

The Dissemination of Dewey's Educational Ideas by Chinese Intellectuals in the Early 20th Century: An Example of the Activities of Early Marxists

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[Abstract] Dewey's visit was a major event in China in the early 20th century, and has exerted huge influence on the intellectual and education history of China. During their unprecedented presence in China for over 2 years, Dewey traveled to 11 provinces except Beijing and Shanghai, and gave over 200 speeches. Around the time when Dewey visited China, local intellectuals illustrated and spread his thoughts through magazines, newspapers and books. It has brought far-reaching influence. Early Chinese Marxists, such as Chen Duxiu (陈独秀), Mao Zedong (毛泽东), and Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江) were also subject to the influence of Dewey's educational ideas, and helped spread them in a direct or indirect way.

[Keywords] Dewey; educational ideals; Chinese intellectuals; early Marxists

In the early 20th century, China witnessed a conflict between old and new forces, a collision of Chinese and foreign ideas, and a situation of turmoil and great complexity. The modern transition of politics, society and culture occurred amidst internal strife and foreign aggression. In the field of education, various educational ideas from the West became widely circulated, especially those of John Dewey, a pioneer of pragmatism and the founder of the progressive education in the United States. After Dewey's visit to China in 1919, Chinese intellectuals, with unprecedentedly great passion, propagated his educational ideas. Among them, there were such early Marxists as Chen Duxiu (陈独秀), Mao Zedong (毛泽东), and Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江), who were involved in this process directly or indirectly.

I. Dewey's visit set off a wave in China

Dewey's visit was undoubtedly a major event in China in the early 20th century, and had far-reaching influence on the intellectual history of China. Dewey came to China by

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accident. He was invited here by Hu Shi and others because he was in Japan at that time. Dewey had no plans for his stay in China even on the ship heading for Shanghai. The inviters included Peking University, Shangzhi Society (尚志学会), China Public University (中国公学), New Society (新学会), education associations of Zhejiang and Jiangsu, Beijing Higher Normal School, Nanjing Higher Normal School, and others. ^[1] Dewey arrived in China on April 30, 1919 (May 1 according to another source). During the two years in China, the Deweys traveled to 11 provinces in China (including Hebei, Liaoning, Shanxi, Shandong, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong, but not Beijing and Shanghai), and gave more than 200 speeches on topics such as social and political philosophy, educational philosophy, history of Western thought, and ethics. These speeches were published in newspapers and periodicals such as *Morning News* (晨报), *New Wave* (新潮), *Shun Pao* (申报), and *New Education* (新教育), and finally became *Dewey's Lectures in China* (杜威五大讲演). The book was reprinted more than ten times and became popular for a time before Dewey's departure from China, and later published repeatedly. ^[2]

Dewey's influence was greatly felt throughout China roughly for the following reasons. First, Hu Shi (胡适), Jiang Menglin (蒋梦麟), Guo Bingwen (郭秉文), Tao Xingzhi (陶行知) and other students of Dewey who had studied at Columbia University occupied important positions in the academic world back then, and thus played a significant role in expanding Dewey's influence. Second, the May Fourth Movement took place soon after Dewey arrived in China. He was so greatly moved by the passion of students that he grew sympathetic with China and decided to stay here long for help. His ideas were spread by the movement. ^[3] Third, Dewey got unpaid for a long time, so groups of different backgrounds invited him for lectures. After 1920, rather than being active only in his students' circles, Dewey began to travel more in China, which helped expand his influence.

Dewey affected China profoundly, and vice versa. The trip to China gave Dewey, who had suffered economic and mental strain for a long time, a break. What he saw in China inspired him. Drastic changes in the Chinese society, after the May Fourth Movement in particular, made him more concerned about political issues and other aspects of reality. Dewey, a philosopher of scholarly nature, had since then engaged in active contact with Chinese students and ordinary people for two years. He gained a deeper understanding of this ever-changing society in the East, as well as political and social issues. Hu Shi (胡适) pointed out, "Dewey published monographs on many topics except political or social ones before his visit to China."^[4] In 1927, shortly after returning to the United States, Dewey published *The Public and Its Problems*, one of his most important works in political science in life. Dewey, an American, had a major influence on China, and, in return, China affected him profoundly. ^[5]

II. The dissemination of Dewey's works on education in China

Before Dewey came to China, Tao Xingzhi and others published articles on his works to popularize pragmatism. His arrival in China propelled republication of his works.

In 1911 before Dewey's visit to China, Liu Boming (刘伯明) translated "What is Thought" (the first chapter of *How We Think*) and had it published in *New Education* (新教育). It initiated the dissemination of Dewey's works about education in China. In 1917, Zhu Yuanshan (朱元善) (pen name Tianmin (天民)) published two introductory articles in the *Education Magazine* (教育杂志). In the article "Dewey's Philosophy of Education", he provided an outline of *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. In the article "Dewey's Schools of Tomorrow: The Education that Stresses Natural Development", he pointed out that *Schools of Tomorrow* has clarified "the fundamental principles that should be followed in primary education".^[6] At this stage, the dissemination of Dewey's writings about education served the new education movement. They were outlined in and popularized through articles mainly and sometimes with translations, which were found in more magazines than books.

After Dewey's visit to China, the dissemination of his works reached a climax in China. Shortly before Dewey's visit to China, Tao Xingzhi (陶行知) published an article entitled "An Introduction to Mr. Dewey's Educational Theory" in the magazine *New China* (新中国) in the order the 16 books by Dewey were published. Later it was distributed at the venues where Dewey gave his lectures. Dewey's lecture notes are published most frequently at this stage. They were mostly the outlines of *Democracy and Education* or introduction to Dewey's pragmatism. Meanwhile, nearly all his works were translated. Examples of articles translated included "The Democratic Conception in Education" (extracted from Chapter Seven of *Democracy and Education* and translated by Zhen Chang (真常)), "My Pedagogic Creed" (translated by Zheng Zonghai (郑宗海)), "How We Think" (translated by Zhao Naichuan (赵迺传)), "Democracy and Education" (translated by Zou Enrun (邹恩润)), "Interest and Effort in Education" (translated by Zhang Zuoshi (张佐时)), "Schools of Tomorrow" (translated by Li Xiaofeng (李小峯) and Pan Zinian (潘梓年)), "The Child and the Curriculum" (translated by Zhou Ganqing (周澍卿)), and "The School and Social Progress" (translated by TC). Books were also published such as: *The School and Society* (translated by Liu Hengru (刘衡如)), *Moral Principles in Education* (translated by Yuan Shangren (元尚仁)), *Democracy and Education* (translated by Chang Daozhi (常道直)), *The Child and the Curriculum* (translated by Zheng Zonghai (郑宗海)), *Schools of Tomorrow* (translated by Zhu Jingnong (朱经农) and Pan Zinian (潘梓年)), *Interest and Effort in Education* (translated by Zhang Yuqing (张裕卿) and Yang Weiwen (杨伟文)), and *Democracy and Education* (translated by Zou Enrun (邹恩润)). The dissemination could be felt in the teaching practice at Peking University and Beijing

Higher Normal School. In 1920, Dewey listed 9 reference books in the English language for undergraduates majored education at Peking University, such as *Democracy and Education*, *Schools of Tomorrow*, and *The School and Society*. In the autumn of the same year, Dewey delivered the course of "Philosophy of Education" at the Education Faculty of Beijing Higher Normal School with the textbook translated by Chang Daozhi (常道直) from *Democracy and Education*, which lasted for one academic year. In the autumn of 1921, Hu Shi taught the subject of "Selected Works of Dewey" at Peking University.^[6]

III. The dissemination of Dewey's educational thought by early Chinese Marxists

In China, "early Marxists" mainly refer to progressive intellectuals that accepted Marxism before the First National Congress of the Communist Party of China (1921) and made significant contributions to the founding of the Communist Party of China. Some believe that communists in the early days of the founding of the Party should also fall under the term, but no consensus has been reached in the academic circles. It takes a long time for the development and transformation of ideas, and the practical activities before and after that see a certain continuity, so it seems reasonable to allow for a large time span for the study of ideas and activities of early Marxists. The study will be placed in the historical period from the early 20th century to the failure of the Second Chinese Revolution (1927) in this paper. As space is limited, Chen Duxiu (陈独秀), Mao Zedong (毛泽东) and Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江) will be primarily studied in the paper, and how they interpreted and popularized Dewey's educational thought will be discussed.

Chen Duxiu (陈独秀) spoke highly of Dewey's pragmatic pedagogy. *New Youth* (新青年) was the pioneer in spreading Marxism during the May Fourth Movement period. Dewey's pragmatism has been discussed in Issue 4, Volume 6. Later, "Dewey's Lectures" were published in Issue 1, 2, 3, and 4 of Volume 7 of *New Youth*. It can be seen that Dewey's pragmatism had a great influence on editors of this magazine. In March 1920, Chen Duxiu (陈独秀) wrote in "The Shortcomings in Education: A Lecture at the Jiangsu Provincial Education Conference" that "Dewey's most important speeches in China were not about ethics or sociology, but about education."^[7] Chen Duxiu (陈独秀) admired Dewey's democratic ideas in education, and believed that the essence spirit of new education lied in the society and the masses rather than the individual or the nobility.^[8] He said in "The Spirit of New Education: A Lecture at Wuchang Normal School": "Education is closely related to society. If society becomes independent of education, human knowledge will not be developed. Without the development, the national culture will be doomed. …… It can be seen that the society instead of individuals should be the focus of education."^[7] If education is mainly provided for individuals, the

effectiveness of cultural popularization will be reduced and education for the masses hindered. Chen Duxiu (陈独秀) also highly applauded Dewey's educational ideas about placing children and students at the center and running middle schools. In "What is New Education?" A Lecture at Guangdong Normal School", he said that it is "the spirit of new education."^[9] Chen Duxiu (陈独秀) also agreed with Dewey's view that "a school is a society". He said: "Students and schools in the eyes of ordinary people across the society are luxuries and ornaments rather than necessities."^[9] He believed that this kind of education would lead to the adverse effects including a large number of useless people, and the weakening of education. Consequently, the society would not believe in education, and hence hinder the development of education. To remove the drawbacks, "the only way is to integrate society and education, and build education on the needs of society."^[9] He added that "according to the concept of new education, all schools are set up for the society, not for certain students. From universities to kindergartens, all libraries, laboratories, and museums should be open to the public, so that everyone in the society can enjoy them. Only in this way can education and society be integrated. Only in this way can society be made a big school and a school a small society. Only in this way can school be turned into society, and vice versa."^[9] As Dewey gave a speech in Xiamen at the invitation of Xiamen University in March 1921, Chen Duxiu (陈独秀), then chairman of the Guangdong Provincial Education Committee, "made a call to him and invited him to Guangdong for a visit."^[10] On May 2, Chen Duxiu (陈独秀) hosted Dewey's speech at the Guangdong Normal School, and gave an introduction Dewey's academic background.^[11]

Among the educational ideas from abroad, Mao Zedong (毛泽东) was most interested in Dewey's. On the evening of March 17, 1920, Mao Zedong (毛泽东) paid a visit to Li Jinxi (黎锦熙), and the two discussed the schools of modern philosophy. According to Li Jinxi's comments made in 1952 and recollections in 1967, they talked about Bergson, Russell and Dewey.^[12] In a letter to Li Jinxi (黎锦熙) on June 7, Mao Zedong (毛泽东) wrote: "I've been studying English, philosophy, and newspaper recently, just the three kinds. I've proceeded from the "three modern philosophers" to other schools."^[12] Dewey made more than 200 academic reports across China after his arrival in April 1919. Mao Zedong (毛泽东) attended the lecture on Dewey hosted by Huang Yanpei (黄炎培) during his stay in Shanghai in 1920. In October 1920, Dewey and other cultural figures came to Changsha to give speeches. Mao Zedong (毛泽东) attended and also served as the recorder of those by Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培), Yang Duanliu (杨端六) and Wu Zhihui (吴稚晖). On July 21, 1919, Mao Zedong (毛泽东) published the "Process of the Establishment of the Society of Sound Teachings (健学会)" in the first issue of the supplement to *Xiangjiang Review*, illustrating the rules for the society are to "study and disseminate the latest academic ideas". He listed the lectures organized by the

society, such as that titled “adopting Dewey’s educational philosophy”, and acknowledged it by writing “it is transmitted so fast and produces so great benefits that its influence should be immeasurable.” In the “Declaration of Xiangtan Society for the Advancement of Education”, he said: “Dr. Dewey came from the United States to the East, and his new educational theories deserve our study. The county is so cut off from the outside world, and completely ignorant of the external situation. The leaderships are shallow and stubborn, and particularly fatuous and ignorant. If the trend of thought cannot be turned, the cause of education will be doomed.”^[13] On July 14, 1919, Mao Zedong (毛泽东) talked about the new trend in various fields of modern ideology and culture in the manifesto of *Xiangjiang Review*, and pointed out “the trend refers to democracy in education” and “experimentalism in ideology”.^[14] He proposed that “Dewey’s theories of education” are “completely applicable” to academic research.^[14] On September 1, 1919, Mao Zedong (毛泽东) developed the “Articles of the Issue Research Association”, proposing 144 issues under 71 categories to be addressed for the then China. These issues were related to politics, economy, culture, society, national defense, foreign affairs, science and technology, etc. Those about education came top, involving 17 specific ones, such as education popularization (compulsory education), secondary education, specialized education, university education, social education, compilation of textbooks on spoken language, teaching of Chinese language and liberal arts at the secondary school, non-punishment, abolition of examinations, improvement of teaching methods at all levels, knowledge, health and salary of primary school teachers, and development and revision of the educational system. The 16th specific issue was about dispatch of students for oversea study, and the last issue was “how to put into practice Dewey’s theories of education” listed separately.^[14] Although this “issue research association” was not materialized eventually, it reflected how he thought about educational issues. In September 1920, Mao Zedong (毛泽东) set up a “Culture Book Club” (文化书社) in Changsha. On November 10, he wrote an article titled “Announcement of Culture Book Club to Learners” with a list of recommended books, magazines and newspapers. Among the 61 books he recommended, there were four by Dewey alone, including *Dewey’s Lectures in China*, *Experimentalism*, *The Trend of Modern New Education* and *The Development of American Democracy*. Dewey was the most frequently recommended author in the list. Mao also recommended books on education and psychology such as *The Republic*, *An Outline of Psychology*, *Modern Psychology*, and *Society and Education*.^[14]

Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江) was deeply influenced by Dewey’s theories of pragmatistic education in his early days of research. In the article “Education Should Be Practical”, Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江) has specified that the education at schools today “is oriented to the impractical and repeating, but renders students mechanical and lifeless. I am afraid that after graduation

they will go astray, not knowing how to handle practical issues.”^[15] So how to remedy it? “Pragmatism is the solution.”^[15] He also listed various reasons for resorting to pragmatism, and concluded: “If the school adopts pragmatism, people will tend to be practical and abandon hypocrisy. Only when one becomes practical will he be diligent, thrifty and self-restraint, and able to avoid waste and corrupt practice. It is beneficial to oneself even if he doesn’t pursue benefits. Only when one becomes practical will he be well trained mentally, and overcome affectedness and evil thoughts. It helps one brace up even if he doesn’t intend to do so.”^[15] Resorting to pragmatism enabled the schools in China to cultivate students of practice and great use, who could follow the trend of the world and save the critical situation in the 20th century. These statements have shown how Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江) believed in pragmatism. Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江) cited Dewey’s principle of “seeking knowledge through action” to demonstrate the necessity of involving students in social activities. In terms of personality development, he was also influenced by Dewey’s child-centered theory. He totally denied the classroom system with scheduled courses and a time limit for graduation, and believed that it was like mass production or the operation of machines based on a certain model. It was mass production and quite anarchical. It did not care about the way out for graduates. It just aimed for recruitment of students and sending them to the society in batches. As a result, graduates would be unemployed, causing social disruption. The equalization between classroom system and scholastic year system would strangle students’ individuality, leading to a major contradiction that cannot be eliminated with school teaching in the capitalist society. Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江) believed that the classroom system hinders personality development, which shows that he was influenced by the theory about free development of personality among the bourgeoisie. From 1919 to 1922, Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江) published at least 13 articles and translations on American education in magazines such as *Education Tide* (教育潮), *Student Magazine* (学生杂志), and *Youth World* (少年世界). Back then, the United States was experiencing the rise of the progressive education movement under the leadership of Dewey, “founder of progressive education”. For example, Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江) published “Recent Trends in Education in the United States” in Issue 1, Volume 14, *Journal of Education* (教育杂志). He detailed the progressive education experiment, reform of the school system and innovation of teaching methods in the United States, as a reference for the Chinese education circles at that time. Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江) also cited Dewey’s new “three centers” of education to demonstrate the necessity of actively involving students in social activities, extracurricular sports and the development of individuality.

In June 1919, to further arouse the public and promote the “May Fourth” patriotic movement, Chen Zhidu (谌志笃) and Ma Jun (马骏), president and vice president of the

Student Union of secondary schools and above, asked Zhou Enlai (周恩来) to be the chief editor of *Tianjin Student Union News* (天津学生联合会报). Zhou Enlai accepted it with pleasure. On July 12, 1919, the foreword to *Tianjin Student Union News* (天津学生联合会报) by Zhou Enlai was published on Issue 35 of *Daily Journal of Nankai* (南开日刊). It has referred to Dewey's experimentalism - "And now the latest trend of thought in the world is about 'experimentalism'. Students should especially apply what they have learned to experiments."^[16] Li Dazhao (李大钊), Qu Qiubai (瞿秋白), Yun Daiying (恽代英) and others also mentioned Dewey's theories in letters and diaries.

IV. Conclusion

Early Marxists outlined and vigorously disseminated modern state systems and social and political ideology since the beginning of the 20th century. Education was only a part of it, but Dewey's educational thought occupied an important position. The popularization of Dewey's educational ideas by them was seen mainly before or in early days of their acceptance of Marxism. Because, before accepting Marxism, most of them were sincere believers of the theory of "saving the nation through education". They hoped to transform Chinese education by learning from broad, and to enlighten the people and build a new country through new education. During the May Fourth Movement, most of the young people in China advocated an gradualist approach to reforms, and were attracted to Dewey's reformist ideas.

Chen Duxiu (陈独秀), Mao Zedong (毛泽东), Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江) and other early Marxists were mostly engaged in education. According to the authors' investigation, of the 53 Party members across China when the first National Congress of the Communist Party of China was convened, 25 served as teachers (but not as teachers at the labor-oriented continuation schools before they graduated), accounting for 47.2%¹. Among the 12 representatives of the first National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 7 were teachers (Mao Zedong (毛泽东), He Shuheng (何叔衡), Dong Biwu (董必武), Chen Tanqiu (陈潭秋), Chen Gongbo (陈公博), Li Da (李达) and Li Hanjun (李汉俊)). After they truly accepted Marxism, they began to abandon the idea of saving the nation through education. They believed that learning from

¹ Those who served in teaching included: Bao Huiseng (包惠僧), Chen Duxiu (陈独秀), Chen Gongbo (陈公博), Chen Tanqiu (陈潭秋), Chen Wangdao (陈望道), Deng Zhongxia (邓中夏), Dong Biwu (董必武), He Shuheng (何叔衡), Huang Fusheng (黄负生), Li Da (李达), Li Dazhao (李大钊), Li Hanjun (李汉俊), Li Zhong (李中), Lin Boqu (林伯渠), Liu Zitong (刘子通), Mao Zedong (毛泽东), Shao Lizi (邵力子), Shen Yanbing (沈雁冰), Shen Zemin (沈泽民), Tan Pingshan (谭平山), Tan Zhitang (谭植棠), Yang Mingzhai (杨明斋), Yuan Zhenying (袁振英), Zhang Shenfu (张申府) and Zhao Zijian (赵子健). Furthermore, Deng Enming (邓恩铭), Gao Junyu (高君宇), He Mengxiong (何孟雄), Li Meigeng (李梅羹), Liu Renjing (刘仁静), Luo Zhanglong (罗章龙), Wang Jinmei (王尽美), Zhang Guotao (张国焘), Zhang Tailei (张太雷) and some others taught in labor-oriented continuation schools when they were students or after graduation.

abroad in education could not fundamentally solve China's problems, so they became revolutionaries.

Furthermore, they started to borrow from Russia after its success of socialist revolution instead of foreign countries on an extensive scale. As Mao Zedong (毛泽东) said: "The Chinese have learned a lot from the West, but it doesn't work, and the ideal cannot come true . . . The launch of the October Revolution brought us Marxism-Leninism. The October Revolution helped the progressive figures across the world as well those across China. They resorted to a proletarian world view as the tool to look at the fate of the country, and to reconsider their own problems. Follow the path the Russians have walked - that is the conclusion."^[17] Under such circumstances, early Chinese Marxists parted ways with Dewey in the mid- and late-1920s and embarked on another road to save the country.

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