

Our Country Right or Wrong: A Pragmatic Response to Anti-Democratic Cultural Nationalism in China

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Since Deng Xiaoping came into power, China has been described as pragmatic in its approach to politics and development, and in the nineties there has been a revival of interest in Chinese cultural tradition. What is the relation between these two phenomena? Do they coexist, separately in mutual indifference, or in tension? Has there been constructive engagement, or at the very least does the potential for such engagement exist? More specifically, what roles, if any, do they play in China's quest for democracy? Does Dewey's pragmatism have any relevance to China in the twenty-first century? The issue of cultural tradition was central in the historical encounter between Dewey's pragmatism and Confucianism in the New Culture movement of early twentieth century. It is still salient in the debates about China's future and whether it would or should follow the democratic path. This essay will examine anti-democratic tendencies in the rising cultural nationalism in China and, through a philosophical exploration of John Dewey's views about tradition, it will suggest how Chinese pragmatists today might defend democracy against attacks by cultural nationalists who reject the democratic path as alien and therefore wrong for China.

1. Liberal-Democratic Iconoclasm: May Fourth to June Fourth

Although both Communist Party cadres and Chinese scholars have been anxious to draw a line between Marxist emphasis on practice, which is the source of CCP's "pragmatism," and the philosophical pragmatism of John Dewey, William James, and C. S. Peirce, some scholars have been arguing that there are significant resonances between Dewey's pragmatism and Chinese traditions, especially Confucianism.¹ A skeptical pragmatist such as Richard Rorty could ask, "Why look to such ancient stuff for solution of present problems? Shouldn't we be more concerned about the stories present-day Chinese are telling about themselves and the world, if we wish to understand China or influence its

future?”² Confucius and Dewey seem to have very different attitudes to cultural tradition, if nothing else.

The Master said, “I transmit but do not innovate. I am truthful in what I say and devoted to antiquity.” (*Analects* 7.1)

Traditional ideas are more than irrelevant. They are an encumbrance. (Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, LW5.86)³

This difference was central to the historical encounter between Dewey’s pragmatism and Confucianism in early twentieth century China. Dewey’s closest associates during his China visit (1919–1921) were prominent figures in the New Culture movement, known for its iconoclastic attacks on Confucianism and other aspects of traditional Chinese culture.⁴ Although its aspiration was to bring “science” and “democracy” to China through radical cultural transformation, the New Culture movement has been blamed for destroying Chinese tradition in such a way as to create a “vacuum” that paved the way for the Communist victory. Some might even view the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution as a perverted outcome of the idea of China needing radical cultural transformation in order to free itself from traditional Chinese culture, which some Chinese Communists consider an obstacle to socialism. Certainly Confucianism was a target of the Cultural Revolution, just as it was attacked during the New Culture Movement.

Chinese intellectuals who were most closely associated with John Dewey at the beginning of the twentieth century, including those who actually called themselves pragmatists, were often also perceived as cultural iconoclasts determined to destroy Chinese traditions, to demolish “the Confucian shop,” in order to modernize China. Hu Shih (1891–1962), Dewey’s most famous Chinese student and foremost advocate of pragmatism in Republican China, was involved in several debates with cultural conservatives throughout his career.⁵ Hu was among several Chinese students who studied with Dewey in Columbia University and the Teachers College in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Some of these students arranged a visit to China for Dewey when he was spending a few months in Japan in 1919. What was intended to be a visit of weeks stretched into more than two years, during which Dewey traveled to several provinces, lectured in well-known educational institutions, and gave public lectures attended by thousands of Chinese. His visit coincided with one of China’s most turbulent period of history, as Dewey arrived in Shanghai a few days before the student demonstrations that became the center-piece of the May Fourth Movement.⁶

The demonstrations were triggered by the events of the Peace Conference in Paris, but Hu Shih saw them as an important milestone in the New Culture Movement, the beginning of which may be traced to the publication of the *New Youth* (originally titled *Youth Magazine*) in 1915. Hu Shih published a series of