustain continual conflict. Therefore, when radical ideas are presented, they usually get both response and support. Dewey (1973) contradicted radical ideas when he wrote: "The basic reason why a radical idea can gain acceptance quickly lies not in the idea itself, but in the circumstances under which it is advanced" (p. 177). He explained that what people need is not the radical idea itself, but some means of expressing their displeasure, disbelief and antagonism, and radical ideas often seem to expedite the realization of that "dream."

Radical ideas ignite the fuse attached to the bomb of tension and eagerness infused within the masses. Ideas must be internalized and linked to a person's experience for them to be utilized and to achieve true acceptance. A radical idea or a radical action does not allow process for people to reflect, to wonder. If an idea is put into action too quickly, without its intellectual "digestion" by its practitioners, it cannot promise stability. Dewey, therefore, believed that it was not the radical idea itself, but rather the environment within which the people suffer that might accelerate their acceptance of radical ideas. Instead of choosing radical ideas and resolving their problem the fast but temporary way, Dewey suggested changing the world incrementally – little by little. He said: "Progress is retail business, not wholesale. It is made piecemeal, not all at once" (p. 62). Democracy needs to be lived rather than preached. For a true sense of democracy, Dewey reminded Chinese people to use intelligence to distinguish radical forces from a gradual democratic consensus.

#### *Associated democracy*

For Dewey, a democratic society was for all, including both friends and enemies. A democratic society is based on communication, cooperation and interaction among all involved individuals; its survival depends upon the consensus of its people. He claims: "A democratic society depends for its stability and development not on force, but on Consensus" (p. 93). He favored the common good over class struggle. For Dewey, theories of class struggle deprive opponents of their rights; these opponents are also part of the society, and are elements of the same society; they are still important and should not be ignored. Some followers of class struggle theory, including the early Communists in China's history, deprived the bourgeoisie of their rights to own land, property, and even to possess common human dignity. Between 1949 and 1976, many landlords, capitalists and intellectuals were put into re-education camps, and were publicly criticized and insulted. Spiritually, the bourgeoisie were treated as an exploiting class, an opposite to the proletariat. But do two different classes have to be in opposition to one another? Does one's success have to be the other's failure? Looking back on Chinese history, every exchange of dynasties, every revolutionary action, was due to class struggle. The antagonism was intense, the struggle was difficult, and the means were always radical. This model, for Dewey, obviously did not represent the common good. To end this antagonistic cycle, he argued that incorporating democratic ways of living could present a satisfactory resolution for all parties involved. Recognizing the common good and the compatible relationship among social groups, Dewey suggested the enrichment of associated living. He understood associated living to be the essential criteria for judging a right act of human activity and societal improvement. He told the Chinese people:



Associated living is characterized by cooperation, and that it is to the mutual advantage of everyone concerned in it. It is like friendship. Friends help each other, exchange knowledge and insights, with the result that their lives are richer and more meaningful. Associated living is the highest ideal of social development (Dewey, 1973, p. 89).

In associated living, animosity could be attenuated and cooperation strengthened. Reconstruction of relationships would take the place of power struggles when dealing with controversies and conflicts. Reconstruction would keep the original infrastructure of the society, making changes to it without totally destroying the existing social structure. This reconstruction would be internal, generated from a mutual understanding among the living system of an entire society rather than stemming from superficial structures or rules. The reconstruction of a society should aim to increase progress both socially and culturally and would depend upon every member's effort. Social progress, in Dewey's words, "is neither an accident nor a miracle; it is the sum of efforts by individuals whose actions are guided by intelligence" (p.63).

#### *Tolerant democracy*

Associated living primarily depends upon one's degree of tolerance. Recognizing human weakness, Dewey remained optimistic and treated examples of such weakness with tolerance. He preferred Aristotle to Plato because Plato was too utopian to be realistic about human society. A utopia, for Dewey, was simply a castle in the sky, unrealistic and unreachable; utopia could only ever be an illusion never to come true for human society. For Dewey, there were no ideal human beings or society. As Ryan (1995) writes: "Individuals and societies alike are stirred into life by problems; an unproblematic world would be a world not so much at rest as unconscious" (p, 28). Dewey saw society as problematic and believed that an unproblematic world is also wholly unrealistic. Therefore, human life itself is also necessarily problematic. He acknowledged that human nature is flawed and that people have weaknesses. As a result, social conflicts are unavoidable. However, being both positive and hopeful, he believed that the purpose of life as a human being is to overcome one problem after another; these problems, then, would include the weaknesses of human beings themselves. Dewey optimistically believed that during the process of solving these problems, human beings could change and grow in a positive way. He understood that social conflicts do not always exist simply because there are different interests among the classes, races or different belief structures. We cannot avoid the occurrence of conflict, and instead need to discover if there is a group's interest based upon other groups' disadvantages, and if other groups are being suppressed or deprived of their rightful privileges and opportunities. The function of democracy is not to reject difference or disallow controversy, but rather to achieve the common good through discussion and debate. Dewey (1916/1944) believed that there can be a shared common good among different groups of people. He argued: "It is not true there is no common interest in such an organization between governed and governors" (p. 84). Tolerance of difference is an ideal shared by many Western democracies. The diversity within American society exemplifies this principle. Dewey cherished this value and affirmed it by calling for free participation in social activities and associated living.

#### *Deweyan pragmatism cf. Marxism*

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially between the onset of World War I and the late 1920s, the problems within China intrigued many young Chinese intellectuals, encouraging them to try to find the best way to save China from an historical crisis. Both Dewey's pragmatism and Marx's communism were honored and speculated. Dewey and Marx



emphasized many similar social issues such as social justice, democracy and the economy. Some ideas generated by these different schools of thought were not totally opposite, yet both their focus and understanding of each problem were quite different. Marxism eventually won political dominance, and this final outcome has since inspired people to ponder how Marxism managed to succeed, what characteristics of the Chinese, of Chinese habits, living philosophies and national emotions facilitated this takeover at that time.

Dewey is well known for his pragmatism, and Dewey's democracy is supported by pragmatic values. Because of Dewey's democratic emphasis on the social aspects of life and his critique of capitalism, he was often considered a socialist. While both Dewey and Marx promoted similar aims for human beings, that is, the creation of a society for the common good, their means were substantially different. For Dewey, such a result could only be obtained by a gradual construction of communicative social relationships, and this process must be based upon self-improvement; for Marx, a radical revolution was necessary to get expunge the old, and even to oppress the opposite, currently dominant parties. With regards to their relationship to working for the common good, for many Chinese, Dewey's philosophies and ideas were unclear, overly complicated, and inefficient, while Marx pointed out a concrete destination, a clearly designed and expedient way to implement an egalitarian society. Both Dewey's pragmatism and Marx's socialism shared social equality as their aim. However, Dewey's emphasis was on the process and the foundation, such as the human being's capacity to achieve social equality and actually live it through cooperative approach, whereas Marx focused on a blueprint for the future, empowering the oppressed, and ignored the capacity of individual intelligence. Dewey's pragmatic democracy focuses more on morals and ethics, more on individual initiative and intelligence of a single person within the democratic system – on the internal characteristics of human beings; Marx proposed a materialist or class-struggle socialism, an external system.

If Marx's socialism emphasized an external form of egalitarian suffrage, i.e., economic rights, Dewey's pragmatism focused on a more a spiritual one. Dewey's spiritual focus matched Confucian ethics and Taoist aesthetics, both of which occupy a prominent place in Chinese thinking. Dewey (1973) criticized Marx for overlooking the importance of morality. He explained that Marx's socialism "eschews morality as an irrelevant criterion for criticizing social and economic institutions, calls its point of view scientific, and postulates a determinism in which the natural law of cause and effect will automatically bring about revolutionary changes" (p.118). Facing the impending political and social crisis in China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Chinese intellectuals might not have been able to admit abstract human intelligence and ethical issues to be as critical as the possibility of obtaining concrete political power. The human intelligence and ethics that Marxism substantially neglected were what Chinese intellectuals left unexpressed and understated. Chinese Marxism failed to elaborate upon ethics and aesthetics, the traditional virtues and infrastructure of a society, and this failure to harmonize Marxism with ethics and aesthetics created a dissonance between Marxism and the inner character of most Chinese people.

Dewey also opposed Marxism's governmental control of the economy, which is called a "planned economy" in China. Dewey argued that one important and dangerous aspect of this kind of economy was the "diminution of individual initiative, a reduction of spontaneity, a lessening of incentive, and a resulting apparent regression to feudal arrangements" (p.122). Dewey's economic theory represented his democratic ideas on human potential, and the importance he placed on developing that potential. The planned economy of socialism nullifies these potentials and deprives individuals of their creativity, vigor and the power of their imagination. Both Marx and Dewey remarked that the economy is the foundation of a country, but on some of the finer points of this claim, they differed. For Marx, economy was



the decisive factor for the entire social structure, but for Dewey, considering only the economy was not enough; the human mind, or human intelligence, was more critical. Marx implied that in capitalism the exploiters would always be richer; the proletariat would be much poorer as a capitalist system developed. He believed that a capitalist's property should be appropriated to break the recycling of wealth. As Campbell (1988) argues:

Marxists' complex of the exploitation of the many by the few brings about the need for fostering an exclusive class morality and the class struggle to establish the kind of economic equality which will eventually result in a truly democratic society (p. 141).

Marx aimed to establish a proletariat democratic society, and his point of view was deeply rooted in his lack of faith in capitalists, or indirectly, he doubted that any capitalist would intentionally work for the common good of other groups of individuals. This distrust led to his theoretical dichotomy between human beings. He felt that this dichotomy did not compromise the diversity of the proletariat or those who did not share in one another's Truths. Alternatively, Dewey's pragmatic democracy was a plural one, which accepted and compromised to accommodate all diversity and difference. Hall and Ames (1999) describe Dewey's communitarian Pragmatic pluralism: "In general, communitarians will promote the idea of a community that manages to harmonize the greatest degrees of difference. Difference itself becomes a value to be prized" (p. 181). Dewey conceived that the wealth that capitalism produced could benefit the poor. Also, he believed that experienced capitalists could better manipulate business than governments, allowing for a more prosperous economy that would inherently carry advantages for the poor. He felt that capitalism was not really the enemy of the poor. He did not like capitalism, but his unfavorable opinion of capitalist society stemmed from the "exploitative possessive individualism fostered by capitalism" (Westbrook, 1991, p. 434), which over-emphasized isolated individuality and neglected an individual's social functions and responsibilities. Dewey was less a social Darwinist and more a welfare liberal. He believed in associated living and hoped that capitalists would be able to work for the good of other groups. He believed that "any real advantage of one group is shared by all groups; and when one group suffers disadvantage, all are hurt" (Dewey, 1973, p.71).

Instead of examining class struggles among social groups, Dewey conceptualized society as an associated living community. The notion of associated life centered on Dewey's definition of democracy. He considered that every individual in such a society was an essential component and had to be conscious of social changes in order to make it his or her duty to act for a better social environment for all. Dewey (1916/1944) considered an extended democracy to be a joint endeavor. He wrote:

The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity (p. 87).

For Dewey (1973), the essential components of associated living were "free and open communication, unself-seeking and reciprocal relationships, and the sort of interaction that contributes to mutual advantage" (p. 92). Associated living stressed equal opportunity for the free participation of all social groups, assuming that in such a society everyone would, by necessity, be considerate of others' rights and needs.

We can see that the heart of Dewey's democracy lies in his attitude towards moderation, his belief in doing things gradually, his optimism about people's potential to change themselves as well as his acknowledgement of the weakness of human nature, his respect for



differences and pursuit of common interests, his construction of social intelligence as opposed to blind faith, and finally, his understanding that the content of democratic life is much more important than the form (i.e., voting).

Dewey's moderate attitude is not singular to his philosophy. In Confucianism, *Chung Yung*, or *the Doctrine of the Mean*, also valued moderation and harmony as the soul of living. Confucius took the virtue of *Chung Yung* to be the highest. However, this does not necessarily mean that many Chinese people or even many Confucian intellectuals actualized or embodied such a virtue. Even Confucius himself always questioned: "How transcendent is the moral power of the mean! That it is but rarely found among the common people is a fact long admitted" (quoted in Zhang & Zhong, 2003, p. 256). In Chinese history, every dynasty's exchange occurred according to the revolutionary means of overthrowing the former dynasty. The Chinese had not actively practiced the way of *Chung Yung*.

Although Dewey and Chinese traditional culture fostered one another, Marxism eventually took control. Marxism demonstrated a definite answer to Chinese psychological aspirations during that period of time. On the one hand, Chinese people resented their corrupt, feudalistic warlord government, which also happened to be supported by Western powers; that resentment was developed for both anti-feudalism and anti-imperialism. On the other hand, the capitalistic democratic revolution of 1911<sup>3</sup> was not tangibly successful and left many problems unresolved. China's direction was uncertain, and substantial doubt for capitalist democracy did exist. Essentially, Marxism could be considered to be both anti-feudal and anti-capitalist/imperialist, and it also asserted that communism was the unavoidable ultimate endpoint to human society's development. Feudalism and capitalism were just steps along an unavoidable progression towards communism. These ideas align more closely with the needs of many Chinese than with Dewey's moderate pragmatism, and pragmatism itself was considered to be an extension of Western capitalist democracy. Marxism convinced the Chinese that they could take a faster road to utopia by skipping capitalism.

## Dewey's contribution to China

Dewey received a warm welcome from Chinese intellectuals when he visited China in the 1920s. Before Dewey's arrival, his former student, Hu Shih, had already written several articles to introduce Dewey's pragmatism to the Chinese intellectual community. When Dewey arrived in China, he gave lectures at the National Peking University and the National Nanking University; his articles were published in the *Bulletin of the Ministry of Education* and various newspapers. Dewey taught courses at the National Peking University, the National Peking Teachers' College, and the National Nanking Teachers' College. During his time in China, he visited at least eleven different cities. He and his wife wrote of their experiences in letters to their daughter, Evelyn Dewey, in the U.S., and she later published them under the title *Letters from China and Japan* (1920). This book gave readers a picture of his experiences in China and of Chinese social life in the 1920s. Dewey also recorded his impressions of China and the Chinese people, which were collected into another book entitled *Characters and Events* (1929). His most direct, face-to-face encounters with Chinese people occurred during his lectures. Dewey lectured on social and political philosophy, philosophy of education, ethics, types of thinking, three philosophers of the modern period, modern tendencies in education, and the democratic development of America. Of these topics, he considered the philosophy of education and social and political philosophy to be the most important. Dewey put tremendous effort into these lectures, and his philosophy of education lectures attracted substantial attention, greatly influencing China during that time and after.



The most significant influence Dewey had on China was due to his arduous promotion of civilian education. Dewey believed absolutely in the importance of knowledge for the entire nation, and especially knowledge as it featured within democracy and science. The human intelligence he encouraged not only fit the sphere of science, but most importantly for Dewey, it helped to develop reflective ways of thinking, living, reasoning and doing, and would be best developed through basic education for all. Dewey's influence extended from higher education to middle and elementary schools. Many Chinese teachers were inspired by Dewey's lectures and began to teach by using Dewey's pragmatic educational philosophies. One of the great Chinese educators, Tao Hsing-chi, was one of Dewey's graduate students at Columbia University. After he finished his study in the United States, Tao Hsing-chi went back to China and taught at the National Nanking Teachers College. Like Dewey, Tao realized that civilian education was the foundation for national development. Tao later left his job at the college and went into the countryside to promote civilian education. He considered his work in the country to be one of the most important educational concepts he practiced, and set up his own experimental teachers' school, XiaoZhuang Teachers School, to actualize his beliefs. Civilian education provided the opportunity to educate those who lived at the lowest levels of society; step-by-step, civilian education popularized the possession of knowledge within the rural populace. Tao's school emphasized doing, and learning by doing, exemplifying Dewey's influence on Tao's educational philosophy. Chinese traditional thinking believes that knowing is first. Only when you know, can you do. Dewey argued that doing comes first, and that by learning while doing, you will actually know. Tao Hsing-chi acknowledged the difference in philosophies and agreed with Dewey. Tao, previously named Chi-hsing changed his name to Tao Hsing-chi after he embraced Dewey's philosophy. When translated to English, "Hsing-chi" means "doing-knowing." Thus Tao Hsing-chi and his educational philosophies were greatly influenced by Dewey, and Dewey in turn paid great attention to Tao's work. When Tao died in 1946, Dewey, then aged 87, sent condolences to Tao's family and was Emeritus Chairman of Tao's memorial gathering in New York. However, although they clearly had a meaningful relationship, Dewey was not acknowledged when other Chinese intellectuals eventually evaluated Tao's work. Tao was a great thinker who put his beliefs into practice and adapted Dewey's theories to Chinese conditions – a pragmatic approach that worked. Dewey did not think China was a nation that should uncritically accept ideas from others. He always suggested that the Chinese combine advanced foreign ideas with their own cultural potential. Hu Shih was another Chinese intellectual who advocated civilian education. In Hu Shih's lectures he emphasized that civilian education is the prerequisite of civilian politics. He was also one of the founders of the "Chinese Organization for Promoting Civilian Education." Civilian education was important and meaningful for China, with its substantial population of peasants. To educate most civilians, instead of only the elite, was to construct human intelligence on an extensive scale.

Another important contribution Dewey made to the Chinese people in the sphere of education was the guidance he gave in achieving intelligence. A few days after Dewey arrived in Shanghai in 1919, the May Fourth Movement<sup>2</sup> broke out and quickly spread from the north, into southern China. Students in Beijing were the initiators, and later more students joined in the south. In addition, businessmen and workers in both the north and south joined in the movement. Dewey was emotionally affected by the students' enthusiasm, but at the same time he worried that this movement was only an expression of outrage instead of an expression of a more mature, national wisdom. About the movement, Dewey (1929) said, "The movement is for the most part still a feeling rather than an idea. It is also accompanied



by the extravagances and confusion, the undigested medley of wisdom and nonsense that inevitably mark so ambitious a movement in its early stages" (p.278).

By facing the situation in China at that time, Dewey showed his great compassion for the Chinese people and the nation of China. His compassion became his method of enlightening the populace about both democracy and science. During the end of his lecture entitled *Moral Education: the Social Aspects*, he told his Chinese audience about his thoughts on the May Fourth Movement. He hoped to convince the Chinese people to realize the difference between emotion and intelligence, and to guide them to transcend emotion in exchange for intelligence. He explained:

I do not deprecate emotion; emotion is essential, but I must be under the control of intelligence if it is to contribute to the solution of fundamental problems. The student movement now has this characteristic of controlled emotion; it is a conscious movement which hopes, with reason, that it can help build a new China (Dewey, 1973, p. 302).

Most likely, the educational reform under Dewey's philosophy was appeared to be the most obvious and most effective. According to Clopton and Ou (who translated and edited Dewey's lectures in China), some practical reforms under Dewey's influence in the 1920s can be seen in the following alterations to Chinese culture: Chinese educational aims were changed to "the cultivation of perfect personality and the development of democratic spirit" (p, 22); the principles of the national school system reformation in 1922 were described as:

(a) to adapt the education system to the needs of social evolution; (b) to promote the spirit of democracy; (c) to develop individuality; (d) to take the economic status of the people into special consideration; (e) to promote education for life; (f) to facilitate the spread of universal education; and (g) to make the school system flexible enough to allow for local variations" (quoted in Dewey, 1973, p. 23).

A child-centered curriculum was developed, experimental schools following the model of Dewey's Chicago Laboratory School were set up, and textbooks written in the common vernacular were used. From these practices, the significance of Dewey's ideas in Chinese education was exemplified.

Although Dewey's philosophies were purged in the early days of the Chinese communist party's governance, Dewey's influence on Chinese educators was lasting and remarkable. Besides the impact he had at that time in history, Dewey's importance can also be seen today. Even during the 1970s, in Mao's era, Dewey's educational philosophies were discussed and published in China, and after the 1980s, more and more people became interested in Dewey. Since then, his theories and books, one after another, have increasingly been published.

### **Problematic reappraisal of Dewey**

Dewey's theories were suppressed from the 1950s to the 1970s. Even Dewey's pragmatism had been affected by the purge initiated by the Chinese government in the 1950s. This movement aimed to purge the influence of Dewey's pragmatic philosophies and the details of his capitalistic democracy that did not fit with Marxist dogma, for Dewey had explicitly expressed his disapproval of Marxism. The Chinese Communist government's desire to keep dominant the dictatorial status of Marxism was evident through its continual preaching of Marxism and constant criticizing of capitalism (or any other -isms that did not align with Marxist principles). Dewey's pragmatism became a target not only because of his anti-Marxist ideas, but also because many of Dewey's followers, especially the most famous one, Hu Shih, escaped to Taiwan and joined the National People's Party (Kuomintang), a sworn



enemy of the Communists. It is no surprise that pragmatism survived and developed in Taiwan, but not in mainland China.

In the 1980s, some mainland Chinese scholars began to reappraise Dewey's theories and his influence. Most of them carefully and quietly considered Dewey's educational ideas within the boundaries of Chinese educational requirements. What they primarily discussed was Dewey's pragmatic educational theories. Few discussed Dewey's social and political theories, or his theories on ethics. Zhang Rulun, a philosopher at Fudan University, gave lectures on Dewey at Beijing University in the fall of 2002. There, he argued that Dewey's 16 lectures on social and political philosophy given during his visit to China did not get sufficient attention.

After the 1980s, many Chinese scholars tended to focus on Dewey's educational philosophies, leaving behind Dewey's social and political philosophies. One possible reason for this was probably the inconvenience associated with obtaining references. According to Zhang Rulun, the original English transcripts of the essential 16 lectures were missing. These 16 lectures were given on the request of Hu Shih, specifically meeting the requirements of China's unique situation. Although Dewey had other published works on social and political philosophy, they seemed not as relevant to China's problems. Another reason for a lessening of interest in Dewey's work was that many scholars became more conservative with regards to sensitive topics, especially after the Cultural Revolution that suppressed Chinese intellectuals and deprived them of their intellectual and academic freedom. At the time, it was simply too risky to be political. Yet another reason was that at the time there was a contrasting vogue in the academic field. People tended to focus on more popular persons and philosophies. New theorists began to attract Chinese people's attention, such as Derrida, Habermas and Heidegger. As Zhang Rulun (2002) argues: "Usually people judge a thinker by the academic popularity instead of one's achievement and importance in academic sphere".

When reappraising Dewey's philosophy, only focusing on his educational philosophy is not enough. Dewey's educational theories and his values were closely tied to the social, political and economic environment of his time. Education is a socially sponsored activity, and Dewey did not deny the political nature of education. He pointed out that "Any education given by a group tends to socialize its members, but the quality and value of the socialization depends upon the habits and aims of the group" (Dewey 1916/1944, p. 83). Bearing in mind the political and social implications of his educational philosophies would help further research in comparative education.

### **Current problems in Chinese society**

Like all societies, China has her own unique problems, and these problems become the obstacles to critically examine social, political and educational problems in the light of Dewey's legacy. One of these problems is the party's monolithic presence in both social and political life. When Chinese Marxists took over power in 1949, the whole nation was ordered to learn Marxism. Even in the interpretation of Marxism, diversity was not encouraged. Dogmatic and assertive, the implementation of the knowledge of Marxism became rigid doctrine. A piece of knowledge, an idea that cannot wholly be one's own, is dead if it is not allowed to develop. William Doll (2005), drawing on Whitehead, argues: "Ideas are inert when they are 'disconnected,' atomistic, isolated; related neither to the practicalities of life, nor to an individual's own interests, nor to the field in which they exist" (27). What made the Chinese Communist Party afraid to allow different interpretations of Marxism or the making of Marxism more discussable in people's own individual ways, based upon their personal experiences? Perhaps that human intelligence, the advancement of which Dewey was so dedicated, was a threat to the dominant party in China. The free expression of ideas might



allow for a challenge to the status quo, but that does not necessarily mean that Dewey, himself, was a threat. He argues: "When ideas are openly expressed and published, they can be modified and corrected; when they are suppressed they erupt in some other form, frequently in violence. The more rigid the efforts to suppress ideas, the greater the danger" (p.176). The numerous radical rebellions in China's history exemplify the fact that if the ideas of oppressed peasants cannot be expressed, the government leaves those peasants only one way to express themselves: through rebellion or revolution.

The second problem inhibiting Dewey studies is the trust crisis. In the 1950s, many movements directed and initiated by the Communist Party gradually caused a deeply rooted disbelief to exist amongst intellectuals and the populace. Most of these movements intentionally exaggerated class conflicts among the people. They were aimed at finding those individuals who had opinions different from Marxism, Leninism or the current dominant ideology (i.e., Chairman Mao's theories). People with different ideas or beliefs from the above-mentioned dominant theories were usually taken into government custody as suspected "enemies." Movements such as adjusting the Capitalistic ethos, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution Decade caused inestimable trauma to the Chinese people. Whatever the individual purposes of the respective movements were, during their practice, due to the doctrinism of their theories and ideas, the officers accepted authoritative opinions indiscriminately and uncritically; they even used their imagination and apparently omnipotent "-isms" to classify innocent intellectuals as suspected "enemies." To avoid being a victim of these movements, rather than face the truth, many honest people became silent or even told lies to protect themselves. The Confucian notion of ethics, morality and culture was all but destroyed by these movements. After the reformation of the 1980's, materialistic modernization replaced class struggle, but a reconstruction of morality, ethics and culture was left undeveloped.

The third problem with a continued study of Dewey's theories is that Chinese people are not in the habit of thinking about and deciding for themselves their philosophical opinions, and are mostly indifferent to politics. On the one hand, they believe that political life does not belong to the common people, that it's the business of public officials. In addition, in their experience an individual idea or effort cannot change the status quo. Being indifferent to politics was one of the characteristics Dewey accurately represented when he wrote about the Chinese. He quoted from an ancient Chinese poem describing a farmer: "Dig your well and drink its water; plow your fields and eat the harvest; What has the Emperor's might to do with me?" (Dewey, 1929, p, 224). This national character has not changed with the passage of time, but has instead grown stronger. This indifference is not helpful when attempting to construct the type of associated living that Dewey suggested. Being indifferent causes one to not think or decide. Majiang (Mahjong) is a gambling game played primarily for entertainment in China. Majiang has become the most important form of entertainment for the Chinese people since the latter part of the previous century, enjoyed by everyone from the high officials to the common people, from the southern part of the country to the north. Many Chinese people grow passionately attached to the game of Majiang, which does not help gain knowledge about how to live a reflective life. Nor does it help to improve one's health. When they play Majiang, their minds stop thinking. They can avoid all inquiry, all pondering, and all questions. The only thing they learn is how to win another's money. Many people play Majiang as much as 24 hours a day, and it can frequently become a daily activity. Majiang does not create a mutually helpful social relationship amongst individuals. Playing Majiang may be a way for many common Chinese people to escape from their own personal realities, realities they cannot change but must bear. In the long run, the Chinese people's minds will be dulled because they will lose the ability to see other meanings of being alive. Hu Shih was



very against Majiang and in calculating the time Chinese people spent on Majiang, he pointed out:

There are one million Majiang tables (each table seats four people), if every table plays eight circles, every circle is thirty minutes, then four million hours would be used, it will be more than one hundred sixty thousand days. Playing Majiang wears out the energy and money. But the most important thing is that it is wasting time and we cannot find any advanced and civilized nation like our country! (Quoted in Huibin, 2003, originally in Chinese)

The critical issue for Chinese society today is how the Chinese see the importance of constructing humanity, human intelligence, morality, culture, ethics and history. The traditional Confucian belief is that a person should embody a moral and ethical self. This self has multiple roles as son/daughter to the family, father/mother to the children, friends to the neighbors, and citizen to the state; the self is responsible, even and especially to oneself. Tseng Tzu said: "Each day I examine myself in three ways: in doing things for others, have I been disloyal? In my interactions with friends, have I been untrustworthy? Have not practiced what I have preached?" (quoted in Muller, n.d.). Dead minds were what Dewey worried about, for a dead mind runs away from the development of human intelligence that Dewey proposed through his speeches made in China. The Confucian notion of examining the self frequently and Dewey's worry about dead minds both reflect the importance of constructing a human intelligence that is at the root of a nation's development. Pragmatic democracy, like Confucian morality, was also generated from self-improvement, for democracy is obtained by all the people's effort, and from efforts made on a daily basis. It is a living concept - not only a political means to an end. We cannot wait for democracy to fall upon us. Instead, we must work for it.

## Conclusion

Today, reexamining Dewey's democracy and his legacy to China is meaningful both for democracy *per se* and for China as a whole. Democracy is beyond a noun. It demands a closer look and a comprehensive examination. The capacity to tolerate differences, the patience to move forward, and the wisdom to achieve associated living, all engage in making intellectual inquiry dynamic and human intelligence constructive. These aspects of Dewey's democracy are valuable references for China. In China, due to the above listed historical, political reasons, the foundation for associated living in China, the traditional ethics, morality and culture have not been fully experienced by most Chinese people. They now need to be reevaluated and enhanced. The rapid economic growth of China today gives individuals enough freedom to realize self-fulfillment, but does not encourage initiative to develop social responsibilities. The notion of self in relation to others remains yet a far off vision for Chinese people; therefore, for the common good, it is both imperative and advantageous for both the government and the people to develop civilian intelligence, associated living, and free participation in social and political life.

Dewey's legacy to China was significant in the past, and is inspirational today.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Berry, in his article "Dewey's Influence in China," made a detailed argumentation on Liang Shu-ming and Liang Qichao's doubt about the spirituality nature of Western democracy.
- <sup>2</sup> The May Fourth Movement: The Chinese sided with the Allies against Germany in the First World War, and after the war requested that the Allies end their occupation of Chinese territories in the form of



concessions made to China. Despite China's support for the Allies against Germany, her requests were ignored. The Chinese felt betrayed. Anger and frustration erupted in student demonstrations on 4 May 1919 in Beijing in order to protest the betrayed and impotent Chinese government.

- <sup>3</sup> The 1911 Revolution: This movement was led by Sun Yat-sen, who was educated both in the United States and Japan. Sun aimed to build a democratic and republican China with Western democracy. The 1911 revolution overthrew the last feudalistic dynasty of China — the Qing (Manchu) dynasty — so this revolution was considered to be a watershed in Chinese history. However, the democratic practices of the new government of the 1911 revolution met many obstacles. As a democratic political system, it had not been successfully organized.

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