

Life is Education and Unity of Knowledge and Action: Tao Xingzhi's Transformations of the Educational Philosophies of John Dewey and Wang Yangming

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Introduction

John Dewey's sojourn to China from 1919 to 1921 is one of the most fascinating episodes in the educational history of the Chinese Republican period (1912–1949). Under Dewey's influence, throughout the 1920s, a group of Chinese educators, most of whom studied with Dewey at Columbia University, strived to adopt, transfer, and apply Dewey's pragmatism into Chinese education. According to John King Fairbank, Dewey's most creative Chinese student was Tao Xingzhi (1891–1946),¹ who played a highly significant role in the history of Chinese education. A former student at Teachers College, Columbia University, Tao committed to reforming Chinese rural education. His educational thought and practices were influenced not only by Dewey but also by the philosophy of Wang Yangming (1472–1529), a Chinese Neo-Confucian scholar during the Ming period (1368–1644).

In this paper I illuminate the cross-cultural philosophical dynamics that took place during the 1920s by exploring the ways in which Tao's educational ideas fuse Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucianism with Dewey's pragmatism. Furthermore, my purpose herein is to answer a crucial question: How did Tao Xingzhi innovatively formulate his own educational theory by melding and modifying the philosophies of Wang Yangming and John Dewey, and what might be learned from bringing the results of this influence to light?

My inquiry begins with an exploration of the ideas Tao derived from Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucian teachings. Next, I turn to the beliefs to which Tao was exposed under Dewey's tutelage. Lastly, I analyze the ways in which Tao synthesized and reshaped Wang Yangming's scholarship and Dewey's educational philosophy in developing his own educational vision and offer implications based upon the outcomes of my analysis.

Wang Yangming's Influence on Tao Xingzhi

With the ending of China's imperial period in 1912, Confucianism lost its prestige as an official ideology. However, during the early Republican era, some aspects of Confucian thought remained influential within the Chinese intellectual community. Wang Yangming's School of Mind, one of the most significant philosophical branches of the Confucian tradition, was especially prominent among Chinese scholars and educators in the early years of the Republican era. It is therefore unsurprising that Tao was immersed in Wang Yangming's philosophy during his college years, 1910–1914, at China's Jingling University. Indeed, before studying Dewey's pragmatism, Tao was “mentored” chiefly by the Master Wang.

I now offer a brief discussion of the historical roots of the Master Wang's philosophy meant to shed light on Tao's intellectual development. Historically, Wang Yangming's philosophy is considered an indispensable part of Neo-Confucianism. During the Song dynasty (960–1279), Confucianism was challenged by Buddhism and Taoism, and Neo-Confucianism can be seen as an evolutionary response to this conflict. When elaborating on Confucian ideas, Neo-Confucians chose to change their scholarly rhetoric by introducing Buddhist and Taoist elements. In other words, Neo-Confucianism is a product of the reformation of orthodox Confucianism within China's changing historical and philosophical circumstances.

After the Song period, two intellectual threads emerged from Neo-Confucianism: the “School of Principle” and the “School of Mind.”² Both schools hold that everything in the universe is a manifestation of the concept “Principle” (*li*), an idea that comes from the Confucian view of cosmology.³ “Principle” refers to the underlying reason and order of nature as reflected in its organic forms. More importantly, Principle in Neo-Confucianism denotes a pattern or order to the whole of the cosmos, upon which ethical codes related to Confucian hierarchical relationships might develop. Followers of the School of Principle and the School of Mind advocate different interpretations of Principle. During the Ming and Qing periods (1368–1644 and 1644–1911, respectively), the School of Principle enjoyed a prestigious position in official ideology. The School of Principle during this time was represented by the Cheng-Zhu school, founded by Neo-Confucian scholars Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi during the Song period (960–1279), and stressed the significance of “the investigation of things and extension of knowledge” in leading students of Confucianism to an understanding of the essence of Principle.⁴ Followers of the School of Mind, on the other hand, emphasized the subjectivity of the human mind in pursuing of the essence of Principle.⁵ In other words, the School of Principle favored an

empirical, experimental path to understanding Principle, whereas the School of Mind promoted a more theoretical or even mystical approach. The latter approach was represented principally by Wang Yangming.

Wang Yangming maintained that, in order to pursue the perfection of self-cultivation, students need consult only their own hearts or minds, wherein the Principle is located.⁶ Accordingly, Wang's view of the relationship between knowledge and action was quite different from the view espoused by the Cheng-Zhu School's adherents. When investigating Principle, a Cheng-Zhu School follower would acquire knowledge first and then put that knowledge into action. For example, a student would first learn theory of gardening before attempting gardening work. However, in Wang's view, acquiring knowledge and taking action should be unified, occurring simultaneously.⁷ According to Wang, by uniting knowing and acting an ordinary person could become wise like the sages Confucius and Mencius.⁸

During the Ming and Qing dynasties the Cheng-Zhu School held a privileged position in official ideology. Because Wang Yangming had critiqued the Cheng-Zhu School's tenets, the royal courts of these two dynasties repressed his School of Mind. Nevertheless, Wang's thought was increasingly adopted by Chinese scholars during the late Qing period and the early part of the Republican era, when China was confronting political upheaval, social unrest, and Western powers' aggressions. Another reason for the surge of interest in Wang Yangming's philosophy during this time was his theory of "Unity of Knowledge and Action," which contributed greatly to Japan's Meiji Restoration (1868), an event that eventually empowered and modernized the island country.⁹ Inspired by the Japanese model, Chinese intellectuals and educators at the turn of the twentieth century looked to Wang's Unity of Knowledge and Action philosophy as they attempted to save China from poverty and riots.¹⁰

Tao's interest in Wang Yangming's teachings was influenced by the high regard held among the Chinese intellectual community for the Neo-Confucian School of Mind. Because of his belief in Wang Yangming's philosophy, Tao gave up his original name, *Wenjun*, and adopted the name *Zhixing*,¹¹ which means "knowing (*zhi*)" then "acting (*xing*)." In fact, the combination of these two Chinese characters is derived from a passage from Wang Yangming's teachings: "knowing should be the beginning of acting, and acting should be the completion of knowing."¹² The influence of Wang Yangming's philosophy on Tao Xingzhi is further witnessed within his undergraduate thesis, "The Spirit of Republic," written in 1914. While elaborating on his own understanding of the relation between individuals and republicanism, Tao draws on Wang Yangming's thinking.

In republicanism, individual persons should be the owner of society and state. The master Wang Yangming's thesis that "Everyone can become a sage" implicitly matches with our expectation for any individual. If everyone can become a sage, why doesn't he try to be sage? ... Republicanism is a reflection of the current of thought, which underlines the possibility that each one could become a person who can make a right decision.¹³

In this passage Tao suggests that, even as an undergraduate, he saw Wang Yangming's School of Mind as a Chinese cultural asset, conducive to shaping the spirit of republican citizenry.

Moreover, in Wang Yangming's philosophy, the idea of Unity of Knowledge and Action highlights a tendency to extend knowledge to practical affairs. This tendency is compatible with the Confucian idea of "Learning of Practical Use to Society."¹⁴ Both approaches emphasize the significance of Confucian classical learning to the resolution of social and political problems. This pragmatic aspect of Confucian educational thought became a strong driving force behind Chinese intellectuals' dedication to Western learning during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Tao proves no exception to this intellectual trend. In the personal statement he submitted with his application to the doctoral program at Teachers College, Columbia University, he implies he is strongly influenced by the pragmatic aspect of Confucian educational thought.

As early as three years ago [1913], I made a decision to go to Columbia University as my final educational goal in the United States. ... My life goal is to make a contribution to the establishment of a democratic China through education rather than military revolution. ... I strongly believe that there would not be a real republican state without a public education. ... I really wish that Chinese citizenry could follow in American people's footsteps, developing and retaining a real democratic system.¹⁵

Inspired by the pragmatic aspect of Confucian education, Tao viewed republicanism based on democracy and the U.S. educational system as Western cultural assets that could help China enter the modern world. His strong preference for Western culture greatly contributed to his acceptance of Dewey's educational philosophy.

Dewey's Educational Philosophy and Chinese New Education

As a young student with a Confucian activist's disposition, Tao Xingzhi came to the United States in 1914 in pursuit of higher

education. He earned his master's degree in political science from the University of Illinois in 1915. From 1915 to 1917, Tao was enrolled in the Ed.D. program at Teachers College, Columbia University.¹⁶ During his time at Columbia, Tao remained in close contact with John Dewey.¹⁷

In 1917, after becoming a doctoral candidate but before earning his degree, Tao received a job offer from China's Nanjing Teachers College. There he served as Professor and Chair of the Education Department as well as the Dean of Academic Affairs. Soon after returning to China for this position, he wrote an essay entitled, "Educational Method in Pragmatism," in which he proposed applying the experimental method of U.S. pragmatism to Chinese education. In his essay, Tao writes critically about Wang Yangming's School of Mind, the system of thought in which he had strongly believed prior to his study at Columbia.

In his essay he explains that, as a reformer of the Neo-Confucian school, Wang Yangming wisely realized that Zhu Xi (one of the founders of the Cheng-Zhu School) failed to identify a method for conducting an "investigation of things"—that is, for learning about the physical world.¹⁸ Although Wang took pains to reform Zhu Xi's theory, he could not discover an appropriate method for the "investigation of things." Accordingly, the Master Wang changed "investigation of things" to "investigation of mind" in order to achieve the goal of understanding Confucian Principle.¹⁹ In his essay, Tao asserts it is impossible for Wang's School of Mind to achieve "extension of knowledge" because the experimental method is absent.²⁰ Tao concludes, "What made both Europe and the U.S. progress rapidly is the implementation of the experimental method; and what made China lag behind the West is the lack of it."²¹

In light of his argument, Tao insists Chinese education should learn from U.S. enthusiasm for experimentalism.

Since William James founded the program of [educational] psychological experiment, [Western] scholars gradually changed their perception. Nowadays, almost all of famous Universities created the major of education. At the same time, there are over one hundred programs of educational psychology across country. ...the spirit of experimentalism is very popular [among U.S. educators]. ... It is reasonable that the U.S. education can make such a tremendous progress based on the spreading of experimentalism.²² ... If we want to truly reform Chinese education, we must greatly advocate the idea of experimentalism.²³

More significantly, Tao connects the introduction of U.S. educational ideas with the duty of strengthening and modernizing China. He claims,

“We cannot achieve the goal of national salvation unless China adopts the idea of education in experimentalism.”²⁴ From Tao’s point of view, U.S. pragmatism represented an efficient instrument to improve Chinese education. Motivated by this belief, Tao enthusiastically joined the group of scholars who invited John Dewey to China in 1919.

Dewey’s two-year sojourn indeed proved to enlighten Chinese educational and cultural reform. In addition to philosophy, democracy, and political thought, in Dewey’s lectures in China he paid considerable attention to the issue of common education.²⁵ His lectures emphasized the importance of scientific and experimental methods as instruments of social change, as a way of changing China.²⁶ In Dewey’s view, the objectives of new Chinese education would carry out the principles “Education is Life,” “School is Society,” and “Learning through Doing.”²⁷ As Dewey’s influence spread, during the Republican era *Democracy and Education* was read widely among Chinese educators. Increasing numbers of Chinese intellectuals advocated parts of Dewey’s educational philosophy as practical and scientific cultural assets that might help solve social problems in China. Simultaneously, Confucian examination-oriented education based on rote memorization of classics increasingly was rejected by progressive Chinese educators as traditional-focused cultural liability.

Consequently, after Dewey left China in 1921, Tao and Dewey’s additional Chinese followers worked together on a series of educational reforms designed to maximize transmission of cultural assets from Dewey’s educational thought throughout Chinese society. For instance, under the influence of Tao and his colleagues the Chinese Ministry of Education in 1922 gave up the Japanese model of a 7–4 system (seven years in elementary school followed by four years in middle and high school).²⁸ Instead, the reorganization of Chinese elementary and secondary schools was legislated to follow the current U.S. model, or a 6–3–3 system (six years in elementary school followed by three years in middle school then three years in high school).²⁹

Like the Seven Cardinal Principles of U.S. Secondary Education of 1918, the School Reform Decree of Republican China proclaimed seven educational criteria.³⁰ Some provisions in the Decree, such as “the promotion of the development of individuality,” “education by life,” and “to meet the need of social evolution,” vividly reflect key features of Dewey’s educational ideas: student-centered pedagogy, education for life, and emphasis on schooling as a pathway to social reform.³¹ In short, during China’s early Republican period, Chinese educators were eager to follow Dewey’s teachings, with his emphasis on practice and individuality.

The Limitations of New Education

The 1920s ushered in the culmination of John Dewey's influence on Chinese education. During this period modern Chinese educators sought to transform Chinese education as rapidly as possible and, in their haste, they often accepted Dewey's educational thought and the U.S. model more or less uncritically. Most of Dewey's Chinese students became intoxicated by their success in reforming Chinese education, but Tao began to notice problems arising from the new design.

After carefully observing effects of the implementation of the new schooling system for five years, Tao Xingzhi theorized in Chinese rural areas there was serious misalignment between Westernized education and rural Chinese reality. As his understanding of Chinese national conditions deepened, Tao began to criticize the drawbacks of the modern Chinese educational system based on the Western model. He states in 1927, since the late Qing period,

China completely took a wrong pathway to run her education. It teaches Chinese to abandon countryside to run to city; it teaches people to consume food but does not teach them to plant crops; it teaches people to build house but does not teach them to make forest; it teaches people to pursue luxury but look down on farm labor...it teaches sons of peasantry to become bookish weaklings. ... Such an Education cannot and should not be popularized.³²

Later that same year, Tao argues:

All of the returned students from abroad attempt to introduce foreign educational system to China. However, they are unclear about if the system really match[es] with Chinese reality at all. They just tend to treat the foreign educational system as a fashionable thing from the civilized countries...then uncritically input it to children's brain. ... I used to be a follower of foreign educational system. Nevertheless, I realized that a blind imitation of foreign educational system can be deadly harmful to China and her people. ... We must find a solution for our educational problems based on Chinese reality.³³

Taking his line of argument further, Tao assumes if China continues to copy the Western educational system blindly, the Republic of China will be transformed into a nation-state which can serve only the interest of the elite class.³⁴ He argues it will be destructive for the new Republic if Chinese education aims to generate only modern gentlemen, fashionable

ladies, useless bookworms, and ambitious politicians.³⁵ Moreover, Tao points out that imitating the Western educational model will produce a Chinese false-intelligentsia class that has no purpose other than to cultivate and advertise its image as a group of educated elites bent upon overshadowing the common people.³⁶

I want to be clear as to Tao's true intention and concern: he was not critical of Western education itself, but rather of the false Western education adopted by Chinese educators. In other words, he believed the Western school system established in China since the late Qing era was designed chiefly to strengthen the spirit of book-learning at the cost of practical knowledge. From Tao's perspective, China's modern educational system, which had been blindly introduced by copying that of the West, had been transformed from a cultural asset into a cultural liability, for useless, bookish knowledge from modern education was having a damaging effect on Chinese society. After reflecting deeply upon the disharmony he saw between the new schooling system and the Chinese national condition, Tao concludes that Chinese educators must place their emphasis on rural education so the construction of a living education could be re-aligned with the reality of Chinese rural life.³⁷

Revising the Philosophies of Wang Yangming and John Dewey

Tao's sharp critique of Chinese new education triggered his rethinking of Wang Yangming's School of Mind. In his 1929 article, "Action Is the Beginning of Knowledge," Tao reformulates the relationship between the two important philosophical concepts of knowledge and action in Wang's theory of "Unity of Knowing and Acting."

The Master Wang Yangming said, "Knowledge is the beginning of action, and action is the completion of knowledge." I do not agree. Action is the beginning of knowledge, and knowledge is the completion of action. Let us begin with children, they know that fire is hot only after they have felt the heat; they know that snow is cool only after they have felt the cold; they know that candy is sweet only after they have tasted it, and they know the stone is rocky only after they have touched it. ...all of these can prove "Action is the beginning of knowledge, and knowledge is the completion of action."³⁸

In a later essay, Tao expresses a similar thought:

Action is the father, knowledge is the son, and creation is the grandson. Therefore, I advocate the formula of *xing* (action), *zhi* (knowing), *xing* (action). The Master Wang Yangming...said[,] "Knowledge is the beginning of action, and action is the completion of knowledge." I turned his theory

half a somersault to “action is the beginning of knowledge, and knowledge is the completion of action.”³⁹

Following this development in his thinking, during the late 1920s, Tao eventually changed his first name from *Zhixing* to *Xingzhi*, which means “acting” then “knowing.”⁴⁰ According to Roland Martin, changing one’s name represents a metamorphosis of the whole person.⁴¹ It is worth noting Tao’s experiment with the creation of the new Chinese schooling system became a catalyst for his rethinking of Dewey’s educational philosophy. In response to Dewey’s notion “education is life” from *Democracy and Education*, Tao wrote an article entitled “Life is Education” in which he turned Dewey’s theory “half a somersault”⁴² in order further to explicate his reason for advocating the idea “Life is Education.”

The idea of “Education is Life” tends to treat education as a life. Good education can generate a good life. However, bad education can generate a bad life. The idea of “Life is Education” can fundamentally overcome this weakness. ... In the theory of “Life is Education,” education encompasses a very broad and free field. ... the notion of “Education is Life” places both education and life inside the school...[but] the idea of “Life is Education” acknowledges the value of all informal educations. ... The idea of “Life is Education” can extend education from subject materials to human life.⁴³

This passage illustrates Tao’s increasing awareness that Dewey’s educational philosophy is rooted in U.S. culture and society. As some educational historians point out, the emergence of Dewey’s pragmatism was a reaction to the rise of numerous economic, political, and social problems encountered by the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century. Therefore, Dewey’s educational philosophy reflects an ideal form of American progressivism in a well-developed industrial and democratic society.⁴⁴

Although Tao’s perspective on the role of education in democracy is similar to Dewey’s, he grew to realize that China lacks a social and cultural foundation for actualizing the ideas of “Education is Life.” Based on Chinese reality, Tao believed common people could be educated only in their life surroundings, where they live and work in the village, home, or shop, and wherever they gather.⁴⁵ That is to say Tao envisioned that, for millions of Chinese peasants, everyday rural life was the best possible educational experience.⁴⁶

While reforming the idea “Education is Life,” Tao also scrutinized Dewey’s dictum “School is Society.”

The idea related to “Education if Life” is “School is Society.”... Right now I also turn the idea of “School is

Society” half a somersault, so that I changed it to “Society is School.” That is to say, the totality of social activities would be believed to be a scope of our education. ... If school is a real society, we don’t have to socialize it. The idea of “School is Society” sounds like putting a bird in a cage. This idea tries to use a small school to accommodate all things from our society. Therefore, the notion of “School is Society” easily misleads us. On the contrary, the idea of “Society is School” wants to release a bird out of the cage, letting it fly swiftly. This idea wants to extend all things from school to the natural world. I believe that “Society is School” should be the requirement of “School is Society”; “Life is Education” should be the requirement of “Education is Life.” Such a school is a real school, such an education is a real education.⁴⁷

Tao’s idea of “Society is School” was also a product of his reaction to Chinese rural reality. He explains that, in accordance with Dewey’s “School is Society” theory, Chinese students in the Morning Village School were supposed to receive education in the school setting. However, the rural school could not provide enough faculty members, facilities, materials, or curriculum, so it was impossible for the Chinese peasantry to learn rural knowledge inside the modern school.⁴⁸ Likewise, restricted by Dewey’s “School is Society” notion, all valuable extracurricular activities at the school also were closed to the outside public.⁴⁹ However, congruent with the idea “Society is School,” the entire society could provide teaching materials and educational tools. In other words, the Morning Village students could learn from experienced peasants outside the school. With no boundary between school and society, both teachers and students could learn from society as a whole, benefitting the entire community.⁵⁰

Tao’s revision of Wang Yangming’s philosophy contributed to his transformation of Dewey’s educational thought. In his article “Creative Thinking,” Tao indicates his new understanding of Wang Yangming’s School of Mind inspired an equivalent revision of Dewey’s educational philosophy. In his writing, Tao again criticizes the weakness of Wang’s thought:

We know that the Master Wang Yangming advocated...“knowledge is the beginning of action and action is the completion of knowledge.” Based on the saying, we should pour knowledge in our brains first, then try to do something. Therefore, many educators regard school as a place in which they can pursue knowledge. In the meantime, they treat society as a place in which students apply their knowledge to their actions. According to this viewpoint, school and

society are in divorce, so that schools only produce bookish people, who are incompetent in putting their knowledge into action.⁵¹

It is important to understand that, although Tao frequently critiques Wang Yangming's teachings, he never rejects the concepts of "knowledge" and "action." In particular, Tao strongly highlights the importance of "action" in educational theory and practice. In the same article, Tao adopts the concept of "action" to reflect on Dewey's educational philosophy.

Let us talk about the sequence of the problem-solving formula from Mr. Dewey's *How We Think*. The first step is to identify and state the problem, the second step is to analyze the problem, the third step is to determine criteria for optimal solution, the fourth step is to propose solution, and the fifth is to evaluate proposed solution. I want to put one more thing, "action," before the first step of Dewey's sequence of the problem-solving formula. Only "action" can help us to identify where the difficulty exists, then we are motivated to resolve the difficulty. Subsequently, a new value can be generated out of our experiments with resolving the difficulty.⁵²

Tao concludes, "Therefore, I believe that action is the father, knowledge is the son, and creation is the grandson."⁵³ Interestingly, in his reflection on Wang Yangming's idea, Tao writes the same thing. Undoubtedly, Tao's understanding of "knowledge" and "action" from Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucianism exerts a strong influence on his reconsideration of Dewey's educational thinking. It is fair to say that his first name, *Xingzhi*, represents the embodiment of his attempts critically to synthesize the thoughts of Wang Yangming and John Dewey into his own educational theory: "Life Education." Tao sums up, "'Life Education' means an education of life, by life, and for life."⁵⁴

In terms of educational goals meant to prepare one for a full life, there was no divergence between Dewey and Tao. Dewey embraces abstract concepts in his philosophy, whereas Tao's idea of "Life Education" avoids constructing profound philosophical discourse. According to Dewey's essay, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," before forming his pragmatic philosophy, the American educator wrestled long-term with philosophical conflicts between educator intuitionism, rationalism, German idealism, sensational empiricism, and Scottish common sense.⁵⁵ Correspondingly, when approaching Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, Tao seems not to acknowledge these philosophical schools' influence over Dewey's philosophy of education. As an ambitious educational reformer Tao focuses mainly on specific

concepts (such as “Education is Life” and “School is Society”) drawn from Dewey’s educational philosophy. In constructing his own educational theory, Tao largely travels between Wang Yangming’s Neo-Confucian philosophy and certain ideas from Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*. In particular, as a by-product of the interaction of Dewey’s educational thought and Chinese reality, Tao’s idea “Life Education” aims to resolve specific difficulties in Chinese education.

Another important aspect Tao likely ignored is Dewey’s conceptualization of “action.” In fact, in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey puts forth an argument for the influence of “action” on the process of human learning.

Human actions are modified in a like fashion. A burnt child dreads the fire; if a parent arranged conditions so that every time a child touched a certain toy he got burned, the child would learn to avoid that toy as automatically as he avoids touching fire.⁵⁶

In addition, while Tao attempts to improve Dewey’s educational thought by using the concept of “action,” during his lectures in China Dewey expresses a thought similar to Tao’s idea of “Action is the beginning of knowledge.”

Action is the way to pursue knowledge. ... Even although we cannot predict success or failure, we still need to take a risk to act. More actions lead to more experiments; more experiments generate more knowledge. Therefore, intelligence and belief (or sensation) are closely related. If we have a belief that action should go first, we surely can gain more knowledge through our actions. If we pursue complete knowledge first, then apply it to action, it is impossible for us to really understand how to act. ... Therefore, I believe that knowledge and belief (or sensation and knowledge) are independent.⁵⁷

It is important to note that in this speech Dewey makes a connection between “sensation” and “action.” This connection is reminiscent of his important 1896 article entitled “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology”:

...the various activities of reaching and withdrawing will be the sensation, because they are that phase of activity which sets the problem, or creates the demand or the next act. At the next moment the previous act of seeing will furnish the sensation, being, in turn, that phase of activity which sets the pace upon which depends further action. Generalized, sensation as stimulus, is always the phase of activity requiring to be defined in order that a coordination may be completed.⁵⁸

This passage indicates Dewey was inclined to view “action” through the lens of functional psychology. His thinking highlights both the continuity of human action and its significance in terms of adaptation. “Action,” he claims, is derived from the interaction between an organic unity and the environment. In contrast with Dewey, Tao’s writings pay less attention to the connection between “action” and psychological factors. In other words, Tao still avoids obscure philosophical arguments while conceptualizing the term “action.” For the Chinese educator, “action” is perhaps a more practical concept drawn from Wang Yangming’s School of Mind, something that quickly could be applied to Chinese reality.

In addition, in keeping with China’s rural reality, Tao makes great efforts to update Dewey’s notion of “Learning through Doing” to “Unity of Teaching, Learning, and Doing.” For Dewey, “Learning through Doing” takes place in a school environment. However, for Tao, the principle of “Unity of Teaching, Learning, and Doing” is a direct result of the implementation of the theory “Life is Education.” In Tao’s thinking, “teaching,” “learning,” and “doing” represent three related aspects of human life.⁵⁹ Hence, teaching, learning, and doing are inseparable not only in life, but also in education. When Tao explains the meaning of “doing” in his new pedagogy, he again stresses the notion that “action is the father, knowledge is the son, and creation is the grandson.”⁶⁰ The concept of “action” in Wang Yangming’s philosophy still plays a dominant role in Tao’s construction of the idea of “Unity of Teaching, Learning, and Doing.”

While criticizing the miseducation of the Western educational system, Tao’s theory “Life is Education” also targets the cultural liability derived from Confucian education. In particular, alongside the idea of “Unity of Teaching, Learning, and Doing,” the Chinese educator criticizes the Confucian idea of class division. For thousands of years, Confucian educators asserted that, “Those who labor with their minds govern others; while those who labor with their strength are governed by others. Those who are governed by others support them; those who govern others are supported by them....”⁶¹ In Tao’s view, this educational tradition produces two opposing classes in Chinese society, and the social barrier between the elite and ordinary people obstructs the channel of cultural transmission among Chinese people.

...if someone only concentrates on his manual labor, he easily gets used to a routine life. As a result, it is impossible for him to embrace the spirit of innovation. If someone only concentrates on his intellectual work, his thought will become more and more abstruse. Accordingly, the idea advocated by

“Those who labor with their minds” cannot be turned into a useful experience. The separation between mental work and physical work leads to the impossibility of the emergence of any progressive inventions.⁶²

In fact, John Dewey expressed affinities with Chinese education while lecturing on experimentalism in China.

During the authoritarian era [of pre-modern China], there was a strict class boundary in human society. Confucian scholar-apprentices belonged to the class only concentrating on intellectual work. Peasantry, workers, and merchants all belonged to the class working with strength. Those who work with the mind have never examined their conduct according to experiment. Those who work with strength have never used their conduct to guide their minds. Therefore, it is difficult for Chinese people to propel social progress. China in a transitional period needs to strongly advocate experimentalism.⁶³

Tao's critique of traditional Chinese education echoes Dewey's pragmatic educational thought. In compatibility with Dewey's democratic educational ideal, Tao advocates for the idea of “Working with One's Mind While Working with One's Strength” to close the gap between the two opposing classes.

If everything is done with one's mind and one's strength working together, then the truth about them can be discovered. If everyone works with his mind while working with his strength, there will be no wasted human beings, and there will be no [social] classes anymore.⁶⁴

From Tao's perspective, “Unity of Teaching, Learning, and Doing” corresponds with “Working with One's Mind While Working with One's Strength.”⁶⁵ More importantly, Tao argues developing ideas also depends on the principle of “Action is the Beginning of Knowledge.” In other words, the concept of “action” from Wang Yangming's philosophy also becomes the logic underlying the principle of “Working with One's Mind While Working with One's Strength.” In essence, for Tao Xingzhi, “Action is the Beginning of Knowledge,” “Unity of Teaching, Learning, Doing,” and “Working with One's Mind While Working With one's Strength” are equivalents.

Tao's Educational Practice in the Morning Village School

To apply the theory of “Life Education” to Chinese rural reality, Tao and his colleagues worked together in 1927 to establish the Morning Village (*xiao zhuang*) School, an experimental teacher training school, located in a rural area near Nanjing. Based on the principle “Life

Education,” the Morning Village School illustrates Tao’s attempts to help Chinese farmers avoid the two cultural liabilities: useless bookish knowledge from the modern school system, and class division derived from Confucian education. When the Morning Village School was first founded, Tao put forward four specific goals based on the principle “Life is Education:” “a farmer’s physique and skill, a scientific mind, a consciousness of social reform, and an artist’s interest.”⁶⁶

Aligned with these goals, Tao advocated for students to practice Chinese martial arts to build their physique; learn gardening to develop farming skills; study biology to develop a scientific mind; participate in theater to nourish their artistic interests; and take part in autonomous society to help students embrace social reform.⁶⁷ In the spirit of “Life is Education,” Tao asserts that actualization of the principle of “Unity of Teaching, Learning, and Doing” should be accompanied by establishment of close friendships among teachers and students in the Morning Village School.⁶⁸

To strengthen intimacy between teachers and rural residents, Tao and his colleagues designed educational plans that integrated the experimental school into rural communities. For instance, to encourage more local villagers to get involved in education, Tao and his colleagues built a teahouse in the village, also open to the public.⁶⁹ Rural residents were often invited there by Tao to drink tea and talk. At the same time, the teahouse became a public place where teachers and students hosted lectures on an array of issues, including public health, personal hygiene, and national and world news.⁷⁰ Villagers also could gather to exchange ideas while reading books. The teahouse was designed as a reflection of the spirit of “Society is School,” which combined educational and social dimensions.

Through cooperation between the Morning Village School and local villagers, the rural community experienced great change from 1927 to 1930. The school founded a village hospital and kindergarten. A united village self-defense team was organized to protect the whole community from attacks by gangs and bandits. Gambling and opium smoking were strictly banned. At the same time, with the initiation of an adult literacy class, more villagers received a basic education. Knowledge of modern agricultural science also spread among villagers. More importantly, Tao’s rural experimental school provided rural residents with opportunities to learn basic skills necessary for the practice of democracy.⁷¹

Tao’s educational experiment in the Morning Village School won considerable attention in both China and the U.S. One of John Dewey’s colleagues from Teachers College, William H. Kilpatrick, was deeply impressed by Tao’s rural educational experiment. After visiting the

Morning Village School in 1929, the U.S. educator was impressed with the educational reformation carried out by Tao's experimental school: "I want to tell people about the story of the Chinese Morning Village Experimental School. I want to let the world know about the educational ideal of the school, as well as its facility."⁷¹

Unfortunately, just at the point when Tao expected to make the Morning Village School more progressive, his educational reforms met their demise. The Guo Mingdang (Nationalist Party) defeated military warlords starting in 1927, reunited China in 1928, and the party immediately wielded political influence over Chinese education, turning instead to ideology of the Republic of China's founder, Sun Yat-sen. Tao's school was accused of accommodating communist party members, and the Nationalist Government under the Guo Mingdang sent troops to shut down the Morning Village School in 1930. However, this did not stop Tao's motivation to further his common educational movement in rural domains of China. Until Tao's death in 1946, he exerted all of his energy to promote common education in China. Tao's life journey indeed embodied the spirit of his first name, "*Xingzhi*."

Conclusion

It is appropriate to remark on significant implications here by way of concluding my argument. John Dewey's two-year visit to China created a shared educational experience between the U.S and China. As one of Dewey's daughters, Jane Dewey, recalled, "when he was in China, Dewey left feeling affection and admiration not only for the scholars with whom he had been intimately associated[,] but for the Chinese people as a whole. China remained the country nearest his heart after his own."⁷³ What is more, in the configuration of globalization, through a detailed historical and philosophical examination of Dewey's visit to China, Deweyan scholars can better understand the educational thought of U.S. pragmatists from the perspective of cultural pluralism.

John Dewey's influence over China's education system has not received the attention of U.S. scholars. Consequently, one of Dewey's most influential Chinese students, Tao Xingzhi, is also little known in the history and philosophy of educational thought and practice. Accordingly, an understanding of Tao Xingzhi's influence offers valuable opportunities for scholars of educational history and philosophy to view Dewey's experience in and influence on China, in particular through the lens of Confucianism.

In tracing this history, I highlight aspects of Confucianism or Neo-Confucianism compatible with Dewey's thought and with modern democratic values. Of note, during Dewey's visit, China was in the midst of the May Fourth/New Culture Movement period, when the country

transformed itself from an imperial dynasty into a modern nation-state. During this period, Confucian legacy and foreign ideas competed and interacted in Chinese society. Consequently, it is not unusual that many Chinese intellectuals, including Dewey's students, then explored a path toward synthesizing Chinese tradition and Western learnings. By examining the ways in which Tao Xingzhi melded and modified the philosophies of Wang Yangming and Dewey, scholars may understand how Chinese educators during the Republican period dealt with the relationship between their Confucian past and Deweyan learning in an effort to reform Chinese education.

In sum, the story of Dewey's visit to China goes far beyond the scope of Tao's case. In my larger line of inquiry, my historical and philosophical analysis of Dewey's visit to China only begins with inquiry into Tao's educational journey. Nevertheless, the revelation of more historical and philosophical implications behind Dewey's sojourn to China depends on my future research, which will take into account even more historical figures and their ideas and actions.

Endnotes

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