

John Dewey as a Learner in China

Jessica Ching-Sze Wang

The decade of the 1920s marks an important period in the life of John Dewey: his trips to Japan, China, Russia, Mexico, and Turkey undoubtedly broadened his horizons and enriched his understanding of international politics. Of all the foreign nations Dewey visited, China is where he stayed the longest and about which he wrote the most extensively. However, this particular phase in the life and work of Dewey has been largely ignored. In fact, Dewey's two-year visit (1919–21) marks a geographical and cultural transition from the West to the East as well as a personal, psychological transition from the tensions of wartime polemics to the soberness of postwar reflections.¹ In a letter, Dewey wrote, "Nothing western looks quite the same an[y] more, and this is as near to a renewal of youth as can be hoped for in this world."² However, the existing literature has focused exclusively on how Dewey influenced China, rather than what Dewey learned in China. This paper aims to explore this much neglected aspect about Dewey's visit, namely, his own education.

A Timely Visit

Dewey arrived in China on May 1, 1919. Excited about this adventure, Dewey wrote, "We are going to see more of the dangerous daring side of life here I predict," and he added, "Nothing worries us. . . . We ought to have a very good time."³ Interestingly, Dewey was right about the "dangerous daring side of life" in China. Three days after he made this remark, Dewey learned of a serious student revolt, which came to be known as the May Fourth Movement.⁴ On the fourth of May, from which the 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. Feelings of indignation and the zeal for reform expressed by the students in Beijing triggered similar demonstrations throughout China in the few weeks that followed. In big cities, people went on general strikes to support the students and promoted boycotts against Japanese goods.⁵

Dewey's response to the May Fourth movement was more than enthusiastic; he was galvanized by the social energies being released. As Dewey wrote to his

children in June 1919, “never in our lives had we begun to learn as much as in the last four months. And the last month particularly, there has been too much food to be digestible.”⁶ In fact, such an eye-opening experience was not unprecedented for Dewey. Earlier in his life when Dewey was moving from rural Michigan to the city of Chicago in 1894, he found himself in the midst of the Pullman strike.⁷ He was so excited about the scene that he wrote his wife, Alice:

Every conceivable thing solicits you; the town seems filled with problems holding out their hands and asking somebody to solve them—or else dump them in the lake. I had no conception that things could be so much more phenomenal and objective than they are in a country village, and simply stick themselves at you, instead of leaving you to think about them.⁸

The strike, conflict and chaos Dewey witnessed in Chicago and Beijing uplifted rather than dampened his spirit.

Dewey said, “To the outward eye roaming in search of the romantic and picturesque, China is likely to prove a disappointment. To the eye of the mind it presents the most enthralling drama now anywhere enacting.”⁹ The May Fourth movement was China’s gift to Dewey. It kept him excited, interested, involved, anxious, puzzled, and, at times, frustrated. It was also an intellectual bait that enticed Dewey to stay in China for a full year, and later, to extend his stay to a second year.

Dewey as a Political Commentator: The May Fourth Movement

Dewey’s timely presence in May-Fourth China provided a great opportunity for his own learning and gave him a vantage point to witness the unfolding of the event. It also put him in a unique position to serve as a political commentator for the *New Republic*. During his stay, Dewey published dozens of essays about China, which Walter Lippmann praised as “models of what political reporting ought to be.”¹⁰

Dewey first interpreted the meaning of the May Fourth movement for his American readers by saying that “[t]he possibilities of organization independent of government, but capable in the end of controlling government, have been demonstrated.”¹¹ He felt so hopeful that he even predicted, “It would be highly surprising if a new constitutionalist movement were not set going. The combination of students and merchants that has proved so effective will hardly be allowed to become a mere memory.”¹² Dewey believed that these events embodied the power of public opinion. As he later indicated, “the most impressive single feature of my stay in China was witnessing the sure and rapid growth of an enlightened and progressive public opinion.”¹³ This experience was reassuring to Dewey because he had always believed that public opinion as a moral and intellectual force *should and would* triumph over the forces of coercion and violence.

However, Dewey's hope that the impact of the May Fourth movement would effect significant political change was thwarted. It did not accomplish much other than prevent China's signing of the Versailles peace treaty. This "relative political failure," as Dewey analyzed retrospectively, was due to "the youth and inexperience of the students," "the fear of excess," "the difficulty in maintaining continuous organized cooperation with the mercantile guilds," and "the natural waning of enthusiasm when crisis was past."¹⁴ Nonetheless, it was a mistake, as Dewey said, to think that the movement proved to be of no avail. "In the Sequel of the Student Revolt," Dewey turned to emphasize its intellectual implications: "It was the manifestation of a new consciousness, an intellectual awakening in the young men and young women who through their schooling had been aroused to the necessity of a new order of belief, a new method of thinking."¹⁵

Robert Westbrook pointed out that "Dewey was prone throughout his life to . . . hopeful predictions of the unintended consequences of the defeat of democratic reform" and that "such efforts at prophesy are a telling index to his own political desires." Even though "Dewey's record as a prophet was undistinguished," as Westbrook noted,¹⁶ one still finds great insights in Dewey's political commentaries about China, as we shall see in our discussion of Dewey as a goodwill ambassador and a cultural anthropologist in China.

Dewey as a Goodwill Ambassador

While Dewey's stay in China proved to be a rare opportunity for him to gain an insider perspective on Oriental conditions, it also entailed a moral responsibility. Throughout the course of Dewey's writing about China, one senses Dewey's ongoing concern about the role of the United States in the Far East. Like his views of the May Fourth movement, Dewey's suggestions for American diplomacy in China also underwent significant changes.

Early in his stay, Dewey noticed a pro-American sentiment, especially prevailing in the intellectual circles of China. In the eyes of many Chinese, Japan was the despoiler, whereas America was the rescuer. Resentment toward Japan had contributed to a "pathetic affection for America." As Dewey put it, "China in her despair has created an image of a powerful democratic, peace-loving America, devoted to securing international right and justice, especially for weak nations."¹⁷ He insisted that China's idealization of America should impose "humility rather than self-glorification upon Americans."¹⁸ Even though he applauded the American influence "in the educational line," he cautioned: "this success is not of a kind to be impressive when it comes to determination of international affairs."¹⁹

The key to peace in the Far East, Dewey claimed, lay in the relationship between Japan and America. In his own writings, Dewey tried to influence American policy toward China by attacking Japanese propaganda. He urged American politicians not to be bought off by Japan and or be taken in by their façade of liberalism. After learning more about the status of Japan in international politics

and its predatory attitude toward China, Dewey perceived the seed of a future war being deeply implanted in China. He cautioned American readers that “every appeal to American sympathy on the ground of the growing liberalism of Japan should meet with neither credulity nor cynicism, but with a request to know what this liberalism is doing, especially what it is doing about China and Siberia.”²⁰ When commenting on the greed of Japanese businessmen and the aggression of Japanese militarists, Dewey said that “it is no pleasure for one with many warm friends in Japan, who has a great admiration for the Japanese people as distinct from the ruling military and bureaucratic class, to report such facts.”²¹ Despite this caveat, Dewey knew that these facts needed to be exposed before justice could prevail.

Apart from informing his American readers of the reality of Japanese imperialism, Dewey also gave suggestions concerning what America should do to help China overcome its current crisis and to embark on the path of normal development. In his earlier writings, Dewey asked America to “sympathetically comprehend the Chinese situation,” to be “patient and persistent” in its foreign policies,²² and to realize “the enormous power which is now in her hands.”²³ Dewey advised that the American government assist China in important practical tasks such as improving agriculture, constructing railways and inland waterway systems, and regulating currency systems. He hoped that such potential on the part of the United States won’t be “thrown away by reason of stupidity and ignorance.”²⁴ To ensure that China be made “the mistress of her own economic destinies,” Dewey stressed that these large-scale tasks should be performed by “enlisting the cooperation of Chinese voluntarism” and that American-trained Chinese students should be utilized to administer the implementation of these plans.²⁵ Dewey felt assured that when these tasks were accomplished, China should be able to take care of herself politically.

Since Dewey felt that the masses of Chinese people were relying desperately on the United States for their redemption, Dewey found America’s “policy of no foreign entanglements” deplorable. He traced the root of America’s “national egotism” to the fear that “engagement with the undemocratic world threatens internal democracy.”²⁶ In an unusually scathing tone, he remarked that “the contrast between prior professions and actual deeds was so obvious as to evoke revulsion.”²⁷ Dewey’s sense of obligation as a close witness of China’s predicaments and his deep convictions about the interconnectedness of international affairs propelled him initially to espouse an activist, paternalistic approach toward China. However, as his understanding of Chinese history, culture, and psychology deepened, his initial activism mellowed. In his response to whether the U.S. should join the alliance with Great Britain to resolve the Far Eastern crisis, Dewey said, “There is an obligation upon us not to engage too much or too readily with them until there is assurance that we shall not make ourselves worse.”²⁸ Experience had taught Dewey much about the dark realities of international

politics—that professed ideals for democracy and peace could turn out to serve imperialistic ends.

The shift in Dewey's thinking was most evident in an article written shortly after his return as a response to the upcoming Pacific Conference in Washington. Dewey advised against exogenous intervention in China's domestic affairs and suggested instead a "hands-off" policy:

The hope of the world's peace, as well as China's freedom, lies in adhering to a policy of Hands Off. Give China a chance. Give her time. The danger lies in being in a hurry, in impatience, possibly in the desire of Americans to show that we are a power in international affairs and that we too have a positive foreign policy. And a benevolent policy from without, instead of promoting her aspirations from within, may in the end do China about as much harm as a policy conceived in malevolence.²⁹

Dewey's earlier paternalistic impulses gave way to a deep respect for the self-determination and self-government of the Chinese people. His earlier enthusiasm gave way to a healthy skepticism that kept him suspicious of any proposal to place China under international tutelage. It is important to note that Dewey's proposal for a hands-off policy should not be labeled as "isolationist," for non-intervention did not mean non-communication or non-interaction.³⁰ Dewey's non-interventionist approach was the result not of cold indifference but of a profound respect for China's capacity for self-governance. In addition, Dewey realized that "China will not be saved from outside herself," 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."³¹ Transformation from within was the only hope, and America could best help China by making sure that she "gets the time she needs in order to effect this transformation, whether or not we like [the] particular form it assumes at any particular time."³² Treating China like "a sick patient rather than an active living force" would only weaken her and paralyze her.³³ Even though a policy of non-intervention "may not seem benevolent," he said that "I do not believe that any nation at present is wise enough or good enough to act upon the assumption of altruism and benevolence toward other nations."³⁴

In an article written a few years after his return, Dewey reiterated his opposition to the paternal attitude of the United States in its interaction with China, particular in light of the increasing resentment toward missionary efforts in China. He said,

We have gone there with ideas and ideals, with sentiments and aspirations; we have presented a certain type of culture to China as a model to be imitated. As far as we have gone at all, we have gone in loco parentis, with advice, with instruction, with example and precept. Like a good parent we would have brought up China in the way in which she should

go. There is a genial and generous aspect to all this. But nonetheless it has created a situation, and that situation is fraught with danger.³⁵

The danger lay in the resentment on the part of the Chinese toward the “the air of superiority” assumed by foreign guardians, such as American missionaries, and in the consequent charges on the part of the foreign helpers that the Chinese were ungrateful. Dewey urged the United States to alter its “traditional parental attitude, colored as it has been by a temper of patronage, conscious or unconscious, into one of respect and esteem for a cultural equal.”³⁶ Throughout the course of his stay in China and the immediate years following his return to America, Dewey devoted much thinking to finding out what America should do, or should not do, in order to contribute to peace and prosperity in that region. There is no doubt that his views underwent significant, not if dramatic, changes. To understand and appreciate Dewey’s growing sensitivity, openness and farsightedness, as reflected in his final proposal for a “hands-off” policy in China, we need to examine closely the process by which Dewey learned to understand and respect China on its own terms.

Dewey as a Cultural Anthropologist

One major purpose of Dewey’s trip was to “get some acquaintance” with what was happening on the other side of the world. Soon after he arrived on the scene, he became interested in more than collecting exotic stories that might impress his grandchildren. His mind was set on an intelligent inquiry into China’s predicaments and his heart on the destiny of its people. Obviously, it was not an easy task to understand an old civilization and the causes of its current crises. As Dewey admitted to a close friend, “[It’s] an absurdly pretentious performance in one way, with my short stay here and no knowledge of the language” to write “on the general political and social psychology of the Chinese as affecting the [present] situation.” However, Dewey thought that “it will be just as good as most of the stuff travelers put out [for] the American reader, and a little better than some for it will give some attempt at interpretation from the Chinese [standpoint].”³⁷

As a reflective thinker, Dewey soon realized that the history of contact between the West and China was characterized by grave misunderstandings. The reason was that many of the political and economic conceptions of the Western world did not apply to Chinese situations. In other words, Dewey was realizing that a non-Eurocentric point of view—a concept alien to Dewey’s time but quite in keeping with his pragmatic sensibility—was key to an accurate and sympathetic understanding of China. Dewey summarized this unusual cultural experience to a former student of philosophy: “This is really ‘the other side of the world’ in every sense, and it [is] most interesting to see a culture where so many of our prepossessions are reversed. It has a tendency to make academic affairs in-

cluding [academic] philosophy shrink. [It's] a good thing we can't [visit] the rest of the universe in space; our [own] habits and beliefs would shrink too much."³⁸

On a different occasion, Dewey wrote, "The visitor spends his time learning, if he learns anything about China, not to think of what he sees in terms of the ideas he uses as a matter of course at home." For Dewey, the need to cultivate a culturally sensitive perspective is what gave China its "overpowering intellectual interest for an observer of the affairs of humanity."³⁹ Given that the Western world view in the early twentieth century was predominantly Eurocentric, one finds remarkable intellectual farsightedness and open-mindedness in Dewey's reflections on the problem of Eurocentrism. A tyro in Chinese history, Dewey inevitably made a few mistakes in his judgments about current events, but he was quick to correct them and continued to learn along the way.

One of Dewey's misjudgments pertains to his overzealous attitude toward the May Fourth student movement, which was largely grounded in his own political desires. As mentioned earlier, Dewey was fascinated by the power of public opinion and grassroots activism demonstrated in the student movement. His spontaneous enthusiasm kept him, as he put it, "always on the alert to see what is coming next"; he admitted that it was hard "to repress one's desire for a [little] more [direct] western energy to tackle things before they get to the toppling over point."⁴⁰ However, everything seemed to have returned to normalcy after a few weeks of heated agitation, leaving Dewey's high hopes for significant change unfulfilled. The disappointed Dewey sometimes found the ingrained passivity of the Chinese people baffling. As Dewey wrote to his children one month after the outbreak of the student demonstration:

Status quo is China's middle name, most status and a little quo. I have one more 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."⁴¹

Dewey observed that the Chinese "talk more easily than they act—especially in politics," and they love "finding substitutes for positive action, of avoiding entering upon a course of action which might be irrevocable."⁴² Dewey later came to realize that "China has never been anything but apathetic towards governmental questions. The Student Revolt marked a temporary exception only in appearance."⁴³ Implying his own error, Dewey wrote, "The new comer in China in observing and judging usually makes the mistake of attaching too much significance to current happenings."⁴⁴ He even remarked in a tongue-in-cheek manner, "After a few months in China, a visitor will take an oath, if he is wise, never to indulge in prediction."⁴⁵ Refraining from making predictions may be easy for others but difficult for Dewey, whose lifelong project is to make practice intelligent through anticipation of consequences and application of foresight. Dewey

still allowed himself to make a few more predictions in his later articles on China, but a few more in Dewey's eyes probably wouldn't count as indulgence.

On one occasion, Dewey posed the question, "Is it possible for a Westerner to understand Chinese political psychology?" He quickly answered, "certainly not without a prior knowledge of the historic customs and institutions of China, for institutions have shaped the mental habits, not the mind the social habits."⁴⁶

As a committed and diligent learner about China, Dewey undertook to read Chinese history; he read local English newspapers to keep abreast of the latest political developments; he conversed with local foreigners to share and exchange views with them; and he even took Chinese language lessons from a tutor. Dewey could have made the same comment as his wife when she said, "Since reading of their history I can see why they have always been in a state much like this."⁴⁷ Dewey's exposure to Chinese history, coupled with his own observations, led him to remark: "China can be understood only in terms of the institutions and ideas which have been worked out in its own historical evolution."⁴⁸

To be more specific, Chinese politics "has to be understood in terms of itself, not translated over into the classification of an alien political morphology."⁴⁹ According to Dewey, Westerners who pigeonholed Chinese facts into Western conceptions misconstrued China as a nation with a single centralized government in full operation. Dewey argued that China was not a nation, but, at best, a nation-to-be. In his view, China was more like older Europe than contemporary France. Patriotism, Dewey observed, took a special form in China; it was not allegiance to a political state but an attachment to soil and birthplace. The Western conception of the nation-state could not be universalized across cultures.

Moreover, Western economic terms do not fit the Chinese context. He said, "When we turn from political to economic affairs, our habitual western ideas are even less applicable. Their irrelevancy makes it impossible intelligently to describe the Chinese conditions or even grasp them intelligently." The most salient fact was that "there is no bourgeoisie in China." Dewey asked, "How is a class of peasants proprietors who form not merely the vast mass of a people but its economic and moral backbone, who traditionally and in present esteem [constitute] the respectable part of the population, next to the scholars, to be classified under western notions?"⁵⁰ Dewey insisted that China was politically and economically a different world and should be understood and treated as such.

Not only is China a politically and economically different world, it is socially different as well. An example of Dewey's penetrating insights into Chinese social psychology is his analysis of China's "crowd psychology" that contributed to her conservatism and passivity. As he observed,

It is beyond question that many traits of the Chinese mind are the products of an extraordinary and long-continued density of populations. Psychologists have discovered, or possibly invented, a "psychology of the crowd" to account for the way men act in masses, as a mob at a lynching bee. They have not inquired as to the effect upon the mind of constant

living in close contact with large numbers, of continual living in a crowd. . . . I wonder whether even the Anglo-Saxons would have developed or retained initiative if they had lived for centuries under conditions that gave them no room to stir about, no relief from the unremitting surveillance of their fellows? Possibly they would then have acquired a habit of thinking of their “face” before they thought of the thing to be done. Perhaps when they thought of a new thing they would have decided discretion and hesitation to be the better part of invention.⁵¹

Dewey’s sympathetic rendering of the Chinese “face-loving” habit is unprecedented; he said, “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.”⁵² As Dewey continued:

Until the recent introduction of rapid transportation, very few Chinese ever enjoyed even the possibility of solitude that comes from being in a crowd of strangers. Imagine all elbow-room done away with, imagine millions of men living day by day, year by year, in the presence of the same persons (a very close presence at that), and new light may be shed upon the conservatism of the Chinese people.

Dewey also told his American readers that “Live and let live is the response to crowded conditions” and that “Not to rock the boat is wisdom the world over.”⁵³ If things are going well, then there is no point of trying to make them better. If things are worse, it is easier to endure them than attempt to seek solutions and run the risk of making things worse.

Dewey’s deepened understanding of the Chinese social and political psychology is the result of a long, searching process filled with high moments as well as low. Throughout his stay, Dewey oscillated between hope and frustration. “History,” he said, “may be ransacked to furnish a situation that so stirs interest, that keeps a spectator so wavering between hope and fear, that presents so baffling a face to every attempt to find a solution.”⁵⁴ In his low moments, he felt that “China remains a massive blank and impenetrable wall” and that “Chinese civilization is so thick and [self-centered] that no foreign influence presented via a foreigner even scratches the surface.”⁵⁵ At one point, Dewey felt so pessimistic about the situation that he revealed to his close friend Albert Barnes that “The western world is rotten, but it is distinctively in advance of China.”⁵⁶ However, when Barnes replied by asking whether Dewey really meant what he said, Dewey did not pursue this subject further.⁵⁷ Apparently, the comment is an expression of frustration, not a seriously considered judgment.

At other moments, Dewey felt that he had a better understanding of China’s problems. He noted that China’s political chaos was “the result of pure ignorance.” As he explained, “One realizes how the delicate and multifarious business of the modern state is dependent upon knowledge and habits of mind that have grown up slowly and that are now counted upon as a matter of

course.”⁵⁸ Toward the end of his stay, Dewey said that he would like to stay another year “to see what happens,” but he knew that “there would still be the waiting to see something definite happen.”⁵⁹ In spite of all the difficulties, obscurities and uncertainties, Dewey remained concerned and sympathetic. He continued to write about China for years after his departure.

One article Dewey wrote after he returned to America deserves special attention because it contains the conclusions about his inquiry and his education in China. Dewey may not have been a great prophet in a world that was constantly changing, in a world that operated under habits of mind often contrary to his own. However, he proved to be a remarkable learner whose intellectual humility and open-mindedness were exemplary. His perseverance in learning led him to the ultimate understanding that China was not only a politically, economically and socially different world but more importantly, a philosophically different world, a world that could be understood only in its own philosophical terms.

The article under discussion is entitled “As the Chinese Think,” first published in *Asia* in January 1922, and later republished in *Characters and Events* in 1929, with the title “The Chinese Philosophy of Life.” Dewey began by stating that Oriental and Occidental peoples “have different philosophies ingrained in their habits” and that “an attempt at an honest understanding of one another’s philosophy of life” was crucial to eliminating international disputes that often resulted from deep-seated misunderstandings. He then repeated the many questions that constantly baffled him during his stay in China. Dewey asked: “Why are the Chinese so unperturbed by circumstances that appear to a foreigner to menace their country with national extinction? . . . Is their attitude one of callous indifference, of stupid ignorance? Or is it a sign of faith in deep-seated realities that western peoples neglect in their hurry to get results?” He wondered, “Why hasn’t China taken the lead in developing her own resources? . . . Is her course stupid inertia, a dull, obstinate clinging to the old just because it is old? Or does it show something more profound, a wise, even if largely unconscious, aversion to admitting forces that are hostile to the whole spirit of her civilization?” After a long and deep grappling with these questions, Dewey considered the possible explanation that “industrialism as it exists in the western world is a menace to what is deepest and best in Chinese culture” and added, “Only those who are completely satisfied with the workings of the present capitalistic system can dogmatically deny this possibility.”⁶⁰

After Dewey pointed out the hypothesis regarding the inherent conflict between indigenous Chinese beliefs and Western industrial practices, he turned to an analysis of Taoism’s impact on the conservatism of Chinese people. Dewey specifically referred to Laotzu’s teachings: the doctrine of the superiority of nature to man and the concept of *Wuwei*, often translated as non-doing. Dewey here rendered these notions in a way few Westerners could surpass in sympathy and penetration. As he contended,

[The idea of non-doing] is nothing more than mere inactivity; it is a kind of rule of moral doing, a doctrine of active patience, endurance, persistence while nature has time to do her work. Conquering by yielding is its motto. 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.⁶¹

Dewey stated that Laotzu's teachings were influential in China because they had long been integrated into her agrarian habits of life. In his reading about Chinese agriculture, Dewey learned that "while western peoples have attacked, exploited and in the end wasted the soil, [the Chinese] have conserved it." He believed that "this unparalleled human achievement in agriculture" accounted much for the conservatism of the Chinese, for they had "learned to wait for the fruition of slow natural processes," "because in their mode of life nature cannot be hustled."⁶² Dewey found the major key to the answers he had been searching for. He reminded his American readers that the way the Chinese dealt with their political and social problems would always remain unintelligible unless their philosophy of life was taken into account. Dewey insisted, "To 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."⁶³

Nonetheless, Dewey was not uncritical of the downsides of such *laissez-faire* reverence for nature. He said, "Non-doing runs easily into passive submission, conservatism into stubborn attachment to habitudes so fixed as to be 'natural,' into dread and dislike of change." Nonetheless, he held that "the Chinese philosophy of life embodies a profoundly valuable contribution to human culture and one of which a hurried, impatient, over-busied and anxious West is indefinitely in need."⁶⁴

In fact, this view was shared and popularized by the English philosopher, Bertrand Russell, in his 1922 book *The Problem of China*—the result of his nine-month stay in China. It is interesting to speculate why Dewey did not write a book on China, as did Bertrand Russell.⁶⁵ While Dewey was in China, a publisher wrote to him, expressing great eagerness to publish a volume of his essays on China.⁶⁶ Walter Lippmann also wrote to Dewey, encouraging him to write a special book on China and assuring him that there was already more than one publisher who had expressed interest.⁶⁷ A simple and obvious reason why Dewey declined the opportunity might be that he had said all he needed to say about China in dozens of his articles and thus did not want to repeat himself. Upon closer examination, Dewey's decision was, in fact, quite consistent with his commitment to interpret China in its own terms. Knowing that China was going through a series of rapid changes and that the terms employed to interpret China at one time might seem superfluous or irrelevant at others, Dewey was modest and wise enough not to assume the role of an expert or prophet. In his review of

Russell's book, Dewey indicated that Russell's treatment of China in a straightforward and clear-cut manner overlooked underlying obscurities and ambiguities. As Dewey put it, Russell made "a lucid exposition of the external, or political and economic, problem of China—with a lucidity which, emerging from an obscure world, must always be close, as it is with Mr. Russell, to irony." Dewey further remarked that "probably no one but a Chinese can give it to the world, a picture of the most wonderful as well as the most difficult to bring to conclusion of any that human history has yet witnessed."⁶⁸

Furthermore, Dewey's decision to not write a book on China might also reflect an unwillingness to portray a China in a fixed and stereotypical framework often associated with what Edward Said famously calls "Orientalism."⁶⁹ As Dewey said in his review of Russell's book, Russell portrayed China as "an angel of light to show up the darkness of western civilization," but failed to touch on the problem of China's internal transformation. Dewey concluded, "As a good European, he [Russell] is perhaps chiefly interested in European culture and what Europe has to learn from Asia; in comparison the stupendous and marvelous problem of the intrinsic remaking of the oldest, thickest, and most extensive civilization of the world does not attract his attention."⁷⁰ Unlike Russell, who constructed an elevated image of Chinese virtues as a weapon to lash out against the vices of Western industrialism and imperialism, Dewey viewed China neither retrospectively nor instrumentally, but prospectively.⁷¹ In his look towards the future of China, Dewey was willing to remain a sympathetic observer and an eloquent defender, rather than an authoritative expert.

Most importantly, Dewey's attitude toward China was a liberal one, as C. F. Remer observed in 1920:

[Dewey's] thought [about China] is not of the apologetic sort; it is experimental. This makes him a liberal thinker in the true sense; there is an air of freedom and hope about him. He does not, as many do, pay lip service to liberalism while his mind is set upon the main chance and "safety first." This is what makes his contribution to an American policy toward China of such first-rate importance.⁷²

As Remer continued to say:

[Dewey] has helped the people of the United States to get a fair and honest appreciation of the activities of the Chinese since they became a factor in the Chinese political situation. He has helped the Americans at home to understand what "Shantung" means, calling into question President Wilson's easy distinction between economic rights and political control. He has done all these things for which the Americans in China owe him a vote of thanks.⁷³

Remer honored Dewey as "true servant of his country and of the people of his time."⁷⁴ Even though there was nothing improper about Remer's patriotic glori-

fiction of Dewey, I think Dewey's concern for China came from "his intellectual interest [as] an observer of the affairs of humanity," as Dewey himself put it.⁷⁵ His concern for China persisted in the remainder of his life. At the age of eighty-six, he even planned to visit China for the second time.⁷⁶ China was indeed the country "nearest to his heart after his own," as his daughter remarked.⁷⁷

Notes

1. Shortly after the end of the First World War, Dewey and his wife, Alice, decided to travel to Japan. Dewey hoped that this trip could help eliminate Alice's depression, while allowing himself a temporary break from postwar politics. Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey: A Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 305. Their initial plan for a short vacation in Japan led to an unexpectedly long sojourn in China: from May 1919 to July 1921. Even though Dewey agreed to his former students' invitation to lecture in China while traveling there, he initially saw himself more as a tourist than a lecturer and did not plan to stay in China beyond the summer of 1919.

2. Dewey to John Jacob Coss, Beijing, 13 January 1920, *The Correspondence of John Dewey, CD-ROM*, ed. Larry A. Hickman (Charlottesville: InteLex Corporation, 2002), no. 04882.

3. John and Alice Chipman Dewey to Dewey children, Shanghai, 1 May 1919, *Correspondence*, no. 03898.

4. In a narrow sense, the movement refers to the student demonstration on 4 May 1919. In a broader sense, it represented a vast modernization movement from 1917 through 1921, which sought to reform China through intellectual and social means. Tse-tsung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), 5–6.

5. For a detailed account of the May Fourth Movement, see Tse-tsung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*.

6. John Dewey to Dewey children, Beijing, 1 June 1919, *Correspondence*, no. 10759.

7. In the spring of 1894, a severe wage cut at the Pullman Car Works led to the strike of its workers for a reduction in rents to help them maintain basic standard of living. The company responded to their grievances by firing those who protested. The strikers later won the support of American Railway Union leader Eugene Debs, who launched a boycott of Pullman sleeping cars. Dewey observed these events with heightened interest and wrote to his children: "the men won't work until some of their friends get paid enough money for their work so that they can live" (quoted in Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 86).

8. *Ibid.*, 84.

9. Dewey, "Transforming the Mind of China," in *Middle Works*, 11: 215.

10. Walter Lippmann to John Dewey, New York, 14 June 1921, *Correspondence*, no. 05208.

11. Dewey, "The Student Revolt in China," in *Middle Works*, 11:190.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Dewey, "The Tenth Anniversary of the Republic of China," in *Middle Works*, 13:147–48.

14. Dewey, "The Sequel of the Student Revolt," in *Middle Works*, 12:23.

15. *Ibid.*, 27.

16. *Ibid.*, 88.

17. Dewey, "The International Duel in China," in *Middle Works*, 11:196.
18. Ibid.
19. Dewey, "The American Opportunity in China," in *Middle Works*, 11:231.
20. Dewey, "The Far Eastern Deadlock," in *Middle Works*, 13:84.
21. Dewey, "Shantung, as Seen from Within," in *Middle Works*, 12: 33.
22. Dewey, "Chinese National Sentiment," in *Middle Works*, 11:226–227.
23. Dewey, "The International Duel in China," 198.
24. Ibid.
25. Dewey, "The American Opportunity in China," 234.
26. Dewey, "Our National Dilemma," in *Middle Works*, 12:5.
27. Ibid., 3.
28. Ibid., 7.
29. Dewey, "Federalism in China," in *Middle Works*, 13:155.
30. Alan Ryan's comment that Dewey "took up the isolationist and outlawry of war banner" after he returned to the States did not do justice to Dewey. *John Dewey and High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 204.
31. John Dewey, "A Parting of the Ways for America," in *Middle Works*, 13:171.
32. Ibid., 171–71.
33. Dewey, "The Issues at Washington," in *Middle Works*, 13: 182.
34. Dewey, "We Should Deal with China as a Nation to Nation," in *Middle Works* 15: 187.
35. Dewey, "America and the Far East," in *Later Works*, 2: 174.
36. Ibid., 175.
37. John Dewey to Albert C. Barnes, Beijing, 15 September 1919, *Correspondence*, no. 04103.
38. John Dewey to Herbert W. Schneider, Beijing, 3 January 1921, *Correspondence*, no. 03491.
39. Dewey, "Is China a Nation?" in *Middle Works*, 13:75.
40. John Dewey to Albert C. Barnes, Beijing, 15 September 1919, *Correspondence*, no. 04103.
41. John Dewey to Dewey children, Beijing, 1 June 1919.
42. Dewey, "On the Two Sides of the Eastern Sea," in *Middle Works*, 11:175–76.
43. Dewey, "The Sequel of the Student Revolt," 24.
44. Dewey, "Federalism in China," 149.
45. Dewey, "New Culture in China," in *Middle Works*, 13:120.
46. Ibid., 215.
47. Alice Chipman Dewey to Frederick A. Dewey, Beijing, 15 Feb. 1920, *Correspondence*, no. 03585.
48. Dewey, "Chinese National Sentiment," 216.
49. Dewey, "Transforming the Mind of China," 211.
50. Dewey, "Is China a Nation?" 75.
51. Dewey, "What Holds China Back," in *Middle Works*, 12:53.
52. Ibid., 58.
53. Ibid., 55.
54. Dewey, "Old China and New," in *Middle Works*, 13: 95.
55. John Dewey to John Jacob Coss, Beijing, 13 January 1920, *Correspondence*, no. 04882.

56. John Dewey to Albert C. Barnes, Beijing, 15 October 1920, *Correspondence*, no. 04106.
57. Albert C. Barnes to John Dewey, Philadelphia, 4 January 1921, *Correspondence*, no. 04116.
58. Dewey, "The New Leaven in Chinese Politics," in *Middle Works*, 12:49.
59. John Dewey to Albert C. Barnes, Beijing, 13 March 1921, *Correspondence*, no. 04120.
60. Dewey, "As the Chinese Think," in *Middle Works*, 13:220–21.
61. *Ibid.*, 222.
62. *Ibid.*, 222–23.
63. *Ibid.*, 223.
64. *Ibid.*
65. Russell once wrote that "I don't think that I shall write on China—it is a complex country, with an old civilization, very hard to fathom." Bertrand Russell to Colette O'Neil, Beijing, 6 January 1921, *The Selected Letters*, no. 343. Russell proposed the plan for his book to a publisher immediately after he returned to England, as he needed the money at the time to support his newborn child. Clark Ronald, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).
66. John Macrae to John Dewey, 28 October 1919, *Correspondence*, no. 04704. A short collection of Dewey's essays related to the Washington Conference was published in 1921, with the title *China, Japan and the U.S.A.* (New York: Republic Pub. Co., 1921).
67. Walter Lippmann to John Dewey, 16 June 1921.
68. Dewey, "China and the West," in *Middle Works* 15: 217–18.
69. Orientalism denotes "a way of coming to terms with the Orient, based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience," especially in the way "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) in its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience." Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1.
70. Dewey, "China and the West," 217–18.
71. Russell said that the distinctive merit of Western civilization is the scientific method, whereas the distinctive merit of the Chinese is "a just conception of the ends of life." Bertrand Russell, *The Problem of China* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1922), 205.
72. C. F. Remer, "John Dewey's Responsibility for American Opinion," *Millard's Review* 13 (10 July 1920): 321–322.
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*, 322.
75. Dewey, "Is China a Nation?" 75.
76. In 1946 when Dewey received the invitation to lecture in China, he decided to accept it, even though his family showed concerns for his safety and health. However, the invitation was cancelled due to unsettling political situations. Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey*, 326–27.
77. Jane Dewey, "Biography of John Dewey," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1939), 42.

Jessica Ching-Sze Wang is an associate professor at the Graduate Institute of Secondary and Primary Education of National Chiayi University, Taiwan.
chingsze@mail.ncyu.edu.tw