

## John Dewey In China

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In February and March, 1919, John Dewey delivered at the Imperial University of Japan in Tokyo, a series of eight lectures which were published the following year as the epoch making book, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*.<sup>\*</sup> Immediately after his Tokyo lectures, Dewey accepted an invitation to lecture at the Chinese National University in Peking, the first foreigner ever to be invited by Chinese officials to lecture at a government supported university. (1,200) Although he originally intended to spend only a few weeks in China, the public response to his lectures was so enthusiastic that he was prevailed upon to deliver them in other universities. By the time he left China twenty-six months after his arrival, he had spoken before enthusiastic audiences in at least eleven provinces. (2, 191)

The lectures were widely printed throughout China in newspapers and periodicals, and were later published in a book which went through 14 Chinese printings of 10,000 copies each in two years. (2, 192). Their impact was such that Hu Shih, the foremost Chinese philosopher of his time, was to say later\*\* that no other single individual, Chinese or Western, exerted so profound influ-

ence on "The Chinese Renaissance" which was initiated in the second decade of this century. Similar judgments were echoed a year later by Berry (1) and Chow (2).

It is interesting to review some of the circumstances which combined to make it possible for Dewey's lectures in China to have the impact they did have, as these are recounted by Father Berry (1) and Professor Chow (2).

Increasing contact with the rest of the world throughout the 19th century, at first commercial, then intellectual, and finally at the end of the century, in armed conflict, had shattered China's long tradition of isolationism and undermined her stability. In common with the rest of the world, though later than the nations of the West, China was beginning to be subject to the growth of industrialism. Western ideas and ideals appealed to the Chinese intelligentsia, more and more of whom came to look upon their own traditions as outmoded and unsuited for participation in the modern world. The works of Herbert Spencer, Thomas Huxley and Charles Darwin enjoyed great popularity among intellectuals — a fact which Father Berry sees as predisposing them to a ready acceptance of Dewey's pragmatism. (1, 211)

### *Critical Years*

The Manchu Dynasty was overthrown in 1912, but the Republic which replaced it was far from stable, and political unrest was the order of the day. By the time that Dewey arrived in 1919, China was in "the most critical years of modern Chi-

nese history. The more westernized elements in Peking were taking control. Confucius, and his greatest modern defender, K'ang Y u-wei, under the assault led by Ch'en Tu-hsiu and Hu Shih, had just retired from the scene." (1, 200) The intellectuals of China were indeed hungry for ideas, eager for suggestions of ways in which they could remake their society so that China could take her place among the family of nations. Dewey brought bold ideas and offered concrete and practical suggestions—and he found a receptive and sympathetic audience. Father Berry characterizes this as "the supreme moment of intellectual communication between China and America . . . Emotionally and intellectually the Chinese were keyed to hear and to give serious consideration to the thoughts that he [Dewey] would present to them." (1, 206)

Notwithstanding the enthusiasm of the Chinese intellectuals for Dewey's ideas, these ideas could not have had the profound effect on the country at large that they did have had it not been for a fortuitous development in the years immediately preceding his visit. For hundreds of years the books, magazines, and even newspapers of China had been printed in the language of the classical tradition, a language so different from that spoken by the vast majority of the people that it could be read and understood only by a very small educated minority. It was as if America's press restricted itself to Chaucerian English—if, indeed, the difference between the language of classical tradition and that of popular

speech were not even greater than that between the language of Chaucer and that of *Time*.

In 1915 Hu Shih and some of his colleagues had begun agitation to have the popular spoken language, *pai-hua* also become the written language. They thought they were being optimistic when they conjectured that it would take a decade or more to make the transformation, but the movement succeeded beyond their wildest hopes. Within four years *pai-hua* "had become the language of the schools, and the re-education of China was begun in earnest. Politics, language, thought and education, all were to become democratic at the same time. One important result of this linguistic change was that communication between the scholars and the people was now more complete and more immediate than at any time in Chinese history." (1, 202-203)

A third circumstance which combined with the two just mentioned to prepare the ground for rich fructification of Dewey's ideas was the outbreak in Peking of "The May Fourth Movement" on the very day before the Deweys landed at Shanghai. Regarded by the authorities at the beginning as "student riots," (which they undertook to stamp out by mass arrests until the students courted arrests in such numbers that the officials finally emptied the jails and apologized to the "rioters"!) this movement proved to be the initial stage of an intellectual and social revolution which was ultimately to assume significance that dwarfed the political revolution in which the Emperor had been overthrown seven years earlier.

The May Fourth Movement was both evidence of and stimulus to intellectual ferment. Within six months after the incident, more than 400 new periodicals, all in *pai-hua*, appeared on the newsstands. Established journals which had not yet switched to *pai-hua* were forced to do so in order

to survive and keep their readership. Newspapers added special columns or supplementary magazines in order to print new literary works and discuss cultural and student movements. Book publication boomed, especially publication of Chinese translations of foreign works. Imports of paper more than doubled. (2, 178-183)

Commenting on this phenomenon, Dewey himself noted:

It is significant that at this moment of the height of the revolt against corrupt and traitorous officials and also of the Japanese boycott, these topics were secondary in the students' journals. . . . Their burden was the need of educational change; attacks upon the family system; discussion of socialism; of democratic ideas; of all kinds of utopias. . . . There seems to be no country in the world where students are so unanimously and eagerly interested as in China in what is modern and new in thought, especially about social and economic matters, nor where the arguments which can be brought in favor of the established order and the status quo have so little weight—indeed, are so unuttered. (quoted in 2, 182-183).

### *Dewey's Influence*

Chow notes that academic and popular lectures became a vogue in China in 1919 and the years immediately following. Dewey was the first of a considerable number of prominent Western thinkers who were invited to visit China for the purpose of lecturing, and all of them were enthusiastically received. Not only were these lectures widely published in Chinese both in periodicals and in book form, but usually earlier works of the lecturers were translated into Chinese and published, sometimes in sizable editions. (2, 191-192). In the years since Dewey lectured in China at least a dozen of his books have been published in Chinese.

In this atmosphere of receptiveness

to which so many circumstances had contributed, Dewey delivered five major series of lectures, most or all of which he repeated by invitation in other universities over the next two years and two months. Dewey spoke in English, with his lectures being interpreted into *pai-hua*, sentence by sentence, by Hu Shih, who had been one of Dewey's doctoral candidates at Columbia University and who was to be a life-long friend. Various people, among whom are known to be some professors and at least one newspaper editor, "took dictation" as Hu Shih interpreted. At times Dewey provided the amanuenses with sketchy notes to aid them in their choice of words, but aside from this, we must assume that he followed his customary practice of speaking only from notes (and even these for the most part he does not seem to have preserved).\*\*\* In a preface to the Chinese version of the lectures Hu Shih wrote of Dewey's intention of publishing the series in English, but it is obvious that he never got around to doing so.

In style the lectures are simpler, more elementary, and in a more popular vein than the works which Dewey himself prepared for publication. Although in the years immediately preceding his visit to China Dewey had given a course in "Political Philosophy" at Columbia University, he had not given systematic treatment as he did in the first series of lectures in China, "Social and Political Philosophy." Chow notes that in this series social and political philosophy was "explored in the light of pragmatism for the first time." (2, 192)

While, of course, echoes of ideas which Dewey propounded in these lectures appear here and there in his later works, there is no later book which in any sense parallels the development of his thought in the 16 lectures on "Social and Political Philosophy." His discussion of the ideal of democracy, and his plea for

the development of a democratic social and political philosophy which would lend itself to dealing with specific and concrete problems and issues rather than depending on broad generalizations and panaceas, was keyed throughout to the situation confronting the Chinese people at the time—a situation which Dewey analyzed with rare perceptiveness and sympathy.

The second series of lectures (also numbering 16), "Philosophy of Education" presented a simplified and "popularized" version of the main ideas which Dewey had treated in *Democracy and Education* which had been published three years earlier. (A full translation into Chinese of *Democracy and Education* was to be published fifteen years after Dewey's lectures were delivered.) This particular series was probably more immediately influential than any of the others. Writing on this topic, Father Berry says of Dewey, "His influence on education was original, decisive, lasting. Not only in China, but on a universal basis, it is doubtful if anyone in this century has had as extensive influence on the educational programs of the world. If this influence has been delayed in making itself felt in Europe, in Asia it arrived much earlier. *Its greatest impact was in China.* (1, 214; emphasis added.)

Again the series of 15 lectures on "Ethics" is reminiscent of the subject matter of the book by the same name, which Dewey had written in collaboration with James H. Tufts and published in 1908, although the style is much simpler and the treatment more elementary; and again, Dewey gave evidence of his perceptive sympathy by the degree to which he drew his examples from and made application of his ideas to the Chinese situation.

The series (8 lectures) titled "Types of Thinking" reflect some of the ideas Dewey had first presented in 1903 in *Studies in Logical Theory*

and in 1916 in *Essays in Experimental Logic*; but these lectures are also prophetic of the restatement that was to come almost two decades later in his monumental *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*.

The briefest series (3 lectures) on *Three Philosophers of Our Time: William James, Henri Bergson, and Bertrand Russell*, "were given at special request as an introduction to Russell before the latter's arrival in China in 1920 to deliver a number of lectures." (3, 765). These lectures deal with subjects familiar to western readers, but they contain appraisals and insights which are sufficiently unique to warrant their "retranslation" into English.

Also in the book published in 1920 by the Peking Morning Post is a series of lectures on "Elementary Education," by Alice Chipman Dewey. It has not yet been decided whether to retranslate these into English.

In addition to *The Five Major Series of Lectures by John Dewey in Peking*, published in book form by the Peking Morning Post in 1920\*\*\*\* Dewey delivered a wide variety of single lectures and brief series of lectures on his tours through the provinces. Many, if not all, of these were printed, among other places, in *The Bulletin of the Ministry of Education*. Most of them, and probably all of them should eventually be retranslated into English.

### *Dewey's Influence*

Assertions by Dewey's friends and admirers about the extent of his influence on Chinese culture and thought could possibly be subject to the charge of bias. More convincing evidence lies in the diatribes directed toward Dewey in the Communist press, more than a generation after the lectures were delivered. Among the samples of such criticism quoted by Hu Shih in his lecture, "John Dewey in China," (3, 766-767), two are especially revealing:

"If we want to criticize the old theories of education, we must begin with Dewey. The educational ideas of Dewey have dominated and controlled Chinese education for thirty years, and his social philosophy and his general philosophy have also influenced a part of the Chinese people." (*The People's Education*, October, 1950.)

The second is a statement by Ch'en Ho-ch'in, "one of the great educators of the Dewey school, who was responsible for the modernization of Shanghai schools, who was ordered to make this public accusation in February, 1955:"

"How was Dewey's poisonous Pragmatic educational philosophy spread over China? It was spread primarily through his lectures in China preaching his Pragmatic philosophy and his reactionary educational ideas, and through that center of Dewey's reactionary thinking, namely, Columbia University, from which thousands of Chinese students, for over thirty years, have brought back all the reactionary, subjective-idealistic, Pragmatic educational ideas of Dewey. . . . As one who has been most deeply poisoned by his reactionary educational ideas, as one who has worked hardest and longest to help spread his educational ideas, I now publicly accuse that great fraud and deceiver in the modern history of education, John Dewey." (*Wenhui Pao*, February 28, 1955.)

In light of the undisputed fact that Dewey's ideas, especially those set forth in his lectures in China in 1919-1921 did exert such a tremendous influence on the development of modern Chinese thought and culture, it becomes increasingly important that the text of the lectures should be generally available to students of recent and current developments in China. Only a few copies of the Morning Post volume are known to exist outside mainland China; and the attitude of the Chinese Communists toward Dewey being what it

*Continued on page 35*