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RESEARCH NOTE:
UNDERSTANDING DEWEY’S CONNECTION TO CHINA- A BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY ON SELECTED WORKS

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John Dewey's two-year sojourn to China (1919-1921) created a shared educational experience between the United States 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."¹ During Dewey's visit, China was in the midst of its May Fourth/New Culture Movement, during which the country transformed itself from an imperial dynasty to a modern nation-state. It is no exaggeration to say that the encounter between Dewey and modern China is one of the most fascinating episodes in the intellectual history of twentieth-century China.

However, Dewey's connection to China is one of the lesser-known aspects of his scholarly work. This bibliographic essay therefore aims to describe, organize, and provide critical commentary on some of the significant works in English and Chinese that address Dewey's educational experiences and influences in modern China. After comparing and synthesizing these works, I will categorize them into three groups: works that treat Dewey's visit to China as a historical event, works that address Dewey's sojourn as a cultural exchange, and works that explore Dewey's visit as an episode in intellectual history.

**Dewey's Visit to China as a Historical Event**

The first category regards Dewey's visit to China as an influential event in Chinese history. Some researchers have used a historical framework to study Dewey's activities in China and to examine his influence on modern Chinese education and culture.² Most works in

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this category successfully delineate the limitations and achievements of Dewey's influence on China.

Within this group, Barry Keenan’s *The Dewey Experiment in China: Educational Reform and Political Power in the Early Republic* is a pioneering historical study of Dewey’s time in China. Keenan characterizes the influence of Dewey’s pragmatism on modern Chinese education while simultaneously analyzing a series of mismatches between Dewey’s educational thought and Chinese societal and political reality during the Republic of China’s early period. However, Keenan’s analysis of Dewey’s influence on Chinese education is limited mainly to the realm of educational administration. When detailing Dewey’s contribution to Chinese educational reformation during the early Republican period, his book does not sufficiently explore the intellectual and philosophical motivations behind Chinese scholars’ acceptance of American pragmatism.

Equally significant is Yuan Qing’s *John Dewey and China*. In this Chinese book, Yuan explicates Dewey’s life and lectures in China and the aftermath of the American educator’s visit, arguing

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that he had a deep influence on Chinese intellectual life and education during the May Fourth period. A particularly valuable aspect of this work is that it notes the compatibility of Dewey's philosophy with the traditional Confucian cultural psychology of Chinese scholars. However, this issue is not covered in sufficient depth.

**Dewey's Sojourn to China as a Cultural Exchange**

The scholars of this group generally highlight the significance of cultural diversity by exploring an intercultural dialogue between Dewey and modern China. In this category, two of the most substantive studies are Jessica Ching-Sze Wang’s *John Dewey in China: To Teach and To Learn* and Wang Yanli’s *Approach to Dialogue: John Dewey and Chinese Education*.

The first book proposes and explores an intercultural understanding between Dewey and China. Wang reconsiders the implications of Dewey’s visit to China by uncovering the mutual influences between Dewey and China. Her most important finding is the multiplicity of roles that Dewey played during his two-year

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stay in China as a teacher and as a student. This work asserts that when modern Chinese scholars and educators learned new ideas from Dewey’s visit, they also contributed to the development of Dewey’s own intellectual thought and worldview. Nevertheless, in discussing the connection between Dewey and May Fourth China, Wang tends to oversimplify the intellectual dynamics of the May Fourth period and fails to clarify the main intellectual schools prevalent during this period. For instance, the book does not identify what part of Confucianism they targeted while arguing the standpoint of anti-traditionalism held by Chinese iconoclasts.  

A work published in Chinese, Wang Yanli’s Approach to Dialogue: John Dewey and Chinese Education, also puts Dewey’s visit in the setting of an equal dialogue between Dewey and Chinese history, extending from the May Fourth era to the periods of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. In the conclusion, Wang states, “the reason that John Dewey’s ideas deeply influenced modern Chinese educational thought during the May Fourth Period was that his educational thought fundamentally challenged Chinese education’s traditional methods of thinking.” Of note, the educational thought of Confucianism embraces some aspects, such as the thought of Wang Yangming’s School of Mind, Confucian School of Evidential Investigation, and the idea of Learning of Practical Use to Society, which become the driving forces behind Chinese educators’ access to Dewey’s pragmatism. In other words, based on a dichotomy between traditional Chinese education and Dewey’s educational ideas, Wang’s work downplays the role of Confucian education in Dewey’s Chinese students’ approach to American pragmatism.

Another relevant work in this category is Xu Guoqi’s Chinese and Americans: A Shared History, which treats Dewey’s visit to China as one of the most significant aspects of a shared history held by both China and America. Xu points out that Chinese scholars learned new values and ideas from Dewey, but Dewey also

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5 Wang, Approach to a Dialogue, 166.
6 Xu, Chinese and Americans, 204-231.
7 Ibid., 214-219.
transmitted to the American people the new ideas acquired from his
Chinese sojourn. Xu also notes that “the most important and
fundamental claim Dewey brought to China resonated deeply with
Confucian value—education is life and life is education.”
Nevertheless, this is an important point that deserves more
attention than Xu gives it in this book.

Dewey's Visit to China in Intellectual History

The third approach utilized by scholars is to examine the
implication of Dewey's visit to China from the perspective of
intellectual history. In this category, works by some scholars
examine the intellectual link between influential modern Chinese
intellectuals and Dewey. To varying degrees, these works focus on
Dewey's Chinese devotees as a specific group in the context of the
May Fourth Movement.

In “The Encounter between John Dewey and the Modern
Chinese Intellectuals: The Case of the 1922 Education Reform,” Yu
Xiaoming concentrates on the interaction between Dewey and
Chinese educational reformers in the 1920s by analyzing the role of
Dewey's educational thought in Chinese education reform.

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8 Ibid., 226-231.
9 Ibid., 228.
10 Chow Tse-tsung, The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern
China (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960); Li Yun-shin, “John Dewey
and Modern Chinese Education: Prospectus for a New Philosophy” (doctoral
dissertation, Ohio State University, 2000); Lin Yusheng, The Crisis of Chinese
Consciousness: Radical Anti-Traditionalism in the May Fourth Era (Madison:
University of Wisconsin Press, 1979); Wang Ying, John Dewey’s School and Chinese
Education (Beijing: Beijing Institute of Technology Press, 2000); Xie Changfa,
The Study of the Educational Activities of American-Trained
Chinese Students before the Second Sino-Japanese War (Shi Jiazhuang: Hebei
Educational Press, 2001); Kuang Qizhang, “Pragmatism in China: The Deweyan
Influence” (doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, 1994); Zhang Huajun,
John Dewey, Liang Shuming, and China’s Education Reform (New York: Lexington
11 Yu, “The Encounter between John Dewey and the Modern Chinese
Intellectuals,” 34-170.
author mentions the shared ground between Dewey’s and Confucius’s intellectual thought, but his argument does not provide a detailed explanation of how Confucianism affected Dewey’s Chinese students when they confronted Dewey’s thought.¹²

Li Yun-shin’s dissertation, “John Dewey and Modern Chinese Education: Prospectus for a New Philosophy,” examines and evaluates Dewey’s influence on the May Fourth generation. By studying several historical figures, including Hu Shih, Tao Xingzhi, Bertrand Russell, Mao Zedong, and Sun Yat-sen, this dissertation attempts to identify and explicate a philosophical dialogue occurring between Dewey and the diversity of Chinese intellectual thought.¹³ Li argues that the intellectual ferment experienced by the Chinese scholars was greatly shaped by Western learning (in particular, Dewey’s influence) and Chinese social and political reality.

Among the works in this category, Wang Yin’s *Chinese Education and the School of John Dewey* is the latest monograph in Chinese that explores an intellectual linkage between Dewey and his Chinese followers.¹⁴ Wang’s study of the intellectual development of these scholars focuses specifically on an inquiry regarding modern aspects of the educational journey of Dewey’s Chinese devotees. That is to say, the author regards these Chinese scholars’ acceptance of Dewey’s pragmatism only as the result of the American philosopher’s tremendous influence.

Overall, the three categories of scholarship outlined here are interrelated and complementary. Although page limitations prevent me from expounding on all works pertinent to Dewey’s connection to China, I believe that the works discussed in this essay are sufficient to provide scholars with a comprehensive overview of the topic.

When studying Dewey’s connection to China, some researchers synthesize the cultural exchange approach and the intellectual history approach. For example, my dissertation, “When

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¹² Ibid.
Confucius Encounters John Dewey: A Historical and Philosophical Analysis of Dewey’s Visit to China,” focuses on how Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy interacted with the specific themes of Confucian education during the May Fourth period. By investigating five Chinese educators (Hu Shih, Liang Shuming, Tao Xingzhi, Guo Bingwen, and Jiang Menglin), my study uncovers how these Chinese intellectuals bridged the gap between their Confucian education and their Deweyan learning in order to apply Dewey’s educational thought to Chinese social and political reality. In contrast with other works that view Western civilization as the driving force behind Chinese scholars’ approach to Dewey’s pragmatism, my dissertation demonstrates that Chinese educators’ Confucian educational experiences forged a solid foundation for them to learn from Dewey’s philosophy.

Last, in addition to the academic works described above, two collections of Dewey’s lectures deserve attention from the Dewey community. During his tour of China from 1919 to 1921, Dewey delivered more than 200 lectures on politics, education, culture, and society. *John Dewey: Lectures in China, 1919-1920* comprises two series of sixteen lectures each, one series on social and political philosophy and the other on educational philosophy. Unfortunately, although Dewey’s lectures were originally delivered in English, all of the texts were transcribed into Chinese. Therefore, in editing the volume, translators have had to translate the lectures back into English from notes taken in Chinese. This book should be of special interest to English-speaking scholars of the Dewey community.

Correspondingly, *Democracy and Modern Society: Dewey’s Lectures in China* is a compilation of Dewey’s speeches published in Chinese and therefore conducive to the work of Chinese scholars.

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15 Yang, “When Confucius Encounters John Dewey.”
studying Dewey’s connection to China. In contrast with John Dewey: Lectures in China, 1919-1920, the book includes Dewey’s lectures on Chinese higher education and traditional education, which are not contained in John Dewey: Lectures in China, 1919-1920. Likewise, this book’s editor extends the focuses from Dewey’s lectures to include the speeches of Alice Dewey (Dewey’s wife) and Evelyn Dewey (his daughter) in China. Furthermore, the book also includes essays and speeches by some of Dewey’s Chinese followers, whose aim is to introduce Dewey’s pragmatism to the Chinese intellectual community. Together with John Dewey: Lectures in China, 1919-1920, the Chinese-language Democracy and Modern Society: Dewey’s Lecture in China is a valuable asset for the Dewey community.

Finally, it is worth noting that several Deweyan scholars pay special attention to certain parts in Dewey’s private letters, which were written during his two year trip to both China and Japan. During the 1920s, Dewey’s East Asian trip letters were collected and published under the title of Letters from China and Japan.17 Fortunately, this book has been translated into a Chinese version in 2016.18 As a Chinese translator, Liu Xing asserts that these letters will be of great benefit in understanding Chinese influence on Dewey’s intellectual development.19 Of note, both the collections of Dewey’s lectures and his letters from East Asia have not been included in the collected works of Dewey. Therefore, for both American and Chinese Deweyan scholars, these documents will be conducive for them to explore Dewey’s connection to China beyond Dewey’s scholarly works.