

The Trans-Pacific Experience of John Dewey

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With the rapid progress of globalization and emergence of the United States as the only superpower since the end of the Cold War, American culture has become more and more an international phenomenon, penetrating traditional cultures around the globe. This growing influence of American culture on indigenous cultures is everywhere denounced as the Americanization of world cultures. In this context, American culture is equated with Hollywood movies, Disneyland theme parks, Rock n' Roll music, McDonald's fast food, as well as the democratic rhetoric of American politicians. The bulk of existing scholarship by non-US Americanists is devoted to dissecting the nature and impact of this "American cultural imperialism." What is often ignored in this debate, however, is the fact that American culture has been reduced to American pop culture, and usually the vulgar part of it.

To do justice to American culture, international Americanists are well advised to make a distinction between the pop culture and "high" culture of America. Due attention should be paid to the nature and value of this "high" dimension of American culture. This paper examines the reception and impact of the work of John Dewey, one of the greatest American philosophers, in Japan and China over the past one hundred years or so. It can be regarded as a case study of American high culture from a trans-Pacific perspective in an attempt to shed some new light on the criticism of American culture.

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DEWEY IN JAPAN

Long before John Dewey set foot on the soil of Japan, his philosophy had been introduced to Japanese academic circles. As early as 1888, a Japanese journal published one of Dewey's essays on psychology. In 1900, Dewey's early work *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* was translated into Japanese. Then, in 1901 and 1918 respectively, two of Dewey's most important works on education, *School and Society* and *Democracy and Education*, were introduced to Japanese readers. The introduction of Dewey's educational philosophy to Japan gave rise to the establishment of about a dozen experimental elementary schools modeled on Dewey's experimental school at the University of Chicago. All these schools made efforts to put into practice Dewey's educational principles of learning by doing and education as growth.

Dewey's visit to Japan from February 9 to April 28 in 1919 came at the right moment. First of all, the publication of his works in Japan had helped to spread his democratic ideas among the educated public and had won him a group of followers. More importantly, Japan at that time was undergoing the democratization movement known as Taisho Democracy. Just as Dewey and his wife Alice observed, "All Japan is talking democracy now. . . ."¹ Naturally when Dewey, the American philosopher of democracy, arrived to preach his experimental liberalism and democratic educational creed in the name of reconstructing philosophy at the University of Tokyo and a number of other schools, he was everywhere warmly received. In a letter to his daughter, Dewey wrote, "[P]eople were so kind that they created in us the illusion of being somebody, and gave us the combined enjoyments of home and being in a strange and semi-magic country. . . ."² He was deeply impressed by the friendly treatment they received from the Japanese people and exclaimed to his daughter, "Politeness is so universal here that when we get back we shall either be so civil that you won't know us, or else we shall be so irritated that nobody is sufficiently civil that you won't know us either."³

As a pragmatic philosopher, Dewey was not carried too far away by the seemingly endless excitement, with ceremonies and parties coming one after another. He noticed that "[l]iberalism is in the air,⁴ but at the same time, he was aware of "a race between fulfillment of the aspirations of the military clans who still hold the reins, and the growth of genuinely democratic forces which will forever terminate those aspirations."⁵ Looking into the future of Japanese liberalism, Dewey predicted:

The cause of liberalism in Japan has taken a mighty forward leap—so mighty as to be almost unbelievable. The causes which produced it can sustain it. If they do sustain it, there will be little backward reaction. If they do not continue in force to sustain it, they will betray it. To speak more plainly, the release of liberal forces that had been slowly forming beneath the lid was due to the belief that democracy really stood for the supremacy of fairness, humanity, and good feeling, and that consequently in a democratic world a nation like Japan, ambitious but weak in many respects in which her competitors are strong, could afford to enter upon the paths of liberalism. The real test has not yet come. But if the nominally democratic world should go back on the professions so profusely uttered during war days, the shock will be enormous, and bureaucracy and militarism might come back. One cannot believe that such a thing is to happen. But every manifestation of national greed, every cynical attack upon the basic ideas of the League of Nations, every repudiation of international idealism, every thoughtless word of race prejudice, every exhibition of dislike and unjustified suspicion directed at Japan is a gratuitous offering in support of the now waning cause of autocratic bureaucracy in Japan. Liberalism here has plenty of difficulties still to overcome.⁶

Dewey's astonishing foresightedness was to be borne out in the Japanese history of the 1920s and 1930s. Not long after Dewey left Japan, liberalism gave way to militarism and the emperor-cult, which ultimately drew the whole nation onto the path of imperialism.

The short-lived democratization movement between the two world wars in Japan prompts Dewey scholars to conclude that Dewey's pragmatism and progressive philosophy of education failed to take deep root in the soil of Japanese culture.⁷ This claim, however, cannot be fully justified.

First, interest in Dewey's philosophy did not recede after Dewey left Japan. This could be seen in the increase rather than decrease in the number of translations of his works, including almost all his major works, such as *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, *School of Tomorrow*, *Quest for Certainty*, *How We Think*, *School and Society*, *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy*, *Human Nature and Conduct*, *Experience and Education*, and *Ethics*. Altogether twenty-one of Dewey's works have been translated into Japanese. There has also been a growing interest in Dewey studies since the 1920s. Fifty-eight books on Dewey have been published, and the number of articles on Dewey has reached as many as 254.⁸

Second, Dewey's educational philosophy played a significant role in Japanese educational reforms after World War II. It is true that Dewey's

name was more or less forgotten during the Second World War. However, the late 1940s and early 1950s saw a dramatic revival of interest in Dewey studies, called a “Dewey Boom” by Japanese scholars. It is believed that Dewey’s educational philosophy laid the theoretical foundation for post-war educational reforms, and in return these reforms contributed to the propagation of his philosophy. According to R. S. Anderson, an American educator who was involved in Japanese educational reforms, Dewey’s liberal educational philosophy gained large numbers of adherents among both American and Japanese educators during the American Occupation period.⁹ That might explain why the Japanese Fundamental Law of Education is seen by many as an embodiment of the progressive educational ideals initiated by Dewey. Dewey’s popularity could also be seen in the fact that the John Dewey Society of Japan founded in the late 1950s succeeded in attracting 137 members representing almost every university in Japan in the early 1960s.

Up until today, Dewey’s pragmatism has continued to inspire a new generation of Dewey scholars in Japan to inquire into new problems of the age of globalization. For example, in an article entitled “Education for Global Understanding: Learning from Dewey’s Visit to Japan,” Naoko Sato argues:

The Deweyan wisdom of living in a middle way can be exercised not only in the history class or the social science class, as an extension of citizenship education, but also in moral education in the broadest sense. In a world of tragic confrontations between different cultures and religions, Dewey offers a way of living with the tragic beyond the absolute distinction between good and evil. He suggests a way of education for global understanding that can enable us to overcome conflicts not by revenge or retaliation in the name of combating evil, but by a pragmatic search for the better. This approach does not see itself in terms of a realization of totalized good but rather encourages patient dialogue as the most practical, intelligent means to live with different others.¹⁰

DEWEY IN CHINA

After a three-month sojourn in Japan, John Dewey left for China. On May 30, 1919, he arrived in Shanghai, to find to his great surprise that over a thousand of the leading educators in central China were expecting to hear his opening address three days later. Throughout the following two years and two months that Dewey spent in China, his speeches

were attended by thousands of fervent young admirers, his lectures were carried by numerous journals and articles, and at least five book editions collecting different series of lectures were published. During this period of time, he addressed Chinese audiences in seventy-eight different lecture forums, including several series of between fifteen and twenty lectures. He left footprints in thirteen provinces spreading from the north to the south of China. In describing some of the fervor surrounding Dewey's visit, an article that appeared in the New York *Chinese Students' Monthly* only a month before he left China says:

Mr. Dewey's career in China is one of singular success. From the time of his arrival to the present, continual ovation follows his footprints. Bankers and editors frequent his residences; teachers and students flock to his classrooms. Clubs compete to entertain him, to hear him speak; newspapers vie with each other in translating his latest utterances. His speeches and lectures are eagerly read; his biography has been elaborately written. The serious-minded comment on his philosophy; the lighthearted remember his name.¹¹

This description is no exaggeration. The question is: Why was this Yankee professor so highly esteemed and fervently followed in China in the 1920s?

I would attribute Dewey's singular success in large part to the social and intellectual context within China before the May Fourth Movement. The internal situation of China then was well summarized by Lin Yu-sheng in one sentence: "After celebrating the collapse of the Ch'ing empire, Chinese intellectuals soon came to realize that the founding of the republic, instead of making China a modern nation-state, was merely the culmination of the process of the disintegration of the traditional sociopolitical and cultural-moral orders."¹²

This overall national crisis resulted in an alliance of the new intellectuals from 1917 to 1919 with Beijing University as the activity base. United around *New Youth* magazine and *New Tide* magazine, New Culture intellectuals such as Ch'en Tu-hsiu, Ch'ien Hsuan-tung, Hu Shih, Li Ta-chao, Kao I-han, Fu Ssu-nien, Luo Chia-lun and many others launched a concerted attack on "old literature" and "old ethics," encouraging at the same time "new thoughts" and vernacular literature. The basic principle of the new intellectual leaders was best summarized by Ch'en Tu-hsiu in an article published in January 1919 in *New Youth*, which was a response to the attacks from conservative intellectuals:

All these charges are conceded. But we plead not guilty. We have committed alleged crimes only because we supported the two gentlemen, Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science. In order to advocate Mr. Democracy, we are obliged to oppose Confucianism, the codes of rituals, chastity of women, traditional ethics, and old-fashioned politics; in order to advocate Mr. Science, we have to oppose traditional arts and traditional religion; and in order to advocate both Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science, we are compelled to oppose the cult of the “national quintessence” and ancient literature.¹³

This attempt to “save China” and “re-create civilization” by introducing and establishing in China new learning, new values, new thoughts, new modes of life, new literature, new education and new spirits, or briefly in Ch’ en Tu-hsiu’s words, “Mr. Democracy” and “Mr. Science,” was the social atmosphere already in existence before Dewey arrived in China. And this cultural orientation was a stand shared by different groups of new intellectuals, not just the liberals such as Hu shih. Dewey himself and his disciple Hu noticed this phenomenon. In his article “New Culture in China,” Dewey obviously agreed with Hu’s summary of the stages of foreign influence in China. According to Hu, the first stage was characterized by the realization of the importance of western powers’ new military devices. In the second stage, the weakness of China was attributed to her outgrown form of government, and so the construction of a republic became the aim. The third period is that of reliance upon technical improvements. In the fourth period, the period around the May Fourth Incident in 1919, in which Dewey was caught up, a new formula evolved: China could not be changed without a social transformation of ideas.¹⁴ This sketch by Hu is basically in accordance with the real historical process as proved by historians’ studies.

Many Dewey scholars such as Barry Keenan, Maurice Meisner, and Robert B. Westbrook tend to believe that Dewey, in his articles as well as his lectures in China, was either preaching his “irrelevant” cultural reform program or just “aiding” his liberal disciples in spreading their wishful liberal ideas, or else “had heard echoes of his own voice in China.”¹⁵ They tend to link Dewey with Hu Shih and in turn Hu Shih with the trend of cultural reformism. Then, they regard cultural reformism as the hopeless search of a liberal minority, failing to see the prevalence of this attitude before the May Fourth Incident. To be more exact, it was neither Dewey nor Hu Shih who had initiated the New Culture Movement or the New Thought Tide or even the cultural reconstruction approach that is often ascribed to Chinese liberals. As Chow

Tsetsung writes, "This approach was neither planned nor directed by any one person. Rather, it represented a common meeting ground for a number of people with divergent ideas." Lin Yu-sheng further traces this "cultural-intellectualistic approach" to "a deep-seated traditional Chinese cultural predisposition, in the form of a monistic and intellectualistic mode of thinking,"¹⁶ which is quite convincing. That is to say, Dewey arrived in China just in time to convey his culturally-based reform program as well as his democratic ideas and scientific methodology to an already largely receptive audience. He was warmly welcomed and highly esteemed because what he preached was just what the new intellectuals had been more or less propagating and were still striving to strengthen. As Dewey observed, "The Chinese liberals do not feel very optimistic about the immediate outcome. They have mostly given up the idea that the country can be reformed by political means. They are sceptical about the possibility of reforming even politics until a new generation comes on the scene. They are now putting their faith in education and in social changes which will take some years to consummate themselves visibly."¹⁷ In a sense, Dewey helped the new intellectuals to express themselves more systematically and more clearly in the early twenties. On his arrival, he was at once recognized and accepted as a powerful ally by the new intellectuals.

It was soon after the May Fourth Incident in 1919 that the alliance among different groups of new intellectuals began to disintegrate. Dewey had arrived in China at a time when the cultural reformist movement had begun to decline. Just one month after he began his lectures at Beijing University, Hu Shih and Li Ta-chao started the famous debate over "problems" and "isms," which reflected the conflict within the new intellectual circle. Sympathizing with Hu's stand, Dewey tried on different occasions to persuade his audiences to adhere to the way of a "step-by-step" cultural reconstruction. This effort by Dewey and his followers to hold fast to the cultural reformism of the first period of the May Fourth Movement, however, turned out to be futile. The Chinese liberals failed to realize that China then was faced at the same time with two serious problems. One was the "survival" and "unity" of the nation; the other was modernization. They were concerned with the latter while taking the former almost for granted. But the problem of national survival and unity on which the problem of modernization depended so much for its effective solution was actually more urgent. It was because of this fatal failure that the liberals' reform program, or in other words,

the cultural-intellectualistic approach of the earlier period, gradually lost its appeal and was finally replaced by the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary solution.

In terms of Dewey's influence in China in the 1920s, Dewey scholars have focused on his relationship with Hu Shih and the Chinese liberal movement. Since liberalism was short-lived in China, the Deweyan experiment in China was, of course, a total failure. As Meisner writes: "As applied to China, Dewey's program was neither conservative nor radical but largely irrelevant." Talking about the educational reform carried out by Dewey's followers, Keenan writes: "Deweyan experimentalism, as a way of thinking, as a way of acting politically, and as a component of democratic education, offered no strategy his followers could use to affect political power." Based on Meisner's and Keenan's comments, Westbrook concludes: "Dewey was not the man to talk politics with the Chinese in the early twenties."¹⁸

Compared with the above writers, Michael Eldridge takes a more balanced view. He holds that the charge of Deweyan strategic shortcomings with regard to China is not accurate, pointing out that Dewey recognized the need for both a new culture and a new politics and their interdependence in China. He is also keen to note the significance of the transformation of the Chinese vernacular into the standard written language.¹⁹ It is true that although Dewey more often stressed the importance of gradual progress and foundational cultural reconstruction, he did realize the complexities of China's situation. He wrote: "China was trying to crowd into a half century literary, religious, economic, scientific and political revolutions which it had taken the western world centuries to accomplish." He saw the need in China for a stable, centralized, domestic government, a unified and nationwide currency, a unified and comprehensive transportation and communication system, and a national consciousness to supplement local loyalties with strong nationalist feelings and sentiment. He saw the danger of extreme cultural radicalism among the new intellectuals, describing it in terms of embracing the view that "the more extreme and complete the change, the better." He even envisaged the possibility of China taking the Bolshevist road in a letter to Albert C. Barnes: "It is conceivable that military misrule, oppression and corruption will, if they continue till they directly touch the peasants, produce a chaos of rebellion that adherents of the existing order will certainly label Bolshevism." This was exactly what happened later in China. Commenting on the New Culture Movement, he pointed out that what

was required in China was “a new culture, in which what is best in western thought is to be freely adopted—but adopted to Chinese conditions, employed as an instrumentality in building a rejuvenated Chinese culture.”²⁰ Obviously, Dewey did not expect his liberal disciples simply to put their lecture notes into practice in China. Seen from a historical perspective, this last comment is especially insightful.

Dewey’s influence in China in the early twenties went beyond the sphere of Chinese liberalism and education reform. His experimental methodology greatly influenced not only the liberals but also the leftists. As Hu admitted, his thought was mainly influenced by two people, Huxley and Dewey. Huxley taught him how to doubt and to believe in nothing without sufficient evidence. Dewey taught him how to think and to consider the immediate problems in need of verification, and to take into account the effect of thoughts. These two people made him understand the character and function of scientific method. For Hu, pragmatism was “only a methodology”—a way to think about life, not what to think of it.²¹ Through Hu’s active promotion and Dewey’s own lectures and the translations of his works, pragmatic methodology—concentration on real “problems” in life and searching for solutions through critical analysis based on facts—became a shared “instrument” for both the liberals and the leftists.

In the famous debate over “problems” and “isms” between Hu Shih and Li Ta-chao, the real disagreement was not over whether “problems” or “isms” should be studied, but what should be considered as China’s real problems. In Hu’s mind, the problems were the working conditions of Peking’s rickshaw coolies, the customs and prejudices that perpetuated the social abuse of women, standards and systems of public health, elementary and secondary school textbooks and curricula, and scholarly issues having to do with the interpretation of China’s historical and literary inheritance. In Li’s mind, China’s real problem was the fact that China was not a well-organized and vital society, but a disorganized and moribund society, its faculties already impaired.²² Therefore, although Li shared Hu’s argument that China’s real problems should become the focus of study and no “ism” should be accepted and practiced in total, they parted in their conclusion as to the route China should take. In other words, they shared the pragmatic methodology, but came to different conclusions because they studied different problems. This is a point many scholars of the May Fourth Movement and Chinese liberalism have failed to see.

A more typical example would be the influence of pragmatism on Mao Tse-tung. Mao began to learn about Dewey and his pragmatism while he was working as a librarian's assistant in Beijing University from August 1918 to the spring of 1919. He attended Hu Shih's courses and had private talks with Hu asking for Hu's advice on whether he should go abroad or do "on-site investigation and research" in China—Hu suggested the latter—and also on how to carry out Dewey's educational program. Hu suggested the creation of a "Self-Study University" in Mao's home province. Mao accepted both suggestions. Mao must also have read many of the translations of Dewey's works, since Dewey's books such as *Five Major Lectures*, *Trends in Modern Education*, *On the Development of Democracy in America*, *Pragmatic Ethics*, and *Pragmatism* frequently appeared on "important books" lists and on the list of books sold by the Cultural Book Society, of which Mao was one of the founders. Among the bestsellers of the Society were the newspapers and magazines that often carried Dewey's lectures. In a letter to a friend of June 7, 1920, Mao said he was reading "three great contemporary philosophers," namely Dewey, Russell and Bergson. Also, in "Manifesto on the Founding of the Xiang River Review" published in July 14, 1919, Mao listed pragmatism as the most progressive thought. He wrote: "In the area of thought, we have moved forward to pragmatism. . . ." ²³

From 1918 to 1919, Mao's acceptance of pragmatism was wholesale. Between the "extreme" and the "moderate" ways of social progress, he chose the latter. He wrote: "Thus it is our position that as regards scholarship, we must uphold thorough study . . . we must seek the truth. . . . Thus we will not provoke widespread chaos, nor pursue that ineffectual 'revolution of bombs,' or 'revolution of blood.'" Later he wrote again, explaining the aim of his newspaper *Xiang River Review*: "This paper is concerned purely with academic theories and with social criticism. We do not meddle at all in practical politics." Following Dewey's and Hu Shih's educational program of social reconstruction, Mao together with his friends established the Xiangtan Society for the Promotion of Education in 1920. In "Declaration of the Xiangtan Society for the Promotion of Education," he wrote: "Education is an instrument for promoting the progress of society; an educator is a person who utilizes this instrument. . . . Dr. Dewey of America has come to the East. His new theory of education is well worth studying." For Mao and his comrades at this time, Dewey and Russell meant "the hopeful and bright side of things" instead of "the hopeless, dark and evil side of things."²⁴

It was after the end of 1920 that Mao gradually leaned toward Marxism-Leninism and revolutionary activities. In a letter of December 1, 1920, Mao formally declared Dewey's "method of education" as "not feasible." According to his detailed analysis, education required "money," "people" and "institutions." But:

In today's world, money is entirely in the hands of the capitalists; those in charge of education are all either capitalists or slaves of capitalists. The schools and the press, the two most important instruments of education, are all under the exclusive control of the capitalists. In short, education in today's world is capitalist education.²⁵

According to Mao, the capitalists controlled parliaments, governments, armies, police, banks and factories. "That is why," he wrote, "I believe that the method of education is not feasible. A Russian style revolution, it seems to me, is a last resort when all other means have been exhausted." He further argued from a historical standpoint that "human life is nothing but the expansion of men's desires." "Intelligence can direct impulse effectively only within certain boundaries. Once beyond those boundaries, impulse will prevail over the intellect, advance boldly, and not be stopped until confronted with forces greater than itself." Therefore, to stop the bourgeoisie's desires, the only effective way was to appeal to the greater force of the proletariat that Mao believed "is actually several times more numerous than the bourgeoisie." It is interesting to notice that Mao's criticism of the Deweyan experiment is strikingly similar to the charges often made against Dewey by his American critics.

However, although Mao finally gave up the Deweyan formula of education as a way to social progress, he did not give up the pragmatic methodology he learned from Hu Shih and Dewey. In 1919, soon after Mao returned to Hunan province from Beijing, he established the Problem Study Society. Article I of the Statutes of the Problem Study Society stipulated: "All things and all principles, whether essential or nonessential to contemporary human life, that have not yet been solved and yet influence the progress of contemporary human life, are problems. Together we today found this society, emphasizing that the solution to such problems as these starts first with study, and name it the Problem Study Society." Article VI stipulated: "The emphasis will be on the study of problems related to contemporary human life, but we shall also take note of those for which projections about the future can be made. Problems of the past that have no relevance to the present or future will not be examined." In terms of study method, Article III stipulated: "The

study of problems should be solidly founded on academic principles. Before studying the various problems, we should therefore study various 'isms.'” Obviously, Mao was much influenced by Hu Shih at this time; but unlike Hu, he did not see any conflict between problems and “isms.” In particular, the Statutes listed seventeen educational problems including “[t]he problem of how to implement [John] Dewey’s educational doctrine,” seventeen women’s problems, fifteen labor problems, eight industrial problems, seven transportation problems, nine public financial problems, five economic problems, and more than sixty other international and general human problems.²⁶

It was this problem-centered pragmatic way of thinking that distinguished Mao from other new intellectuals in the May Fourth Movement period. Soon after the May Fourth Incident, he was the first one who set out to study real social problems systematically. As for Hu Shi himself, who most vigorously preached the “scientific method” and the study of real problems, the scholarly study of the history of Chinese thought and literature remained the focus of his interest. In a large sense, Hu was the man who was not practical or pragmatic in the face of China’s critical situation from the teens to the twenties.

Mao was also the first one among his Marxist comrades who went deep into the social and political realities of China instead of just talking “isms” in order to find the revolutionary way suitable for China’s situation. In 1926, Mao did a very factual study in an article entitled “Analysis of the classes in Chinese Society” in order to combat two deviations within the Communist Party. One, represented by Ch’ en Tu-hsiu, advocated cooperation with Kuomintang; the other, represented by Chang Kuo-tao, advocated a labor movement. A year later Mao made a firsthand investigation of the peasant movement in five counties of Hunan province. With this long investigative report and the above analysis based on China’s situation, Mao established his basic theory of peasant revolution, which distinguished his revolutionary ideas from those of the more dogmatic Marxists, and through which he gradually won the support of his comrades and finally established his theoretical and political authority within the communist Party.²⁷

The pragmatic methodology that influenced Mao in his early years remained an important element of his thought for a long period of time. In 1937, on the eve of the Anti-Japanese War, he wrote one of his most important philosophical works entitled “On Practice—On the Relation between Knowledge and Practice, between Knowing and Doing,” which

was mainly intended to criticize the dogmatic Marxists within the Communist Party. First, Mao argued that “[a]ll genuine knowledge originates in direct experience.” He wrote: “If you want knowledge, you must take part in the practice of changing reality.” Second, the purpose of gaining knowledge lay in “applying the knowledge of these laws actively to change the world.” In Mao’s words: “Knowledge begins with practice, and theoretical knowledge is acquired through practice and must then return to practice.” Third, the movement of human knowledge was never ending. He wrote: “Every process, whether in the realm of nature or of society, progresses and develops by reason of its internal contradiction and struggle, and the movement of human knowledge should also progress and develop along with it.” Fourth, “man’s social practice alone is the criterion of the truth of his knowledge of the external world. What actually happens is that man’s knowledge is verified only when he achieves the anticipated result in the process of social practice.” Finally, Mao pointed out: “Our conclusion is the concrete, historical unity of the subjective and the objective, of theory and practice, of knowing and doing, and we are opposed to all erroneous ideologies, whether ‘Left’ or ‘Right,’ which depart from concrete history.”²⁸ Obviously, these ideas concerning knowledge and experience, knowing and doing, regardless of their mixture with dialectical materialism and the theme of class struggle, are surprisingly consistent with or close to Dewey’s pragmatic methodology. Although it can never be said that Mao was a pragmatist, it can be said that what he emphasized from Marxism and Leninism in this article revealed the influence of pragmatic methodology on his thought in his early years. It can also be said that one major characteristic of early Maoism is its “practicalism,” if not pragmatism.

With China plunged into the whirlpools of the Anti-Japanese War and the Civil War from the 1930s to the 1940s, Dewey’s name was somewhat forgotten. The founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, however, brought in another opportunity for Dewey to become well-known again, this time not as a “fad,” but as a target of attack.

From 1951–1952, there appeared a barrage of articles and a few book-length critiques of Dewey and pragmatism. From 1955–1956, Dewey’s disciple Hu Shih was targeted and criticized together with Dewey and pragmatism. This wave of critique was under Mao’s direction. In December 1954, Mao said: “Essays criticizing Hu Shih’s thought must be written in a vernacular and popular manner and should propagate Marxism in a direct way. Every one of Hu Shih’s essays had a political

purpose. We too should have targets in mind when we write.”²⁹ As a result, Dewey’s educational philosophy became “poisonous,” “reactionary,” and “subjective-idealistic;” Dewey himself became a “great fraud and deceiver in the modern history of education.”³⁰ In 1963, there was another systematic critique of all aspects of pragmatism, and Dewey’s epistemology and pedagogy in particular. Dewey’s fame in China thus fell to its nadir.

Several reasons can be pointed out as to why Dewey was reduced to a target of attack in these three decades. First, as early as 1937, Dewey led the American Preliminary Commission of Inquiry to Mexico to hear and study the charges against Leon Trotsky made by the Moscow Trials under the control of Stalin. In opposition to Moscow’s charges, the Dewey Commission, after careful study of the evidence, declared that the Moscow Trials were frame-ups and that Trotsky and his son were innocent. This event suddenly turned Dewey from a “friend” to an “enemy” of the Soviet Union. Dewey was condemned as “one of the most fiendish reactionary thinkers in the imperialist age.” His instrumentalism was castigated as an “instrument” to “serve the big capitalists and the most reactionary imperialist bourgeoisie.”³¹ The attitude of the Soviet Union toward Dewey was soon adopted by the Chinese Communist Party.

Second, during the period from the fifties to the seventies, Extreme Leftism ruled China and all academic activities were politicized. As Liu Fang-tong, a witness of that generation, recalled in 1997: “In the mid-fifties, dominated by the Leftist political ideological line, a large-scale movement was launched in order to criticize pragmatism. This wave of critique mainly aimed to serve certain political purposes; as a result, most critics divorced themselves from Dewey’s pragmatism itself. . . . Henceforth, the Leftist political criterion dominated the academic criticism of Dewey and other western Philosophers, resulting in oversimplified negation taking the place of objective and concrete analysis. As a result, the real image of Dewey and other western scholars as well as their theories was often twisted. . . .”³²

Finally, since Soviet-style Marxism, Leninism and Extreme Leftism dominated China’s intellectual circles in these years, it is not surprising that Dewey was severely attacked. In other words, part of the criticism of Dewey was not merely due to misunderstanding. For instance, Dewey strongly opposed “class struggle” and “revolution” as well as dialectical materialism, all of which were kernels of the political ideology of the Communist world including China in the Cold War years.

The period of reform and opening up of China from the eighties to the present has coincided with a revival of interest in and a reevaluation of Dewey. Almost every year a scholarly work on Dewey is published, and articles discussing Dewey's educational or social philosophy or aesthetics frequently appear in academic journals. Two years ago a center for Dewey studies was established in Fudan University; in the same year an international conference on Dewey and pragmatism was held in Shanghai. Finally, although all of Dewey's major works have already been translated into Chinese, an academic press has made an ambitious plan to publish a Chinese version of the thirty-seven volumes of the *Complete Works of Dewey*.

Among the numerous works published in recent years, Liu Fang-tong's article entitled "Re-understanding and Re-evaluating Dewey" can be regarded as a summary of this trend. Liu's article focuses on three aspects in which Dewey was misunderstood. First, Dewey was usually regarded as a subjective idealist opposing materialism, therefore unscientific. Liu writes: "Actually, the fundamental feature of Dewey's philosophy lies in its opposition against . . . dualism, stressing that the world that man confronts, lives in and regards as the object of cognition, is the world in man's view (experience) that has been acted upon and reconstructed (humanized) instead of the world per se that exists outside of man." It was often assumed that Dewey denied the objective existence of the world. Liu argues that what Dewey stresses is the interdependence and interaction between man and the world, subject and object, instead of the independence of the physical world or the spiritual world. Therefore, "life" and "practice" are the basic concepts of Dewey's philosophy.

Second, Dewey was usually criticized as an apologist of the bourgeoisie; therefore, his advocacy of democracy and freedom was considered hypocritical. Liu argues that what Dewey tries to defend is "the democracy and freedom of the majority," although his theory is still "within the boundary of the bourgeois ideology of democracy and freedom." Obviously, according to Liu, there could be two different democracies. Dewey himself would not agree, of course.

Third, Dewey's theory of truth was often attacked as subjectivistic and egoistic, and his ethics as preaching selfish individualism. Liu argues that Dewey's stress on the efficacy of truth has nothing to do with the private profit that truth produces; rather it means that the truth of ideas lies in whether they can produce the anticipated result and stand the test of practice. Thus Liu's article actually announced Dewey's thorough rehabilitation after he was wronged in China for more than three decades.

Liu concludes: “Therefore, in a certain sense, we are back to the starting line similar to that of the May Fourth Movement after going around a large circle.”³³

Of course, China’s situation is different today, and certainly more favorable for social experimentation. “Intelligence,” “cooperation,” “communication,” “social reconstruction,” “associated living,” “step-by-step progress,” “democracy as a way of living”—these Deweyan reformist formulas have become more relevant today than in the early decades of the twentieth century. And this, I suppose, is the reason for the revival of interest in Dewey in today’s China. To a large extent, China has become pragmatic, though not in a strictly Deweyan sense. When Deng Xiaoping, China’s Chief Architect of Reform, stressed again the Maoist motto “seeking truth from facts,” he actually declared an official reconciliation between Chinese Marxism and Deweyan pragmatism.

CONCLUSION

The trans-Pacific experience of John Dewey reminds international American studies scholars of the hidden facet of American “high” culture that is often undervalued. While we have good reason to fight the cheap American pop culture that is flooding the globe, usually at the expense of destroying the traditions of indigenous cultures, we should not ignore the good things American culture can offer to world civilizations.

Americans should view the dramatic experience of Dewey in Japan and China as a dialogue rather than a clash between civilizations, a slow but steady way of bringing the best of American democracy to the rest of the world. By avoiding the irresponsible use of force, Americans can make a greater contribution to the peace of the world and the progress of human civilizations.

NOTES

¹ Evelyn Dewey, ed., *Letters from China and Japan* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1920), 38.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴ John Dewey, *China, Japan and the U.S.A.* (New York: Republic Publishing Co., 1921), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶ John Dewey, *Essays on China, Japan, and the War 1918–1919* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 154–155.

⁷ Naoko Saito, “Education for Global Understanding: Learning from Dewey’s Visit to Japan,” *Teachers College, Columbia University: Teachers College Record*, vol. 105, no. 9 (December 2003): 1758–1773.

⁸ Shan Zhong-hui, “Dewey’s Educational Thought in Japan,” *Foreign Education Research*, no. 8 (2002).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Naoko Saito, “Education for Global Understanding: Learning from Dewey’s Visit to Japan.”

¹¹ T.H.K., “Confucius and John Dewey: The Bankruptcy of the East and the West,” *Chinese Students Monthly*, vol. 16, no. 8 (June 1921): 539; and quoted in Keenan, *The Dewey Experiment in China* (Harvard University: Council on East Asian Studies, 1977), 34.

¹² Liu Yu-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 11.

¹³ Ch’ en Tu-hsiu, “Our Answer to the Charges against the Magazine,” *New Youth*, vol. 6, no.1 (Jan. 15, 1919): 10–11.

¹⁴ Dewey, “New Culture in China,” *The Middle Works*, vol. 13 (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press), 108–110.

¹⁵ See Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-Chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 10; Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 250; and Keenan, *The Dewey Experiment in China*, 51, 158.

¹⁶ See Chow Tse-tung, *The May Fourth Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 58; and Lin Yu-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 28.

¹⁷ John Dewey, *China, Japan and the U.S.A.*, 31.

¹⁸ See Meisner, *Li Ta-Chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 107–108; Keenan, *The Dewey Experiment in China*, 161; Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 251; and Dewey, “New Culture in China,” 114.

¹⁹ Michael Eldridge, Manuscript, 154–155.

²⁰ Dewey, “Is China a Nation?” MW13:77; “Chinese National Sentiment,” MW11; “Is China a Nation?” MW13; and Letter to Albert C. Barnes, 12 September 1920, 16 October 1920, Dewey Papers.

²¹ Hu Shih, “An Introduction to my Own Thought,” quoted in Grinder, *Intellectuals and the State in Modern China* (New York: Free Press, 1981), 275.

²² Hu Shih, “To yen-chiu hsieh wen-t’I, shao t’ ao hsieh chu-i,” [Study More Problems, and Talk Less about Isms], *Mei-chou p’ing-lun*, no. 31 (July 20, 1919); Li Ta-chao, “Tsai-lun wen-t’I yu chu-i” [Another Discussion of Problems and Isms], *Mei-chou p’ing-lun*, no. 35 (August 17, 1919).

²³ Mao Tse-tung, letter to Zhou Shi-zhao, March 14, 1920, Stuart R. Schram, ed., *Mao’s Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949*, vol. 1 (Armond, N.Y.: An East Gate Book, 1994), 505–506; “First Business Report of the Cultural Book Society,” *ibid.*, 585; “Business Report of the Cultural Book Society” (no. 2), *ibid.*, vol. 2, 54–55; letter to Li Jin-xi, *ibid.*, vol. 1, 519; and “Manifesto on the Founding of the Xiang River Review,” *ibid.*, 318.

²⁴ Mao, “Manifesto on the Founding of the Xiang River Review,” *ibid.*, 319; “Explanations by the Xiang River Riverw,” *ibid.*, 377; “Declaration of the Xiangtan Society

for the Promotion of Education,” *ibid.*, 536; and “Report on the Affairs of the New People’s Study Society” (no. 2), *ibid.*, vol. 2, 85.

²⁵ Mao, “Report on the Affairs of the New People’s Study Society” (no. 2), *ibid.*, vol. 2, 8–10.

²⁶ Mao, “Statutes of the Problem Study Society,” *ibid.*, vol. 1, 407–413.

²⁷ Mao, “Analysis of the Classes in the Chinese Society,” *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1967), 13–22; and “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” *ibid.*, 23.

²⁸ Mao, “On Practice,” *ibid.*, 300, 304, 306, 296, 308.

²⁹ Mao, *The Writings of Mao Zedong 1949–1976*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Y. M. Kao (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1986), 508.

³⁰ Quoted by Hu Shih in “John Dewey in China,” in *Philosophy and Culture: East and West*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1962), 767. The quotation is from Wenbui Pao (Shanghai), February 28, 1955.

³¹ Kang Meiliwei’er, *Meiguode Shiyongzhuyi* [American Pragmatism], trans. Guo Lijun (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Press, 1958), 76, 149.

³² Liu Fang-tong, “*Daixu: Chongxin Rensi he Pinjia Duwei*,” [Preface: Re-understanding and Re-evaluating Dewey], *Xinjiu Gerenzhuyi: Du-wei Wenxuan* [Individualism Old and New: Selected Writings of Dewey], trans. Sun You-zhong, et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press, 1997), 4.

³³ *Ibid.*