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Chinese educational development through the lens of John Dewey

Daiki Yamashita

This paper aims to examine John Dewey's lens on Chinese educational development. Dewey is one of the key founders of pragmatist philosophy in the United States. After World War I, he travelled to China at the request of former Chinese students at Columbia University. Coincidentally, just after his arrival there, the May Fourth Movement took place in Beijing. During his over two-year stay, he commented on the trend of ongoing educational reform through his lectures. At the same time, as an inner China visitor, he contributed many essays on Chinese education to American journals. Since he visited China after his stay in Japan, his perspective included a cross-cultural comparative approach between China and Japan. Therefore, it is not only important to understand how Dewey's philosophy was accepted in China, but also how Dewey himself interpreted Chinese educational development.

Keywords: John Dewey; China and Japan; The May Fourth Movement; Literary revolution; Language education

John Dewey (1859–1952) is widely regarded as the founder of pragmatist philosophy. Throughout his life, Dewey visited many countries to explain the need for educational innovation. In 1919, during a sabbatical from Columbia University, Dewey travelled to Japan, where a new educational movement emphasising children's autonomy and creativity had emerged.¹ It was during this time that Dewey's philosophy of education was translated into Japanese and became the fundamental theory that underpinned child-centred educational practices in Japan.²

After learning that Dewey was in Japan, several of his former students, including Hu Shih, Tao Xingzhi, Chiang Menglin, and Guo Bingwen, all of whom would go on to become influential educators themselves, asked Dewey to visit China. He arrived in Shanghai on 30 April 1919 and lectured extensively throughout the country for over two years. His collective work, *'Dewey's Lecture in China'*, was well-received and has been reprinted many times in China.³ When considering Dewey's seminal impact in China, Hu Shih noted that 'since the [initial] contact between Chinese and Western culture, no foreign thinker had a greater influence than Professor John Dewey'.⁴ In a speech during Dewey's 60th birthday celebrations, Cai Yuanpei, a president of Beijing University, said that Dewey's philosophy should be considered as a representative of the new western civilisation.⁵

It should be noted that, during his time in China, Dewey was not only teaching his own educational theories, but was also discussing China's ongoing educational reform, and many of his lectures and essays during this time were on this topic.⁶ Similarly, during his visit to Turkey in 1924, Dewey wrote a recommendation addressed to the Turkish government on the country's educational issues and provided his own commentary on Turkish affairs in an American journal.⁷ Dewey not only promoted his own philosophy in each country, but also recognised and commented on the educational development of each country he visited.

This paper picks up Dewey's visit to China and aims to examine his view of Chinese educational development. For this purpose, the author analyses his lecture transcripts and his essays on Chinese education. Hu Shih himself noted that Dewey had faithfully conveyed the Chinese situation to the international community through his essays in *'The New Republic'* and *'Asia'*.⁸ Since Dewey visited China after his stay in Japan, these essays included a cross-cultural comparative approach between China and Japan. Hu Shih argued that Dewey, during his stay, greatly emphasised educational innovation.⁹ Therefore, it is significant to pick up

Dewey as the case of 'Americans in China'¹⁰ and analyse his perspective on Chinese educational development. With the above background, the first section presents an overview of the characteristics of Dewey's philosophy of education and linguistic theory. The second section discusses how he viewed the characteristics of Chinese education in comparison with the Japanese model. The third section will discuss how Dewey evaluated language education reform in relation to Chinese modernity.

Searching for a democratic society

In 1894, Dewey was appointed as a professor in the Department of Philosophy at Chicago University. Chicago itself played an important role in developing Dewey's educational theories. During this time, Chicago was a mecca for social investigation and urban sociology and was home to many influential groups and campaigns, such as Jane Addams' Hull House movement.¹¹ Dewey drew on Chicago's rich intellectual and social resources to develop his own philosophical ideas.¹² Chicago also served as a place of educational experimentation for Dewey. The Chicago University Laboratory School was founded in 1896, and it was here that Dewey developed his own philosophy of education. In *'My Pedagogic Creed'*, published in 1897, Dewey argued that 'education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform', and that 'school is simply that form of community life'.¹³ Teachers at the Laboratory School were able to pioneer practical research in an autonomous school environment.¹⁴ In the preface of *'How We Think (First Edition)'*, published in 1910, Dewey noted that his wife, Alice Chipman, was deeply involved in the management of the Laboratory School, and that the 'embodiment and testing in practice' were important for the formation of Dewey's own educational ideas.¹⁵

Of these ideas, Dewey took an instrumentalist position on language education. For instance, in *'My Pedagogic Creed'*, he notes that language is 'a social instrument', 'the device for communication', and 'the tool through which one individual comes to share the ideas and feelings of others'.¹⁶ In *'School and Society'*, published in 1899, Dewey emphasised 'the shifting of the centre of gravity' in new education, referring to 'a change, a revolution, not unlike that introduced by Copernicus when the astronomical centre shifted from the earth to the sun'.¹⁷ In *'How We Think'*, Dewey argued that, under such a child-centred approach, education should transform language into an intellectual tool via the following: '(1) enlargement of the pupil's vocabulary, (2) rendering its terms more precise and accurate, and (3) formation of habits of consecutive discourse'.¹⁸ Dewey also noted that 'the vocabulary of things studied in the classroom is very isolated; it does not link itself organically to the range of the ideas and words that are vogue outside the school'.¹⁹

Dewey's arguments were very relevant to how the United States as a nation constituted a democratic society at that time. He noted that 'the American nation is itself complex and compound', and 'strictly speaking it is interracial and international in its make-up'.²⁰ According to Dewey, the interracial composition of the American people was likened to a 'hyphen'. Although a 'hyphen' is normally used to separate something, Dewey positioned it as something that established a connection between diverse Americans.²¹ In *'Democracy and Education'*, Dewey indicated that children could obtain 'a unity of outlook upon a broader horizon' through the use of common subject matter in American public schools.²² In this situation, Dewey argued that language played an important role in connecting diverse people and facilitating a sense of solidarity between oneself and others.²³

In summary, as a proponent of the instrumentalist theory of language, Dewey argued that language should be considered an intellectual instrument that is developed through schooling, and that the difference in vocabulary used at school and in wider society must be overcome. This theory of language education was closely related to the diversity of society in

the US. Language was seen as an expression of solidarity between diverse American people, and the widespread teaching of a common language in schools was seen as essential in the development of a democratic society. Through this lens, Dewey also recognised that similar trends were starting to take place in Chinese educational development.

A comparative approach between China and Japan

In February 1919, Dewey travelled to Japan to give a series of lectures organised by Tokyo Imperial University. Inazo Nitobe, a Japanese educator and diplomat, helped him stay in Japan. Eiichi Shibusawa, widely known as a Japanese industrialist, financial supported Dewey’s visit.²⁴ His time in Japan granted him several insights on the country’s education system. Dewey saw that the Japanese education system under the Taisho democracy involved a degree of indoctrination that was closely related to the emphasis on the Imperial Rescript on Education and the display of the Emperor’s portrait in Japanese schools. He believed that the relationship with Japanese Emperor system was far from the expected democratic education.²⁵

On hearing of Dewey’s stay in Japan, Guo Bingwen contacted Dewey in Tokyo and asked him about his intentions to visit China. Dewey was originally due to return to the US after delivering his lectures in Japan. However, Guo Bingwen and fellow former students, such as Tao Xingzhi and Hu Shih, convinced Dewey to come to China, and he arrived in Shanghai on 30 April 1919. Unlike in Japan, Dewey’s visit to China was organised by those who had studied directly under his supervision.²⁶ To commemorate this visit, the Chinese journal ‘*The New Education*’ published a special issue on Dewey in May 1919, including a group photograph taken in Shanghai (Figure 1).²⁷

Figure 1. Group photograph with Dr. Dewey (front right) and his wife (front center) at Shanghai



[In the back row]: Hu Shih, Chiang Menglin, Tao Xingzhi, Zhang Zuoping

[In the front row]: Shi Liangcai, Alice Chipman (Dewey’s wife), John Dewey

Coincidentally, immediately after Dewey's arrival in China, the May Fourth Movement took place in Beijing. This was said to have a profound impact on Dewey, who recognised that the movement involved active spontaneity from students and that it signalled a new intellectual and moral awakening of the students through their schooling. Dewey had originally committed to a year of delivering lectures in China; however, his stay was extended for another year due to the great social upheaval sparked by the May Fourth Movement.

Dewey contributed many essays to American journals based on his experiences in China at this time (Table 1). In some of these essays, Dewey identified the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) as the start of a conscious modernisation in China. The Boxer Rebellion was an anti-foreign and anti-imperialist movement in Beijing, that was eventually suppressed by the Eight-Nation Alliance. Dewey analysed the bloodshed of this incident, which led to recognition that the old Chinese system was failing.²⁸ Dewey also observed that the real problem emerging from this incident was 'the transformation of the Chinese mind'.²⁹

To examine this problem, Dewey drew comparisons with the Japanese model. First, Dewey likened Japan's acceptance of Western culture in the last 60 years to the changes experienced by Europe, which had recently developed from feudalism into a powerful nation state system.³⁰ However, after his stay in Japan, Dewey had the impression that Japanese modernisation was a combination of traditional methods and criteria, with foreign knowledge and technology.³¹ He also saw that many of the revolutionary leaders who shaped early Republican China were motivated to further modernise the Japanese model.³² As a visitor to China, he perceived that there was significant mainstream support for the use of the Japanese model in education.

Dewey believed that the May Fourth Movement could provide an alternative to the Japanese model, describing it as an intellectual and moral movement that would be marked as 'the dawn of a new day'.³³ From Dewey's point of view, the Japanese model still strongly adhered to tradition and was only an 'outwards adjustment' or a 'borrowing', whereas, in China, he could recognise a new phase of 'transforming growth from within' or 'inner modification'.³⁴ In particular, Dewey focused on the fact that Young China attempted to set the stage for 'a social transformation based upon a transformation of ideas'.³⁵ Dewey also recognised that Young China believed 'national existence can best be secured by building up China from within, by spreading a democratic education, raising the standard of living, improving industries and relieving poverty'.³⁶

Establishment of language education

In the lectures and essays produced by Dewey during his time in China, he regularly discussed the Chinese literary revolution that promoted colloquial literature, as well as the ongoing reform of language education. In China, difficult literary language held a dominant position in literature. To overcome this situation, the literary revolution advocated for the adoption of vernacular Chinese as a new literary language. Hu Shih's article '*Some suggestions for the reform of literary improvement (Wenxue gailiang chuyi)*', which he wrote while studying in the US in January 1917, played a significant role in the establishment of this movement.³⁷ After studying in the US, Hu Shih proposed a new thesis which argued that literature written in a vernacular language could promote a national language with literary values.³⁸ He also argued that school textbooks written in the national (vernacular) language and a new set of curriculum standards for language education were needed. His comments were well-received by academics and the Ministry of Education. The latter began to create new language education policies at an accelerated pace, a process that Hu Shih was deeply involved in as a council member. These

policies required all school textbooks to be composed in the national language from 1920 onwards, and new curriculum standards for language education were issued in 1923.³⁹

Table 1. Dewey's essays on the Chinese situation.

Year	Journals	Articles
1919	<i>Asia</i>	Transforming the Mind of China
		Chinese National Sentiment
	<i>The New Republic</i>	The Student Revolt in China
		The International Duel in China
		Militarism in China
		The American Opportunity in China
		Our Share in Drugging China
1920	<i>Asia</i>	The New Leven in Chinese Politics
		What Holds China Back
	<i>The New Republic</i>	The Sequel of the Student Revolt
		Shantung, as Seen from within
		China's Nightmare
		A Political Upheaval in China
		Industrial China
1921	<i>Asia</i>	Old China and New
		New Culture in China
	<i>Baltimore Sun</i>	Shrewd Tactics are Shown in Chinese Plea
		Four Principles for China
		Angles of Shantung Question
		Chinese Resignations
	<i>China Review</i>	The Tenth Anniversary of the Republic of China
	<i>Chinese Students' Monthly</i>	China and Disarmament
	<i>The New Republic</i>	Is China a Nation?
		The Consortium in China
		Hinterlands in China
		Divided China
		Shantung Again
Federalism in China		
1922	<i>Asia</i>	As the Chinese Think
	<i>The New Republic</i>	American and Chinese Education

As previously mentioned, Dewey's theory of language education held an instrumentalist position. Thus, he approved of these developments in China. Dewey pointed out that a new generation in China participated in the literary revolution with the scientific method.⁴⁰ It here refers to the universal method of investigation, research, and experimentation, which he saw as the basis of the so-called New Culture Movement and, in practice, also linked to the May Fourth Movement.⁴¹ In particular, Dewey acknowledged that the literary revolution spearheaded by Hu Shih and his colleagues predated the student movement and was one of the most notable campaigns in Chinese history.⁴² Dewey commented on these developments in his lectures and essays.

As Dewey's lectures in China were written from the perspective of teaching, they were based on the contents of his books *'School and Society'* and *'Democracy and Education'*. Based on these books' contents, he included a commentary on the state of education in China. Specifically, in his lecture *'Philosophy of Education'*, Dewey widely discussed the importance of language education. Regarding his experience in the US, Dewey was told by a Chinese teacher that children should be taught equally through recitation.⁴³ However, Dewey noted that such conventional education would only be relevant for a very limited class of people and would not reflect the lives of the majority.⁴⁴ Because a new style of education could be conducive to the formation of a democratic society, Dewey argued that, due to China's vastness, inconvenient transportation, and many dialects, language reform was crucial if it was to become a genuine republican nation.⁴⁵ Moreover, in this lecture, referring to the decision of the National Educational Policy Council to compile textbooks in the national language, Dewey noted it favourably as 'a great step forward in education'. Based on this decision, the Ministry of Education decided in 1920 that school textbooks, written in our national language, should be made available for the lower grades. Hu Shih, as a council member on the design of this policy, also noted that the resolution would speed up educational innovation in China about 20 years earlier.⁴⁶ It is likely that Hu Shih accompanied as an interpreter of Dewey's lectures, so that Dewey incorporated his comments on the policy decision on school textbooks into his own lecture based on progress reports.

In contrast to Dewey's lectures in China, his essays in American journals mainly focused on how educational reform was developing in China, and how to capture these trends. One such essay, *'The Sequel of Student Revolt'*, published in 1920, explained that the literary revolution aimed to reform the language used in books, magazines, newspapers, and public debate, and it re-evaluated the use of spoken language in printed materials.⁴⁷ Dewey went on to say that, because Young China had organised many rallies in support of the literary revolution and the number of journals written in colloquial language had increased to 300, the common man could now access all social, moral, and economic subjects.⁴⁸ In response to this change, Dewey noted the significance of the transition from the Middle Ages to modern-day Europe and declared that Chinese educational development was more important than the adoption of a new constitution.⁴⁹ Dewey believed that, if this new textbook coursework continued for a generation, it would be recorded by judicious historians as more significant than the fall of the Manchu dynasty.⁵⁰ The difference in expression between his lectures and essays was due to the nature of the media and the fact that his essays focused more on his close perspective of the educational reform in China.

Conclusion

This article examines how Dewey interpreted Chinese educational development. Many American educators and philosophers visited China in the 1920s, writing their books and essays of observations on the Chinese situation. Among them, Dewey's lectures and essays on Chinese education have the following two characteristics.

First, Dewey conducted a cross-cultural comparative analysis of China and Japan. As he visited China after his stay in Japan, Dewey's perspective was influenced by his experience of the Japanese education system, and he integrated this into his commentary on the situation in China. Dewey noted that the Japanese model had widespread support in China; however, he saw this model as being deeply rooted in tradition, with only superficial adjustments and borrowing of ideas. In contrast, Dewey regarded the May Fourth Movement, which coincided with his visit, as a new phase of Chinese modernisation. He believed that Young China, as the main actors of this movement, had a strong sense of agency and a desire to develop the transformation from within. Dewey attributed the emergence of this new attitude to schooling, and he believed that education was the basis for the shift in the Chinese mindset towards modernity.

Second, Dewey supported the literary revolution and the ongoing language education reform. He held an instrumentalist position on language and advocated for overcoming the differences in language used in schools and wider society. His theory of language education was related to the diversity of society in the US during this time. Based on this theory, Dewey acknowledged the historical significance of these reforms, specifically noting that the policy of using colloquial language in school textbooks was a great step in education and 'more significant than the downfall of the Manchu dynasty'. Most notably, his essays played a key role in conveying China's educational reform to American readers.

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3 John Dewey, *Dewey's Lecture in China [Duwei wuda jiangyan]* (Beijing: Chenbaoshe, 1920).

4 Hu Shih, Dewey in China [Duwei xiansheng yu zhongguo], in Kuang-che Pan (ed.), *The Complete Works of Hu Shih: Collected Essays of Hu Shih Vol. 1 [Hu Shih quanji]* (Taipei: Hu Shih Memorial Hall, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 2019) 284.

5 Cai Yuanpei, Celebration Party Speech for Dewey's sixtieth birthday [Duwei liushisui shengri wancanhui yanshuoci], in Gao Pingshu (ed.), *Completed Works of Cai Yuanpei [Cai Yuanpei quanji]* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1984) 349 – 351.

6 Barry Keenan, *The Dewey Experiment in China: Educational Reform and Political Power in the Early Republic*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, *John Dewey in China: To Teach and To Learn* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Ruth Hayhoe, *China Through the Lens of Comparative Education* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

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- 7 Jeremy Cole, 'Democracy Exported, History Expunged: John Dewey's Trip to Turkey and the Challenge of Building 'Civilised' Nations for Democratic Life', *History of Education* 43, no. 8 (2014) 504–523; Selahattin Turan, 'John Dewey's Report of 1924 and His Recommendations on the Turkish Educational System Revisited', *History of Education*, 29, no. 6 (2000) 543–555. For more details on Dewey's essays, see J. Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World, Mexico, China, Turkey* (New York: New Republic, 1929).
- 8 Hu Shih, Dewey in China, 285. Dykhuizen also pointed out that 'Dewey became an interested observer and interpreter of the events around him' in China, and he spent much of his time writing essays on Chinese situation for the American journals. See, George Dykhuizen, *The life and mind of John Dewey* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973) 201.
- 9 Hu Shih, Dewey in China, 284.
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- 17 John Dewey, The School and Society, 23.
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- 19 John Dewey, How We Think, 323.
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- 28 John Dewey, Transforming the Mind of China, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey Vol. 11 1918–1919* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982) 205.
- 29 John Dewey, Transforming the Mind of China, 206.
- 30 John Dewey, Transforming the Mind of China, 206.
- 31 John Dewey, Transforming the Mind of China, 206–207.

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- 32 John Dewey, New Culture in China, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey Vol. 13 192–1922* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983) 113.
- 33 John Dewey, ‘The Student Revolt in China’, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey Vol. 11 1918–1919* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982) 191.
- 34 John Dewey, Transforming the Mind of China, 207–213.
- 35 John Dewey, New Culture in China, 110. Traditionally, young people were expected to show deference to those who were older, as per Confucian ethics. However, ‘Young China’ had a new attitude and an active agency as the main body of the May Fourth Movement. Regarding the analysis of Young China’s attitude, see Song Mingwei, *Young China: National Rejuvenation and the Bildungsroman, 1900–1959* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 36 John Dewey, The Sequel of the Student Revolt, 24.
- 37 Hu Shih, Some suggestions for the reform of literary improvement [Wenxue gailiang chuyi], in Kuang-che Pan (ed.), *The Complete Works of Hu Shih: Collected Essays of Hu Shih Vol. 1* (Taipei: Hu Shih Memorial Hall, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 2019) 6–15.
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- 39 Daiki Yamashita, ‘Hu Shih’s Impact on the Reform of Chinese Language Education: How the Curriculum Standards were Created’ [Koseki to Kokugokyoikukaikaku], *The Japanese Journal of Educational Research* 87 [Kyoikugaku kenkyu 87], no. 4 (2020) 143–154; Zhao Kang, ‘The Reception and Use of John Dewey’s Educational Ideas by Hu Shi in the Early Republic of China’, *History of Education Review* 50, no. 1 (2021) 24–38.
- 40 John Dewey, New Culture in China, p. 110.
- 41 John Dewey, New Culture in China, p. 110. It was evident through his essay description that Dewey used the concepts of the ‘New Culture Movement’ and the ‘May Fourth’, and recognized the practical relationship between them in 1921.
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