

JOHN DEWEY'S EXPERIENCE IN CHINA (1919-1921)

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Abstract

The American philosopher John Dewey is probably best known for his contributions to educational philosophy, though his writings on logic, metaphysics, epistemology and value theory are for the most part equally impressive. Before and after his death in 1952, he was lauded as “America’s philosopher” and a “public intellectual for the twentieth century.” During the early 1920s, to call Dewey an internationalist would be to state the obvious. He had travelled to Japan, Russia, Mexico, Turkey and China. Of all these places, he stayed in China the longest—two years and two months (May 1919 to July 1921)—and wrote the most about his experiences there. Unfortunately, too much of the extent literature speaks to how Dewey influenced China. In this brief paper, the author focuses on the question of how China changed Dewey. Before attempting this project, it helps to explicate how Dewey conceived experience—to paint a picture of his so-called “metaphysics of experience”—in order to then appreciate how he conceived his own China experience.

Keywords

John Dewey – education – culture – China – Chinese philosophy – diplomacy

“The new comer in China in observing and judging usually makes the mistake of attaching too much significance to current happenings.”

— J. Dewey, “Federalism in China” (MW 13:149)¹

“Dewey learned to understand and respect China on its own terms.”

— J. Ching-Sze Wang, “John Dewey as a Learner in China” (p. 64)

Dewey the Internationalist

The American philosopher John Dewey is probably best known for his contributions to educational philosophy, though his writings on logic, metaphysics, epistemology and value theory are for the most part equally impressive. Before and after his death in 1952, he was lauded as “America’s philosopher” and a “public intellectual for the twentieth century.” During the early 1920s, to call Dewey an internationalist would be to state the obvious. He had travelled to Japan, Russia, Mexico, Turkey and China. Of all these places, he stayed in China the longest—two years and two months (May 1919 to July 1921)—and wrote the most about his experiences there. Unfortunately, too much of the extant literature speaks to how Dewey influenced China.²

What I would like to focus on in this brief paper is how China changed Dewey.³ Before attempting this project it helps to explicate how Dewey conceived experience—to paint a picture of his so-called “metaphysics of experience”—in order to then appreciate how he conceived his own China experience.

Dewey on Experience

For Dewey, experience can be compared to the waves of the ocean pounding a sandy beach. Much of our experience is “had” or “felt” passively and non-cognitively through culture, upbringing, metaphors, and journeys.⁴ This primary experience is guided by the products of a more cognitively-rich secondary experience. To stick with the metaphor, the sandy beach of primary experience is littered with the seashells and pebbles or products of secondary experience.

Secondary experience involves “knowing” or learning” through intelligent inquiry, experimentation and reflection—the active waves of the ocean that deposit everything from mathematical formulas to logical forms to psychological principles on to the beach of primary experience to be habitually employed later on. Secondary experience is shot full of cognition, but its point is to enrich primary experience, not to be a temple unto itself. Indeed, Dewey’s debate

with Bertrand Russell is a testimony to how starkly different two philosophers could conceive experience; Russell seeing it as a thing that could be known and analyzed into its most elemental building blocks; Dewey conceiving it as a process that should first be appreciated holistically. So, what was Dewey's experience of China?

Dewey on Chinese-Japanese Relations

John Dewey set foot in mainland China on May 1, 1919, just three days prior to events that would spark the May Fourth Movement, a student demonstration in Beijing to protest the Versailles Treaty's transfer of Shandong to Japan, as well as the Chinese government's weak response.⁵

Setting aside his complex view of the movement, Dewey was far more impressed by China than Japan. Eleven days into his trip to China (May 12, 1919), Dewey dined with Sun Yat-sen. Over dinner, Dewey expressed concerns about Japanese militarism and imperialism, as well as hope for China's future given its people's spirit of volunteerism and educational innovation. As he recalled the conversation in correspondence with his children, Dewey was surprised by the Chinese revolutionary's reaction:

"[T]he weakness of the Chinese [according to Sun] is due to their acceptance of the statement of an old philosopher, "To know is easy, to act is difficult." Consequently, they did not like to act and thought it was possible to get a complete theoretical understanding, while the strength of the Japanese was that they acted even in ignorance and went ahead and learned by their mistakes; the Chinese were paralyzed by fear of making a mistake in action."

This early engagement with Sun Yat-sen likely inspired Dewey's own curiosity about Chinese culture and psychology. By June of 1919, Dewey confessed to his children in a letter that, "never in our lives had we begun to learn as much as in [China]."

Dewey on Chinese-American Relations

Before his two-year stay, Dewey took a paternalistic view of America's relationship with China. In at least one respect, America's paternalism toward China was fortuitous in that it opened the way for Dewey to form relationships with Chinese students. In refunding a portion of the indemnity payments China owed the U.S. after the Boxer Rebellion, one condition was that the monies would be used to fund scholarships for Chinese students to study in America. Dewey's chief expositor in China, Hu Shih, initially came to study with Dewey at Columbia University in 1910 and was a recipient of one of these scholarships. Hu Shih would later arrange Dewey's stay in China.

Over time Dewey would eventually reject the U.S.'s paternalism toward China in favor of a "hands-off" or "non-interventionist" approach. "China would not be saved from outside herself," he wrote, for she "is used to taking time for her problems: she can neither understand nor profit by the impatient methods of the western world which are profoundly alien to her genius" (MW 13:171). Dewey would encourage American leaders to treat China not as a child, but as "a cultural equal" (LW 2:175). Nevertheless, Dewey struggled to overcome his own Eurocentrism, attempting during his two-year stay to gain a more culturally-sensitive appreciation of China.

Dewey on Chinese Culture

With time, Dewey came to see Chinese culture as bound up with deeply-ingrained customs and a time-honored respect for tradition. He remarked that, "China can be understood only in terms of the institutions and ideas which have been worked out in its own historical evolution" (MW 11:216). For Dewey, institutions are not just discrete organizations, the buildings they occupy or even the people who compose them. Instead, institutions resemble more amorphous cultural and habit-formed constructs that change through time, though slowly in more traditional societies such as China.

Not unlike Sun Yat-sen, Dewey observed the Chinese people's conservatism and passivity and speculated about their causes. He believed that living in such close proximity to one another in dense population centers partly explained these psychological tendencies: "It is beyond question that many traits of the Chinese mind are the products of an extraordinary and long-continued density of populations" (MW 12:53). And again: "Live and let live is the response to crowded conditions" (LW 12:55). He also thought that the same living conditions accounted for the habit of saving face or keeping up appearances: "When people live close together and cannot get away from one another, appearances, that is to say the impression made upon others, become as important as the realities, if not more so" (MW 12:58).

Although Dewey was an amateur cultural anthropologist, what we might take away from these observations is that Dewey tried to appreciate Chinese culture from the inside-out. Even in the many public lectures Dewey gave while in China, he adapted his message to his audience, regional concerns and the wider culture, rather than push an American pill as a universal prescription for China's ills.⁶

Dewey on Chinese Philosophy

Dewey was also surprisingly open-minded and humbly accepting of Taoism and Confucianism. Dewey's own distinctly American philosophy, pragmatism, is often described as a call for action and progress, whereby humans manipulate nature in ways instrumental to the achievement of flexibly determined ends. Laotzu's teachings, specifically his notion of Wuwei or non-doing and his doctrine that nature is superior to man, stand in stark contrast to Dewey's pragmatism. So, Dewey had every reason to reject Laotzu's teachings. Almost paradoxically, though, he defended them: "The workings of nature will in time bring to naught the artificial fussings and

fumings of man. Give enough rope to the haughty and ambitious, and in the end they will surely be hung in the artificial entanglements they have themselves evolved” (MW 13:222). Faith that the passage of time and letting nature take its course would dissolve problematic situations was alien to pragmatism’s experimental and instrumental approach to problem solving.

Still, Dewey was aware that methods of inquiry did not emerge in a vacuum. They reflected beliefs that were dominant in the wider community and culture. Similar to Confucians, Dewey believed that the Western idea that individuals possess inalienable rights which trump any collective obligations to the larger community was nothing more than a “fiction” (Hall and Ames, 1999, p. 225). The ancient Chinese concept of Ren influenced Dewey’s own turn toward embracing communal ideals and shared experience. According to Jessica Ching-Sze Wang (2007), Dewey’s “encounter with China reinforced his belief in the essential value of community life” (p. 106). If Dewey could learn something valuable from the Chinese approaches to community and inquiry, so could other Westerners. Dewey reached a similar conclusion: “[T]he Chinese philosophy of life embodies a profoundly valuable contribution to human culture and one which a hurried, impatient, over-busied and anxious West is definitely in need” (MW 13:223).

Conclusion – How did China Change Dewey?

Between May 1919 and July 1921, China changed Dewey in at least three profound ways. First, it showed him that a thorough understanding of one’s present situation could only be had through a deep appreciation of the past. This might appear oddly un-pragmatist, given the forward-looking thrust of pragmatist philosophy.

However, as I argued in my first book, *John Dewey’s Great Debates—Reconstructed*, it is the only way to make sense of Dewey’s preoccupation with historical inquiry. Second, China and particularly Taoism changed Dewey by making him more attentive to questions concerning how humans should interact with nature. As I noted in my second book, *Pragmatic Environmentalism*, we humans need not always dominate or control nature. We should also learn to exercise restraint in our relationship with the natural world, preserving its biota and conserving the resources it provides us, especially if we want the Earth to sustain the human race over the long term. Consistent with the Taoist concept of *Wuwei*, sometimes we just have to choose not to act and, likewise, not to exploit. Finally, China changed Dewey by increasing his sensitivity to the cultural conditions for experiencing time.

In my third book, *Philosophical Pragmatism and International Relations*, I wrote about the relationship between pragmatist philosophy and the practice of international diplomacy. If American diplomats could learn one thing prior to interacting with their Chinese counterparts, it is that talks and negotiations should never be rushed. Likewise, Dewey noted, “[t]o achieve anything worth while in our relations with the Chinese we have to adopt enough of their own point of view to recognize the importance of time. We must give them time and then more time;

we must take time ourselves while we give them time” (MW 13:223). Within the framework of experiential metaphysics, what Dewey learned about China during his two-year visit enriched his overall impression of the country, its people and his hope for its future. Dewey’s China experience also left a deposit of seashells on the beach of primary experience that would guide the American philosopher’s thought for years to come.

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Notes

1 Citations are to Dewey (1996), following the conventional method, LW (Later Works) or MW (Middle Works) or EW (Early Works), volume:page number. For example, MW 10:354 refers to the Middle Works, volume 10, page 354.

2 On how Dewey influenced China during his two-year trip, see Ryan (1995, pp. 206), Westbrook (1992, 249-252) and Tan (2011).

3 Jessica Ching-Sze Wang has taken up a similar though much more extensive project in her book *John Dewey in China* (2007) and her earlier article "John Dewey as a Learner in China" (2005).

4 For the full development of this metaphor, see my "The Ebb and Flow of Primary and Secondary Experience" (2009).

5 Wang (2007) claims that “[h]ad the movement not occurred in May 1919, Dewey might not have lingered in China for two years and two months” (p. 1). She also describes the exact circumstances surrounding the trip to Asia: “In the fall of 1918, Dewey was on 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 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 long-time depression over the death of their son on a trip to Italy. [. . .] When Hu Shih and other former students of Dewey at Columbia University learned of Dewey’s visit to Japan, they tried to contact him there and invited him to spend a year in China as a visiting scholar” (p. 3).

6 Scott Stroud (2013) notes how Dewey adapted his public lectures in China to specific audiences, with particular sensitivity to the cultural context: “Throughout all of his lecturing in China, he wanted to advance his pragmatist line of thought on issues relevant to democracy and science, but he attempted to adapt it to the specific audience at hand. At various talks to Peking educators and students, he personalized his message to focus on the university’s role in shaping public opinion and the importance of student self-governance; to colleges of law and politics, he spoke on political democracy” (p. 105).