

CHILD-CENTEREDNESS IN
CHINA:
HOW MIGHT DEWEY'S
LEGACY SAFEGUARD
DEMOCRACY TODAY?

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Introduction

According to Lipset (1959), education is the most important way to cultivate citizens for democracy, which Darhrendorf (2003) defines as the power of the people to achieve change in society without violence. Lipset's (1959) analysis not only reveals the tie between democracy and education, but also implies that democracy needs to be taught in schools intentionally for young citizens to explore and exert its values. Dewey is renowned for promoting democracy through education, and his influence is still felt today. As there is limited Western literature on Dewey's legacy in China, this paper attempts to make a small contribution to discussing how his thought has influenced the development of democracy in China via education, how academics actively participate in this process, and what relevant reflections can be brought about.

The Relationship between Dewey and Democracy in China

In the early 20th century, the concept of 'democracy' was imported by some reform-minded intellectuals from the West to China (Liu, 2010a). According to Dewey (1916):

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey, 1916:151)

The reformists believed that Dewey's progressive thought might save China from domestic feudal oppression and foreign invasion by fostering a sense of solidarity and community, and they therefore invited Dewey to China to share his theories on democracy and education (Liu, 2020).

With the efforts of Dewey and his followers, young people, especially students at schools and universities, were encouraged to strive for their rights as human beings, criticise the government and voice their opinions on political issues (ibid). However, this nonviolent movement was severely suppressed by the authority and was unsuccessful (Tan, 2004). Because of this, Dewey and his followers provisionally lost their audience in China after the 1920s (ibid); the Chinese people eventually overthrew the old government and the regime of democratic centralism was established for its current communist society (Qiao, 2021). Nevertheless, over the past few decades, the new government and the Chinese academics have been reflecting on and re-recognising the value of Deweyan thought on cultivating democracy through education (Liu, 2020).

Tan (2004) points out that Dewey was concerned that too much emphasis was put on political democracy instead of the idea of community life itself. This chimes with Tiles' (1997) standpoint that Dewey's ideal is democracy as culture while education plays a key role. From this perspective, it seems that Dewey's ideal of cultivating democracy in a mild

way may not necessarily conflict with the change of authority and/or political regime. This could be linked back to Dewey's (1916) argument that democracy is beyond a form of government. Gradually, certain consensus has been reached in Chinese society: the old government was overthrown because it was against democracy, while the current authority provides official guarantee for democracy, including supporting Deweyan educational experiments for the improvement of democracy (Liu, 2020). In this way, Dewey's thought is again applied to the Chinese educational system, and positive changes have begun to occur.

Child-Centredness: An Important Approach to Cultivate Democracy in China

Pertaining to the application of Deweyan thought in Chinese society, the concept of 'child-centredness' is inevitable. Within Deweyan thought, child-centredness was the most recognised and promoted by his followers in China since the very beginning (Schulte, 2011). This is perhaps linked with the unprecedented awareness occurring

in China that children should be seen as whole human beings and independent individuals (Zhou, 1920). Because of this awareness, people began to value childhood, consider children as the nation's future, and pay attention to various aspects of the development of children (Luo, 1933). Under this historical background, Dewey's idea of positioning the child from the 'edge' to the 'centre' (Liu, 2010b) is highly aligned with the new ethos in China. Since then, Deweyan thought, particularly 'child-centredness', has been playing an important role in the development of democracy in China (Schulte, 2011).

Although as Chuang and Walsh (2000) point out, there are various interpretations about child-centredness in different contexts, in the overview of Chinese literature, the predominant understanding in China is based on Dewey's (1922) original argument. More specifically, 'child-centredness' in the Chinese context mainly refers to respecting the child as a whole person, valuing children's learning based on holistic experience and their own developing pace, focusing more on facilitating learning instead of teaching knowledge, and considering curiosity,

experience, personality and so forth as valuable learning resources (Zhang & Yu, 2019; Zhang, 2020). According to Liu (2006), child-centredness is the premise and core of cultivating democracy through education, for it recognises the power of children/learners as whole human beings who can independently and interactively take part in civic issues and civil life. Therefore, by emphasising child-centredness in education, it is possible for young Chinese citizens to learn to respect each other and resolve problems peacefully and creatively, which is a vital condition for cultivating democracy (Darhrendorf, 2003).

How do Academics Participate in Sustaining Child-Centred Education for Democracy in China?

In the overview of English literature, noticeable criticism about child-centredness focuses on the weakening of the teacher's power and agency (e.g. Smail, 2014). However, by studying Dewey's original arguments, many Chinese academics provide a different perspective. For example, Yang (2015) contends that the child-centredness Dewey

promotes is a comprehensive system: although it emphasises the importance of empowering children, the recognition of teachers' values is not lacking. In other words, the co-existence of teachers' power and agency should be seen as the subtext of 'child-centredness'. Furthermore, Zhang and Yu (2019) argue that Deweyan child-centredness expects teachers to level up to become professionals of multiple roles such as children's supporters, collaborators and guides; they are being empowered with as much agency as children. Such insights convey a piece of crucial information: the teacher and the child should not be seen in a binary perspective, and it is necessary to have a holistic view to understand 'child-centredness'. In this way, neither teachers nor children are hegemonic in the classroom, they listen to each other and their interactions should be equal and respectful.

On the Relationship between Personalism and Collectivism in Child-Centered Education

In the West, child-centredness often has the orientation of personalism, as it emphasises the uniqueness of each child (Souleles, 2017). There is concern that child-centred education may lead to negative qualities in children including lack of self-regulation, or educators being indifferent to social change (e.g. Lanford, 2010; Souleles, 2017). In response to these concerns, many Chinese academics again put forward a holistic perspective. For instance, Tu (2018) reminds us that individuals and collectivities should not be seen as antithetical to each other, as the respect for individuals is mutual and is in harmony with the respect for collectivities. In addition, Jiang (2018) argues that facilitating individuals' development can be seen as a methodology in child-centred education, while social change can be a natural outcome. This understanding resonates with Dewey's (1915) own intention of utilising child-centred education to eventually realise social change: democracy not only in schools but also in society.

Participating in Policy-Making

By publicly promoting what they consider to be appropriate interpretations of Deweyan child-centred thought, Chinese academics have already stepped into the domain of politics to provide advice for policy-making. The government also provides opportunities for some representatives to directly express their standpoints (e.g. Beijing Normal University, 2020). Apart from advocating child-centred education in a positive way, some academics also express their concern about potential harmful intentions. For example, Yang et al. (2020) caution that the outcome-oriented educational market outside the public system may damage child-centred education in China, as the latter values the process of children's development in the long term while the former values the short term economic return of educational investment. So far, the academics' efforts are paying off: there is a remarkable feature of child-centredness shown in China's educational policy-making (e.g. Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). The academics therefore push to realise child-centred education

in a top-down way in China, which could further benefit the development of democracy. Moreover, the 'associated living' (Dewey, 2016) of the academics and policy makers is itself a positive example of democracy.

Providing Guidance for Educational Practice

Although child-centredness for education and democracy is supported on a national level, according to Yang et al. (2020), there still are obvious gaps between child-centred theories, policies and practice. To deal with this problem, a number of academics actively take part in providing guidance for educational practice. In China, many institutes establish collaborative relationships with nurseries and schools, and academics communicate directly with practitioners to provide concrete guidance (e.g. Nanjing Normal University, 2020). Meanwhile, academics from comparatively developed areas are often dispatched to help practitioners in less developed areas better understand child-centred education and the democracy cultivated through it (e.g. Nanjing Normal University, 2019).

Although problems still exist in reality, the academics, their government and the practitioners have reached a consensus and are working together to sustain child-centred education for democracy in China.

**A Brief Reflection on the Tensions between the
'Heavy Hand of the State' and Positive Changes in
Education for Democracy China**

As mentioned in the first part, the current political regime in China is democratic centralism (Qiao, 2021). In the Western perspective, centralism may be broadly seen as 'heavy hand' which seems not to be in line with democracy. Therefore, it could be confusing that the 'heavy hand of the state' and positive changes in education for democracy can co-exist. Some Chinese academics may provide a thought-provoking interpretation. For example, Jin (2021) contends that the Chinese democracy is different from the liberal democracy in the West; it is directed by the central guidance to better serve the democratic life of people. Moreover, Qiao

(2021) argues that the current democratic regime is a result of complex historical reasons and is selected by the Chinese people. That is, academics as such think that democracy can have different forms and do not consider the Western democratic regime as the absolute truth. Furthermore, they (e.g. Jin, 2021) reckon that the 'heavy hand' in the Western perspective can actually be seen as a 'helping hand' to better guarantee democracy in China, including the implementation of the Deweyan approach of cultivating democracy through education. However, this does not mean that tensions do not exist. For example, in Chinese society, various forms of conformity are allowed, even promoted (Wang, 2020), which obviously suppresses individuals to question given answers and have different voices. Problems as such bring deep challenges for the balance between centralism and democracy. For the time being, it seems that no effective solution has been posed, but the tensions at least provide an opportunity for us to rethink our understandings on education, democracy and our relationships with them, and to ponder what Dewey's legacy in China brings about for both Chinese and Western society.

Conclusion

As an attempt to fill a small gap in our understanding of the influence of Dewey's legacy in China, this paper has briefly discussed the relationship between Dewey and democracy in China, Deweyan child-centred education as approach for democracy in China and how Chinese academics participate in this process. In addition, this paper has also reflected on the tension between the 'heavy hand of state' and positive changes in democratic education in China. Since the early 20th century, Chinese academics have seen the power of Deweyan thought on cultivating democracy through education, and have been considering child-centred education as the premise and core to achieve this goal. Chinese academics have been playing a significant role to connect the government and the people to appropriately interpret and implement child-centredness together, and positive results concerning the cultivation of democracy can be found in Chinese policy-making and educational practice. Furthermore, academics in China provide a

different perspective to interpret the current Chinese political regime, its achievements and challenges in education and democracy. Although the context is limited, Dewey's legacy in China and the Chinese experience could still provide reflections for the West.

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