**BOOK REVIEW**

**Title:** John Dewey in China: To Teach and to Learn  
**Author:** Jessica Ching-Sze Wang  
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**Reviewed by:** Xiaobin Li (Brock University)

Part of the SUNY series in Chinese philosophy and culture, this book is a combination of biography and philosophy. Wang delineates Dewey’s two-year teaching in China (May 1, 1919 – July 11, 1921), how Dewey was interpreted there, and what influence he has had. In addition, Wang discusses what Dewey learned from his stay in China and how his experience there influenced his philosophy.

Wang states that in the existing literature Dewey’s own intention to learn from other cultures has been ignored and his mature thoughts after his encounter with these cultures are never considered. Her account of Dewey’s stay in China has filled a large gap in the common understanding of the Deweyan story (p. 121). She offers her interpretations as an attempt to understand what happened to Dewey in China (p. 9).

In chapter one Wang provides a brief introduction of the relationship between China and the West and the background of Dewey’s visit. Wang examines Dewey’s role as a teacher during his visit in chapter two, focusing on what he said to the Chinese and what kind of teacher he was in China. In chapter three Wang looks at the reception of Dewey’s ideas in China, focusing on the enthusiasm on his lectures, followed by a discussion of the increasing radicalism among Chinese intellectuals. Chapter four examines Dewey as a learner. “In his long sojourn, Dewey came to understand Chinese social and political psychology and philosophy of life” (Wang, 2007, p. 11). With concrete evidence, Wang discusses the meanings of Dewey’s journey in the larger context of his personal life and work. One example is that after his return, Dewey urged the United States to alter its traditional parental attitude toward China into one of respect for a cultural equal (p. 74).

In chapter five Wang contends that Dewey’s learning in China contributed to his evolving thought about internationalism and the distinction between democracy as a form of government and democracy as an ideal community. Wang demonstrates that Dewey’s own observations and appraisals of Chinese society can lend credence to the notion of “Confucian democracy” for China. Chapter six offers Wang’s suggestions for future research on Dewey and China. One suggestion is to explore the relevance of Dewey’s reflections on internationalism to contemporary ethics of globalization.

The main strength of Wang’s book is that she points out that scholars in the United States discussed Dewey’s influence in China but ignored Chinese influence on him. She gives a convincing description of how in China Dewey was not only a teacher, but also a learner. Dewey’s experiences in China and later in other countries opened his
mind and transformed him from being primarily an American philosopher into a transnational intellectual.

A weakness of the book is that not much of Dewey’s current influence in China is discussed. At Fudan University, one of the top 10 Chinese universities, a Dewey Studies Centre was established on January 7, 2004, and the translation into Chinese of The Collected Works of John Dewey began (Shanghai Culture, Radio, TV and Film Bureau, 2004). In current Chinese academic journals there are articles on Dewey’s influence related to education and philosophy. Chinese are very interested in learning from the West, particularly from the United States, Canada, Britain, and Australia. Almost all Chinese children have to learn English in school. In 2007 approximately 145,000 Chinese went overseas for further education (Meng, 2008).

China is different from what it was 90 years ago when Dewey lectured there. Currently the American government owes the Chinese government money, which is a complete reverse of the situation 90 years ago when Chinese governments at various levels owed foreign governments money. In agreeing to lend money to Chinese, these foreign governments obtained privileges in return. Still, China is a developing country at least in terms of education. In 2005 the Chinese combined gross enrolment ratio of primary, secondary, and tertiary schools was 69, compared with the American ratio of 93 and the Canadian ratio of 99 (United Nations, 2007). The combined gross enrolment ratio is the number of students enrolled in primary, secondary, and tertiary education as a percentage of the population of theoretical school age for the three levels.

Before Dewey’s visit, Chinese began going overseas to learn from the West, and some Chinese became his students at Columbia University. At least four of Dewey’s Chinese students became well-known scholars back in China. Dewey was one of the very few Westerners at the time who thought the West could learn something from the Chinese. As the first foreign scholar to be invited formally to lecture in China, Dewey was ahead of his time. He continues to be relevant today, not only in North America, but also in China.

Chinese still need to learn from Dewey and other Western scholars. With the largest education system in the world, China is changing, but this change may not be appropriately noticed outside of China. In 2007 about 195,000 international students received education in China, with the United States being the number three source country (Zhang & Gong, 2008). If the current Chinese economic development rate continues, it is possible that more North Americans may find it useful to have some understanding of the Chinese.

In China Dewey received an honorary degree with a citation calling him a “Second Confucius” (Grange, 2004). Confucius (551 – 479 BC) was a great Chinese educator who believed knowledge should be used to improve existing conditions. Dr. Wang, we enjoyed reading your book and have certainly increased our understanding of Dewey as a teacher and a learner. Anyone interested in education and philosophy with regard to the relationship between China and the West may also find the book enlightening.
References


