

Confucian-Deweyan Transactions: Keeping Faith in Creative Democracy and Educational Experience by Sustaining Intercultural Philosophical Conversations in the Present Age

Joseph Harroff

Temple University

Kyle Greenwalt

Michigan State University

In fall of 1918, John Dewey was on leave from Columbia University, enjoying a visiting appointment at the University of California in Berkeley. This was a time, no doubt, for the American sage of democracy, education, and experience to rethink familiar habits.

The “Great War” was nearly over—hostilities had ceased, and a peace treaty was being negotiated in Paris. At this point Dewey was regretting his initial support for Wilson’s prosecution of the war. And as it became ever clearer to him that the peace deal being negotiated would do little or nothing in terms of achieving a more just, peaceful, and democratic new world order, his sense of regret would only grow.

Dewey in China

It was in California, then, that John Dewey was said to have told his wife, Alice, that, “we may never again get as near Japan as we are now and that as the years are passing, it is now or never with us.”¹ And, so, Dewey set sail for Japan, where he would spend approximately three months writing and lecturing. During this time, he became increasingly concerned about the Japanese government’s approach to international affairs.

It was therefore, perhaps, with a sense of some relief and happy contingency that Dewey received an invitation from his former student, Hu Shih 胡適 (1891-1962), to teach for a year at National University in Beijing. Dewey accepted this invitation, and ended up staying for over two years in China, during which time he was treated as an intellectual “rock star,” traveling throughout the country as he gave talks at various venues.

Dewey arrived in China in May of 1919—a moment of great national renewal. And it was no doubt the May Fourth Movement, a nationwide student-led protest movement against Japanese imperialism and Western colonialism in China, that resulted in Dewey’s warm welcome. He was, in this way, viewed as a harbinger of a more enlightened future for the Chinese public. Indeed, Dewey was perhaps treated as a kind of convenient stand-in for the values he supposedly personified: as “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy.”

Dewey was enthralled by what he experienced in China, as he taught and lectured across the country. Jane, Dewey’s daughter, would later say that:

¹ Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 240.

China is the country nearest his heart after his own . . . The change from the United States to an environment of the oldest culture in the world struggling to adjust itself to new conditions was so great as to act as a rebirth of intellectual enthusiasms.²

Dewey, himself, would say about the May Fourth Movement: “To think of kids in our country from fourteen on, taking the lead in starting a big cleanup reform politics movement and shaming merchants and professional men to join them. This is sure some country.”³

Clearly, Dewey’s trip to China was important in expanding his thinking about community, democracy, and the possibility of international peace. Increasingly, he would employ a more dynamic and robust conception of social intelligence as he sought to bring about a more optimal reality. This is best seen in one of his most important books on democratic social theory, *The Public and its Problems*, published in 1927, soon after his return to the States.

We might wish to reconsider Dewey’s trip to China as opening up into a world beyond the interest of merely historical particulars. In this special issue, we are of course seeking to learn from history, but are simultaneously also hoping to revisit and reimagine the fecund possibilities of transformative philosophical dialogue that could happen across cultures and epochs in the interstitial encounters and entanglements opening up between Confucianism⁴ and Deweyan thinking about democracy, education, and experience as all-encompassing ways of life best approached with a working faith in creative

social intelligence.

Themes That Emerge From This Issue

This issue—and the next—of the *Journal of School & Society* are devoted to critical issues of comparative philosophy. In particular, as we remember Dewey’s trip to China, we need to inquire into what an embodied practical wisdom might look like. We can do so by joining the best of the relatively young tradition of American pragmatism with the time-tested wisdom of the Chinese philosophical traditions.⁵

All of the articles in this issue approach these vital questions in one way or another, from a diverse array of theoretical and historical perspectives. And it is in this context of appreciating pluralism, that we feel the following three focal issues can be productively foregrounded in order to facilitate an inter-cultural conversation that concerned educators might wish to attend to in reflecting upon the educational scene in the present:

Democratic Experience and Relational Metaphysics. Ordinary human experience⁶ and “heavenly values”⁷ are always thought of as being deeply continuous and correlational within Confucian traditions.

The non-dualistic mantra of “the heavenly and human are everywhere continuous” (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) can be found animating the Confucian tradition. For example, early in the tradition, there is the Zhou dynasty invention

² Westbrook, *John Dewey*, 240-241.

³ Westbrook, *John Dewey*, 243.

⁴ Confucianism is here broadly construed as an intergenerational project of optimizing human experience via a thoroughly relational conception of persons rooted in family dynamics—gerundively understood as an ideal process for cultivating creative social intelligence.

⁵ With a particular focus on the historical and “corporately” imagined Confucius in the context of living Confucian traditions.

⁶ *ren* 人 as an ethical-aesthetic achievement concept from the relatively anonymous and ambiguously swarming multitude of *min* 民.

⁷ *tian* 天 as a “sky-like” set of natural transformations with ordered growth in intergenerational significance.

of a non-coercive governing regime of “Cultural China” or “focal state” (*zhongguo* 中國) at the heart of a cosmopolitan “all-under-heavens” (*tianxia* 天下) way of thinking about a shared world order. A more recent example is the manifold of modern Confucian voices of reformation and revolution calling out emergent publics to address post-colonial projects of the ethico-political order by thinking outside of, or “otherwise” than, the still dominant Western ideologies of possessive individualism and exceptional sovereignty.

We might consider ways in which the current set of problems and predicaments we are facing as a fragile planetary public could be reimagined and redressed in such a philosophical conversation, if not resolved, in light of the creative thinking that can come into view regarding the deep relationality and creative intelligence found in both Deweyan and Confucian conceptions of collaborative democratic agency and the concomitant hopes for a more robust world of shared human flourishing and planetary sustainability

Pragmatic Fallibilism and Communal Moral Inquiry. Solutions to any problem are best thought of as temporary adjustments to ongoing changes in the natural and human environment—concrete adjustments in response to emergent conditions. And as such we need to situate our collective energies and collaborative inquiries of a broadly moral nature within horizons of traditional intelligibility and affective signification. For the Confucian tradition, this is evinced in the abjuring of both atomized individualism and the myth of totally personal responsibility. If we want to “help ourselves, then we help others, and if we want to get ahead, we help others get ahead.”

Critically Reflexive Cultural Hermeneutics. So it follows that a return to tradition (“warming up the old to realize the new” *wengou er zhixin*

溫故而知新) is the only viable (re)source that we have from which to develop critically informed conversations and democratically efficacious action. We can't step outside of our skins to realize a philosopher's dream of an objective “View from Nowhere,” nor can we disencumber ourselves from our lived family and social roles, a nexus of relationships that constitutes our very identity as unique persons, in order to realize our quotient of creative potential to transform this world as we find it.

Dewey, Confucius, and the Work of Teaching

As Henry Rosemont and Roger Ames have called our attention to, there is practically no way for those reared exclusively in the environs of Western culture (viz., European philosophical grammar as a melding of Platonic metaphysics and Abrahamic monotheism) to make sense of the Chinese conception of *tian* 天, most often translated into English as “heaven.”⁸

However, by engaging in responsible philosophical generalizations in order to better contextualize our understandings of this and other concepts in early Chinese philosophies, those most deeply entrenched in the ideology of individualism and absolute sovereignty might have a fighting chance to think otherwise with the help of Confucian texts and a ritual-social grammar of intelligibility (*li* 禮). In the standard textbook-version of Chinese history, so often derived from a rather (politically) conservative Christianized understanding of the “mandate of heaven,” we are taught a political theology

⁸ Henry Rosemont, Jr. & Roger T. Ames, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009).

wherein the divine Sovereign always stands ready to make a decision as to who is a friend/enemy in an exclusive politics of policing boundaries and guarding supposedly sacrosanct identarian modes of association.

Such readings of the Confucian basis for assessing political legitimacy and the viability of ethical-educational aims seems similar to Western notions of the divine right of the monarch—i.e. God’s blessing upon the rule of “his” representative “dominions” on this Earth. In this way of thinking, authority stands above and beyond individual authors as a transcendent source of self-justifying and self-authorizing *ex nihilo* sovereign power.

This model of imposing an order on a chaotic nothingness mirrors the pedagogical logic found in far too many disciplinary classrooms, wherein a teacher’s sense of purpose and supposed license to act is thought to derive from a purportedly extra-experiential or transcendental source of pre-existent fact or dogma. Students are made to suffer the whims of such institutional sovereignty at their wits’ end. This oppressive model of education as indoctrination, we believe, is a recipe for existential alienation, or worse, as it cannot possibly call forth the optimally creative participation of students and educators in a transactional experience of collaborative learning. A sense that one’s purpose is never quite one’s own thereby haunts any transcendently imposing sovereign model of coercive classroom dynamics.

By way of contrast, in the Chinese tradition, human experience and heavenly values operate on a continuous register of dynamic and reciprocal information:

Tian is both *what* our world is and *how* it is ...
Tian is both the creator and the field of creatures. There is no apparent distinction between the order itself, and what orders it ... On this basis, *tian* can be described as an

inhering, emergent order negotiated out of the dispositioning of the particulars that are constitutive of it. But *tian* is not just “things”; it is a living culture—crafted, transmitted, and now resident in a human community ... In the absence of some transcendent creator deity as the repository of truth, beauty, and goodness, *tian* would seem to stand for a cumulative and continuing cultural legacy focused in the spirits of those who have come before.⁹

For educators, this means that there is no sense in appealing to some super-ordinately ideal notion of what a student, a family, a classroom, or a community should be. Rather, emergent order—or transactionally realized “optimizing relationality” (*he* 和)—always arises spontaneously via the concerted efforts of all involved.

Such order cannot be imposed from the outside upon a supposedly discrete set of atomized personalities, interests, and problems that inhabit any classroom. Coercive rules, laws, and punitive actions that are imposed from without rob the vital and relational dynamics animating a creative democratic classroom—an ideal marked in our ethical imaginations by a critically nuanced Confucian sense of deferential reverence for the truly meritocratic and intergenerational legitimate hierarchies of optimizing relationships. Understood as intergenerationally reciprocal and operating in a logic of caring, it is then and only then, that we can hope to realize the emergence of a class dynamic wherein situations conducive to learning will spontaneously and sustainably arise.¹⁰

⁹ Roger T. Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 47.

¹⁰ Henry Rosemont has clarified the sense of legitimate “hierarchy” in role-focused relationships by translating *shang* 上 and *xia* 下 as “benefactor and beneficiary” rather

Yet, ordered harmony can be realized only through attending to emergent possibilities. For Confucius, and for Dewey, it was concrete situations that mattered most for thinking. Abstract principles in ethics tend to be much less helpful for making decisions than appeal to exemplary role models and affective dispositions to act compassionately and intelligently as a matter of habit. But, even in this context of a logic of situations, imagining just how to help *this* child, to mediate *this* interpersonal conflict among classmates, or how to reassure *this* anxious parent, as an educator, requires an attention to the emergent order of the whole push and pull of the historically and politically inflected cosmos.

Such situational intelligence and moral imagination requires skillful ways of relating and communicating as the role-encumbered teacher.¹¹ This holistic understanding of the role of teacher in educational experience, in turn, also opens up onto the need to advertise the importance of cultivating a keen attention to the always potentially discordant elements that inhere in any educational situation as well.

This emergent order can be realized in relationship to the teacher's understanding of the cultural legacy. This cultural legacy, in this day in age, is, ideally, global in scope. It includes a living embodiment of the ways of being of the local communities from which the students come. But, perhaps even more importantly, it involves a teacher's sense of what is most optimally appropriate or relationally significant (*yi* 義) in the living traditions that are animating the student's lifeworlds for the moment at hand. Drawing upon such resources, an effective educator seeks to exemplarily embody

them, if but for realizing a creative moment of ameliorative transition in the educational experience as a whole.

Good teachers, then, are always seeking emergent harmonies as they creatively draw upon the live traditions at hand. They do so as they seek to develop what is unique and best within each pupil, so that they may wholeheartedly share of it with the communities in which they live.

This is our sense of what an exemplary teacher working in the Confucian wisdom tradition ought to be energetically and imaginatively seeking to realize. It is also, we believe, a very Deweyan view of the nature of a teacher's work working out their social salvation in a common faith of democratic meliorism.

Contents of This Issue

In this first of two issues devoted to revisiting an ongoing and ever new Deweyan-Confucian dialogue, we are very pleased to be sharing five articles that go deeply to the heart of the matter regarding the urgent ethical, political and ultimately educational issues that we've adumbrated upon here.

From **Leonard Waks**, we learn what an always freshly reconstructed notion of a globally-aware, learner-centered progressive education might entail through a sustained historical dialogue between the best of the Deweyan pragmatist tradition of thinking about education and experience and the Confucian approach to learning for oneself (*weijizhi xue* 為己之學). Waks skillfully interweaves themes in Deweyan and Confucian thinking about educational potentials in an immanent situational logic informed by an urgent need to reconceptualize the old to revitalize the new. In this essay, we get a sense that the time is now ripe for a true encounter between the “educator of ten-

than a top-down coercive model of “superior” and “inferior: in any role-focused relationship.

¹¹ We prefer the language of role encumbrment following the late Henry Rosemont, since the effective teacher can never just “play” their role as a matter of mere dramatic performance.

thousand generations” (*wanshizhi shi* 萬世之師) and the philosophical persona that Cai Yuan-Pei honorifically called the “second Confucius” when Dewey was invited to give a talk at Peking University in 1919.

From **Jim Behuniak**, we learn how the Chinese conception of harmony (*he* 和) might be helpful for thinking through the urgent issues of national identity, assimilation, and cultural pluralism in the United States. Behuniak’s essay makes a plea for appreciating diversity and deep cultural pluralism by exploring the semantic and metaphorical dimensions of *he* 和 as a trope for thinking about unity in heterogeneous historical and cultural conditions. Moving away from the problematic “melting pot” model of cultural assimilation, we can see clearly the vital importance of thinking with the Confucians regarding an ethical-political ideal of “optimizing harmony without reducing to homogenizing sameness” (*he er bu tong* 和而不同). Such an ideal can serve as a working ideal for democratic faith because it is so deeply resonant with our natural inclinations (grounded in family-born feeling) and our culturally refined aesthetic sensibilities. There is much to be further contemplated in this essay that covers so much ground in recent discursive strategies in American democracy alongside of profound metaphysical ruminations from a leading thinker in the relatively nascent field of inter-cultural comparative philosophy.

From **Lina Zhang**, we learn how “the great unity of heaven and human” as a working Confucian faith in the potentials of educational experience might be able to give us a healthier picture of holistic childhood development—at a time when national educational systems seem to increasingly be relying on narrowly conceived biometrics that stress standardized tests with quantifiable outcomes and a neoliberal conception of the “efficient use of resources.”

Zhang draws upon contemporary case studies in the People's Republic of China and a creative reading of Confucian classics, with special attention paid to the *Analects*, to develop her plea for taking into account the whole person when thinking about the aims of education in an increasingly complex and globalized present.

From **Brandon King**, we are offered critical balance in our admittedly “rosy” conception of Confucian cultures of learning. King presents the philosophical importance and pedagogical insights of the Legalist tradition that revolves around the works attributed to or associated with the teachings of Shang Yang and Han Feizi. This essay reminds us how critical it is to “think like an institution” in the context of managing large scale populations and recalcitrant student bodies. Without coming to facile conclusions, King’s essay leads us into new horizons of comparative thinking about pedagogical practice wherein any ethical aspirations to creative democracy and non-coercive harmony must be tempered with the realist considerations of a body politic marked with dissensus and factionalism. The importance of thinking about *fa* 法 as not being entirely reliant upon “good or exemplary persons” (*ren* 仁) and “ritual practice” (*li* 禮) should be all the more evident for us in the present moment, as we witness the rapid erosion of respect for the rule of law and civic-mindedness.

From **James Yang**, we learn how Dewey’s philosophy historically entered into the Chinese scene, from his Chinese student and host, Hu Shih. Yang interprets the way in which Dewey’s influence allowed Shih to better appropriate his own Confucian tradition in a time of great cultural upheaval. Revisiting Hu Shih’s thinking in the present is timely as we attempt to carry out a more nuanced inter-cultural encounter that reverses the asymmetry of philosophical dialogues that operate within an Orientalist preju-

dice. Just how much Hu Shih's historicist and speculative thinking about Chinese philosophy was influenced by his Deweyan education is a matter of considerable debate. Professor Yang's provocative essay goes a long way toward providing a responsible historical and philosophical context that we might have such a debate.

And, finally, in the collaborative work from **Charles Howlett, Audrey Cohan, & Mariola Krol**, we see how Dewey's China mission served as a turning point in his own thinking about war, peace, and the possibility of Outlawry at a moment wherein he was re-imagining what participatory democracy might mean in an era of intensifying globalism in economic, political, and cultural modes of production. The “peace angle” presented in this essay emerges for us as a consummatory ethical and political end-in-view by which to go forward from this energizing constellation of essays adventuring into the educational potentials inherent in any democratic experience—especially when fully recognizing the many different cultural “masks” that creative democracy can take as a working faith in the relational dynamics of associated living together in family, school, and society.

We would like to thank here our readers for their interest in this issue. In line with the collaborative and experimental nature of the *Journal of School & Society*, and perhaps even more so in the unique context of this inter-cultural comparative issue as so focally aware of the vital importance of relational deference and communicative virtuosity, we welcome further comments and contributions going forward together as concerned educators.

Both John Dewey and Confucius were tireless educators who professed a working faith in creative social intelligence. As we face an overwhelming and dispiriting array of problems and predicaments in these trying times, perhaps we can find some edifying consolation

in the ethical hope attributed to Confucius by an unnamed gatekeeper, in countenancing what was witnessed to be a declining ritual order of the Zhou *li* 周禮:

Zilu spent the night at Stone Gate. The morning gatekeeper asked him, “Where are you from?” “From the residence of Confucius,” replied Zilu. “Isn't he the one who keeps trying although he knows that it is in vain?” asked the gatekeeper.¹²

In any event, both Dewey and Confucius would surely agree with us in this issue that democracy *as* experience-based education and education *as* creative democracy provide the only grounds we have for continuing to hope against hope for realizing a more sustainable, just, and peaceful world together in this all-too-fragile moment in our planetary history.

¹² Roger T. Ames & Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 181.