

How History Created its own Dramas: A Study of John Dewey's Experiences in his 1919 Visits in Japan and China

LIU Xing

Hiroshima University

The Journal of Northeast Asian History
Volume 13 Number 2 (Winter 2016), 9-31

Copyright © 2016 by the Institute of International Affairs at GSIS. All Rights Reserved.
No portion of the contents may be reproduced in any form without
written permission of the Institute of International Affairs at GSIS.

How History Created its own Dramas: A Study of John Dewey's Experiences in his 1919 Visits in Japan and China

American philosopher and educationist John Dewey was invited to Japan and China in 1919. He gave lectures, visited schools and met celebrities in both countries. Comparatively speaking, Dewey showed more affection to China, where he extended his stay up to two years. His correspondence during that time shows that his involvement in the May Fourth Movement, which marked the climax of the democratic movement in China, impressed him very much, suggesting the possibility of putting his theory of democracy into practice. He changed his ideas about China through such a process. On the other hand, the centralization of authority under the Imperial System in Japan worried him, becoming the obstacle to the acceptance of his theory in Japan during that time. History is influenced by complicated factors, both internal and external.

Keywords: John Dewey, Letters from China and Japan, Democracy, China, Japan

How History Created its own Dramas: A Study of John Dewey's Experiences in his 1919 Visits in Japan and China

LIU Xing
Hiroshima University

I. Introduction

As a famous philosopher and educationist, John Dewey's (1859-1952) influence extends across many fields and countries. Numerous monographs and journal papers have been written about him from different perspectives. Therein, his trip to East Asia is a heated topic. Accompanied by his wife, Alice Dewey, John Dewey visited Japan and China in 1919. He delivered lectures, visited schools, met celebrities and stayed for long periods in both countries. Japanese scholar Akihiro Mori (森章博) held the view that Dewey's visit was closely connected with the Taisho New Education Movement of Japan during that time.¹ Hu Shih (胡適), a leading intellectual in China and the translator of most of Dewey's lectures, claimed, "Ever since the contact of China and the Western world, no one has influenced our Chinese intellectuals as greatly

¹ Akihiro Mori, *Nihon niokeru john dewey dhiso denkyuu no seiri* [An Overview of the Studies on John Dewey in Japan] (Tokyo: Syuuousha, 1992), 12-15.

as Dewey did.”²

In 1969, as a commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Dewey’s visit, a collection entitled *Studies on Dewey* was published in Japan. Scholars like Yoshio Nagano (永野芳夫) and Norio Miura (三浦典郎) wrote of their memories of Dewey’s travel in Japan. In the first chapter of his book, *Nihon Niokeru John Dewey Shiso Kenkyuu No Seiri* (An Overview of the Studies on John Dewey in Japan), Akihiro Mori described how Japanese scholars translated and introduced Dewey’s works before and after his stay in Japan. Regarding studies of Dewey’s visit to China, monographs such as *Du Wei Yu Zhongguo* (John Dewey and China), and *John Dewey in China* might be most representative.³ In brief, most of the historical facts and a comprehensive itinerary of Dewey’s trip have been clarified in previous studies. The problem is that Dewey’s trips have always been treated in terms of one-way instruction, that is, he taught people in these two countries with a developed theory. However, what Dewey himself experienced and thought remains unclear. This is particularly interesting considering that, as is well known, Dewey knew little about Japan and China before he embarked on his journey. How he constructed his understanding of these two unfamiliar countries in his travels is an interesting issue deserving further analysis.

To analyze this issue, attention should be paid to a long-ignored set of historical documents, Dewey’s Letters from China and Japan. John and Alice Dewey wrote letters to their children in America almost every day during their travels informing them of what they had experienced and thought in these distant and unfamiliar countries. These letters were edited and published as a book by their daughter Evelyn Dewey in 1920. It is absolutely first-hand information allowing one to relive their

² Hu Shih, *Hu shi quan ji* [The Collected works of Hu Shih], vol.1 (Hefei: Anhui Educational Press, 2007), 360.

³ Yuan Qing, *Du wei yu zhongguo* [John Dewey and China] (Beijing: Renmin Press, 2001); Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, *John Dewey in China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

experiences in East Asia nearly one hundred years ago. Due to issues of style, these letters were not included in the *Collected Works of John Dewey*, which has become the canonical text when referring to Dewey. This might be one of the reasons why this material has received much less attention than warranted.⁴

The current study, based upon his correspondences and contemporaneous records, tries to offer a clearer portrait of Dewey's visits in these two countries and his experiences, feelings, and thoughts therein.

II. Days in Japan

The following passage sums up the commencement of Dewey's trip to Japan:

In the fall of 1918, Dewey was on a sabbatical leave from Columbia University and was teaching at the University of California at Berkeley. Because Dewey and his wife, Alice, were geographically nearer to Asia than they would otherwise have been, they thought they might as well take this opportunity and travel to Japan in the spring. Dewey also agreed to this plan because this trip might help cure Alice's longtime depression over the death of their son on a trip to Italy. When two of Dewey's Japanese acquaintances learned that he was planning a trip to Japan, they arranged for him to deliver a series of lectures at Tokyo Imperial University.⁵

The lectures served to turn their trip into an official one. Eiichi

⁴ This historical material was translated into Chinese by Liu Xing and published by Beijing Normal University Press in 2016. Neither Chinese nor Japanese translation was available before. This might be another reason why this material was ignored.

⁵ Wang, *John Dewey in China*, 3.

Shibusawa (渋沢栄一), “the father of Japanese capitalism,” agreed to be their sponsor during their stays.

Boarding the ocean liner *Shinyo Maru* (春洋丸), they left San Francisco on January twenty-third, 1919 and reached the port of Yokohama on February ninth. The next day, reports about their arrival appeared in newspapers like *Osaka Asahi Shimbun* (大阪朝日新聞) and *Yorozu Choho* (萬朝報), complemented by a picture of them taken in Yokohama. In the first letter to their children, Alice wrote with surprise that a man came out of a curio shop and asked: “Exguse me, madame, is this not Mrs. Daway? I knew you because I saw your picture in the paper.”⁶ This scene testifies to the development of mass communication in Japan at that time.

The Dewey’s were fascinated by everything. In the second letter home, Dewey said that he was “having so many interesting experiences and impressions” that it was “already difficult to catch up in writing them down.”⁷ Clogs, tea ceremonies, a festival of dolls, lacquer and porcelain—all manner of Japanese traditional things caught their eye. They were also impressed by the modernization brought about by the Meiji Restoration. Dewey’s letters give us a vivid portrayal of a developed Asian country with wonderful service, clear districts and politeness everywhere. Dewey claimed that it was “about as easy shopping in this store, the big department store, as it is at home—much easier as respects attention and comfort. They give us little wrappers or feet gloves to put over our shoes. Think of what an improvement that would be in muddy weather in Chicago.”⁸ Regarding Japanese restaurants, an ‘ordinary one,’ in Dewey’s view, “was cleaner than any

⁶ John Dewey and Alice Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1920), 3. Spellings like “Exguse” and “Daway” are not mistakes, but rather attempts to transcribe the pidgin English.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

American one, even the best.”⁹ He also joked with his children that “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.”¹⁰ The combination of traditional and modern characteristics in Japan led Dewey to judge that, in Japan, “Old world and new world are not mere relatives; they are as near absolutes as anything.”¹¹

When Hu Shih and other former students of Dewey at Columbia University learned of Dewey’s visit to Japan, they tried to contact him and invited him to visit China. P. W. Guo (郭秉文), another student of Dewey, called on Dewey with this specific purpose in mind when passing through Tokyo on March fourteenth. Dewey “entertained the idea of visiting China in the summer before returning to the United States.”¹² And in a letter on March twenty-seventh, he wrote “We can’t give an exact date for everything we are going to do till we go to China.”¹³ In other words, at least until that time, the date of departure to China had not yet been decided.

After “the storm of sociability and hospitality” came the most important issue for Dewey in Japan, his lectures at Tokyo Imperial University.¹⁴ From February twenty-fifth to March twenty-first, Dewey gave lectures every Tuesday and Friday under the title, “The Position of Philosophy at the Present: Problems of Philosophic Reconstruction.”¹⁵ Some previous studies seem to exaggerate the influence of these lectures. Meanwhile, historical records show that that they attracted more than one

⁹ Ibid., 34.

¹⁰ Ibid., 31.

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

¹² Wang, *John Dewey in China*, 3.

¹³ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 74.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵ Akihiro Mori, *Nihon niokeru john dewey shiso kenkyuu no seiri*, 5.

thousand listeners. But after three lectures, in a letter on March fifth, Dewey wrote, “They [the Japanese] are a patient race; there is still a good-sized audience, probably five hundred.”¹⁶ His use of the word “patient” is interesting, suggesting that some in the audience did not exit probably out of simple politeness. It is said that just thirty or forty people attended the final lecture. In any case, it seems that Dewey’s lectures were much less influential than commonly imagined. The reason for this will be discussed below.

Apart from giving lectures, Dewey also visited several kindergartens and schools. On February twenty-second, he and his wife went to Houmei (豊明) Kindergarten and School, itself an affiliate of Japan Women’s University. The weekly university newspaper reported, “Doctor Dewey and his wife’s visit started from nine o’clock a.m. After a lunch, they continued their inspection. They showed great interest in Japanese ancient etiquette, the Samurai’s sword, flower arrangement, and the Koto.”¹⁷ Viewing articles such as these, Dewey seemed to be seeking cross-cultural novelty. But only his letter home can reveal his actual focus:

The forenoon we spent in the elementary classes and kindergarten, which are their practice school. Those very bright kimonos for children you see are real—all the children wear them, as bright as can be, generally reds, and then some. So the rooms where the little children were are like gardens of flowers with bright birds in them—gay as can be. The work was all interesting, but the colored crayon drawings particularly. They have a great deal of freedom there, and instead of the children imitating and showing no individuality—which seems to be the

¹⁶ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 52.

¹⁷ Norio Miura, *Isenkyuhyakujyukyunen toji no nihon niokeru dewey no kiroku* [Records about Dewey in Japan in 1919], in *Dewey kenkyu* [Studies on Dewey], ed. Dewey Society of Japan (Tokyo: Tamagawa University Press, 1969), 91-92.

proper thing to say—I never saw so much variety and so little similarity in drawings and other hand work, to say nothing of its quality being much better than the average of ours. The children were under no visible discipline, but were good as well as happy.¹⁸

Obviously, Dewey cared much more about the mental condition of those children. As he stated in *The School and Society* (1900), “All children like to express themselves through the medium of form and color.”¹⁹ Indeed, one of the main themes in his theory concerns how to allow children to enjoy their freedom and arouse their creativity. It was for this reason that a Japanese classroom, rather than any superficial exotica, attracted Dewey’s attention.

Besides Tokyo, the Dewey’s traveled to Kamakura, Osaka and Kyoto, which they called “the Florence of Japan,” possessing “every natural beauty.”²⁰ Invited to a Geisha party given by the Tokyo mayor, Dewey was again prompted to praise the politeness of the Japanese: “[They] do one thing that we should do well to imitate. They teach the children in school a very nice lesson about the beauty and the responsibility of being polite and kind to the foreigner, like being so to the guests of your own house. This adds to the national dignity.”²¹

But Dewey’s feelings regarding Japan were not characterized by admiration alone. It has been pointed out that those who celebrated Dewey’s coming, including Eiichi Shibusawa, Inazo Nitobe (新渡戸稲造) and Jinzo Naruse (成瀬仁蔵), belonged to an elite circle of liberals, and were thus unrepresentative of the mainstream at that time.²² Most of

¹⁸ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 27-28.

¹⁹ John Dewey, *The School and Society and The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 40.

²⁰ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 82, 119.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

²² Kouiti Kasamatsu, *Nihon no minsyushiso gajJitugenshita j. dewey no tokyo teikoku daigaku*

Dewey's acquaintances in Japan had experiences learning in America. At a dinner party, one such acquaintance remarked to Dewey, "When Japanese met for sociable purposes they were reserved and stiff—at least till the wine went round—as long as they spoke Japanese, but speaking English brought back the habits they got in America and thawed them out."²³ Thus, their politeness was also complemented by some manner of estrangement.

Dewey realized that to know the "real Japan" he could not restrict himself to such an elite circle. Newspapers as well as meetings with the common people became the windows through which he might have a better understanding of current affairs. In a letter on March tenth, Dewey reported "a rumor that the ex-Emperor of Korea didn't die a natural death, but committed suicide, with the hope of putting off or preventing the marriage of his oldest son to a Japanese princess—they were to have been married very soon."²⁴ Dewey had thus already noticed the international tension caused by Japanese colonial policy in Korea, which was "under military rather than civil control."²⁵

Regarding domestic affairs, he heard that "no more progress has been made in constitutionalism" due to the growing fanaticism of the Imperial System.²⁶ "It is very unfortunate for them that they have become a first-class power so rapidly and with so little preparation in many ways," Dewey remarked, "It is a terrible task for them to live up to their position and reputation and they may crack under the strain."²⁷ The

kouen [The Achievement of Japanese Democracy: J. Dewey's lectures at Tokyo Imperial University], *The Journal of Nihon University College of Economics* 75 (2014): 42.

²³ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55. The "ex-Emperor" referred to here is Gojong of Korea, who died suddenly on January twenty-first, 1919 at Deoksu Palace at the age of sixty-seven.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

Emperor, a “symbol of united and modern Japan,” might have been the only choice for them to overcome this strain.²⁸ But Alice expressed her concern for a lady who had been jailed for political activities since it was “against the law for a women to take any part in politics here.”²⁹ And with regard to education, Dewey also came to realize the children would eventually come to be instructed in discipline and obedience when they grew up. Upon encountering a group of young girls, Dewey asked Alice somewhat worriedly “when these girls would undergo the clammifying process and have all their life taken out of them.”³⁰

As time passed and Dewey came to gain a clearer understanding of Japan, his two-month stay came to an end. On April twenty-eighth, after a final lecture in Kobe, the couple left for Shanghai.

III. Dewey in China and the May Fourth Movement

After two days’ travel, the Dewey’s arrived Shanghai on April thirtieth. Starting with a speech entitled “Education for Common People,” John Dewey began his lectures and visits in China. In brief, Dewey stayed in China for more than two years, visiting eleven provinces. It is recorded that he performed more than two hundred lectures and contributed to the widespread acceptance of pragmatism in China. His influence was profound and extensive, both in the intellectual field and with regard to educational institutions. In this respect, Jessica Ching-Sze Wang’s monograph, *John Dewey in China*, has already provided a detailed account. Since this book is easily available, there is no need to repeat any more.

However, perhaps the starting point of Dewey’s visit was not so

²⁸ Ibid., 149.

²⁹ Ibid., 129.

³⁰ Ibid., 50-51.

wonderful as Wang describes. It is worth noting that China in 1919 was much poorer than Japan and several parts of the country were actually occupied by domestic warlords and foreign powers. Dewey describes what he saw in Nanjing:

“They [Chinese children] just seem like dirty, poor miserable people anywhere. They are cheerful but not playful. I should like to give a few millions for playgrounds and toys and play leaders. I can’t but think that a great deal of the lack of initiative and the let-George-do-it, which is the curse of China, is connected with the fact that the children are grown up so soon. There are less than a hundred schools for children in this city of a third of a million, and the schools only have a few hundred—two or three at most. The children on the street are always just looking and watching, wise, human looking, and reasonably cheerful, but old and serious beyond bearing.”³¹

As an educationist, Dewey was grieved to the extreme.

To make matters worse, the common people were rather numb to the possibility of change. Dewey sharply criticized, “Status quo is China’s middle name, mostly status and a little quo. I have one more national motto to add to ‘You Never Can Tell’ and ‘Let George Do It.’ It is, ‘That is very bad.’ Instead of concealing things, they expose all their weak and bad points very freely, and after setting them forth most calmly and objectively, say ‘That is very bad.’”³²

It is hard to say Dewey’s first impression of China was a good one, especially compared with that regarding Japan. What is interesting, however, is that history always creates its own dramas. A great event occurred during Dewey’s visit to China that changed his attitude. Had it

³¹ Ibid., 184.

³² Ibid., 206.

not occurred, in fact, Dewey probably would have had a fleeting visit to China before returning to America as scheduled. This event was the May Fourth Movement.

On May fourth, 1919, the date by which the May Fourth Movement took its name, more than three thousand students in Beijing held a mass demonstration against the decision of the Versailles Peace Conference to transfer German concessions in Shantung to Japan. With their dream of world peace shattered by this unjust treaty, the students were mortified and outraged. To protest against Japanese imperialism and government corruption, they took to the streets and even burned the house of one corrupt pro-Japanese official. The students' expression of patriotism and zeal for reform triggered similar demonstrations throughout China over the next few weeks. In big cities, people went on general strikes to support the students and promoted boycotts against Japanese goods.³³

The May Fourth Movement was much more than a demonstration that happened on May fourth, 1919. The same can be said for Dewey's involvement in this movement. Dewey was in Shanghai on May fourth. The first time he mentioned this movement was in a letter on May twelfth, writing, "The Peking tempest seems to have subsided for the present."³⁴ It was true that armies had been sent by the government to the university and Ts'ai Yuan-pei (蔡元培), the Chancellor of Peking University, was forced to resign to protect his students. Dewey noted, "This Chancellor was more the intellectual leader of the liberals than I had realized, and the government had become really afraid of him."³⁵ He also had the feeling that perhaps the students would "go on strike all over China."³⁶

His feeling was right: "The resignation of Ts'ai Yuan-pei under

³³ Wang, *John Dewey in China*, 4-5.

³⁴ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 161.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

government pressure was viewed by the new intellectuals, both students and teachers, as a public assault by the government upon them.”³⁷ This aroused a new round of strikes, as Dewey describes in a letter on May thirteenth: “The students’ committees met yesterday and voted to inform the government by telegraph that they would strike next Monday if their four famous demands were not granted—or else five—including of course refusal to sign the peace treaty, punishment of traitors who made the secret treaties with Japan because they were bribed, etc.”³⁸ Compared with the enthusiasm of the students, the feelings of the common people were more complex. In a letter home, Dewey observed, “I don’t know whether I told you about the clerk in the tailor shop in Shanghai; after taking the usual fatalistic attitude that nothing could be done with the present situation, he said the boycott was a good thing but ‘Chinaman he got weak mind; pretty soon he forget.’”³⁹

But the youth ultimately did manage to bring about change. The movement went into its climax in June. The Dewey’s saw thousands of students take to the streets, giving speeches calling for freedom, unity, and courage with respect to the police. They also put their knowledge to use: “In these departments the students had set about seeing what things of Japanese importation could be replaced by hand labor without waiting for capital. After they worked it out in the school they went out to the shops and taught the people how to make them, and then peddled them about, making speeches at the same time.”⁴⁰ In a letter on June first, Dewey wrote with admiration, “We are witnessing the birth of a nation, and birth always comes hard.”⁴¹

It really was as hard as Dewey described: “The resumption of stern

³⁷ Tse-tsung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 136.

³⁸ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 177.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 209.

policy was marked, the afternoon of the next day, i.e. June 2, by the arrest of seven students who were selling Chinese goods in the Tung-an Market in Peking.⁴² Police patrols in the city had multiplied in size several times and “by the end of June 4, the government had about 1150 student prisoners on its hands.”⁴³ The buildings of Peking University were turned into a temporary prison. As Dewey wrote in a letter on June fifth, “This is Thursday morning, and last night we heard that about one thousand students were arrested the day before.”⁴⁴

In spite of the arrests, the students did not give up, intensifying their lecturing ventures: “The Peking authorities could not make any more arrests, but dispersed the audiences, who were considerably touched by the boys.”⁴⁵ Dewey was an acute observer, writing, “On the whole, the checkmate of the police seems surely impending. They will soon have the buildings full, as the students are getting more and more in earnest, and the most incredible part of it is that the police are surprised. They really thought the arrests would frighten the others from going on. So everybody is getting an education.”⁴⁶

The acting Minister of Education, Yuan His-tao (袁希涛), who faced dual pressures from the military group as well as from the students and other social groups had no way out of the dilemma except to offer his resignation. Another vice-minister, Fu Yo-fen (傅岳棻), succeeded him and requested “the military and police authorities to withdraw the garrison of police and troops stationed around the school buildings.”⁴⁷ But “the students inside held a meeting and passed a resolution asking the government whether they were guaranteed freedom of speech,

⁴² Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, 148.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁴ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 219.

⁴⁵ Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, 150.

⁴⁶ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 220.

⁴⁷ Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, 159.

because if they were not, they would not leave the building merely to be arrested again, as they planned to go on speaking. So they embarrassed the government by remaining in 'jail' all night."⁴⁸ Dewey judged that "the government's ignominious surrender was partly due to the fact that the places of detention were getting full and about twice as many students spoke yesterday as the day before, when they arrested a thousand, and the government for the first time realized that they couldn't bulldoze the students; it was also partly due to the fact that the merchants in Shanghai struck the day before yesterday, and there is talk that the Peking merchants are organizing for the same purpose."⁴⁹

In a letter on June seventh, Dewey reported that "the government sent an apology to the students," and "the students were speaking and parading with banners and cheers and the police standing near them like guardian angels, no one being arrested or molested."⁵⁰ Three days later, orders for the dismissal of three traitors were published. With pleasure as well as prudence, Dewey wrote that the students had merely "won the game at the present."⁵¹ As apparent in the following passage, however, he later reevaluated this claim:

I didn't do the students justice when I compared their first demonstration here to a college boys' roughhouse; the whole thing was planned carefully, it seems, and was even pulled off earlier than would otherwise have been the case, because one of the political parties was going to demonstrate soon... To think of kids in our country from fourteen on, taking the lead in starting a big cleanup reform politics movement and shaming merchants and professional men into joining them. This is sure

⁴⁸ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 227.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 235.

some country.⁵²

But wiping out traitors was only one aim of the movement. As Dewey wrote, “After June 11, the issue between the students and the government centered principally on the problem of whether China should sign the Peace Treaty [at Versailles].”⁵³ Despite the students’ entreaties, on June twenty-fourth, the government instructed the delegation to sign the Peace Treaty. Thus, “Numerous groups including merchants, industrialists, and workers denounced the government’s action. The student Union of Peking urged the President of China to change his instruction.”⁵⁴ On June twenty-eighth, the date of the signing, Chinese students, workers and overseas Chinese in Paris surrounded the headquarters of the delegation at the hotel to prevent their departure to sign the treaty. Of this, Dewey remarked, “Only when French guns announced to the world that the Versailles Treaty was signed did the Chinese students and workers leave their self-assigned posts.”⁵⁵ This marked the successful conclusion of the mass protest that had begun with the May Fourth Movement.

In a letter home on July second, Dewey wrote with great excitement, “To-day the report is that the Chinese delegates refused to sign the Paris treaty; the news seems too good to be true.”⁵⁶ Two days later, immersed in the same atmosphere, Dewey told his children, “You can’t imagine what it means here for China not to have signed. The entire government has been for it—the President up to ten days before the signing said it was necessary. It was a victory for public opinion, and all set going by these little schoolboys and girls. Certainly the United States

⁵² Ibid., 246-47.

⁵³ Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, 164-65.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁵⁶ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 258-59.

ought to be ashamed when China can do a thing of this sort.”⁵⁷

Obviously, Dewey always cared about the students and stood closely by them. But his affection for China in general also grew deeper and deeper. He joked in a later letter, “Since China didn’t sign the peace treaty things have quite settled down here, however, and the lack of excitement after living on aerated news for a couple of months is quite a letdown. However, we live in hopes of revolution or a coup d’état or some other little incident to liven up the dog days.”⁵⁸

IV. Dewey’s Ideas of Democracy

No one can deny that to experience a historical turning point brings strong excitement. Dewey, a famous philosopher, often pondered about this. In his most famous work, *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916, Dewey tried to offer a new kind of understanding about democracy. Arguing that “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience,” Dewey believed that “the free and equitable intercourse which springs from a variety of shared interest” would be a necessary mode of human association.⁵⁹

This is the essential reason why he emphasized in his Tokyo Imperial University lectures that “democracy has many meanings, but if it has a moral meaning, it is found in resolving that the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society.”⁶⁰ In a letter home, as well, Dewey mentioned how he also

⁵⁷ Ibid., 266.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 288.

⁵⁹ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 87, 84-85.

⁶⁰ John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt And Company, 1920), 186.

“spoke on the moral meaning of democracy” at a private party in Japan.⁶¹

But his theory was obviously alien to Japan at that time. Although Japan had rapidly developed since the Meiji Restoration, it had established a centralized state under the Imperial System. The “Imperial Rescript on Education,” promulgated in 1890, indicated such an ideology. This rescript stated, “The Emperor is the descended Son of heaven receiving the divine oracle, and possessed of all virtue and compassion for his subjects,” as well as, “The subjects do not demand basic human rights from the Emperor as sovereign, but are expected to daily endeavor to reflect on their position, and when going to the Imperial Palace, apologize for not adequately fulfilling that expectation.”⁶² In the “Standard Outlines of the Regulations concerning Elementary Schools Courses,” drawn up in 1891, it was reaffirmed that children should be taught in accordance with the educational purpose delineated in the “Imperial Ordinance relating to Elementary School” and the “Imperial Rescript on Education,” each emphasizing cultivation of the “Reverence for Emperor and Love of the Country.” Accordingly, “A photograph of the Emperor and the Imperial Rescript on Education were placed in a designated location,” named Houanden (奉安殿), a space reserved for a course on Ethics.⁶³

Dewey recollected how he had been told that, in Japanese schools, “More than one has been burned or allowed the children to be burned while he rescued the portrait of the Emperor when there was a fire.”⁶⁴ This was simply unthinkable to him. He argued, “There the very great public spirit is nationalistic rather than public spirit as we understand

⁶¹ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 69.

⁶² Katsutoshi Mizuhara, *History of National Curriculum Standards Reform in Japan* (Sendai: Tohoku University Press, 2010), 53-54.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶⁴ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 149.

it.”⁶⁵ Thus, the situation in Japan was opposite to Dewey’s idea of democracy.

Aside from its imperialistic tendencies, Japan had learned a lot from Germany over the course of modernization. This was especially apparent with respect to the intellectuals. Imperial Universities made German philosophy a central part of the curriculum. On the other hand, Japanese scholars tended to regard the pragmatism developed in America as an ‘aberration’ or ‘vulgarization’ of philosophy.⁶⁶ This is another reason why Dewey had a difficult time finding an audience for his theory in Japan.

In contrast, the situation in China seemed quite different, suggesting to Dewey the possibility of putting his theory of democracy into practice. The Qing Dynasty, the last feudal dynasty in China, ended in 1912, replaced by the Republic of China. However, as Dewey argued, a democracy is more than a form of government, and this replacement occurred in form only. Dewey realized that what China really needed was “another revolution, or rather a revolution.”⁶⁷

The May Fourth Movement, which came about rather incidentally, was no doubt a real revolution. The young students stayed united until the final day, fearless of the pressure from police and government. The utilization of what they learned in school ensured their efficient and effective organization. Thus, education proved to be something that could improve society. Meanwhile, the common people were also aroused to participate in this movement. Support from merchants, industrialists and workers showed that the “numbness” of the Chinese had receded—the Chinese people had formed bonds of “association” in such a movement. Only in this respect can we understand why Dewey

⁶⁵ Ibid., 162.

⁶⁶ Akihiro Mori, *Nihon niokeru john dewey dhiso kenkyuu no deiri*, 30.

⁶⁷ Dewey, *Letters from China and Japan*, 206.

stated in a letter, “We are witnessing the birth of a nation.”

In the preface of *Letters from China and Japan*, Evelyn Dewey, editor and first reader of these letters, described how the Dewey’s became absorbed in the political developments unfolding in China:

The fascination of the struggle going on in China for a unified and independent democracy caused them to alter their plan to return to the United States in the summer of 1919. Professor Dewey applied to Columbia University for a year’s leave of absence, which was granted, and with Mrs. Dewey, is still in China. Both are lecturing and conferring, endeavoring to take some of the story of a Western Democracy to an Ancient Empire, and in turn are enjoying an experience, which, as the letters indicate, they value as a great enrichment of their own lives.”⁶⁸

This passage, written in 1920, would be the best explanation for such a turning point in Dewey’s travel plans in China.

V. Conclusion

History creates its own dramas. If Dewey did not come to Japan, or if the May Fourth Movement happened at another time, there would probably be little preoccupation with Dewey in the modern history of China. But the facts show that Dewey’s theory did meet the needs of Chinese educational, or in a broader sense, social transformation rightly during that time. No wonder he met with warm reception and was viewed as “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy” by the Chinese people. History is constituted by the complicated involvement of many factors.

Nearly one hundred hundred years have passed since Dewey

⁶⁸ Ibid., vi.

departed from San Francisco to visit East Asia, but his theory is still alive in China. Some problems that existed one hundred years ago, like how to ensure children's freedom in education and how to achieve democracy in society, yet remain. This may be the reason why Dewey's works still draw so much attention among Chinese scholars. In Japan, after World War II, studies of Dewey also greatly developed, accompanying the introduction of democratic theory by the United States. That, however, is another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chow, Tse--tsung. *The May Fourth Movement*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967.
- Dewey, John. *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. New York: Henry Holt And Company, 1920.
- . *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Free Press, 1966.
- . *The School and Society and The Child and the Curriculum*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Dewey, John and Alice Dewey. *Letters from China and Japan*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1920.
- Hu Shih. *Hu shi quan ji* [The Collected works of Hu Shih]. Hefei: Anhui Educational Press, 2007.
- Kasamatsu Kouiti. *Nihon no minsyushiso ga jitugenshita j. dewey no tokyo teikoku daigaku kouen* [The Achievement of Japanese Democracy: J. Dewey's Lectures at Tokyo Imperial University]. *The Journal of Nihon University College of Economics* 75 (2014): 31-43.
- Martin, Jay. *The Education of John Dewey*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Mizuhara, Katsutoshi. *History of National Curriculum Standards Reform in Japan*. Sendai: Tohoku University Press, 2010.
- Miura Norio. *Senkyuhyakujyukyunen toji no nihon niokeru dewey no kiroku* [Records about Dewey in Japan in 1919]. In *Dewey kenkyu* [Studies on Dewey]. Edited by the Dewey Society of Japan. Tokyo: Tamagawa University Press, 1969.
- Mori Akihiro. *Nihon niokeru john dewey shiso kenkyuu no seiri* [An Overview of the Studies on John Dewey in Japan]. Tokyo: Syuuousha, 1992.
- Wang, Jessica Ching-Sze. *John Dewey in China*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.
- Yuan Qing. *Du wei yu zhongguo* [John Dewey and China]. Beijing: Renmin Press, 2001.