

Reading Dewey's *Letters from China and Japan* (4): Exploration of Dewey's Impression in China With His Letters and His Book

Masaki Onuma

John Dewey had been staying in China from 1919 to 1921. During this period, he wrote letters to his daughter about his life in China. According to his letters, surely he enjoyed staying in China with observing Chinese culture, politics and life styles.

According to Kawashiri (2009, cited in Mori, 1992), Dewey was supposed to stay in China for only two to three weeks. However, the period of his staying in China was much longer than that. There is a great question; what caused Dewey to change his mind? This study explores the possible reason why he extended his period of stay through exploring his letters and his book of *Democracy and Education*.

Reviewing the reading materials of Dewey's, it can be presumed that Dewey might be impressed by Chinese grass-root activity. In fact, when he was in China on June 20th, 1919, he wrote his letter that "To think of kids in our country from fourteen on, taking the lead in starting a big cleanup reform politics movement and shaming merchants and professional men into joining them. This is sure some country." (Dewey, 1920, p. 247)

This study first discusses modern Chinese history and the New Culture Movement which were background of caused the activity. Then, it discusses his letters and his book to explore the reasons that Dewey changed his mind.

<Background 1: Chinese modern history>

China had undergone severe experiences in 18-19th century. The first to be noticed is First Opium War in 1842. It occurred between China and U.K., and China ceded Hong Kong to U.K. Continuously in 1844, China signed the Treaty of Aigun which China ceded the land north of the Amur River to Russia. Second Opium War happened in 1860: U.K. and French forces

Masaki Onuma (PhD, Beijing Normal University)

This paper is based on my presentation given at the session "Reading Dewey's Letters from China and Japan" at the 1st International Symposium on Global Citizenship Education "Restoring Learning to Daily Living: Global Citizenship and John Dewey" (22 October 2022, at Soka University).

looted Beijing and burned down the Old Summer Palace located in the Beijing. In Sino-French War in 1884, French colonized Vietnam. Moreover, in 1895, first Sino-Japanese War occurred and China signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki that China ceded to Japan Penghu, Taiwan and the Liaodong Peninsula. In 1900, the Battle of Peking broke out. Eight-Nation Alliance (Germany, Japan, Russia, Britain, France, the United States, Italy, and Austria-Hungary) conquered Beijing. The treaty required China to pay an indemnity of \$335 million (over \$4 billion in current dollars) plus interest over a period of 39 years.

In 1912, Nanjing Provisional Government of the Republic of China started, Sun Yat-Sen became Provisional President. While later, Chinese traditional government which was Qing Dynasty corrupted. China wasn't able to maintain imperial system which had reigned more than two-thousand years under this struggled situation. In 1913, Yuan Shikai took over the position of President and he governed China with a couple of military groups. Ironically, since Yuan was eager to be the emperor, he announced that he was the emperor. In addition, he took out a huge foreign loan without parliament's consent. In 1916, Yuan Shikai's death, a couple of military groups ruled China.

In 1914, World War I broke out. In 1915, Japan issued the Twenty-One Demands to the Republic of China, including demands for territory in Shandong, Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, and rights of extraterritoriality for Japanese citizens in China. In 1918, World War I ended. In 1919, Paris Peace Conference was held. Chinese people were all struggled under this turbulent period caused by Great Powers of the world.

<Background 2: The New Culture Movement>

In order to overcome the harsh situation, Chinese Great Writers enlightened Chinese people. They criticized classical Chinese ideas and promoted a new culture based upon progressive, modern and western concepts, such as democracy and science.

Chen Duxiu published the magazine of "*New Youth*" which was debating the causes of China's weakness as well as blaming on Confucius culture. Hu Shih, who studied at Columbia University under Dewey, promoted Written Vernacular Chinese which referred to forms of written Chinese based on spoken Chinese, instead of Classical Chinese. Lu Xun published "*A madman's diary*", "*The True Story of Ah Q*" etc., and insisted that people's ignorance caused miserable results. The movement was launched by Chinese intellectuals. They promoted new society and they impacted on youth, especially university students dramatically. To overcome the difficulties of China, The New Culture Movement was led by Chinese Great Writers.

<Background 3: China after 1919>

In January 1919, Paris Peace Conference was held in order to inaugurate the international settlement of the World War I. The Treaty of Versailles decided to allow Japan to retain territories in Shandong that had been surrendered to Germany. On May 4th, 1919, the May Fourth Movement occurred as a demonstrate against the pro-Japanese terms. Students gathered in front of Tiananmen to protest the Treaty of Versailles. During this protest, Chinese Government arrested several university students. Against this arrest, many students went on strike in Beijing. Furthermore, the students in the larger cities across China followed and went on strike. Patriotic merchants and workers joined protests. Furthermore, chancellors from thirteen universities arranged for the release of student prisoners. Consequently, Chinese representatives in Paris Conference refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles. The May Fourth Movement changed Chinese government's attitude and made them protest Great Powers.

In 18-19th century, China faced with hardships that the imperial government which continued for centuries corrupted and they were exploited by Great Powers. Under these hardships, the Chinese Great Writers educated Chinese people, then Chinese youth responded to them and encouraged and educated other Chinese people. Finally, they showed their power in the May Forth Movement.

<Dewey's impression in Chinese grass-root movement from his letters>

Dewey wrote his letters about the Chinese university students' activities in detail with deep affection. He wrote the letter on July 17th, 1919 : "it is said that the students were very successful during the strike in converting soldiers to their ideas. The boys at the High Normal said they were disappointed when they were let out of jail at the University because they had not converted more than half the soldiers." (Dewey, 1920, p. 286) Also, he mentioned on July 4th, 1919 that "remember these are boys, eighteen to twenty, and that they are carrying on their propaganda for their country; that the summer averages one hundred in the shade in Peking, and you'll admit there is some staff here." (Dewey, 1920, p. 265) On July 2nd, 1919, he said "To-day the report is that Chinse delegates refused to sign the Paris Treaty; the news seems too good to be true (···)." (Dewey, 1920, p. 258-259)

<What he wrote in "Democracy and Education" in 1916>

Before Dewey visited China, he published a book entitled "*Democracy and Education*" in 1916. It was three years earlier than his visiting China. In this book, he wrote that "we have seen that a community or social group sustains itself through continuous self-renewal, and that this renewal takes place by means of the educational growth of the immature members of the

group.” (Dewey, 1916, p.18)

Unpredictably in China, he had a chance to witness the self-renewal movement. It was the grass-root movement in 1919 that Chinese Great Writers educated the youth and the youth educated the ordinary people. It seems right to presume that he must be impressed and interested in observing the movement directly.

The other reason is that he wrote his letters with strong passion: “This is sure some country” (June 20th, 1919) , “there is some staff here” (July 4th, 1919), “the students were very successful during the strike” (July 17th, 1919) and “the news seems too good to be true” (July 2nd, 1919). His tone of the words were emotional and passionate obviously.

Moreover, he discussed in this book that “to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.” (Dewey, 1916, p.102) After May Fourth Movement, the strike was spread drastically. First, students in Beijing went on strike, next, students in the larger cities across China followed, then, merchants and workers followed. Lastly, Chinese government followed. The process of expanding the strike movement was exactly same with what he wrote in his book.

<Conclusion>

This study explores the Dewey's impressions in China. Although he planned to stay a couple of weeks, he stayed in China for few years. There is a question of what caused Dewey to change his mind. According to his letters and his book, it is obvious that what he wrote in his book was practiced in China. In other words, he published the book of *Democracy and Education* in 1916, and he indicated the theory of self-renewal movement of the society. In 1919, he had opportunities to observe the process of self-renewal movement in China. He must be so excited. When he discussed the grass-root movement in China, he utilized emotional expressions repeatedly. It is interpreted from these facts that because Dewey must be impressed by Chinese grass-root movement, he stayed longer than he planned.

References

- Dewey, J., & Dewey, A.C. (1920). *Letters from China and Japan*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Company.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. Retrieved from EdTechBooks.org.
- Kawashiri, F. (2009). Kyoto University Research Information Repository: 陶行知とデューイの訪中 – 民国初期中国教育史の一側面 . Retrieved from https://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2433/246457/1/20seiki_431.pdf