

## CHAPTER 1

# DEWEY AND MAY FOURTH CHINA



### Enacting a Historical Drama

The American philosopher John Dewey visited China in May 1919 and departed in July 1921. Coinciding with the well-known May Fourth movement, Dewey's two-year visit demarcated a significant episode in the history of intellectual exchange between China and the United States. In a narrow sense, the May Fourth movement refers to the student demonstration in Beijing on May 4, 1919, in protest of the Versailles Peace Conference. In a broader sense, it represented a vast modernization movement from 1917 through 1921, which sought to reform China through intellectual and social means.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, history creates its own dramas. Had the movement not occurred in May 1919, Dewey might not have lingered in China for two years and two months. To understand the significance of Dewey's encounter with May Fourth China—where it all began and how it unfolded—we need to place his visit in a larger historical context, namely, the history of contact between China and the modern West.

China began to enter truly into the Western consciousness in the sixteenth century as a land of tea and a potential kingdom of God. At the beginning of their contact, the West was a learner as well as a suppliant. It attempted to seek close relations with China to advance its trade and enrich its culture.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, China long remained indifferent to Western influence. In 1793 a British ambassador arrived in China to establish formal diplomatic relations and open more sea ports for trade. However, in his letter to British King George III, the Ching Emperor Qianlong stated, "we have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the

slightest need of your country's manufactures." He wrote to the British king, "Simply act in conformity with our wishes by strengthening your loyalty and swearing perpetual obedience so as to ensure that your country may share the blessings of peace."<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, peace was not to follow from the emperor's complacent, isolationist stance in the face of increasing aggression on the part of foreign traders and diplomats. The glorious past of Chinese civilization was soon to pale before the technological advancement of the West. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, China faced a series of military defeats, starting with the first Opium War with Great Britain (1839–1842), continuing with the second Opium War with Great Britain and France (1856–1860), and culminating in the most humiliating of all, the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), in which China fell at the hands of a neighbor who for centuries had paid tribute to the imperial court of China and revered her as a cultural model. These devastating defeats led to the signing of an array of unequal treaties that forced China to concede many of her territorial and sovereignty rights. Barely a century after the Qianlong emperor's edict, the young Guangxu emperor issued a new imperial statement in 1898, acknowledging that "the methods of government inaugurated by Sung and Ming dynasties, upon investigation, reveal nothing of any practical use. . . . Changes must be made to accord with the necessities of times."<sup>4</sup> The transformation of China's attitude toward the West was most evident in the 1901 edict in which the Empress Dowager was reported to have recognized "the necessity of appropriating the good qualities of foreign nations" so that "the shortcomings of China may be supplemented, and that the experiences of the past may serve a lesson for the future."<sup>5</sup>

The Opium War with Great Britain marked a turning point in the history of contact between China and the West. Before the war, the exchange had always been on China's terms, but after the war, it was on the West's terms. Antiforeign feelings naturally arose. In 1900 the Boxer Uprising erupted, starting as a peasant uprising in Shandong that aimed to drive foreigners out of China. The so-called boxers practiced martial arts and believed that certain talismans would protect them from foreign firearms. The movement gradually spread to Beijing, where the boxers, encouraged by Empress Dowager, began to burn down churches and foreign residences and to kill Chinese Christians and Western missionaries. Finally, internationally organized troops wrested control of Beijing from the boxers and released all hostages, thus putting an end to this violent and disastrous confrontation between Chinese and foreigners.<sup>6</sup> The Boxer Uprising resulted not only in the imperial court's reform but also in a settlement that required China to pay a huge indemnity to Russia, Germany, France, Great Britain, and the United States. Nonetheless, at this low point in Sino-Western relations, Western powers did not have

a uniform approach to China. During the Boxer crisis, they reacted “with varying degrees of sternness toward the Chinese.”<sup>7</sup> The U.S. government was sympathetic to the Chinese while attempting to protect its own interests. A few years after the signing of the final settlement, the U.S. government returned a large portion of its share of the indemnity payments—on the condition that the money should be used to fund scholarships for study in the United States.

One of the most important episodes in the history of intellectual exchange between China and the United States was to grow out of this effort of the U.S. government to promote the education of China’s young elites. Hu Shih, Dewey’s chief disciple in China, received a scholarship from the indemnity funds to study in the United States in 1910. Had it not been for the scholarship, Hu could not have studied at Columbia under the tutelage of Dewey.<sup>8</sup> Had it not been for Hu’s close acquaintance with Dewey, Dewey could not have been the first foreign scholar to be formally invited to lecture in China in 1919. Nonetheless, we have so far answered only half of a puzzle about Dewey’s encounter with China, namely, what brought Hu Shih to Dewey. The other half of the puzzle concerns what initially brought Dewey to the Far East.

In the fall of 1918, Dewey was on a sabbatical leave from Columbia University and was teaching at the University of California at Berkeley. Because Dewey and his wife, Alice, were geographically nearer to Asia than they would otherwise have been, they thought they might as well take this opportunity and travel to Japan in the spring. Dewey also agreed to this plan because this trip might help cure Alice’s longtime depression over the death of their son on a trip to Italy.<sup>9</sup> When two of Dewey’s Japanese acquaintances learned that he was planning a trip to Japan, they arranged for him to deliver a series of lectures at Tokyo Imperial University. When Hu Shih and other former students of Dewey at Columbia University learned of Dewey’s visit to Japan, they tried to contact him there and invited him to spend a year in China as a visiting scholar. Dewey was very glad to receive their invitation. He entertained the idea of visiting China in the summer before returning to the United States, but he did not know how long he could stay. Columbia University might not grant him a leave of absence for a full year. However, this seemed like an attractive plan to Dewey because he thought, “In a year one could begin to learn something of the East.”<sup>10</sup> Even though Dewey received the notification from Columbia on April 15 that his leave of absence was approved, he did not promise to stay a year in China until he arrived there in person. He needed to evaluate the prospects in China to make an informed decision.

This was not an easy decision. Dewey told his children, “Every other day I have cold feet about the whole proposition” because many people

warned him about making contract with the Chinese.<sup>11</sup> Dewey had financial concerns because he “had always been close to being poor.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, he could not have afforded the trip to Japan if his close friend, Albert C. Barnes, had not offered financial support. Barnes proposed to pay Dewey a monthly stipend on the condition Dewey “make a report on Japan as a factor in the future international relation.”<sup>13</sup> Apart from financial insecurity, Dewey was also concerned about the program his disciples were arranging for him. In a letter to his son, Dewey wrote:

My former Chinese students seem to be making as elaborate plans for our reception as we have enjoyed here. The only trouble is that I shall have to lecture all the time to help even up. I don't know the program exactly, but I know it calls for lectures in Shanghai, Nanking and Peking and I assume other places. You look up your geography and you will see how far apart the places are.<sup>14</sup>

Although Dewey had mixed feelings about the proposed plan of his one-year visit in China, Hu Shih was busy laying the groundwork for his reception.

On May 1, 1919, Dewey expressed excitement upon arrival in China. “We are going to see more of the dangerous daring side of life here I predict,” he wrote. “We are very obviously in the hands of young China. What it will do with us makes us laugh to anticipate.” He added, “Nothing worries us. . . . We ought to have a very good time. Quite unlike anything in Japan.”<sup>15</sup> For Dewey, Japan seemed like “a land of reserves and reticence” (MW 11: 174).<sup>16</sup> He was delighted to find that the social atmosphere in China was much more open and free flowing. The significant differences Dewey perceived between Japan and China led him to remark, “every American who goes to Japan ought also to visit China—if only to complete his education” (MW 11: 179). Dewey was right about the “dangerous daring side of life” in China. Three days after he made this remark, Dewey learned of a serious student revolt that broke out in Beijing.

On May 4, 1919, from which the May Fourth movement took its name, more than 3,000 students in Beijing held a mass demonstration against the decision of the Versailles Peace Conference to transfer German concessions in Shantung to Japan. With their dream of world peace shattered by this unjust decision, the students were mortified and outraged. To protest against Japanese imperialism and government corruption, they took to the streets, burned the house of one corrupt, pro-Japanese official, and physically assaulted another. The students' expression of patriotism and zeal for reform triggered similar demonstrations throughout China in the few weeks that followed. Several students were killed in these incidents, and many were arrested. In big cities, people went on general strikes to

support the students and promoted boycotts against Japanese goods. Seeing that public opinion was on the side of the students, the government agreed to release those who were jailed. Nevertheless, this was not enough to appease the students. They refused to leave the jail unless the government agreed to dismiss corrupt officials, reject the signing of the Versailles peace treaty, and allow freedom of speech at public gatherings.

Dewey's response to the May Fourth movement was more than enthusiastic; the social energies being released galvanized him. As Dewey wrote to his children in June 1919, "never in our lives had we begun to learn as much as in the last four months. And the last month particularly, there has been too much food to be digestible."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the May Fourth movement was China's gift to Dewey. It kept him excited, involved, puzzled, and, at times, frustrated. It was also intellectual bait that enticed Dewey to stay in China for a full year, and later, to extend his stay for a second year. Dewey said, "To the outward eye roaming in search of the romantic and picturesque, China is likely to prove a disappointment. To the eye of the mind it presents the most enthralling drama now anywhere enacting" (MW 11: 215). On the Chinese stage, Dewey was both a spectator and a player. His roles were multiple, depending on who was directing, watching, and judging. However, the existing literature fails to capture the full story of Dewey's visit in China.

### **Rethinking Dewey's Visit in China**

The 1920s demarcates an important period in the life of John Dewey: his trips to Japan, China, Russia, Mexico, and Turkey undoubtedly broadened his horizon and enriched his understanding of world cultures. Of all the foreign countries Dewey visited, China is where he stayed the longest and about which he wrote the most extensively. However, this particular phase in the life and work of Dewey has been largely ignored and, even when taken seriously, misunderstood. Compared to the huge bulk of literature on Dewey and his voluminous works, studies on Dewey's encounter with China are meager. Only two major books have been published, and only one issue has been raised and studied, namely, how Dewey influenced China.

The first book was published in 1973, *Lectures in China, 1919–1920*. It originated from a research project of the East–West Center to translate Dewey's lectures into English. In their introduction to the book, Clopton and Ou assert that Dewey's influence on Chinese education was "profound and extensive."<sup>18</sup> According to Ou, "[n]o dissenting views were ever voiced during the time of Dewey's visit nor for many years afterwards. Dewey became the highest educational authority in China."<sup>19</sup> The second book, Barry Keenan's *The Dewey Experiment in China*, was

published in 1977. Keenan claims that “Deweyan experimentalism, as a way of thinking, as a way of acting politically, and as a component of democratic education, offered no strategies his followers could use to affect political power.”<sup>20</sup> Owing to a serious lack of subsequent research, Keenan’s book has been regarded as the single most authoritative account of Dewey’s visit in China.

However, the conclusions of these early works—that Dewey contributed greatly to the modernization of Chinese education but failed to influence political change in China—are seriously problematic. Ou’s claim about Dewey’s influence on Chinese education, if not entirely inadequate, is simplistic at best because it is primarily based on the evidence of external institutional changes. According to Suzanne Pepper, the Chinese school system from 1900 to 1937 was in constant flux; China’s education reform was characterized by a superficial copying of foreign educational systems—first Japanese, then American, and French.<sup>21</sup> No data are available to ascertain how these policy changes affected actual classroom practices.

Although a pioneering historical study, Keenan’s book provides only superficial treatment of Dewey. He focuses largely on the frustrated attempts of Dewey’s disciples to apply his ideas to the reform of China, while treating Dewey and his philosophy as distant background. Keenan fails to do justice to Dewey as a philosopher by ignoring his unique perspective on what was happening to and around him. Above all, the assumption about “the Dewey experiment”—that his visit was intended to bring about dramatic change—makes Dewey an easy target. It is not fair to expect a foreign philosopher to resolve the social and political problems of China. Although Keenan’s underlying portrait of Dewey as a savior may have captured the wishful thinking of many Chinese at that time, it was inconsistent with Dewey’s character and his own intentions. Dewey would not want his ideas to be simply accepted and copied. In “Transforming the Mind of China,” written in late 1919, Dewey clearly stated that China’s development toward democracy “must be a transforming growth from within, rather than either an external superimposition or a borrowing from foreign sources” (MW 11: 213). In a letter he wrote to a colleague at Columbia University, Dewey perceived his “influence” as nothing more than “a sort of outside reinforcement . . . to the young or liberal element . . . in spite of its vagueness.”<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, under the influence of these early studies, Dewey scholars today have serious misconceptions about his visit to China. In his influential book, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1991), Robert Westbrook cites Keenan’s critique of Dewey and comments that “Chinese Deweyans suffered from the same strategic weakness as Dewey’s own hopes to make the school the unsteeped church of democracy.”<sup>23</sup> In *John*

*Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (1995), Alan Ryan accepts the view about Dewey's immense popularity in China and attributes it to the inherent commonalities between Dewey's vision of democracy and "Confucian ideals of family and community loyalty."<sup>24</sup> Ryan's explanation is problematic in that he fails to consider that the May Fourth movement was noted for its antitraditionalism. In fact, Dewey was well received because he was thought to represent an alternative to Confucianism. Ryan also assumes the similarities between Dewey and Confucius to be the reason why Dewey was more popular than Bertrand Russell, who was also visiting China at that time. However, the assumption about Dewey's greater popularity remains to be examined.

A survey of the existing literature leaves one with the impression that no interesting issues beyond the extent of Dewey's influence on China are worth examining. The important question of what Dewey was experiencing, thinking, and learning while he was in China has not been addressed. According to Dewey's own daughter, his time in China "had a deep and enduring influence upon him."<sup>25</sup> No matter what influence Dewey may have had on China, this visit was a vital part of his own education. As Dewey himself wrote in a letter, "I prize highly the unusual opportunity to get some acquaintance with Oriental thought and conditions."<sup>26</sup> In one article Dewey stated, "Simply as an intellectual spectacle, a scene for study and surmise, for investigation and speculation, there is nothing in the world today—not even Europe in the throes of reconstruction—that equals China. History records no parallel" (MW 13: 94). The intellectual interest China presented to Dewey was indeed phenomenal. However, neither Keenan's book nor subsequent studies address Dewey's own learning in China. In his recent biography of Dewey, *The Education of John Dewey* (2002), Jay Martin writes that Dewey "had become a changed person, or more precisely, an evolving person" after his visit to China, but Martin does not elaborate specifically on how Dewey was changed.<sup>27</sup> We now need to ask the question of how China may have influenced Dewey rather than how Dewey influenced China.

My book attempts to answer several important questions that have remained largely unexamined. For instance, how was Dewey received and understood by the Chinese? What were Dewey's own thoughts and reflections on his experiences in China? How did the visit relate to the larger context of his life and work? How did it affect the subsequent development of Dewey's philosophy? The testimony of Dewey's Chinese disciples and supporters have greatly influenced current scholarly opinion. A study of archival documents in China reveals that left-wing radicals and right-wing traditionalists received Dewey's ideas critically. To explore Dewey's learning experiences in China, we need to look into the letters Dewey exchanged with his children, colleagues, and friends

during his stay. We also need to examine some forty articles Dewey wrote for the *New Republic* and *Asia*, which Walter Lippmann praised as “models of what political reporting ought to be.”<sup>28</sup> Alan Ryan was wrong to assume that these articles merely dealt with “momentarily important issues that now interest only the historians of international relations.”<sup>29</sup> A close reading of these articles, in conjunction with a careful study of Dewey’s political writings, shows that his visit to China had a significant impact on the development of his social and political philosophy.

My book draws heavily on historical materials that have been made available through a research trip to China and through the publication of Dewey’s lifetime correspondence. These materials do not simply add to the pool of evidence already available; they allow us to reread formerly available materials from new perspectives. They enable us to unravel the complexities and volatilities of Dewey’s reception in China and the richness of his own experiences. In short, these materials help deepen our understanding of Dewey’s encounter with China, especially where it concerns his reception by the general public, his own learning, and its impact on his philosophy.

### **The Encounter between Dewey and China: Then and Now**

The encounter between Dewey and China in the 1920s was characterized by ambivalences, uncertainties, and changes on both sides. Faced with challenges from the West, Chinese intellectuals had initially sought to acquire Western technology and implement Western institutions. Later, they realized that they had to study the ideas that inform Western development and practice. This meant that Chinese intellectual tradition could no longer remain intact and unimpaired. On the basis of this realization, the May Fourth intelligentsia savagely attacked their Confucian tradition. Early opposition to this antitraditionalist, iconoclastic trend was feeble. However, toward the end of the May Fourth period, especially after 1921, traditionalist sentiments, fermented by nationalistic feelings, were beginning to gain momentum.<sup>30</sup> Dewey correctly characterized the intellectual landscape as vexed by “confusion, uncertainty, mutual criticism and hostility among the various tendencies.” During the two years of his stay, Dewey came into contact with these contending ideologies that made Young China an “ambiguous” term, signifying “all kinds of contradictory aspirations” (MW 13: 112). Examining the reception of Dewey’s ideas in China will show how these uncertainties and contradictions among Chinese intellectuals affected their views of Dewey.

Although Chinese intellectuals had ambivalent attitudes toward the West, Dewey had his doubts about how the United States should respond to China, or rather, how the United States could help China.



As demonstrated herein, Dewey was trying to understand China and its precarious position in the international world, while Chinese intellectuals were trying to understand Dewey and his position in their ideological battles. Dewey was eventually able to understand China on its own terms and to propose thoughtful suggestions concerning the United States' responsibility to China. On the other hand, many Chinese created images of Dewey on their own terms to meet their own needs. Changes in Dewey's views about China resulted from his own learning and reflection, whereas shifting views of Dewey among Chinese intellectuals reflected their deep-seated frustrations with contemporary events that led either to increasing radicalism or to conservatism.

The dialogue between Dewey and China has been ongoing and tends to be shaped by the historical circumstances and dominant ideologies of each era. In the 1920s, Chinese opinions of Dewey reflected their own vexed interests in liberalism, neotraditionalism, and Marxism. In the 1930s and 1940s, as China underwent a series of domestic and international wars, a natural eclipse of interest in Dewey occurred. Since the establishment of the Communist regime in 1949, the dialogue between Dewey and China took a drastic turn. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese Communist government launched a large-scale campaign to purge the pragmatic influences of Hu Shih and Dewey. During this period, pragmatism was eschewed as an evil influence of Western imperialism and capitalism. In the 1980s, due to the Reform and Open Door policy of China, the dialogue about Dewey was revived.<sup>31</sup> Since then, Chinese scholars have started to reevaluate Dewey and pragmatism.<sup>32</sup> In fact, between 1999 and 2001, three collections of Dewey's lectures in China were reprinted. At the turn of the twenty-first century, China is ready to review and rethink her past. Before we applaud the resurgence of scholarly interest in Dewey and his influence on Chinese philosophy and modern education, we need to return to the original encounter in the 1920s and explore the unique story of Dewey's visit from his own perspective as a teacher and a learner.

### **Overview of Upcoming Chapters**

The chapters that follow present a combination of biography and philosophy to correct misrepresentations of Dewey in the existing literature and to cast a new light on his philosophy. Although my study draws on the intellectual and political history of China, particularly during the May Fourth era, I do not wish to suggest that it is a complete account of that period. I offer my interpretations as an attempt to understand what happened to Dewey in China. Therefore, I focus on the views of Dewey and those directly or indirectly associated with him.

Chapter two examines Dewey's role as a teacher during his visit, focusing on what Dewey said to the Chinese, what kind of teacher he was, and how he compared to Bertrand Russell. The contents of Dewey's lectures are examined in relation to the particular images associated with him, such as "Mr. Science," "Mr. Democracy," and as the common people's educator. Dewey is then examined as a benevolent and democratic teacher. In addition, I discuss the problem of translation in Dewey's lectures, asking whether the Chinese texts of Dewey's lectures were unequivocal representations of what he said. Possible discrepancies in Hu Shih's translation point to the danger of evaluating Dewey based solely on these lectures without looking into his own writings in English. Moreover, I explore important differences between Dewey and his chief disciple and Chinese translator, Hu Shih. Hu's cultural and intellectualistic approach to reform diverged from Dewey's more practical and pragmatic stance. Hu's proposal for full-scale Westernization also runs a sharp contrast to Dewey's advice for China. Dewey hoped that China would not imitate the West blindly but would rely on its own cultural strengths to transform itself from within. Having differentiated Dewey from Hu, I contend that one should not hold Dewey accountable for Hu's reform ideas. Instead, one should seek to discover and evaluate Dewey's ideas in their own right. In addition, I discuss the controversial question of whether Hu Shih was a true pragmatist and whether his "pragmatist experiment" in China could offer us some insights about the challenges for pragmatism in the global context.

Chapter three looks at the reception of Dewey's ideas in China. First, I present a chronological account of Dewey's reception during his stay, focusing on the enthusiasm on his arrival, followed by a slight decline in mid-1920 owing to Russell's rivalry and an increasing radicalism among Chinese intellectuals. Then I continue to examine critical responses to Dewey after his departure, focusing on the reception of Dewey's social and political thought and educational theories. Socialists and Marxists challenged Dewey's social and political philosophy, whereas traditionalists criticized his educational ideas. Some of the criticisms were ideological accusations, whereas others result from underlying differences in cultural beliefs and practices. The chapter concludes by returning to the theme of "the Dewey Experiment in China." In one sense, the experiment really existed, granted that a wide range of Chinese intellectuals experimented with Dewey as a symbol of their own conflicting desires. Dewey was co-opted by liberals, traditionalists and socialists alike, all using him to validate their own ideas or to attack their enemies. As a result, Dewey meant different things to different people. Finally, I present my own rendering of the Dewey experiment—one that Dewey himself was conducting. Determined to understand China on its own terms, the U.S. philosopher undertook himself to dissect the problem of Eurocentrism.

Chapter four looks at Dewey as a learner, featuring his role as a political commentator, a goodwill ambassador, and a cultural anthropologist. I discuss Dewey's evolving views about the May Fourth movement, the responsibility of the United States in the Far East, and Chinese ways of life. Dewey wrote thoughtfully and insightfully about China. His intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness were exemplary for those interested in intercultural understanding. In his long sojourn, Dewey came to understand Chinese social and political psychology and philosophy of life. At the same time, he also learned about the West—its Eurocentric worldviews, its secret diplomacy, and its sense of superiority as an international political and cultural force. Finally, I discuss the meanings of Dewey's journey in the larger context of his personal life and work.

Chapter five contends that Dewey's learning in China contributed to his evolving thought about internationalism, the relations between the public and the state, and most important, about the distinction between democracy as a form of government and democracy as an ideal community. I compare Dewey's social and political writings prior to his visit to China with his later works, arguing that Dewey's contact with the communal culture of China reinforced his belief about the essential value of community for democracy. His visit gave him the opportunity to cast aside the institutional baggage of Western democracy and to emphasize the idea of community life as a more secure foundation for democracy. This chapter ends with the implications of my study for the recent scholarship on Deweyan pragmatism and classical Confucianism, demonstrating that Dewey's own observations and appraisals of Chinese society can lend credence to the notion of "Confucian democracy" for China.

Chapter six offers suggestions for future research on Dewey and China. I believe that my work opens up new dimensions in Dewey scholarship. One may reinvestigate Dewey's relationships with his Chinese disciples or other Chinese intellectuals. One may also study the potential link between the entire body of Dewey's later philosophy and his visit to China, engage Dewey and Confucius in a dialogue on democracy, or explore the relevance of Dewey's reflections on internationalism to contemporary ethics of globalization.