John Dewey and Chinese Education: Comparative Perspectives and Contemporary Interpretations

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Abstract

It has been widely claimed that no Western scholar has exerted greater influence on Chinese education than the American education philosopher John Dewey, who visited and lectured in China for more than two years between 1919 and 1921. A comparison of Chinese and American scholars’ evaluations of Dewey’s impact on Chinese education reveals many contradictions and controversies, especially in China during different historical periods. This paper examines the major differences between Chinese and American critics’ views on Dewey’s influence on Chinese education, with a focus on the dramatic changes in Chinese scholars’ perspectives in three distinct stages: from early praise and positive acceptance during the first 30 years after Dewey’s visit to China (1919–1949), to severe criticism and rejection over the next 30 years (1949–1979), and then to new interpretations since China’s opening up to the outside world in 1979. Although Dewey and his education theories were first extolled and then abandoned in China, they have received open and warm reappraisals from Chinese educators in recent decades and have emerged from rejection to renewed appreciation in Chinese education. To fully understand the significance and implications of Dewey’s visit to and lectures in China, both Chinese and American Dewey scholars need to create and sustain continued dialogue on this most fascinating episode in the intellectual histories of China and the US.

Keywords

John Dewey – Chinese education – comparison and evaluation – US–China relations
1 Introduction

The year 2019 marks the 100th anniversary of John Dewey’s historic visit to China in 1919. Although the American Philosophical Society (APS) has been silent about Dewey’s impact on China, the John Dewey Society (JDS), an influential educational philosophy research association affiliated with the American Educational Research Association (AERA), decided to establish “Dewey in/and China: Cultural Transformation & Progressive Education in International Settings Today” as the major theme for its 2019 annual conference. The author was invited to deliver the keynote speech at this annual event on the topic of “John Dewey and Chinese Education” because of her earlier studies on Dewey and China and her significant publications in the US on the comparative analysis and critical evaluation of Dewey’s influence on Chinese education (Su, 1995, 1996). She became the first Chinese scholar to be honored as a Dewey Lecturer in the history of the JDS. Former JDS Dewey Lecturers have included John Goodlad, Lee Shulman, Lawrence Cremin, Larry Hickman, Nel Noddings, Jeannie Oakes, Diane Ravitch, Eliott Eisner, Herbert M. Kleibard, Philip Jackson, Maxine Greene, and other prominent American education scholars.

The 2019 JDS annual conference was well attended by both American and international researchers, including a large number of Chinese scholars. This was in striking contrast to the 1994 Dewey Symposium, where the author was the only Chinese scholar in attendance and likely the first researcher to present on the topic of Dewey’s influence on Chinese education at a JDS conference. Her work was immediately recognized by Philip Jackson, JDS president at the time, as the “most exciting Dewey scholarship” and subsequently published in the American Journal of Education (Su, 1995) and Teachers College Record (Su, 1996). Unfortunately, only a small cadre of scholars in the US has made an effort to inquire into this topic. In fact, most Americans, including educators and philosophers, seem to be unaware of this important historical episode in Dewey’s life and in US–China relations. Meanwhile, since his visit to China commencing in 1919, Dewey has become the most controversial Western philosopher in China. His education theories have been widely studied but also heavily criticized by Chinese educational scholars in their efforts to learn from the West in relation to China’s educational development and reform.

In this paper, the author reviews the historical background of Dewey’s visit to China, examines major differences between Chinese and American critics’ views on Dewey’s influence on Chinese education, and evaluates the dramatic changes in Chinese scholars’ perspectives on Dewey and his theories during several distinct historical periods: from acceptance of and eager experimentation using his ideas in the first 30 years following Dewey’s visit to China
(1919–1949), to severe criticism and total abandonment of Dewey’s theories in Chinese education over the next 30 years (1949–1979), and then to new understandings of Dewey’s philosophy in the era of opening up and modernization since the normalization of US–China relations in 1979, with a focus on contemporary interpretations of Dewey’s influence on Chinese education over the last decade.

2 Historical Background

While traveling extensively in China from 1919 to 1921, John Dewey lectured to large audiences on social and political philosophy, the philosophy of education, ethics, and the main trends in modern education. Although he visited many nations and regions during his lifetime, Dewey spent more time and exercised more influence on education in China than in any other foreign country (Hu 1962; Clopton and Ou 1973). China had become, according to Dewey’s daughter, the country nearest to his heart, after his own (Jane Dewey 1939).

Dewey visited China at a very significant moment in Chinese history. When the First Opium War (1840–1842) revealed the decay and decline of the feudal dynasty and heightened the social crisis in China, many Chinese intellectuals recognized the need to learn Western science and technology to reform the old system of education, which was characterized by Confucian learning and imperial examination that emphasized memorization rather than reasoning. Once they rejected the past models, they were eager to search for Western ideas that might be relevant to China.

By the turn of the century, the more Westernized elements in China had seized control, and the moment of transition from the old to the new arrived with the outbreak of the famous May Fourth Movement in 1919, a nationwide student movement opposing Japanese imperialism and domestic Chinese corruption (Chow 1960; Keenan 1977). In every sphere of social activity the old order was challenged, attacked, undermined, or overwhelmed by a complex series of processes—political economic, social, ideological, and cultural—that were set in motion in China as a result of the penetration of the dominant, expanding, and powerful Western Europe and America (Teng and Fairbank 1954).

Because many of the leaders of the May Fourth Movement had studied abroad, they turned to philosophers of education in other countries for ideas and models to rebuild China. Dewey, then an established scholar in American educational philosophy and a professor at Columbia University, was called upon by his former students in China to address the professors and students of the new Chinese universities, to offer suggestions concerning the best intellectual
approach to reality, and to indicate just what adaptations China should make to survive both nationally and internationally in the new world order. As Smith (1985) observes, Dewey clearly saw his own capacities and the orientation of his thoughts as both appropriate and adequate for the task. He also saw himself, as his lectures in China amply demonstrate, as well-prepared to teach his audiences ways to live and to think in an age of science and technology, and how to understand the possibilities and problems attendant on the development of a democratic form of government (Hughes 1938, Su, 1995).

Dewey’s lectures in China were largely based on three of his books, *The School and Society* (1899), *Democracy and Education* (1916), and *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920), a part of which contained the substance of the lectures he had recently given in Japan. A number of Dewey’s former students interpreted his lectures into Chinese. For several of his major series of lectures, his Chinese hosts selected competent journalists to report every lecture in full for the daily newspapers and periodicals. What came to be known as “Dewey’s Five Major Series of Lectures” in Beijing, totaling 58 lectures, were recorded and reported in full and later published in book form, with ten large reprints even before Dewey left China in 1921, and continued to be reprinted for three decades until the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Later, most of Dewey’s written works were translated into Chinese in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and have been used as key textbooks in Chinese teacher-training institutions. His lectures in China were also republished by major Chinese education presses.

In addition to giving lectures, Dewey took part in educational conferences and met with educational and political leaders, including Dr. Sun Yat-sen, leader of the Chinese revolution that overthrew the last feudal dynasty. Bankers and editors frequented his residences, teachers and students flocked to his classrooms, clubs competed to entertain him and to hear him speak, and newspapers vied with each other to translate his latest utterances. His speeches and lectures were eagerly read, and his biography had been elaborately written. Serious-minded scholars commented on his philosophy, while common audiences grew familiar with his name. A group of his Chinese disciples followed him from city to city and regarded him as a sort of modern-day sage, a source of explanation of modernity in the West (Keenan 1977). At one point, Dewey was even likened to Confucius, especially after his Chinese friends learned that his sixtieth birthday in 1919 fell on the day that the rotating lunar calendar indicated was the birth date of Confucius. Chinese and American critics who have commented on Dewey’s visit to China all agree that Dewey enjoyed the warmest welcome of all the foreign scholars who have visited China, both past and present. There is no dispute in this regard.
3 American Evaluation of Dewey’s Influence on Chinese Education

In evaluating Dewey’s influence on Chinese education, American and Chinese scholars differ in several fundamental ways (Su, 1995). In the United States, the central point of contention is whether the Dewey experiment in China – the legacy of his ideas – is in large part a success or a failure. Clopton and Ou (1973), in their introduction to the English translation of *John Dewey, Lectures in China, 1919–1920*, claimed that Dewey’s influence on Chinese education was profound. They argued that of all the Western educators, Dewey most influenced the course of Chinese education, both in theory and in practice, and observed that Dewey’s philosophy of education dominated the teaching of educational theory in all Chinese teachers’ colleges and in university education departments for many years. His *Democracy and Education* was used everywhere, and most of his major works were translated into Chinese. In addition, both during and after his visit to China, numerous articles, books, and pamphlets were published to introduce and interpret Dewey’s philosophy of education. Some of his most widely used phrases – “education is life,” “school is society,” and “learning by doing” – were familiar at all levels of the Chinese educational world. Thus, “Dewey became the highest educational authority in China, and there were many more converts to his views in Chinese educational circles than among professional philosophers” (Clopton and Ou 1973, p. 22).

The success of Dewey’s experiment in China can also be seen in practice in earlier years, according to Clopton and Ou (1973). First, Chinese educational aims were reconsidered in the light of Dewey’s thoughts in the 1920s. While the old educational aims emphasized military education modeled on the Japanese pattern, the new goals embraced the aim and spirit of American education: “the cultivation of perfect personality and the development of democratic spirit.” Second, the national school system was reformed according to the American pattern – the 6-3-3 plan—and governed by a set of principles advocated by Dewey that aimed “to promote the spirit of democracy,” “to develop individuality,” “to promote education for life,” and “to facilitate the spread of universal education.” Third, child-centered education predominated in the revision of the curriculum. Fourth, new methods of teaching in accord with Dewey’s theory of pragmatism were initiated. Fifth, experimental schools multiplied. Sixth, student government was widely extended as a mode of school discipline. Seventh, literary reform was encouraged, and elementary school textbooks written in the vernacular were adopted. Finally, and most importantly, Dewey’s essential ideas were advanced and adapted in practice by his former students and disciples in China, most notably Hu Shih, Tao Xingzhi, and Chen Heqin, who became famous educators in China. On the basis of these examples, Clopton
and Ou concluded that Dewey’s influence on Chinese education was both profound and extensive.

While not disagreeing with Clopton and Ou on their observations regarding the various changes in Chinese education that resulted from Dewey’s visit, Berry (1960), Sizer (1966), Pavela (1970), and Keenan (1977) maintained that Dewey’s experimentalism in China was, ultimately, largely a failure. They seemed to believe that although Dewey greatly impressed his Chinese audiences, he did not leave a lasting message. The opportunity to build a strong belief in the humanitarian ideals of the West and in democracy as a system of values was not fully exploited. As a distinct political party, the democratic movement envisaged by Dewey was never successful in China. They observed that although Dewey’s influence was considered to be original and decisive in relation to education, opposition to his influence was also very strong. First came the opposition from Confucian scholars who objected to the iconoclastic attitude adopted toward the cultural traditions of the past. Second, the Marxist challenge to Dewey was even more effective than that of the Confucians. Marxism began to awaken in the Chinese a response of great depth and enthusiasm, and in the 1920s, it was already winning the allegiance of many professors and students throughout the country. In comparison, the liberal bourgeois democracy and American pragmatism represented and advocated for by Dewey offered a less dynamic political and educational program than that of Marxist proletarian Communism and dialectical materialism. Eventually, the majority of Chinese intellectuals saw a valid picture of the modern world in the Chinese Communist Party, while the order supposed by Dewey’s liberalism simply failed to develop in a chaotic Old China (Berry 1960). As Billings (1981–82) insightfully pointed out, Dewey’s problem was that he could not provide the necessary bridge between old Chinese tradition and modern Western liberalism. The October Revolution taught the young Chinese intellectuals that Western liberalism could be bypassed and Communism could be adopted directly. Grieder (1970, 1972) in his discussion of Hu Shih (Hu Shi, 胡适) and the Chinese renaissance – the May Fourth experience – also concluded that the Chinese liberals failed because they were overwhelmed by the confluence of two great historical movements, one traditional, the other modern, both of which equated politics with the totality of human experience and obscured the distinction between public and private, thus denying the importance of individual liberty. Dewey and the Chinese liberals considered this to be a key condition without which a true political order could neither come into being nor survive.

What is clear is that it was the political arena that ultimately mattered to China at that time. Deweyan experimentalism – as a way of thinking, as a way of acting politically, and as a component of democratic education – offered
no strategy that Dewey’s followers could use to affect political power in China. Without such a strategy, failure was the main consequence of his followers’ pragmatic reform efforts. Their reformism was paralyzed by dilemma. Dewey himself recognized this failure after his visit to China, writing: “The difficulties in the way of a practical extension and regeneration of Chinese education are all but insuperable. Discussion often ends in an impasse: no political reform of China without education; but no development of schools as long as military men and corrupt officials divert funds and oppose schools from motives of self-interest. Here are the materials of a tragedy of the first magnitude” (1983, p. 231). The experimentalist philosophy, conceived in a rich, literate, industrial, and relatively serene America and propagated by well-intentioned but somewhat sheltered Chinese intellectuals, was in many ways not appropriate for a huge, varied, agricultural, particularistic country like China.

The American evaluation of Dewey’s influence on Chinese education has taken some new turns in recent decades. While studying as a doctoral student at Indiana University, Jessica C.S. Wang conducted in-depth research on Dewey’s experiences in China as a learner (Wang 2007). This was a new and thought-provoking appraisal of the significance of Dewey’s visit to China. Her main goal was to redress the imbalance of previous studies in the US that had neglected to consider the ways in which Dewey himself might have been influenced by his Chinese experience. She concluded that Dewey had learned as much as he taught during his stay in China. Viewed from this perspective, Dewey’s visit to China was a great success in terms of his personal growth and learning, providing a fine example of the value of educational exchange visits and cross-cultural learning for other educators and their students.

Indeed, many American scholars and students have followed in Dewey’s footsteps by visiting and learning from China in the four decades since China’s opening up. Most recently, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Dewey’s seminal visit to China, a group of high school students from the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, the Chicago Charter Schools, and the Laboratory School’s Beijing partner high school retraced Dewey’s steps in China. Moderated by Larry Hickman, former Director of the Center for Dewey Studies at the University of Southern Illinois, the American and Chinese students who participated in this historical journey shared their unique experiences at the 2019 Centennial Colloquium on “Dewey, Then and Now,” held at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, which was founded by Dewey more than 100 years ago. The students observed that even though they could learn about China from newspapers and academic texts, the conversations they had with peers in China around Dewey’s ideas and his ideals for the Laboratory Schools on this trip taught them so much more. American Dewey scholars can now
claim that Dewey’s trip to China 100 years ago is successfully influencing a new
generation, although it has only impacted a limited number of young people
thus far (Braendel, 2019). Dewey himself would have loved seeing students in
his Laboratory Schools having this kind of learning experience – learning by
doing and traveling the routes that he took, reflecting on real-life experiences,
and discussing and debating ideas with peers and educators in China.

4 Chinese Evaluation and Reception of Dewey in the First 30 Years
(1919–1949)

In China, studies of the Deweyan influence and experiment in China have not
focused on its success or failure, unlike American studies, but have concen-
trated on the positive and negative aspects of Dewey’s ideas and influence as
measured by Chinese political ideology and educational needs during differ-
ent historical periods. While American scholars do not question Dewey’s sin-
cerity in promoting the development of a democratic society or the worthiness
of Dewey’s educational philosophy, the Chinese have been involved in con-
stant debates over the intentions and worthiness of Dewey’s ideas for Chinese
schools and society; some praise him as a saint, while others condemn him as
an enemy. In many ways, it has been an ideological struggle between Dewey’s
pragmatism and experimentalism and Marxist–Leninist Communism, which
began soon after Dewey’s visit to China (Su, 1995).

During the first 30 years after Dewey’s historic visit to China, Dewey’s prag-
matic educational theory dominated the Chinese educational field. Nearly
all of his educational works were translated into Chinese, and his influence
was apparent in major Chinese educational publications (Zhou 1991). The
Chinese education system underwent a significant transformation based on
the American model and Dewey’s ideas (Ou 1970, Clopton and Ou, 1973). The
most successful of Dewey’s experiments in relation to Chinese education
was the establishment and operation of the Morning Village Normal School
(1927–1930) by Tao Xingzhi, a former student of Dewey, who creatively trans-
formed Dewey’s theories of “life as education,” “school as society,” and “learn-
ing by doing” to “education as life,” “society as school,” and “unity of teaching,
learning, and reflective acting,” respectively, in his tireless efforts to improve
China’s rural education and society (Su, 1996 and Chu, 2019). Tao was the
first of Dewey’s Chinese followers to develop his own system of educational
theory and practice, and the first to seek to extend Dewey’s influence from
the city to rural areas. Forced to close by the Nationalist Army in 1930, the
Morning Village Normal School was re-opened in 1949, and has since evolved
into Nanjing Xiaozhuang (Morning Village) University and become a national model for training elementary and rural school teachers. Tao continued to apply Dewey’s theories in his practices in other educational institutions and communities in China up until his death in 1946. His creative adaption of Dewey’s ideas into the Chinese education context from the 1920s to the 1940s is still considered a shining example for modern Chinese educators (Su, 2018 and Zhang, 2019).

Another famous Dewey-inspired experiment during this period was the creation of child-centered and experience-based preschools in China by Chen Heqin, also a former student at Columbia University, although he did not study directly under Dewey. As a faculty member at the Nanjing Higher Teacher Education Institute when Dewey visited China, Chen was an active participant in Dewey’s lectures and served as his translator on several occasions. He and Tao Xingzhi shared Dewey’s thoughts on the nature of education and educators’ roles in education. Based on Dewey’s theory of “education as life,” Chen developed a theory of “live education” with more than 30 principles and established experimental preschools that emphasized learning by doing and participation in real-life experiences in nature and the wider society. Chen had great admiration for Dewey’s Laboratory Schools in Chicago, and closely followed the Laboratory Schools model when developing preschools in China. Chen’s preschools were widely regarded as a successful product of the fusion of Chinese and Western educational thoughts (Ke and Peng, 2019).

While Dewey’s disciples and their liberal journals extolled Dewey’s theories on education and democracy as a very positive force and the greatest hope for building a new China, a large number of intellectuals had been won over by the Communist cause, and the remaking of China along Marxist lines had begun in the universities of China and in the publications that appeared during these decisive years. In fact, the Chinese Communist Party was founded during the two-year period that Dewey spent in China (Passow 1982). Eventually, the Communists obtained superior standing among the intellectuals, particularly the professors and students, who found it difficult to accept the West as a teacher, but saw in socialism a practical philosophy through which they could reject both the traditions of the Chinese past and the Western domination of the present (Hsu 1970). To them, Western ideas as presented by Dewey were more negative than positive for China. Such a psychological climate did not work to the advantage of Dewey’s teaching (Ching 1985), although Tao Xingzhi and Chen Heqin’s experiments based on Dewey’s ideas were still considered relevant to China, and continued to operate in the New China.

It should be noted that as a young activist in the May Fourth Movement, the Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong attended Dewey’s lectures in the spring of 1920. Mao not only was familiar with Dewey’s theories, but also
highly recommended Dewey’s *Five Major Lectures*, and included it in his initial stock when he opened a revolutionary bookstore in Hunan later that year (Yu 1991). Clearly, Dewey’s ideas exerted considerable influence on the young Mao’s mind. Later, however, Mao chose Marxist–Leninist Communism over Dewey’s pragmatism and experimentalism, as did many other young Chinese intellectuals at that time. Dewey lived to see the establishment of the New China – the People’s Republic of China – in 1949, and watched as his closest followers, including Hu Shih, left mainland China.

5 Chinese Evaluation and Rejection of Dewey in the Closed-door Period (1949–1979)

At the founding of New China in 1949, Mao Zedong (1949) officially denounced Dewey’s intellectual followers and the form of cultural influence the United States had exerted in China as “imperialist spiritual aggression.” Mao identified Dewey’s students with the United States, an association that implied support of the defeated Nationalists.

In the new republic, the ideological struggle intensified in the 1950s, characterized by severe criticism and total denial of Dewey’s experimentalism and his followers in China. The movement began with two articles by Cao Fu (1950, 1951), “Introduction to the Criticism of John Dewey, Parts 1 and 2,” in the official education journal, *People’s Education* (《人民教育》). Ironically, Cao was a graduate of the University of Colorado, having done his doctoral dissertation on the topic of “The Individual and the Society in John Dewey’s Educational Philosophy,” thereby establishing himself as a promising Dewey scholar before he returned to work in Chinese educational institutions. Cao urged that criticism of Dewey should begin with a critique of his anti-Marxist, reactionary position, both in his lectures in China and in his writings on political and social philosophy. Cao analyzed the fundamental differences in the political and philosophical positions of Marx and Dewey, and labeled Dewey as the “biggest obstacle to the cause of building the people’s education” (Cao 1950). Following his lead, other Chinese scholars launched unrelenting attacks on Dewey and accused him of being “a sly enemy disguised under a progressive mask” (Teng 1957), “a supporter of American imperialism” (Wang 1954), and “a guardian of modern imperialist forces;” “a defender of criminal acts of Wall Street bosses;” “a speaker for reactionary forces all over the world,” and “an enemy of the Chinese people and all people in the world who love peace and freedom” (Chen 1957). Dewey was portrayed as a deliberate supporter of the capitalist system and a vicious enemy who tried to use education as a means of reproducing the evils of Western society (T. Zhang 1955; J. Zhang 1955; Zhu 1956).
Ching (1985) was correct in her observation that the Chinese reactions to Dewey in the 1950s were entirely negative. There was no longer any discussion of pros and cons, nor any impartial analysis of Dewey’s thoughts and influence. It is interesting to note here that in the United States, as early as the 1930s some scholars had argued that there were striking similarities between Dewey and Marx in their methodological commitment, and Dewey himself admitted that his experimentalism was most closely aligned to some form of democratic socialism (Hook 1976; Gavin 1988). In addition, while Dewey was attacked in socialist China as anti-Marxist and a defender of imperialism, he has been criticized for his leftist, socialist Marxist tendencies in Taiwan (Liu 1990) and the United States (Tanner 1994). Nevertheless, in the 1950s, Dewey’s pragmatic educational philosophy was considered to be totally incompatible with the prevailing educational philosophy in China. The words “malicious,” “ridiculous,” “reactionary,” “fallacy,” “sly,” “dirty,” and “ugly” were constantly used to describe Dewey and his ideas (Su, 1995). Such descriptions were not limited to Dewey, but rather were typical of critiques of every intellectual of any influence, Chinese or Western, during this period.

The most severe attack on Dewey was launched by his former disciple, Chen Heqin, who actively promoted Dewey’s theories and practices in modernizing China’s preschool system in the first 30 years following his visit to China. In the 1950s, Chen was forced to denounce Dewey during the course of his public “confession of error”: “As one who has been most deeply poisoned by his reactionary educational ideas, as one who has worked hard 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!” (Chen 1955, pp. 2–3). Thus, Dewey’s educational theories were thoroughly criticized in China during the 1950s. The first target was his opposition to education with an external end and his claim that “education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself” (Dewey, 1916, p. 53). When this was translated into Chinese, it was often referred to as “Dewey’s notorious theory of education without a purpose,” which is quite different in meaning from Dewey’s original intention. Nevertheless, Chinese critics argued that Dewey was using this claim as a disguise for his real position, that is, education should only have individual, temporary, small goals and not social, future, larger purposes. Dewey’s real intention, the Chinese critics said, was to cheat the working-class people and prevent them from demanding the establishment of new educational goals based on their interests (Cao 1955; Li 1956).

In addition to the so-called theory of education without a purpose, Dewey was condemned by his Chinese critics in the 1950s for his emphasis on children’s interests and experiences in the educational process (Su, 1995). He was
blamed for the lack of discipline, lack of teacher authority, and therefore the lack of rigorous teaching and learning in schools. Furthermore, Dewey’s argument that “education is life” and “school is society,” which was literally implemented in some Chinese schools from the 1920s to the 1940s, was interpreted as an attempt to eliminate a formal curriculum, systematic knowledge, and formal schooling, which were considered essential elements for a good education in China (Li 1956). By the end of the 1950s, Dewey’s educational theories had been rendered totally worthless, and were considered to be poisonous and harmful in China. Deliberate efforts were made to eliminate his influence from all spheres of Chinese society. In the 1960s and 1970s, Chinese intellectuals, including the most severe Dewey critics, were heavily involved in the chaotic Great Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and many became targets for criticism and punishment, having been labeled “capitalist roaders” and “bourgeois intellectuals.” Dewey and his theories were largely ignored, if not totally abandoned during these decades (Su, 1995, 2019).

6 Chinese Reevaluation and Reception of Dewey in the Open-door Era (1979–2009)

With the normalization of relations between the US and China in 1979, China began to open up to the outside world and embarked on a speedy path to modernization and globalization. Dramatic changes have taken place since then in China’s social and political climates and in its relationship with the outside world. Since 1980, more than six million Chinese students and scholars have gone abroad to study, most of whom have landed in the United States. By 2018, more than 360,000 Chinese students were studying in various educational institutions in the US (IIE, 2018). Many American scholars and students have also traveled to China to study, although the number of American students studying in China (less than 12,000 in 2017) is much smaller than the number of Chinese students studying in America. By the mid-1980s, Chinese colleges and universities had already established extensive educational exchange and cooperation programs with the Western world (Hayhoe and Bastid 1987). Deng Xiaoping’s political and economic pragmatism paved the way for Chinese intellectuals to turn once again to Western pragmatism.

Under these circumstances, a serious reevaluation of Dewey’s influence on Chinese education began to emerge among Dewey scholars in China in the 1980s. Some critics suggested that the worthiness of certain elements of Dewey’s educational philosophy and its status in the history of philosophy should be revisited. They recommended that instead of totally rejecting Dewey, China...
should selectively borrow Dewey’s ideas and make use of them in Chinese educational practices (see, for example, Zhao 1980; Wang 1982; Meng 1985; Wu 1985; Xia 1985a; Zheng 1985; Wang 1986; Li 1987; Liu 1987). In 1982, the second annual meeting of the Chinese Society for the Study of Educational History included special panels on Dewey that received enthusiastic responses from many scholars. They proposed that the study of Dewey’s educational theories should be conducted with an open mind and result in an honest, matter-of-fact evaluation (Xia 1985b). Some even quoted Lenin in support of their efforts to reevaluate Dewey: “We should transform the most rich cultural tradition, knowledge, and skills accumulated in the capitalist society from a means for capitalism into a means for socialism” (Chen 1982, p. 86). A Chinese scholar studying in the United States went so far as to note the striking similarities between Dewey and Mao (Xu, 1992) in terms of their educational theories and practices. He observed that “although Dewey and Mao emerged from completely different cultures, times, and contexts, their theories had amazing similarities. Their logs, ‘learning by doing’ (Dewey) and ‘learning by practicing’ (Mao), ring a similar note. Moreover, their views on the significant connections between school and society, the social role of education, the role of experience in learning, and their stress on moral education overlap a great deal” (Xu 1992, p. 3).

Within such a positive political atmosphere, the Chinese evaluation and reception of Dewey was in many ways drastically different from the observations on Dewey made by Chinese scholars in the 1950s. The focus was no longer on whether Dewey’s educational theories were positive or negative influences politically, but on the contributions that Dewey had made to world education, the similarities between Dewey and Chinese educators and politicians, and the usefulness of his ideas for the improvement of China’s educational practices in modern times. For example, Chen Jingpan, who had used the most derogatory terms in his harsh criticism of Dewey in the 1950s, barely mentioned any of those terms in his new essays on Dewey in the 1980s (Chen 1957, 1982, 1985). The much-criticized theory of “education without a purpose” was subject to reappraisal and a more accurate interpretation of Dewey’s original meaning. Shi (1985) pointed out that the conclusion drawn in the 1950s in relation to Dewey’s theory of educational purpose was too simplistic and subjective, and thus unfair. He cited different arguments from Dewey’s works to demonstrate that as a pragmatist, Dewey firmly believed in the role of education as a means of social reform for a democracy; thus, he had a very clear social goal for education. Zhang (1989) also observed that Dewey had a strong focus on society in his discussion on creating a balance between individual growth and social development in the educational process. Zhang further quoted from Dewey’s
lectures in China, which offered explicit warnings to Chinese educators against pursuing education without a purpose.

Dewey’s theories on the curriculum and instruction also received a positive reevaluation in China in the new era (Yuan 1983). A major area of contention in the 1950s was Dewey’s emphasis on organizing class activities around the children’s experiences, needs, and interests (Chen 1952), his delegation of a facilitator’s role to classroom teachers (Liu 1955 and Fu 1957), and his promotion of “learning by doing” (Chen 1956 and Liu 1955). In reassessing Dewey, many Chinese scholars seemed to agree that his ideas represented a forceful and revolutionary criticism of the empty formalism in the old education system, although they were not sufficiently constructive to replace the traditional, teacher-centered, discipline-oriented education model (Wu and Zhao, 1988). These scholars maintained that child-centered activities with teachers as facilitators could serve as a supplement to, rather than a replacement of, the existing teacher-centered curriculum. However, some Chinese critics, such as Zhao (1982), Wu (1985), Meng (1985), Ren (1985), Wang (1986), and Zhang (1989), provided a different perspective on this issue. They pointed out that while emphasizing children’s interests, needs, and activities, Dewey also attached great importance to the role of the teacher, who continued to have both the authority and the obligation to help students in their studies. The teacher’s role was even more difficult than it had been before. They recognized that Dewey had sharply criticized those schools that misunderstood his theory on independent thinking and neglected the role of the teacher and other adults in the schools. Furthermore, they now understood that Dewey dialectically and appropriately handled the relationship between the child, the teaching materials, and the curriculum, and that this was a significant contribution to education (Zhang, 1989).

Also emerging in China in the 1980s was a new interpretation of Dewey’s theory of “learning by doing.” In the 1950s, the critics argued that Dewey overemphasized the process of knowing and neglected the consequences of this process knowledge, which was best represented by systematically organized academic subjects, as in a traditional education model. They concluded that students in Deweyan schools, both in the United States and in China, “know how to think, but have no knowledge” (Cao 1950). In reevaluating Dewey’s ideas on this issue, Zhao (1980, 1982) argued that Dewey did not oppose learning organized by subject matter, but was merely against spoon-feeding students with prepackaged knowledge that was disconnected from students’ experiences and therefore could not be understood by them. By advocating “learning by doing,” Dewey encouraged students to acquire useful knowledge by solving problems in their own everyday activities organized around different
types of knowledge. Meng (1985) also had a high regard for Dewey’s “learning by doing,” and observed that Dewey’s method built an excellent connection between theory and practice and motivated students to make the necessary effort to learn. In between these contrasting interpretations, Wu (1985) offered an eclectic position: “We do not want children to learn by doing, but we do not oppose children’s participation in practice. We can experiment with different structures of curriculum to create conditions for children to apply what they learn in practice” (p. 76). Essentially, this position wanted to maintain the traditional teacher-centered, discipline-oriented classrooms, but at the same time create extra “learning by doing” activities for the students. Thus, in this view, Dewey’s ideas were of limited use in improving Chinese educational practices. Some Chinese educators had labeled these types of extra activities as “the second classroom,” or “the second channel of learning” (Wang 1984).

In reality, most Chinese classrooms in the 1980s were still highly traditional, teacher-centered, and textbook-oriented, with very few hands-on activities for the students (Su 1989). In a comparative study of science education in the United States and China that the author conducted in the early 1990s, the participating visiting Chinese scholars were impressed by the student-centered, real-life, experience-oriented science classrooms in American schools. They took a particular interest in the activity curriculum and the project method, which were the natural products of the Dewey theory (Ou 1961). The Chinese scholars all expressed a desire to recommend these models to Chinese schools, although they also recognized the weakness of these methods, namely, the lack of emphasis on systematic knowledge and theoretical reasoning (Su, Z., Su, J. and Goldstein 1994). In fact, this central concern continued to be a major deterrent to experiments based on Dewey’s ideas and American models in Chinese educational practices even after Dewey’s theories came to be viewed under a favorable light in the open-door era.

By the end of the twentieth century, Dewey’s reputation in China had been effectively rehabilitated, with more objective and mostly positive evaluations by Dewey scholars in key positions, as Liu Fangtong (1996) claimed in his summary of the reevaluation of Dewey’s pragmatism in China. He observed that Dewey was the most familiar Western philosopher to Chinese academics, but also the most misunderstood, and deserved to be reevaluated. Liu alleged that the severe criticism of Dewey in the 1950s was politically motivated and mostly delivered by critics who did not fully understand Dewey’s philosophy. He invited Chinese educators to reconsider Dewey’s recommendations for progressive reform in China, and went on to establish the Center for Dewey and American Philosophy Studies at Fudan University in 2004, which was renamed the Dewey Center in 2014. The Center immediately took on the task of translating all
37 volumes of Dewey’s Collected Works into Chinese, which took 11 years and involved nearly 100 experts and translators from all over China. Thus, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, Chinese educators, heavily influenced by what they had learned from the West, were once again eager to make changes in Chinese education, although they were not quite ready to totally abandon the established system. They saw the necessity of incorporating useful elements from Western education, including Dewey’s ideas, into the Chinese system, but they also tried to avoid going to extremes, such as “traditional education” as represented by Confucius’s and Herbart’s educational theories or “modern education” as represented by the more radical reformers in society. In many ways, they were searching for a viable alternative, a “third way,” or “the Chinese way,” as Zhang (2019) termed it later, and Dewey’s philosophy became a valuable guide at this point.

7  Contemporary Interpretations of Dewey’s Influence (since 2009)

In the decade since 2009, Chinese education scholars have developed more positive interpretations of Dewey’s influence and offered a more enthusiastic welcome to Dewey’s ideas, which marked the beginning of a new wave of interest in Dewey in the twenty-first century. First, Dewey’s progressive philosophy and humanistic approach have been found to be highly relevant to the core spirit of and new emphasis on students as individuals and centers of attention in China’s new plans for educational reform and development for 2010–2020 that were published by the Chinese National Ministry of Education in 2010 (MOE, 2010). New reform directions in Chinese education are focused on quality education and the holistic development of students, hands-on experience and problem-solving skills, the cultivation of creativity and critical thinking, attention to students as individuals with various potentials and interests, and moral education. Hence, Chinese scholars have found considerable support for these goals in Dewey’s theories (Liu, 2011, Zhang, 2013, Su, 2019 and Zhang, 2019). For the first time in the history of Chinese education, the new national plans promote the goals of helping individuals to pursue freedom, happiness, and liberation, and these goals are exactly what Dewey wanted to achieve through his educational ideas. Second, Chinese scholars now believe that Dewey’s theory on the importance of experience in education has special implications for reform of the curriculum and instruction in Chinese education (You, 2014). In addition, because China’s new social reform places a heavy emphasis on creating a harmonious society, Chinese scholars are finding inspiration and commonality in Dewey’s theories on building a democratic society.
with associated living, good communication and shared interests for all the people (Zhang, 2013).

A major manifestation of the remarkable acceptance of Dewey’s ideas in China was the publication of *The Complete Works of John Dewey* in Chinese by East China Normal University (ECNU) Press in 2015. This publication contains 38 volumes, and was edited by Liu Fangtong, then Director of the Dewey Center at Fudan University. Fudan University and ECNU jointly held a “Complete Works of John Dewey (in Chinese) Release” press conference at Fudan University, with about 50 Chinese and American scholars in attendance, including Larry Hickman, then Director of the Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, and Roger Ames, a notable American Dewey scholar at the University of Hawaii. At the same time, the International Symposium on Dewey and Pragmatism Studies was convened by the Dewey Center at Fudan University. In addition to serving as the major organizer and coordinator of the translation and publication of the *Complete Works of John Dewey*, the Dewey Center has also initiated and hosted annual conferences on pragmatism studies in China and served as an important platform for communication between Chinese and international scholars (Su, 2019).

Another outstanding event in relation to the reevaluation and study of Dewey in China over the past decade was the 2016 Academic Forum on the “Continuing Transformation of Education, Democracy and Experiences” in celebration of the centenary of the publication of Dewey’s book *Democracy and Education* at ECNU. Several leading education scholars from ECNU’s International and Comparative Education Institute delivered speeches on the relevance of Dewey’s theories to modern Chinese education development and reform. While Zhou Yong suggested that Chinese educational policy researchers should learn from Dewey in conducting comprehensive, in-depth investigations of the transformation of Chinese society over the past few decades to determine the best direction for China’s “new education” and develop China’s own educational theories, Cheng Liang expounded on Dewey’s ideas regarding “experience and education” and compared Dewey’s concepts with traditional concepts relating to experience. However, the most forceful presentation at this forum was delivered by Peng Zhengmei, a senior scholar affiliated with ECNU’s International and Comparative Education Institute. He explored Dewey’s educational theories from a critical perspective and observed that Dewey’s goals in education were to cultivate active citizens with critical thinking skills, which has become a major goal in Chinese education today. Therefore, he regarded the new curriculum reform in China as a Deweyan reform, aimed at laying a solid basic educational foundation to enable China to cultivate a new generation with globally competitive competences, self-initiative, STEAM
capabilities, foreign-language skills, and high-level thinking abilities. Peng argued that the Deweyan model contained the essential elements of internationalism and could provide sustained momentum for China's modernization and globalization efforts (Deng, 2016). This new recognition reflects Dewey's significant impact on current reforms in Chinese education.

Moreover, to commemorate the centenary of Dewey’s arrival in China, the *Journal of ECNU* dedicated a full issue of “Educational Sciences” early in 2019 to publications on John Dewey and Chinese education. Several Dewey scholars, both Chinese and foreign, contributed articles to this issue, which provided more positive interpretations of Dewey’s influence on Chinese education. Zhang Hua, a leading scholar in comparative education and curriculum studies, offered a comprehensive reevaluation of Dewey’s influence on Chinese educational reform at different historical periods. Zhang recognized Dewey’s important contribution to and personal involvement in the creation of the new education system and curriculum in the 1920s. He also observed that Dewey personally mentored and influenced several prominent liberal education thinkers and reformers in China including Hu Shi, Jiang Mengling, and Tao Xingzhi, who diligently and creatively implemented his ideas in relation to China’s educational practices. In addition, Zhang credited Dewey with establishing important links between Chinese and American educators that resulted in more fruitful visits to China in the 1920s by American educators including Paul Monroe, William H. Kilpatrick, and George R. Twiss. Together, they exerted significant influence on Chinese education reform, especially the curriculum reform in the 1920s. Although China’s political conditions did not allow Dewey’s ideas to flourish for several decades during the closed-door period, Zhang found a renewed interest in Dewey’s theories among Chinese educators during the 1988 Basic Education Curriculum Reform in Shanghai, which placed a strong emphasis on developing students’ individuality and freedom through more hands-on activities and inquiry methods. This renewed interest in Dewey and American schools’ activity- and project-based methods was further enhanced by the national Basic Education Curriculum Reform in 2001 that promoted the all-round development of each student. Understanding the hesitation among some Chinese scholars in adapting Western educational theories to Chinese practices, Zhang praised Dewey for “thinking like the Chinese” and complimented him for his brilliant proposal of a “third philosophy” or a “third way” that could help Chinese educators to avoid the pitfalls of extreme conservatism and radicalism, to pursue Chinese liberalism, and to achieve an “Eastern-style” or “Chinese-style” democracy as part of China’s unique path toward educational development and reform. Zhang concluded that Dewey is still very much “alive” in today’s China, and encouraged scholars to continue
to interpret Dewey’s ideas creatively in the search for “Eastern democracy” in Chinese education (Zhang, 2019). Zhang's interpretation of Dewey’s ideas initiated a new way of thinking and acting among Chinese education reformers.

The special issue of the *Journal of ECNU* in 2019 also included a fresh perspective on Dewey by James Yang (2019), continuing on from his research on Dewey and China (2016). Yang followed the example of Wang (2007) in exploring how Dewey’s views and world outlook were shaped by his extensive encounters with the Chinese people during his two-year visit to China. Yang observed that Dewey’s Chinese experiences not only increased his understanding of and appreciation for diverse cultures but also broadened his vision for democracy and enabled him to see the danger in the narrow definition of patriotism or nationalism that led to the notion and promotion of “America first” among some American politicians. Like Yang, Shane Ralsto, a Dewey scholar from the UK and another contributor to the special issue, examined how Dewey’s experiences in China had helped to change his views (Ralsto, 2019). After explaining how Dewey conceived experience and why he appreciated his own Chinese experiences, Ralsto observed that Dewey learned the importance of time in dealing with the Chinese people and understood that time and more time would help resolve important issues and yield valuable results in China (Dewey, 1996). Based on Dewey’s revelation, Ralsto recommended that in dealing with the Chinese diplomat, the American diplomat must not hurry negotiations nor rush to reach agreement – a lesson worth revisiting now to improve current US-China relations.

One of the most interesting proposals contained in this special issue came from Leonard Waks, former President of the American JDS and now a distinguished professor at Hangzhou Normal University. After comparing Dewey to Confucius from both historical and philosophical points of view, he suggested placing Dewey and Confucius together for a dialogue. He argued that the time was now ripe to investigate how each can contribute to educational revitalization in China. He believed that the Confucian ideal of moral self-cultivation could supplement Dewey’s educational program, while Dewey’s active learning strategies could fill a gap in Confucian learning in science and technology, fields that occupied Dewey’s thoughts in his lectures in China (Waks, 2019). This interpretation represents a sharp departure from the critics’ views in the 1920s, when Chinese intellectuals extolled Dewey’s educational philosophy as a much-needed alternative to China’s feudal system of learning as represented by Confucius and his followers.

In addition to the increasingly active dialogue and discussion regarding Dewey’s ideas among educators and scholars in China, the study of Dewey’s works is now readily available and often required for students in Chinese
teacher education and graduate education programs, either as a part of the basic or advanced education theory courses, in a guided-reading class, or as an elective. At major research universities such as ECNU, all graduate students in education are required to take a course on education classics, which usually includes Dewey’s work. In the more practice-oriented teacher-training universities such as Shanghai Normal University (SHNU), there are four areas of study for future educators: required core courses, required elective courses, optional elective courses, and practicum. Dewey’s theories, together with those of Tao Xingzhi, can be found in all four areas, especially in the required core courses, which cover topics on Chinese and foreign education histories, educational philosophy, sociology, moral education, and teaching methods. In addition, SHNU provides special training workshops for school principals to enable them to study Dewey’s theories on topics related to cultivating individuality in students. At Nanjing Xiaozhuang University, which was founded by Dewey’s former student Tao Xiangzhi as the Morning Village Normal School, as mentioned earlier, the faculty now offers a guided-reading course on Democracy and Education to students who aspire to become elementary and rural school teachers. The students interviewed by the author on her visits there in recent years wanted to have more guided-reading classes on Dewey and to receive more detailed explanation and guidance from their faculty. They believed that Dewey’s ideas helped them to create a vision for education and build a shield against the increasing temptation of materialism in society when they began to teach in schools (Su, 2018).

In contrast to the active learning programs on Dewey’s works in Chinese education institutions, American students today seem to have lost the opportunity for such learning. Stephen T. Asma (2014), a professor of philosophy at Columbia College Chicago and a Fulbright Scholar in China at the Beijing Foreign Language School, observed that “in China, enthusiasm for Dewey’s philosophy in particular is growing rapidly, while back home interest in it languishes. My students in Beijing and Shanghai all know John Dewey’s name, but most of my Chicago undergrads back home do not.” Sadly, this situation is also true in American teacher education programs, as most of them have eliminated educational foundations courses (and the faculty members who teach them) that offered a study of Dewey’s works. This is because the current teacher performance expectations in the US do not contain anything related to educational foundations (see, for example, California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016). In the author’s own teacher education courses in a major state university in California, none of the students she has taught in the past decade has studied any of Dewey’s works, and many did not even know who John Dewey was when questioned (Su, 2019).
China Education Improvement Society and Dewey Forums in Beijing – A “New Platform”

The most exciting event in relation to Dewey and Chinese education in the past decade was the revival of the China Education Improvement Society in 2011. The Society was founded in 1921 in response to Dewey’s visit to China and was led by Dewey’s former student Tao Xingzhi as the Secretary-General. Cai Yuanpei, Hu Shi, Guo Bingwen, Chen Heqin, and other prominent Chinese educators and educational leaders became the core members of the Society. More importantly, John Dewey and Paul Monroe served as honorary board members and made significant recommendations in relation to the Society’s international activities. One of the Society’s original missions and tasks was to advocate and promote Dewey’s ideas and experiments in China. However, because of the turmoil in China at that time, the Society ceased to convene its annual meetings in 1926, and remained dormant for many years thereafter. Since its revival in 2011, it has become an increasingly important educational association in China, with Chu Zhaohui, a leading scholar on Tao Xingzhi and senior researcher at the Chinese Central Institute of Educational Sciences, as the Chairman of its Board of Directors.

To commemorate the centenary of John Dewey’s arrival in China in 1919 and his distinguished lectures in China from 1919 to 1921, the Chinese Education Improvement Society, together with the Columbia University Global Center in Beijing, initiated and convened not just one but three consecutive Dewey Forums in Beijing in the Spring of 2019, which attracted hundreds of Dewey scholars from all over China. The theme for the First Dewey Forum was “Dewey and Famous Chinese Educators,” with four keynote speakers and more than 100 Chinese scholars in attendance. The speakers recognized and honored the five most famous Chinese educators, Tao Xingzhi, Hu Shih, Chen Heqin, Jiang Menglin, and Guo Binwen, all of whom were Dewey’s students in China. These notable figures successfully transformed and implemented Dewey’s ideas in Chinese educational practices. The presenters summarized the major scholarship interests shared by Dewey and his Chinese students into seven areas: agreement on the importance of experimentalism in education; promotion of democratic and scientific education; emphasis on active East–West educational communication; belief in education as a means of social reform; emphasis on cultivating individuality; promotion of educational experiments; and emphasis on the connection between education and life. Tao Xingzhi was considered to be the best role model in terms of implementing Dewey’s theories in Chinese education. In light of this knowledge, Chu Zhaohui, China’s leading Tao scholar and chief organizer of the Forum, delivered a candid reevaluation...
of Dewey and Tao Xingzhi. He examined the close friendship and genuine trust between Dewey and Tao and praised Dewey’s strong support of Tao’s efforts in relation to political and educational reform in China. Chu observed that Dewey and Tao’s relationship in the field of education was one of theory and application, because Tao’s educational thoughts and practices represented the best application of Dewey’s theories in the Chinese context. Chu explained that Tao never surpassed Dewey in terms of theory development, either in breadth or in depth, but his application of Dewey’s ideas in Chinese educational practices was both creative and widespread, establishing a shining example for other educators in China (Chu, 2019). Following these positive interpretations, the First Dewey Forum participants called for continued dialogue and a deeper level of Dewey studies to provide strong theoretical underpinnings for the current educational reform in China (China Education Improvement Society, 2019).

The Second Dewey Forum in Beijing focused on “Dewey and Chinese School Education” as the major theme. Six keynote speeches by Chinese Dewey scholars were delivered to more than 120 educators from all over China at Capital Normal University. The scholars explored the current meanings of Dewey’s educational theories and observed that Dewey’s ideas were still relevant to Chinese education and society because there was great value in using his theories to identify, discuss, and resolve issues relating to Chinese education. Recognizing that the twenty-first century was not only an era of technology but also a special period for human development, the speakers maintained that humanism should be the guiding principle for the modernization of Chinese education and society. They observed that Dewey’s theories were consistent with this principle, as he advocated the use of scientific methods, reflective thinking, cooperation and social responsibility, a new form of individualism, democracy, and humanism. Furthermore, these scholars believed that Chinese schools could draw useful lessons from Dewey’s child-centered Laboratory Schools in Chicago, which implemented a non-graded, group-oriented, no-testing approach, and was facilitated by experts. The Second Dewey Forum participants advocated more extensive utilization of the rich resources provided by Dewey studies to improve Chinese education. As Chu Zhaohui concluded at the end of the Second Dewey Forum, the renewed warm embrace of Dewey’s educational theories in China was no accident, but the result of the internal needs of modern China (Ding, 2019a).

The Third Dewey Forum, the final one in the 2019 series, was held on the campus of Beijing Normal University, and attracted more than 150 participants from 50 educational institutions and other walks of life in China. “Dewey and Chinese Education” was the major theme, and more than 30 scholars delivered keynote speeches and panel presentations at the Forum. A.G. Rud,
then president of the American John Dewey Society, and Hope Leichter from Teachers College at Columbia University were unable to attend, but sent congratulatory video messages to the Forum. The presentations at this Forum demonstrated tremendous respect for Dewey and included highly positive evaluations of Dewey’s influence on Chinese education by leading scholars in Dewey studies in China (Ding, 2019b). Shan Zhonghui, a senior Dewey scholar from ECNU, presented a new interpretation of Dewey’s lectures in China, identifying four distinct characteristics of Dewey’s lectures: the freshness of his educational ideas; multiple examples to explain and illustrate his theories; use of good humor and ordinary or oral language in his presentations; and connection of his theories to Chinese educational reality. Wang Wenling from Nanjing Xiaozhung University, which was founded by Tao Xingzhi based on Dewey’s educational philosophy, as mentioned earlier, believed that Dewey’s philosophy of pragmatism, despite having aged over time, remained a useful tool for scholars and students who had returned to China after studying in the West in breaking down barriers in both traditional education and Western education and creating a “Chinese-style education” that is most suitable for China’s current educational conditions.

One of the most inspirational keynote speeches at the Third Dewey Forum was delivered by Liu Fangtong, a senior Dewey scholar and Founding Director of the Dewey Center at Fudan University. He has devoted considerable time during his academic career to studying Dewey’s philosophy, and was the chief editor of The Complete Works of John Dewey (published in Chinese), as noted earlier. Liu reviewed the historical background to Dewey’s visit to China, explained the political contexts underlying the initial warm reception and later rejection of Dewey during different periods in China’s recent history, examined the important characteristics of Dewey’s philosophy that were relevant to the harmonious development of the individual and society, and reaffirmed Dewey as an international educator who had exerted significant influence on Chinese education. Liu expressed his deep admiration of Dewey as a master of masters among Chinese educators, and regarded Dewey’s ideas as important sources of thought regarding the development of educational theories and practices in China. In fact, Liu played a critical role in reevaluating and rehabilitating Dewey in the 1980s, and helped to reestablish Dewey’s reputation in China as a great philosopher (Liu, 2019).

In summarizing the new interpretations and consensus that had been reached at the conclusion of the Third Dewey Forum, Chu Zhaohui removed any remaining doubts as to the importance of Dewey’s role in China’s educational modernization efforts, both in the past and today. He concluded that
if Chinese educators intended to continue their long march on the path of educational modernization, they must not ignore Dewey’s theories, and should consider Dewey’s ideas as valuable resources and effective problem-solving tools for the modernization of Chinese education. Chu and the other Forum participants expressed their firm belief that Dewey was “the front-runner in solving difficult problems in the modernization process because he has the richest thoughts and theories and has prepared the most solid foundation, thinking methods and technical tools.” Citing the newly published national plan, “Chinese Education Modernization 2035” (Chinese State Council, 2019), Chu pointed out that the nature of educational modernization was the modernization of the human being, that is, the transformation of human thoughts, thinking abilities, and socialization competencies. He viewed Dewey’s role as both fundamental and critical in reducing the resistance to change from both traditional and conservative forces, in stimulating human thinking, and in cultivating the modern being (Ding, 2019b). No other education conference in China has ever produced such bold statements and expressed such high hopes in relation to Dewey’s work.

Therefore, the significance of the three Dewey Forums that were held in Beijing in 2019 cannot be overestimated. It was the first time in the history of Chinese education that a forum in Dewey’s name had been convened in China. Further, no education association, either in China or anywhere else in the world, has organized three consecutive forums focused on one education scholar to gauge and celebrate his influence on education. As Shan Zhonghui enthusiastically announced in his keynote speech, the 2019 Dewey Forums in Beijing marked a “new period” in Dewey studies in China, reached a “new height,” and created a “new platform” for Dewey scholars in China (Shan, 2019).

9 Conclusion

One hundred years after his significant visit in China in 1919, Dewey’s lectures remain in print in Chinese, and his influence on Chinese education remains strong. The encounter between Dewey and China is one of the most fascinating episodes in the intellectual history of the twentieth century. Despite the difficulties and opposition he encountered, Dewey accomplished a lot during his visit to China, a fact recognized by both American and Chinese Dewey scholars. Among his greatest contributions, Dewey established a communication of minds between American and Chinese educators, encouraged the Chinese people to break away from the harmful elements of the old tradition,
and helped pave the way for Chinese education to move toward modernization and globalization. This is Dewey’s singular success, one that no other foreign visitor to China has ever achieved, although efforts to implement his ideas and develop an Eastern style of democracy in Chinese education were met with strong resistance and objections for long periods of time as a result of the drastic social and political changes that occurred in Chinese society in the decades following his visit. American scholars’ evaluation of the Dewey experiment in China has been ambivalent at best, and most Americans, including educators, remain unaware of Dewey’s connection with China. However, the centenary of Dewey’s arrival in China has stimulated vital dialogue between American and Chinese Dewey scholars, and Dewey’s spirit is now inspiring some American youth to follow his path. Despite this, most higher education institutions in the US are still not offering Dewey’s theories to students—including student teachers—in present-day courses.

In China, Dewey’s ideas were widely studied and eagerly implemented in Chinese education during the first 30 years after his visit, but the following 30 years witnessed severe criticism and the total abandonment of Dewey in China. However, Dewey received an open and warm reappraisal from Chinese educators in the 1980s after China began to open up to the outside world. While some Chinese critics still consider his political and philosophical positions to be unacceptable, most education scholars in China have recognized Dewey’s valuable contributions to the history of education and his significant influence on both Chinese and worldwide education. They have also recognized the worth of certain aspects of his educational philosophy, especially his ideas on child-centered and experience-based learning, his emphasis on reflective thinking and active communication, his advocacy for harmonious and associated living in a democratic society (and its manifestation in schools), and his focus on cultivating creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities in children, which are well-aligned with the current national education goals and recommendations for curriculum reform in China.

The revival of the China Education Improvement Society in 2011 marked the beginning of a new wave of enthusiasm in China for Dewey and his educational philosophy, as demonstrated by the publication of Dewey’s complete works in Chinese, the institutionalization of learning about Dewey’s works in Chinese education institutions, presentations and publications by leading education scholars on Dewey and China, and the recent Dewey Forums in Beijing, which have resulted in creative and positive interpretations of Dewey and his influence on Chinese education. However, traditional barriers and new challenges still exist for Dewey scholars in China as they strive to seek a third way—the Chinese way or the Eastern style of democracy. Further communication
between Chinese and American Dewey scholars is needed to form friendships and establish trust, thereby creating new grounds for collaboration.

As the US—China trade war continues to intensify, it is increasingly important that Dewey scholars and educators, as well as politicians and diplomats, on both sides “spend time and more time” together to develop friendships and cultivate deep mutual understanding, as Dewey did with the Chinese people when he visited China 100 years ago. There is great potential and many more opportunities now than previously existed for Chinese and American scholars to collaborate in their research and reform efforts. Future developments in China and the US may lead to more definitive and diverse appraisals of the Dewey experiment in Chinese education, but there is little doubt that Dewey and his ideas will continue to resonate in Chinese educational development and reform. As the scholars at the 2019 Dewey Forums in Beijing predicted, Dewey’s philosophy will continue to serve as a bridge for deep exchanges in the humanities between the US and China (Ding, 2019b). Dewey’s visit to China brought educators from both countries together in their pursuit of democratic aims in education, although they have clearly applied different methods and followed different paths over the last 100 years. Democracy cannot be achieved in one country alone, and will only flourish when it is established everywhere throughout the world, as Dewey sincerely expressed in his personal letter to Tao Xingzhi in 1944 (Su, 1996). Dewey’s statement could not be more apt in today’s world, even though there will always be new obstacles and challenges.

Acknowledgment

This paper is based on the author’s Dewey Lecture at the annual conference of the John Dewey Society, Toronto, April 5, 2019 and her earlier historical study of John Dewey’s influence on Chinese education. The author wishes to thank Vice President Huang Tao and Professor Chen Xian of Nanjing Normal University, President Wang Zenong and Dean Cao Huiying of Nanjing Xiaozhuang University, and Director Chi Tianliang of Nanjing Municipal Government Personnel Bureau for their support to the initial research for this study in Nanjing, China. Thanks also to Professor Philip W. Jackson and Professor A.G. Rud, former presidents of the John Dewey Society, for their encouragement to the presentations and publications of the study papers in the US. Special thanks to Lu Airong, Zhou Xiaohong and Ding Xiaona, visiting scholars at California State University, Northridge, for their assistance on references and translation, and to Dr. Zhang Huajun of Beijing Normal University for her useful suggestions of revision on the final draft of this manuscript.
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