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# A fragmentation of Dewey: Dewey in the political and educational reforms of China, 1910s–1920s

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## ABSTRACT

Dewey's influence on Chinese education has been described as a prime example of the transfer of knowledge from the West to the East. This article investigates the precise process of this transfer by re-examining two themes stressed in current scholarship: Dewey's thoughts on education and democracy and his incremental approach to educational and social reform. In doing so, it explores the many roles Dewey played in both radical and moderate reforms and in an educational discourse that shifted its focus from democratic education to education informed by the scientific attitude. As a result, it raises further theoretical questions about the conceptualisation, unity and diversity, and 'influence' of Dewey in transfer processes. In this article, we argue that Dewey's ideas were subject to constant reinvention in Republican China and that the received Dewey was largely a fragmented Dewey born out of its ever-shifting socio-political and cultural context.

## KEYWORDS

Dewey; progressive education; the New Education Movement; democracy; China

## 关键词

杜威; 进步主义教育; 新教育运动; 民主; 中国

## 杜威的碎片化：1910–1920年代间中国政治和教育变革中的杜威

### 摘要

杜威对中国教育的影响被视作‘西学东渐’的一个典范。本文通过重新审视当前学术界关注的两个主题——杜威的教育和民主思想、杜威渐进式的教育和社会变革路径——考查了杜威思想迁移的确切过程。在此过程中，笔者探究了杜威在激进变革和渐进变革中的多种角色，以及其在由民主的教育向以科学态度为依据的教育这一教育话语转变中的作用。由此，提出迁移过程中有关杜威的概念化、一致性和多样性以及‘影响’等更深刻的理论问题。在本文中，笔者认为杜威思想在民国时期不断被重新创造，同时，人们所熟知的杜威大体上是一个产生于变动不居的社会政治文化背景中的碎片式的杜威。

## Introduction

John Dewey's (1859–1952) stay in China is well-known to researchers in progressive education, and the fields of comparative education and the transnational history of education. Dewey visited China in April 1919 and stayed there until August 1921, during

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which time he enjoyed unprecedented popularity. On the 100th anniversary of Dewey's arrival in 2019, Chinese academia and educational circles were immersed in a heady mood of commemorating and celebrating this historic event by publishing books (Zhang and Liu 2019; Zhu, Peters, and Besley 2022), organising themed journal issues and holding and participating in conferences both in and outside China (Su 2019, 731–737).<sup>1</sup>

This article is concerned with the transfer of Dewey's philosophy and educational thought in early twentieth-century China where political disintegration, social turmoil, and cultural pluralism formed powerful contexts. It does not intend to provide an overview of Dewey's connections with Chinese education, but to focus on his ideas on education and society and the approach he suggested to bringing changes to China. By examining the difficulty of combining Dewey's vision of democratic education and his gradualist approach to reform in the Republic of China, we offer a complex account of the transfer, translation and transformation of his ideas in this specific historical context.

### The literature on Dewey in China

Dewey's encounter with China is a classic case in comparative education. It has been described as the 'prime example of West-East transfer in education' and as an illustration of how Dewey was linked both to modernisation processes and educational reforms (Schulte 2012). There has been an increasingly rich body of research exploring how his ideas travelled, were received and reinterpreted in Republican China. Studies have taken particular interest in answering questions as to whether Dewey was read and interpreted correctly and whether the outcome of reforms based on or in the name of Dewey was a success or failure (Su 2019; Wang 2019). Such studies have either attempted to establish a correct interpretation of Dewey 'as the proprietary font of modern, progressive education' (Sobe and Ness 2010, 61) or followed a tradition that assesses the 'faithfulness or abuse' of his ideas (Popkewitz 2005, 8). This approach has provided remarkable insights into how Dewey's ideas in general changed as they travelled over time and across continents. There remain, nevertheless, aspects of the precise transfer process and its relation to the specific context of the Republic of China that remain neglected. More specifically, the obvious tension between the two themes stressed in the existing literature remains unaccounted for.

The first theme is the relation between Dewey's exposition on democracy and education and the development of democratic education in Republican China. For instance, Keenan (1977, 55–66) examines the influence of Dewey's advocacy of individuality and democracy in the New Education Movement, especially his visions of democratic education, progress, individuality, and growth, manifested in the 'democratic educational aims' associated with the 1922 educational system, while Wang (2019, 199–210) centres on Dewey's influence on Chinese pedagogy by assessing how the aims, content and form of state education were democratised in 1922. Similarly, Zhang (2019, 25–27) claims that the 1922 system influenced by Dewey laid the foundation for the democratisation of Chinese education. According to him, Dewey's thoughts on democracy and his philosophy of education continue to be important sources for enlightenment and educational democracy in contemporary China.

The second theme that has been highlighted is the application of Dewey's pragmatic approach, that is, his belief in gradual and incremental reforms. Scholars have made

great efforts to show how Dewey's pragmatism, a notion of gradual improvement based on experience (Dewey [1916] 2018, 364), related to the Confucian view of knowledge and action (Waks 2021, 210; Zhang and Sheese 2017, 402) and found expression not only in the renewed educational system of 1922 and the associated curriculum of 1923, but also in reforming practices of local schools (Zhang and Liu 2019, 46–165; Zhong and Tu 2019, 38–41). But these efforts sometimes overstate the influence of Dewey (Liou 2013) by, for instance, confusing his pragmatic approach with the educational testing and mental measurement advocated by the administrative progressives (Han and Li 2003, 94).

In short, the tension between these two themes creates a paradox. According to some of the literature, the educational reforms of 1922–1923 were largely an actualisation of Dewey's vision of democratic education. Simultaneously, the literature also argues that the implementation of Dewey's ideas followed his pragmatic approach to reform. In this article, we will examine this assumption more closely, by focusing on how Dewey's ideas were transferred to a society that essentially lacked democracy and where democratic education would thus require radical reform. We will do so by taking particular notice of both the precise transfer process and its specific context, which have been stressed in existing literature in the fields of comparative education and transnational history of education (Mayer 2019; Schriewer 2012; Yamada 2008). To accomplish this, we follow Cowen's (2009) conceptual work on 3 T (transfer, translation and transformation) by exploring how Dewey's ideas were (1) transferred at the height of the New Education Movement around 1919, (2) translated into the educational reforms of 1922–1923 and (3) transformed to fit national conditions during the remainder of the 1920s.

Our main argument is that while the ideal of democratic education and gradual and incremental reform were consistent and in harmony with each other in Dewey's writings and lectures, their relationship turned out to be much more complex in Republican China, where the actualisation of democracy in education would require radical changes. In this context, Dewey therefore played varying roles in educational reform during the 1910s–1920s. He was used by both radical progressive reformers wanting to accomplish democracy through high-paced educational innovations and also moderate reformers pursuing changes based on existing conditions. Dewey's position also varied in a context where new education oscillated between catching up with foreign state-of-the-art pedagogy and simultaneously looking for a suitable Chinese path. In addition, the meaning of Dewey changed: from being used to emphasise the principle of democracy, he became a promotor of the scientific attitude.

This article thus provides a complex account of the social reinvention of Dewey in the specific context of early twentieth-century China, where democratic education and gradual reform were difficult to combine and where the tensions between foreign ideals and national realities were salient. Consequently, this article raises further questions regarding the role of Dewey in other parts of the world, by pointing out the potential tension between the ideal of democratic education and a pragmatic approach in countries lacking democracy.

After presenting the sources our article is based on, we will first examine the historical context before and during Dewey's stay in China by outlining moderate and radical views in conceiving educational reform around 1919 and their distinct schemes for

reconstructing Chinese society and attaining progress there. We will then reveal how the radical mindset became all the rage in the New Education Movement and overwhelmed the gradualist experimental approach to educational reform as the main interpretation of Dewey's educational philosophy. Finally, we will trace the shift from the principle of democracy to the scientific attitude in the discourse of new education and point out the dilemma of balancing progress with reality in educational reform.

## Sources and methods

For this historical study, sources were mainly located in two ways. One was requesting reprinted sources via (inter)library services, and the other was retrieving digitised sources from online databases. The databases consulted were the Hanwen Storehouse of Republican Books and the Chinese Periodical Full-Text Database.

Our investigation includes three categories of source materials. The first category consists of records of Dewey's lectures and other remarks that expressed his specific views on reforming Chinese education and society. All these sources have been reprinted in collections, including *Dewey's Lectures on Education in China* and *Democracy and Modern Society: Collection of Dewey's Lectures in China*. The second category consists of public legislation and regulations concerning education in the Republic of China, including the 'Decree on Reforming the Educational System' (1922) and resolutions approved by educational associations and conferences such as 'Resolution on Abandoning Educational Aims and Promulgating the Educational Essence' (1919). The third category includes discussions and debates on critical educational issues in journals and newspapers, such as essays entitled 'What can Education do on Earth' (1919a) and 'Compulsory Education in Changing Times and Situations' (1925b).

## Two approaches to reform in early twentieth-century China

The significance and meaning of Dewey's philosophy and educational thought in China were first and foremost informed by the educational settings and the debate on educational reform in late imperial and early Republican times. The first modern state system of education in China was formally established in 1904 when the imperial Qing government (1644–1911) was bent on institutional reform across the board. Based on the then-existing Japanese system, informed by the German model (Qian and Jin 1996, 93–123), the Chinese government enacted a school system consisting of kindergarten, primary, secondary, and higher education levels. Alongside efforts to increase access to primary schooling, a new comprehensive curriculum on primary and secondary education was introduced. Apart from key subjects concerning reading, writing and arithmetic, the primary and secondary schools also taught subjects such as Confucian classics, history, geography, and science (Zhou 2024, 37–52). If the traditional educational system with a focus on classical learning had been maintained for perpetuating the imperial order by training proper candidates for officialdom and moralising the populace at large, the 1904 educational system was developed to produce qualified (subject-)citizens, attain national wealth and power, repel foreign aggression, and catch up with Western countries.

This institutional framework created by the imperial Qing government remained during the first years of the Republic of China, founded in 1912, albeit with significant

modifications to suit to new socio-political realities (Zhou 2024, 66–85). In this context, however, the debate on whether or not to reconstruct this educational system with late imperial roots remained and became especially lively around the time of Dewey's stay in China. In this debate, a major conflict that is key to understanding the transfer of Dewey's ideas was between moderate reform-minded educators who preferred slow and piecemeal changes and those demanding fundamental and radical reforms.

The educators that advocated moderate reforms, stressed the importance of managing specific and practical problems. For instance, Shen (1915) argued that a proper development of the educational system would be accomplished just if educators were flexible when implementing it. In his eyes, educational innovation should be practical, and educational progress should prioritise societal efforts rather than the creation of a perfect education system *per se*. Similar moderate views were held by Jiang Qi (1885–1951). Jiang (1920) claimed that education could only be improved alongside the prosperity of society. For him, the educational system was merely a framework that would yield practical effects if financial problems were solved and other social undertakings were promoted.

Other educators, on the contrary, believed in the potential of drastic change and argued that the current educational system needed an overhaul. An example of such arguments was a lengthy exposition published in the *News Journal* ('Suggestions' 1916). According to its six published issues, the government should establish an entirely new and sophisticated educational system. More specifically, the new educational system should be adaptable to the needs of billions of people, suit national conditions and support people's activities, have a complex organisation that could be implemented easily and flexibly, and be ranked among the most advanced educational systems in the world. In a word, such an encompassing educational reform would, as the exposition concluded, 'yield twice the result with half the effort' ('Suggestions' 1916).

To sum up, the educational world that Dewey entered upon his arrival in 1919 featured two main camps, where there were both intellectuals and educators who promoted slow and piecemeal reforms and also those who promoted radical educational reform. While both camps assumed that educational advancement was crucial for national reconstruction and progress, the two mindsets clashed with each other regarding how educational development could contribute to social progress. In the moderate view, education was an integral part of society and drastic changes in education would be pointless and even have unexpected effects on society. Social progress would ensue more from the amelioration of practical problems than from formalistic or literal change. In the radical view, educational reform would accomplish the whole task of national reconstruction in one stroke. Because the existing social conditions were so dissatisfying and constricted the development of all sectors within, drastic educational reform should provide leverage to herald an overall transformation and help the country escape from its predicament.

Moreover, the debate or clash between the two camps over education was symptomatic of their confrontation on how to bring about social progress. The two competing viewpoints on educational reform reflected distinct approaches to social progress: while the former was evolutionary and attempted to modify the social conditions in limited ways, the latter was, as it were, revolutionary and tried to promote social changes in drastic ways.



## The New Education Movement and Dewey

In this setting of moderate and radical reformers, the reception of Dewey was particularly affected by the growing radical mentality that originated from the socio-political realities of the Republic of China. In the several years following the founding of the Republic in 1912, national politics was faced with severe challenges as a combined result of economic difficulties, domestic political disagreements and failures in diplomatic negotiations with imperialist powers. The latter included Japan's Twenty-One Demand in 1914, which laid claim to various territories and rights in China (Ma, Tang, and Jiang 2015, 53–107).

In this context, the New Culture Movement provided a key cultural framework for how social and educational reforms in China should be understood. Because of the Republic's failure to address the challenges that China faced, the advocates of this movement criticised traditional Chinese ideals and argued that a complete reconstruction of culture and society was required. Upholding the two slogans of 'democracy' and 'science', leading intellectuals like Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) and Hu Shi (1891–1962) attacked the Confucianism that underlay the traditional culture and morality (Ma, Tang, and Jiang 2015, 286–300), and promoted a wide spectrum of reforms in politics, economy and education. In 1919, the New Culture Movement obtained 'a political dimension' through the May Fourth Movement (Zhang and Sheese 2017, 400). From then on, the Chinese intelligentsia turned to a national reconstruction by virtue of political revolution, rather than that based on cultural means.

In China, the New Education Movement became the embodiment of the New Culture Movement in the field of education. While the term before 1915 denoted Western and Japanese educational thought in general, 'new education' thereafter became the label attached to child-centred pedagogy or progressive education in a bid to cultivate well-developed individuals and promote social progress (Zhou 2024, 65–113). It was also after 1915 that the Chinese understanding of new education, reflecting similar initiatives in other parts of the world, focused on promoting 'the ideals of democratic education and a faith in freedom as a fundamental condition of the good life in school and society' (Boyd and Rawson 1965, 2).

During Dewey's stay in China between 1919 and 1921, the New Education Movement experienced its heyday. February 1919 marked the history of new education entering a new chapter, with two historic events taking place. One was the inauguration of the journal of *The New Education* (*xinjiaoyu*), and the other was Dewey's visit to Japan. The latter spurred his Chinese followers, especially those who had pursued education at Columbia University in the US, to invite him to visit their country. These two events propelled the New Education Movement to reach the height of its popularity. The journal *The New Education* set the tone for the movement by clarifying the meaning, task and prospect of new education in the Republic of China, and became the frontier of popularising Dewey's ideas. Dewey's visit further energised the movement with his philosophy and thought serving as the theoretical basis of the many reforms proposed by the movement. Spurred by the political activism in the May Fourth Movement, intellectuals and educators also combined their support for radical educational reform with proposals for social and political change.

The belief in the power of new education was the foundation of the journal *The New Education*. As revealed on the title page of every issue, the journal stood for individual



development and social progress. Seeing the year 1919 as the start of a brand-new epoch, it believed new education would provide the basis for that new era as a means to 'cultivate well-developed individuality that enables the people to think, speak and act, and enables them to undertake important responsibilities'. As a result, education was intended to 'create a progressive society that enables the people to develop the liberal spirit and enjoy equal opportunities, and so as to make democracy resplendently shine in east Asia and forever illuminate the world beyond borders' ('Purpose' 1919, 1).

But what exactly did new education refer to in this context? According to Jiang (1919, 358–359), a member of the editorial board, new education conveyed a meaning distinguishing it from existing modes of education and aimed at creating education for a new epoch of Chinese society. New education ought to embrace all new theories of education that would promote the progress and happiness of human society. Realising the danger of decoupling the new educational visions from the old, Jiang Qi specifically clarified that 'for old education, new education was reconstructive rather than destructive, modifying rather than opposing and evolutionary rather than original' (Jiang 1919, 358–359). This pursuit of educational progress without ignoring reality echoed Jiang Qi's notions of the moderate and careful reforms mentioned above.

However, despite this awareness, the new education pioneers were marked by a radical mindset. Editors and writers of *New Education* spared no efforts to present education as the fundamental means to salvage the precarious Chinese nation and placed a high hope on new education inaugurating a brand-new epoch and reconstructing politics and society ('Utilising' 1919, 346). For the editor-in-chief, Jiang Menglin (1886–1964), democratic education lay at the heart of attaining social progress by cultivating everyone into a good citizen and a decent human being (Jiang 1919a, 6). Albeit well aware of the danger of rapid change, the need to develop new education based on Chinese culture and the necessity of promoting both individual and social progress, he was optimistic about the ability of education to transform politics and society on its own and was inclined to alter the status quo by making accelerated progress.

Jiang Menglin's view was partly a belief in education as the key to both the progress of the nation of China and the happiness of its population (Jiang 1919b, 123). According to him, schools could create vibrant and productive individuals that would change Chinese society for the better (Jiang 1919c, 271–274). In that sense, a drastic change in schooling was the first step in solving political problems and attaining democratic politics for building a new state and new civilisation (Jiang 1918, 138). To cultivate ideal citizens for an ideal state, schools should create a new state, which would ringfence students from evil habits in society (Jiang 1915, 4–9). For Jiang Menglin, the ultimate end of developing new education was to make China catch up with and even overtake developed countries (Jiang 1915, 5; 1919d, 29). In this process, there was little room for reconciling the new and the old (Jiang 1919e, 78–79).

To conclude, the Chinese New Education Movement and its social, cultural and political context raise interesting questions concerning Dewey. In the turbulent domestic and international context of Republican China, where new education reformers were less interested in reforming education for the current chaotic state of the Republic and more interested in proposing a radically new education for a future ideal society, how could even Dewey's belief in both democratic education and incremental reform be understood?

## Dewey's views on reforming Chinese education and society

As evident from above, Dewey's views of reforming education and society could both support and differ from those of the New Education Movement in China. He certainly agreed with the Chinese who stressed the role of education in ensuring social progress. According to Dewey ([1916] 2018, 24), school was the 'chief agency' for constructing a better future society. In his words, education based on the conditions and needs of society was key when socialising children in the most suitable direction, and when coping with the challenges that China faced (Dewey [1919–1921] 2007, 8, 14). School was the means upon which the improvement of social conditions depended and provided children with an environment by connecting school life with society (Dewey [1919–1921] 2007, 24–25).

Unlike the Chinese new education reformers, however, Dewey was certainly a supporter of incremental reform. As he made clear in *Democracy and Education*, education was 'a shaping into the standard form of social activity' and the means that supported the 'social continuity of life' (Dewey [1916] 2018, 4–13). According to him, the approach to promoting educational and social progress should not be radical, but cumulative and continuous (Dewey [1916] 2018, *passim*). Concerning the specific method that could be used to bring changes to Chinese education and society, Dewey was against both radical and conservative viewpoints and sympathetic to moderate reformers. In this respect, his views can be summarised in three points.

First, Dewey's trust in gradual improvement was manifested in his opinions on the confrontation between those pursuing radical reform and those adhering to the old way. In his lectures in China, he argued that worshipping the new or clinging to the old would be pointless for the transitional era because it created an antagonism between the new and the old. Taking sides with either position was considered dangerous and therefore disadvantageous. Instead, he proposed a solution where moderate and radical reformers reconciled their opinions of the two sides by means of an eclectic approach, which he labelled 'experimentalism' (Dewey [1919–1921] 2007, 222; [1919–1921] 2007, 319). Such an experimentalist approach would be based on step-by-step improvement through trial and error as he often reminded his Chinese audiences (Dewey [1919–1921] 2007, 191–192). For Dewey, the school ought to be run according to an experimental plan and its organisers and teachers ought to experiment and modify the plan when necessary ([1919–1921] 2007, 49). Thus the true meaning of education was to make students utilise knowledge to adapt to the environment ([1919] 2007, 248).

Second, Dewey supported gradual reform via his notions of 'the school as a special environment' (Dewey [1916] 2018, 23–24). In his Chinese lectures, the school was described as a miniature society. It was intended to foster children's capacities for creating, organising and cooperating, to make them realise their relation to the country and better make a contribution to society. As a miniature society, schools should adapt to the local environment. This would make schooling suit the needs of children and pave the way for their future life in society (Dewey [1921] 2007, 193, 195). For Dewey, the basic idea of constructing a better society was to produce good members by connecting school with social life (Dewey [1921] 2007, 195–196).

Third, Dewey argued that the republican form of government was the foundation of people's happiness. He therefore supported some key political arrangements of the

Republic of China, including the right to vote and the necessity of upholding the law (Dewey [1920] 2007, 148). The attention that he paid to the political aspect of democracy in China differed slightly from his earlier reflection on this subject which concerned democracy as a way of life rather than a form of government (Dewey [1916] 2018, 93). Dewey did not, however, abandon that view. According to him, China would not become a true democracy until everyone received education and developed their individual capacities, which could not be achieved overnight (Dewey [1919] 2007, 251; [1921] 2007, 335). To attain democracy, it was necessary to make persistent gradual progress: people should start to improve themselves and their local communities, and thereafter improvement on a national scale could be accomplished (Dewey [1920] 2004, 106). As a result, true progress meant not to dismantle all existing institutions, but to base reforms on the valuable elements of traditional thought-forms and institutions ([1920] 2004, 268).

Dewey thus conveyed a clear message of gradual improvement in China, which corresponded with his position that ‘the work of education is constructive’ (Dewey [1916] 2018, 287). His pragmatism stressed ‘[a] reorganization of education [...] can only be accomplished piecemeal, a step at a time’ (Dewey [1916] 2018, 146–147). While many aspects of Dewey’s visions proved attractive to intellectuals and educators at the height of the New Education Movement, this message was challenging for the dominant radical-minded reformers. This was also evident in the reforms of 1922–1923, which expressed a complex reception of Dewey’s philosophy and thought.

### Dewey and the new system of education

Although radical reform was the ambition behind the reforms of 1922–1923, Dewey’s ideas offered constant sources of reference for the creation of the 1922 educational system and 1923 curriculum. This marked the transfer of Dewey’s ideas entering into the phase of what Cowen (2009) called ‘translation’, that is the initial Chinese reinterpretation of Dewey’s thought. New education reformers learned much from both Dewey’s works and his lectures across Chinese cities and institutions. For instance, Dewey talked about the rationale and key points for arranging the educational system in the lecture delivered at the Ministry of Education (Dewey [1919] 2007, 55–65), on what the aim of education should be at Beijing Fine Arts College (Dewey [1919] 2007, 305), and on the organisation of teaching materials at Xuzhou Municipality (Dewey [1919] 2007, 217–219).

Dewey’s ideas were particularly visible in the seven educational standards that functioned as the organising principles of the 1922 educational system. The standards had been formulated based on education reformers’ discussions since 1919 and finally got approval from the Ministry of Education in 1922. As a result, the previous rigid objectives of education in effect during the first year of the Republic of China, which oriented moral, practical and military education to social needs and conditions, were replaced by seven flexible educational standards. The standards were: to adapt education to the needs of social evolution; to advocate for the spirit of democratic education; to pursue the development of individuality; to pay attention to the capacity of the national economy; to pay attention to life education; to enable education to be easily popularised; and to leave room for local flexibility (‘Decree’ 1922, 1).

The reforms of 1922–1923 shared similarities and differences with those promoted by Dewey. The reforms echoed Dewey’s opposition to providing education with fixed aims.

For Dewey, ‘an end established externally [...] is always rigid’ and a good educational aim must be flexible to meet the altering circumstances (Dewey [1916] 2018, 112–117). Inspired by Dewey, Chinese reformers endorsed child-centred pedagogy and criticised fixed educational objectives that fettered educatees (Resolution 1919, 47). Besides, as Keenan (1977, 55–66) and Wang (2019, 199–210) have observed, Dewey left an indelible imprint on the specific formulations of the standards of 1922. In particular, the standards embodied some key concepts from his views on education and democracy, including commitments to democracy, individual development and social progress, as well as concerns for the national and local actual situations.

Despite this, the standards’ vague expressions of democratic education and individuality significantly discounted Dewey’s ideas. For instance, democratic education was advocated for its ‘spirit’, and was not related to democratic politics. The Chinese term chosen for democracy (*pingmin*) also conveyed an ambiguous meaning since it also could be translated as ‘plain people’ (Zhou 2024, 98). Thus the promotion of democratic education could easily be interpreted as the promotion of universal education. For the rest, the standard concerning individual development neglected free choice that had been in discussion in 1921 (Zhou 2024, 95), which could be used for promoting society-oriented rather than child-centred education.

Moreover, in the course of setting the standards of 1922, educational reformers did not find a way of reconciling the pursuit of progress and the experimental method. Instead, they stressed ‘social evolution’ but neglected the governmental instruction which encouraged the reforms towards ‘giving consideration to the old system to make the reform easy to be implemented’ (‘Educational System Conference’ 1922, 1). The old and new systems were thus placed in confrontation with each other rather than being mobilised as part of a process of gradual improvement, which was actually contrary to Dewey’s pragmatic approach.

Comparatively speaking, the 1923 curricula for primary and secondary schools embodied more of Dewey’s ideas than the standards of 1922. The curricula radically departed from those prescribed in the 1912–1913 educational system, by reforming the fixed curriculum arrangements of subjects and lecturing hours. In the new version, the primary curriculum only prescribed the minimum number of hours for each academic year and the share spent on each school subject. The secondary school curriculum did not stipulate any hours, but adopted a US high school credit system that allowed students to choose school subjects according to their interests and needs.

The new curriculum was inspired by Dewey’s thought in several respects. One of these concerns Dewey’s advocacy of the integration of knowledge (Dewey [1916] 2018, 73). For Dewey, the core of the theory of knowledge was continuity, hence dualisms represented by isolations were undesirable ([1916] 2018, 353–354). A prime example of how this influenced the 1923 curriculum was that History, Geography, Civics, and Hygiene were integrated into one subject – Society. The curriculum also echoed Dewey’s stress on vocation and art by introducing school subjects such as Gardening, Industrial arts, and Image arts (‘General Manual’ 1923, 2–3). Despite the fact that Dewey promoted education that was adapted to local life, this meant, however, that agriculture was removed from the curriculum, notwithstanding China remaining a largely rural country. In that respect, following Dewey’s advice also meant that the curriculum of 1923 diverged from it in this radical attempt at modernising both education and society.

In sum, Dewey was crucial as a point of reference in democratising the aims of education and restructuring subject matter, but of less relevance in reordering the entire educational system. Despite reformers' enthusiasms, the new educational system was not received well by the then-in-power Beijing government and was frustrated not the least by a lack of financial aid and detailed legal backing for its implementation. Its radical nature was also questioned by some among the educated elites, including Tao Zhixing (1891–1946, Tao Xingzhi), another follower of Dewey and a prestigious educator of the day. Tao (1922, 129–130) called to moderately alter the system of education by applying the scientific method and attitude and attending to the needs and capacities of individuals, society and all walks of life. This heralded a new phase of transforming Dewey's ideas.

### A shift towards a moderate approach

The transformation of Dewey's ideas after 1923 was a transformation in meaning that Cowen (2009) gave to the term: a phase of metamorphosis or indigenisation where the social, economic and political context imposes itself on the initial translation of a phenomenon. In China, this context consisted of deteriorating social conditions, increasingly volatile tensions among warlords and the pressure from imperialist powers (Ma, Tang, and Jiang 2015). Accordingly, the concern for democracy thus gave way to a desire among educationalists to create a united nation-state. If the elites had been enthusiastic about radical reform of education and society before 1923, they thereafter paid more attention to how education could suit the needs of the current Republic of China (Zhou 2024, 115–124). The previous radical mindset was replaced by the moderate approach suggested by both Dewey and Chinese moderates as mentioned above.

This changing appreciation of Dewey was well captured by the closedown of the journal *The New Education*, which was replaced by another journal in 1925: *Review of the New Education* (*xinjiaoyu pinglun*, hereinafter the *Review*). As their names indicate, the two journals did share certain characteristics. Both journals were committed to progressive education and Republican politics. Their leading editors, Jiang Menglin and Tao Zhixing, were both Columbia-educated followers of Dewey and prominent educationalists in Republican China. Both were also committed democrats and tried to facilitate democratic politics by disseminating and implementing new education.

Their understandings of social and educational reform did, however, differ (see Table 1). While Jiang was preoccupied with social progress, Tao was more concerned with the adaptability of education to social reality. This difference is clear when examining how

**Table 1.** Distinctions between *The New Education* and the *Review of the New Education*.

	<i>The New Education</i> (1919–1925)	<i>The Review</i> (1925–1928)
Leading editor	Jiang Menglin	Tao Zhixing
Principle	Democracy	Scientific attitude
Objective	To catch up with the world trends and to inaugurate a new epoch	To promote education that appropriately suits national conditions
Approach	Fundamental reform	Experimental spirit

Source: 'Purpose' (1919, 1); 'Utilising' (1919, 346); Tao (1925a, 3–4); Zhao (1925, 7–13). The information summarised above was based on articles in the first issues of both journals. Due to the ever-shifting circumstances, there might be changes in later issues, including the change of editorship. We take particular notice of earlier issues because they were the most indicative of the journals' orientations and pursuits.

these editors perceived the means and ends of educational reform. Whereas the former had been eager to catch up with the developed countries and attain democracy through radical reform, the latter valued education suiting everyday reality by adopting an experimental spirit based on the scientific attitude. In its inaugural issue, the *Review* indicated this shift by making the scientific attitude its model.

The new emphasis on the scientific attitude was a response to the critique that had targeted the reforming thought and practice of new education, especially between 1919 and 1923. Zhao Naichuan (1897–1986), a young educator of the day, for example, considered the scientific attitude as a salient feature and merit of new education, that differentiated it from so-called old education. Lacking this attitude, old education had been dominated by subjectivity, unsuited to practical conditions, and therefore impeded progress. In contrast, education equipped with the scientific attitude would make a greater contribution to educational development in three ways. Apart from (1) being based on objective facts, it would (2) adopt an experimental and incremental spirit to counter radical opinions, and (3) promote sophisticated research that would overcome ambiguity and vagueness (Zhao 1925, 7–13).

This changed the understanding of new education – de-emphasising democracy and stressing the scientific attitude – and was also a reaction against the radicalism in educational thought and practice from the mid-1910s to the early 1920s. Cautious about drastic changes, the above-mentioned educator Zhao Naichuan turned to an accommodative version of new education that appropriately fitted the national conditions of the Republic of China. In this regard, another young educator, Wang Xizhi (1901–1988) was more explicit in an article explaining why the *Review* replaced *The New Education*. He viewed this shift as an improvement of new education and argued that educational affairs could only be addressed by taking the political, economic and social situation into account (Wang 1926, 13). According to him, the scientific attitude paid more attention to education's connection with society at large and to both the actual process and ultimate end of educational reform, which implied educators became more down-to-earth about making progress and attaining democracy.

This new education based on the scientific attitude, which remained in various ways linked to Dewey's ideas, had the following features. First, it acknowledged Dewey's link between education and society by stressing the closeness between school and real-world politics. As the initiator of this attitude, Tao Zhixing's change of mind was revealing. With his complex and changing perceptions of Dewey, his educational ideas changed in accordance with shifting socio-political circumstances (Brown 1987). In 1919, he had tried to separate school from real-world politics and to turn school into a miniature democracy, which in large part echoed the opinion of Jiang Menglin and *The New Education*. New education should help to construct a new state that was a wealthy and powerful republic. Thus, in practice, it was necessary to make of school a small republic in which students would learn everything in society (Tao 1919, 21–25). From 1923, however, Tao began to reconsider the state's role of promoting educational development and students' responsibility in improving the political situation. He seemed to agree with Sun Yat-sen's (1866–1925) plan, under which educational affairs should fall under the government's management for the attainment of democracy in the future (Tao 1925b, 5). To produce 'citizens of a republic' and make 'the republic for citizens' he encouraged students to step out of campus to teach the common people (Tao [1923] 2007, 96; [1925] 2007, 130).



Second, such a scientific-attitude-based new education, apropos of Dewey, was committed to providing education for the people. According to its proponents, new education was no longer confined to the leadership of elites and on-campus education. As the inaugural issue of the *Review* noted, 'it is necessary to connect all educators who are getting on with their own business'; the mission of this journal was to unblock vessels of education to make everyone breathe fresh air and provide them with an opportunity to work and discuss with each other (Tao 1925a, 3–4). Moreover, the *Review* became a platform to promote education for the common people. Zha Liangzhao (1897–1982), one of its editors, considered the complete renewal of the status quo and politics depending on the movement of the whole people (Zha 1925, 3). The way to unleash people's power in changing existing politics, society and economy was to educate them through informal and social education (Tao [1924] 2007, 96–97).

Third, advocates of new education started to criticise what they perceived as a worship of international trends and called for attention to the connection between education and other social sectors. This realisation resembled Dewey's stress on national conditions and on connections between various social sectors. For one thing, although still recognising the critical role of education in reconstructing society, some writers became more inclined to accept the unsatisfying outcomes of previous reforms. They realised that the 'tardy progress' was a result of political and financial problems combined (Meng 1926, 14). For another, due to its connection with society, education ought to accommodate to the real needs and conditions of other social sectors. This even led to a nationalistic understanding of education, as Gao Renshan (1894–1928), another editor of the *Review*, claimed the primal aim of education was to 'foster the national soul' to make China a self-determined nation (Gao 1923, 3).

Facing the rising nationalistic sentiments, the new education reformers still believed in the chief role of schools in bringing about democracy. However, they tended to emphasise the importance of national conditions and social needs, rather than individual development and world trends in education. The previous mentality of 'yielding twice the result with half the effort' gave way to a more down-to-earth attitude towards reconstruction and progress. To rectify the demerits of drastic change, the scientific attitude became the impetus to gear education towards social reality and endorse a more practical and gradual reform perspective. Democratic education began to engage grassroots educators and acquired a broader sense of both schooling and social education.

While this emphasis on the scientific attitude certainly indicated a shift in new education reformers' view on educational change and social progress, it did, however, not necessarily indicate a shift away from Dewey. As noted above, Tao Zhixing, the initiator of the scientific attitude, was a Colombia-educated follower of Dewey who strove to adapt Dewey's theories to better fit Chinese realities and conditions in the 1920s–1930s (Zhang and Sheese 2017, 402–404). As evident from above, the new scientific attitude also had links to Dewey's ideas. These included school as a miniature society, the connection between various social sectors and a construction based on continuous and cumulative improvement (Dewey [1916] 2018, 309–310, 335, 379–380). While the man John Dewey remained the same, the Dewey of importance to the educational landscape in China consequently changed. Instead of the Dewey inspiring international trends and social and educational revolution, it was a Dewey whose scientific attitude, attention to the link between education and society and pragmatic step-by-step approach to educational reform proved to be inspiring.



## Conclusion

As shown in this article, Dewey's philosophy and educational thought played various roles in early twentieth-century China. In this volatile social and political context, where progressive intellectuals and educators could promote either radical transformation of education and society or a more gradualist approach, Dewey could be used to promote both positions. Up until the reforms of 1922–1923, the former radical approach most often gained the upper hand. After these reforms, the focus of new education shifted from the principle of democracy to the scientific attitude, and the emphasis on aligning education to social reality overwhelmed the ambition of thorough reform during the decline of the New Education Movement.

'Although few can doubt Dewey's significance,' Thomas Fallace (2011, 464) admitted, 'determining his exact influence [...] during the early 20th century has been one of the most vexing issues [...]'. This article proposes an analysis of Dewey in China that to a certain degree echoes an observation of James Scott Johnston. Realising the recipient context's distinction from that Dewey himself worked in, Johnston (2012, 225–227) accurately observes that Dewey's followers in other countries always neglected a 'ground up' version of democracy and hurried to set out 'programs and policies designed to foster (or implement) democratic practices in educational systems and [...] in societies'.

This article further considers this phenomenon, and what at times has been referred to as the malleability of Dewey. It indicates that Dewey was, and had to be, something different in the specific context of the Republic of China. While Dewey in his US writings could combine the ideal of democratic education and gradual and incremental reform, this was not possible in a society lacking democracy, where educational reform was eagerly pursued. In such a context, democracy and incremental reform were instead an either-or choice. Consequently, Dewey could be used to support either radical or moderate positions, and both a new education stressing democratic education and one emphasising the scientific attitude. Dewey could not only be part of a framework promoting foreign ideals but also part of one promoting national development. Reflecting the social, political and educational turmoil of the time, the Republic of China consequently heralded the proverbial fragmentation of Dewey.

## Note

1. As recently as 2021 there was a commemoration for the saluting of Dewey's departure from China, see e.g. the five articles in *Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences Edition)* 39, no. 6 (2021): 17–81.

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