

# The Influence of John Dewey on the Chinese Literary Revolution: Hu Shih's Synthesis of Confucian Learning and John Dewey's Pragmatism

**James Z. Yang**

Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University, United International College Chinese Language and Cultural Center

One of the most fascinating and least publicized aspects of John Dewey's scholarly work is his influence on Chinese society. Dewey's sojourn to China from 1919 to 1921 provided modern Chinese intellectuals with an unparalleled opportunity to disseminate Dewey's pragmatism throughout Chinese society.

Throughout the May Fourth/New Cultural Movement period,<sup>1</sup> a group of Chinese educators, most of whom had studied with Dewey at Columbia University, strived to apply Dewey's pragmatic philosophy to Chinese social and cultural reformations. Among Dewey's

Chinese students, Hu Shih was perhaps the most influential representative of Dewey's pragmatism during the Chinese Republican period (1912-1949). One of the key contributors to Chinese literary reform, Hu Shih claimed that, starting in 1915, Dewey's pragmatism became the guide of his life and thinking, as well as the foundation of his philosophy. He furthermore asserted that his idea of Chinese literary revolution was a reflection of pragmatist thought.<sup>2</sup>

The May Fourth Movement period introduced Western learning (i.e., the ideas of science and democracy) while attacking Confucian tradition. As a student of Dewey and of pragmatism, Hu Shih supported the group of Chinese iconoclasts who advocated the slogan "Down with Confucius and sons."<sup>3</sup> In 1919, in his lecture titled, "Dewey's Experimentalism (Pragmatism)," Hu Shih publicly criticized the Confucian principles of "Three Cardinal Bonds and Five Constant Virtues,"<sup>4</sup> which he claimed obstructed China's transformation to democracy and modern civilization.<sup>5</sup>

From Hu Shih's perspective, Dewey's philosophy contradicted Confucianism. Nevertheless, before studying in the United States,

---

<sup>2</sup> Hu Shih, "Self-Introduction," in *Hu Shih's Diary of Studying Abroad* (胡适留学日记), (Beijing, China: Tong Xin Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Tse-tung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 307.

<sup>4</sup> In Confucianism, the "Three Cardinal Bonds" are as follows: "the emperor was the master of his subjects, the father the master of his sons, and the husband and master of his wife." "The Five Constant Virtues" include benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and sincerity.

<sup>5</sup> Hu Shih, "Dewey's Experimentalism (实验主义)," in Ou-Yang Zhesheng (Ed.), in *Collected Works of Hu Shih*, 2, (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1998), 223.

---

<sup>1</sup> The May Fourth Movement was an anti-imperialist and political movement growing out of student protests in Beijing on May 4, 1919, against the Treaty of Versailles, which allowed Japan to receive territories in Shandong from Germany after World War I. Although the movement generated strong political appeal by sparking the sense of a modern nation-state across China, its influence greatly expanded from a mere political appeal to a cultural reformation. Thus, by extension, the May Fourth Movement is also called the New Cultural Movement, which refers to the period 1919-1928.

Hu Shih's education had been steeped in the Confucian tradition. It therefore seems unlikely that Confucian thought would remain entirely absent from Hu Shih's later work (after his time at Columbia). After all, as Dewey's philosophy suggests that educational experiences embody the characteristics of continuity, which run through all stages of a person's life.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper, I illuminate the cross-cultural philosophical dynamics that took place during the May Fourth period by exploring the ways in which Hu Shih's literary revolution synthesizes his Confucian educational experience with Dewey's pragmatism. In other words, this work seeks to answer a crucial question: How did Hu Shih fuse his Confucian education and his Deweyan learning to bring about a Chinese literary revolution?

My inquiry begins with the exploration of what Hu Shih learned from his Confucian/New Confucian educational experience. Next, I will turn to the question of how Hu Shih bridged the gap between his Confucian education and his Deweyan learning. Last, I analyze how he applied Dewey's pragmatic philosophy to Chinese literary revolution.

## New Confucian Father Figure

Hu Shih was born in 1891, when China was in the very late stages of the imperial period. His father, Hu Chuan, was a lower ranking official and a faithful Neo-Confucian scholar. Hu Shih's educational journey thus began with a Neo-Confucian education instilled by his father. Before analyzing Hu Chuan's influence on Hu Shih, it is worth providing a brief discussion of the historical roots of Neo-Confucianism.

This philosophy evolved from orthodox Confucianism, which was developed during the periods of the Spring and Autumn (770 BCE-476 BCE) and the Warring States (476 BCE-221 BCE). During the Song dynasty (960-1279), Buddhism and Taoism challenged Confucianism's privilege, 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. Historically, the leading figures of Neo-Confucianism treated Confucius's thought as the root of their philosophies. As a philosophical school, Neo-Confucianism is thus 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." 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. "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, and this pattern serves as the basis of developing Confucianism's ethical codes regarding hierarchical relationships.

During the Ming and Qing periods (1368-1644 and 1644-1911, respectively), the School of Principle enjoyed a prestigious position in official ideology. During this time, the School of Principle was represented by the Cheng-Zhu school, founded by the Neo-Confucian scholars Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi during the Song period (960-1279), which stressed the significance of the "investigation of things and extension of knowledge" in leading students of Confucian-

<sup>6</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

ism to an understanding of the essence of principle.<sup>7</sup>

Although Confucian civilization was undergoing unprecedented challenges from the West during the late imperial period (1840-1911), the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism as an official ideology still exerted a strong influence on Chinese society and education. The Cheng-Zhu school enjoyed high popularity among local residents of Hu Shih's hometown in Anhui Province.<sup>8</sup> As a dedicated Neo-Confucian scholar in Anhui Province, Hu Chuan wrote several books to educate Hu Shih. These works' primary goal was to teach Confucian ethical codes and Neo-Confucian cosmology.

According to Hu Chuan's writings, the universe and world consist of two concepts from ancient cosmology, *qi* (vital force) and *li* (principle), instead of ghosts and devils, as claimed in popular understandings of Buddhist and Taoist teachings. The Neo-Confucian father believed that all things are brought into being by the union *qi* and *li*, meaning that it is impossible for supernatural beings to exist at all. Because of his firm standpoint on Neo-Confucianism, Hu Chuan not only strongly objected to any form of religious activities in his family, but also formulated strict family regulations to separate his family from the influence of Buddhism and Taoism.<sup>9</sup>

Hu Chuan's deeds and writings truly embodied Neo-Confucianism's view of religion. In fact, Neo-Confucianism's founders tended to

downplay the role of religion in human life, although the philosophical thought absorbed some elements from Taoism and Buddhism. For instance, one of the leading figures of Cheng-Zhu school, Zhu Xi (1130-1200), did not highly promote the worship of spirits or offerings to images. Neo-Confucian rites generally were secular, linking people to each other rather than to the divine. In other words, to Neo-Confucians, the purpose of ritual practice was to maintain an ethical code and hierarchical relations within a human society.<sup>10</sup>

In the *Analects*, Confucius himself tended to pay more attention to human problems than to metaphysical matters: "not yet being able to serve other people, how would you able to serve the spirit . . . Not yet understanding life, how could you understand death?"<sup>11</sup> The secular confusion people face in the real world is always one of the most important concerns in Confucius's philosophical thought.

In their introduction to the *Analects*, Ames and Rosemont state that Confucianism's "absence of an essential religious orientation to life rendered secular education, as a form of human effort toward the achievement of the aims of life, that much more imperative."<sup>12</sup> For instance, in the *Analects*, the Master further said, "the expression 'sacrifices as though present' is taken to mean 'sacrifice to the spirit as though the spirits are present' ... if I myself do not participate in the sacrifice, it is as though I have not sacrificed at all."<sup>13</sup> In other words, Confucius's philosophy did not center at all on a study of religion. Overall, both Confucian and Neo-Confucian scholars held the view that an ethical practice would produce correct action

<sup>7</sup> Tianyu Feng, Jiming Zhou, and Xiaoming He, *The History of Chinese Culture* (中国文化史), (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Zhaojun Zhang, *Neo-Confucianism and Classic Learnings between Late Qing and Early Republican Period* (晚清民初的理学与经学), (Beijing: Shang Wu Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Hu Shih, *Autobiography of My Forty Years* (四十自述), (Beijing: Zhuo Guo Hua Qiao Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Feng, Zhou, & He, *History*.

<sup>11</sup> Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, translated by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 144.

<sup>12</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, 85.

<sup>13</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, 85.

irrespective of belief, and this eventually developed into an atheistic stance.

Hu Chuan's Neo-Confucian ideas had a deep influence on Hu Shih's thinking. Although Hu Shih criticized Confucianism's ethical codes during the period of the May Fourth/New Cultural Movement, he embraced his father's rejection of the worship of supernatural beings, a stance that stemmed from his Neo-Confucian perspective:

My father had no chance to be exposed to the influence of modern natural science. However, his emphasis upon the ideas of *li* and *qi* from Neo-Confucianism was helpful to get rid of many ideas of superstition. Furthermore, the Cheng-Zhu school always advocated *gewu qiongli* (the investigation of things and extension of knowledge), which somewhat matches the spirit of modern science.<sup>14</sup>

Hu Shih obviously recognized his father's Neo-Confucian atheism as a cultural asset in classic Chinese learning, and it is clear that this was conducive to his intellectual growth.

## The Way to Atheism, and Dewey's Pragmatism

Even though Hu Shih's father made great efforts to create a Neo-Confucian atheistic atmosphere for his family, the family members influenced by his thought were mainly the males, because Chinese women's observance of Neo-Confucianism was typically limited to maintaining a chaste widowhood (*shou jie*).<sup>15</sup>

After Hu Chuan died, when Hu Shih was still a little boy, all adult males in the family had

to leave their hometown to make a living. While fulfilling the custom of *shou jie*, Hu Shih's mother actively participated in domestic women's practice of Chinese Buddhism. Therefore, Hu Shih was exposed to the religious activities of his mother and other females. Although he had already learned from his father the basic teachings of Neo-Confucian atheistic thought, he was still frequently terrified by Chinese Buddhism's many ghosts and demons, which the women of his family discussed.<sup>16</sup>

However, Hu Shih's classical education eventually unyoked him from the shackles of superstition. One day at the age of eleven, Hu Shih had a meaningful encounter with the writings of Sima Guang (1019-1086). Sima Guang was one of the pioneers of Neo-Confucianism during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). He is best remembered as a key contributor to the historical masterwork *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* (*xi zhi tong jian*).

In his autobiography, Hu Shih clearly documents how Sima Guang's sayings enlightened him as he read a paragraph of family precepts written in this work:

According to Sima Guang, the spirit was gone away once the human body died. As a result, it is useless to pay any sacrifice and memorial ritual to a ghost and spirit... [A]fter repeatedly reviewing this passage, I suddenly jumped with a great happiness!<sup>17</sup>

After that revelation, Hu Shih was no longer afraid of evil spirits, and he began to question the existence of hell in Chinese Buddhism.

His writings further recorded a historical moment during his educational journey:

<sup>14</sup> Hu, *Autobiography of My Forty Years*, 136.

<sup>15</sup> Zhang, *Neo-Confucianism and Classic Learnings*.

<sup>16</sup> Hu, *Autobiography of My Forty Years*, 40

<sup>17</sup> Hu, *Autobiography of My Forty Years*, 40.

One day I read a famous paragraph from *On the Annihilation of the Soul* (*shen mie lun*) by Fan Zhen<sup>18</sup> (450-515), which was cited from Sima Guang in *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*. “The body is the substance of the soul; the soul is the effect of the body. That means the body refers to the substance. The soul to the substance is like sharpness to a blade; the body to the effect is like a blade to its sharpness. However, there is no blade without its sharpness, and no sharpness without blade ...”<sup>19</sup>

Fan Zhen’s argument eventually led Hu Shih to become an atheist. He recalled that “these thirty-five Chinese words from Fan Zhen, cited by Sima Guang, completely drove out all ghosts and spirits in my mind. Since then I became a person disbelieving any supernatural beings.” He further concluded: “it was very surprising that Sima Guang’s *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* had a great impact on my religious belief, so that I was completely converted to be atheist.”<sup>20</sup>

Evidently, the atheistic aspect of Neo-Confucianism was of great benefit in developing Hu Shih’s view of religion. During his lifetime, Hu Shih took a very critical view of Chinese Buddhism. After studying in the United States, he even criticized Christianity based on his experiences with Chinese Buddhism. For instance, in his diary on October 12, 1912, Hu Shih wrote down his thoughts in response to a speech made by a Methodist minister: his “views were preposterous and confused, resembling a Chinese village woman discussing

the story of devils and ghosts in hell.”<sup>21</sup> During the May Fourth Period, as a young professor at Beijing University, Hu Shih further decried Christianity as a cultural liability with a pernicious effect on Chinese education.<sup>22</sup>

Hu Shih’s Neo-Confucian learning laid a solid psychological and cultural foundation on which he constructed his lifelong and unfavorable view of religion, a perspective that colored his approach to educational reform. It is important to realize that in Hu Shih’s view, Dewey’s outlook on religion became a key factor linking Hu Shih with Deweyan pragmatism:

The reason that I became obsessive in [Dewey’s] philosophy was perhaps because his view of religion was the most moderate in contrast with other pragmatists. Dewey sharply criticized William James. To be honest, I never enjoyed reading James’s *The Will to Believe*. I per se was one of the persons who lacked “the will to believe.” Therefore, Dewey’s instrumentalism-related thought, more based on science instead of religion, greatly attracted me.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, Dewey’s *From Absolutism to Experimentalism* indicates his reluctant attitude toward religion:

I do not mention this theological and intuitional phase because it had [no] lasting influence upon my own development, except

<sup>18</sup> Fan Zhen was a Confucian pioneer who argued against Buddhism during the period of the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589).

<sup>19</sup> Hu, *Autobiography of My Forty Years*, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Hu, *Autobiography of My Forty Years*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Hu Shih, *Hu Shih’s Diary of Studying Abroad* (胡适留学日记), (Beijing: Tong Xin Press, 2012), 49.

<sup>22</sup> Hu Shih, “The Difficulties that Church Schools in China Meet Today (今日教会教育之难关),” in *Collected Writings of Hu Shih*, 14, (Taipei: Yuan Liu Press, 1986), 235.

<sup>23</sup> Hu Shih, *An Autobiography: As Told by Hu Shih* (胡适口述自传), edited and translated by To Tekong, (Taipei: Yuan Liu Press, 2010), 134.

negatively. I learned the terminology of an intuitional philosophy, but it did not go deep, and in no way did it satisfy what I was dimly reaching for.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, in *A Common Faith*, Dewey made additional efforts to retain religious values while removing the indefensible belief in the supernatural. In Dewey's view, belief in the supernatural clearly was not reasonable in the modern world. *A Common Faith* showed that, for Dewey, human intellectual life must progress from traditional religious practice to the improvement of knowledge and understanding:

It is this active relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name "God." I would not insist that the name must be given. There are those who hold that the associations of the term with the supernatural are so numerous and close that any use of the word "God" is sure to give rise to misconception and be taken as a concession to traditional ideas.<sup>25</sup>

Although his argument did not completely express an atheistic stance, Dewey's philosophy tended to emphasize observing and understanding human experience in an earthly society.

In this respect, Confucianism and Dewey's pragmatic philosophy share a similar common ground. Because Confucianism evolved into Neo-Confucianism after the Northern Song dynasty, the ultimate concern of Neo-Confucian scholars was still closely associated with human affairs. These significant similari-

ties between the two philosophical systems inspired Hu Shih to approach and adopt his form of pragmatism. In short, Dewey's view of religion was quite compatible with Hu Shih's cultural psychology stemming from Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. Therefore, Hu Shih saw both Dewey's perspective on religion and Confucianism's atheistic stance as cultural assets, although they came from different educational traditions. When approaching Dewey's pragmatism, Hu Shih was wise enough to build a bridge between these two cultural assets of China and the West.

## Scientific Spirit and the Confucian School of Evidential Investigation

In addition to exploring Neo-Confucianism's atheistic worldview, it also worth examining the role of Confucian School of Evidential Investigation (*pu xue*) in Hu Shih's approach to Dewey's pragmatism. The School of Evidential Investigation originated during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Under Manchu rule, the policy of literary inquisition by the court forced Chinese scholars to avoid critical inquiry into Confucian classic canons and politics. Hence, most of them had to find a "safe" subject to study.<sup>26</sup>

During the period of the Qianglong (1711-1799) and the Jiaqing emperors (1760-1820), an increasing number of Chinese scholars concentrated on the School of Evidential Investigation, which emphasized a concrete analysis of Confucian classic texts. Through careful study of the classic books and ancient relics, Confucian scholars inter-

<sup>24</sup> John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in George P. Adams and William Pepperell Montague (Eds.), *Contemporary American Philosophy: Personal Statements*, (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 13-27.

<sup>25</sup> John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 28.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1984).

rogated their authenticity, interpolations, and exact meanings.

The grand axiom of the School of Evidential Investigation was to use evidence and logical reasoning to determine the truth in the facts. The school embodied the classic methodology of researching classic canons. During the Qing period, familiarity with the School of Evidential Investigation's teachings was prevalent among the Chinese intellectual class. Most members of the May Fourth generation received training in this scholarship when growing up during the late Qing period, and Hu Shih was no exception.<sup>27</sup>

Before coming to the United States, Hu Shih gradually developed a strong interest in the School of Evidential Investigation through his study of the *Thirteen Classics of Chinese Literature* (十三经注疏).<sup>28</sup> Even during his seven years of study in the United States, the young Chinese scholar spent considerable time writing essays focusing on the classic school. For instance, based on his training from the School of Evidential Investigation, Hu Shih wrote an excellent article examining the true meaning of certain words in the *Classic of Songs*, the earliest collection of ancient Chinese poetry, written between 1046 and 771 BCE. While studying in the United States, he examined many classic works covering the canons of Daoism, Chinese Legalism, Confucianism, and other traditional approaches of the Pre-Qin period.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ou-Yang Zhesheng, *Historical Interpretation of the May Fourth Movement* (五四运动的历史诠释), (Taipei: Show-wei Information Co, Ltd, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> A famous Qing dynasty collection of thirteen Confucian canons edited by Ruan Yuan (1764-1849), together with Confucian scholars' commentaries.

<sup>29</sup> Ying-shih Yu, *Hu Shih in Retrospect: Rethinking of Hu Shih's Life and Thinking* (重寻胡适的历程), (Shanghai: San Lian Press, 2012).

More importantly, as Hu Shih came to adopt Dewey's ideas, he began to consider the connection between the ancient School of Evidential Investigation and the modern scientific method. Hu Shih was inclined to regard Dewey's thought as a practical method for useful leaning. For example, when studying Dewey's *How We Think* in the United States, Hu Shih tried to interpret the scientific features of the book from a pragmatic perspective. To his understanding, this book aimed to expound how people can solve puzzling problems using scientific thinking by formulating hypotheses, gathering and analyzing evidence, and using inductive reasoning.

Hu Shih thus believed that the Confucian School of Evidential Investigation shared characteristics with Dewey's ideas. When discussing the influence of *How We Think* on his thought, Hu Shih writes:

Dewey's method of thinking helps me understand the procedure of normal scientific research. His idea also helps me understand the methodology of ancient scholarship in China for the last three hundred years, such as the fields of textology and exegetics. I translated the totality of these classic learnings into English as "The School of Evidential Investigation" ... I was the first one who found a common ground between modern scientific law and ancient Chinese textology and exegetics. Dewey's thought led to my conclusion.<sup>30</sup>

During the May Fourth/New Cultural period, in his famous article titled. "The Research Ways of the Scholars of Qing Peri-

<sup>30</sup> Hu, *An Autobiography*, 138-139.

od,”<sup>31</sup> Hu Shih wrote that the strength of the Qing scholars’ School of Evidential Investigation lies in the fact that they knew how to formulate a hypothesis and were aware of the importance of using evidence to prove their hypotheses. Hu Shih therefore concluded that the classic school embraced modern scientific values.

Hu Shih expressed the Qing scholars’ methodology in one sentence: “Bring up hypothesis bravely while proving it carefully.”<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, he made a similar comment about Dewey’s pragmatism:

John Dewey provided us with a philosophy of thinking, treated thinking as an art, as well as a skill . . . I found out that this skill was applicable to both natural science and historical science . . . The substance of this skill is located in the conviction to bring up hypothesis bravely while proving it carefully.<sup>33</sup>

During his later years, when discussing the generality of scientific law, Hu Shih further stated:

During recent decades, I always simplified scientific law as the formula of “Bring up hypothesis bravely while proving it carefully.” I acknowledged that my understanding of all procedures of scientific law highly depended on Dewey’s instruction. In fact, both the East (China) and the West share the same perspectives of research methods.<sup>34</sup>

Apparently, Hu Shih believed that there was a common ground between China and the West

with regard to theories about research methods. He regarded the School of Evidential Investigation as a cultural asset of Confucian scholarship, which led him to embrace the scientific law of Dewey’s philosophy. Moreover, in contrast with the classic academic school, Hu Shih judged Dewey’s conception of scientific thought as more “useful” because it could resolve all problems in human society. Following this conviction, Hu Shih believed that only verifiable scientific methods could be applied into Chinese social reality.<sup>35</sup>

More to the point, Hu Shih preferred to view Dewey’s scientific insight with an eye toward Confucian education’s notion of “learning of practical use to society.” This classic idea emphasized the conviction that learning should serve the government’s interests by contributing to the resolution of social and political problems. For instance, when talking about education in the arts of poetry, Confucius commented:

If people can recite all of the three hundred Songs and yet when given official responsibility, fail to perform effectively, or when sent to distant quarters, are unable to act on their own initiatives, then even though they have mastered so many of them, what good are they to them?<sup>36</sup>

Confucian education was not inclined to encourage learning merely for the sake of learning. Instead, Confucian scholars believed that education should serve political and social goals.

Most Confucian scholars, even if they were not government officials, focused on the good of the nation. They dedicated themselves to scholarship and moral teachings in order to

<sup>31</sup> The original title of this piece was “The Scientific Research Way of the Scholars of Qing Period.”

<sup>32</sup> Hu, *Autobiography of My Forty Years*, 303.

<sup>33</sup> Hu, *Autobiography of My Forty Years*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Hu, *An Autobiography*, 139-140.

<sup>35</sup> Yu, *Hu Shih in Retrospect*, 197.

<sup>36</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, 58-78.

benefit society. Consequently, as a pragmatic branch of Confucian education, the idea of “learning of practical use to society” paid considerable attention to harmonizing and strengthening the state by applying “useful” knowledge from the classic learning to Chinese social reality.<sup>37</sup> In particular, when China lost its sovereignty and territories to Western invasions in the late 1800s, millions of Chinese scholars were inspired by the idea of “learning of practical use to society” to discover “useful” knowledge to achieve the goal of national salvation.

It is worth noting that the idea of “learning of practical use to society” also led Hu Shih to approach Deweyan learnings. Hu Shih expressed his desire for discovering useful learning in one of his diaries while studying in the United States:

Learning what my country urgently needs is not a novel theory or profound philosophy, but a system of knowledge which can be practically useful for education, social customs, and government method in China. In my view, there are three forms of learning which can be miraculous for Chinese society: the method of induction, a historical horizon, and an evolutionary view.<sup>38</sup>

Here, the precept of “learning of practical use to society” became a philosophical driving force behind Hu Shih’s access to Western learning. More interestingly, it turns out that Dewey’s philosophy embraces these three forms of learning. Therefore, it is not surprising that Hu Shih became one of Dewey’s faithful devotees.

<sup>37</sup> Tianyu Feng, *The Essence of Classic Chinese Canons* (中华元典精神), (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Press, 1994).

<sup>38</sup> Hu, *Autobiography of My Forty Year*, 167.

## Hu Shih’s Application of Dewey’s Pragmatism to the Literary Revolution

On the surface, the central mission of the literary revolution was to supplement the classic written literary style with Chinese spoken language (vernacular language) as a written medium for scholarship and all communication purposes. In essence, as Hu Shih pointed out, overthrowing the classic written language’s dominance over the Chinese people would be very useful to emancipate their thoughts from the restrictions of ancient culture, custom, and character.<sup>39</sup>

In order to justify his advocacy of Chinese vernacular language literature, Hu Shih connected his cause of literary reformation with Darwinian language. In his diary essay of July 6, 1916, titled “Making a Comparison between Classical Writing and Vernacular Language,” Hu Shih wrote that “for classical writing, the spreading of vernacular language is not the result of degeneration, but of evolution.”<sup>40</sup> More significantly, Hu Shih wisely realized a powerful educational motivation behind the Chinese literary revolution movement.

He saw the Chinese vernacular as more than an expedient instrument for communicating with the semi-literate and teaching the illiterate. Therefore, an important objective of the literary reformation was to democratize education. While still at Columbia University in 1916, Hu Shih asserted that “literature should not be the private possession of a few educated elites, but should be accessible to the great ma-

<sup>39</sup> Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*.

<sup>40</sup> Hu, *Hu Shih’s Diary of Studying Abroad*, 531.

majority in a nation.<sup>41</sup>” During the period of the May Fourth/New Cultural Movement, Hu Shih emphasized this point more explicitly:

We have realized at last that certain things must be given up if Chinese is to live. If we really want education, general and universal education, we must first have a new language, a language which can be used and understood by tongue and ear and pen, and which will be a living language for the people. For years and years we tried to have education, but we feared to use the spoken language.<sup>42</sup>

Clearly, Hu Shih’s promotion of Chinese vernacular reflected his advocacy of common education in China.

Furthermore, his view of education aligned with his understanding of Dewey’s educational thought. In one of his writings, Hu Shih remarked, “a key contribution from Dewey’s educational philosophy was to reform educational system and theory, which was derived from class society. His educational theory aimed to generate the men of talent for a civil society.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the heart of Dewey’s philosophy of education was the importance of preparing students for democratic citizenship.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey argued that improving common education would lead all members of a society to embrace democracy as a mode of “associated living” and “conjoint communication experience,” not simply a polit-

ical and governmental arrangement.<sup>44</sup> In his 1919 lecture in China on “Education in Democracy,” Dewey stated that education in the modern period should not be the privilege of a chosen few, but an indispensable right to which every citizen is entitled.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the purpose of education was to improve the common people’s well-being.<sup>46</sup>

As Dewey’s educational ideas resonated in Hu Shih’s thoughts, his scientific wisdom also contributed to his idea of the Chinese literary revolution. As discussed above, one of the most influential ideas that Hu Shih learned from Dewey was the notion that science is a useful method or instrument that can efficiently solve all problems in human lives. It therefore makes sense that Hu Shih attempted to extend this idea to his Chinese vernacular movement, inferring that Chinese literature can be examined using the scientific method.

When arguing with some of his Chinese friends in the United States, who defended the classic literary style, Hu Shih put forth this position:

The history of Chinese literature is simply the history of the slow substitution of outmoded forms by new literary forms (instruments) ... The vitality of literature depends entirely upon its ability to express the sentiments and thoughts of given period with a living medium. When the medium has become ossified, a new and vital one must be substituted for it: this is “literary

<sup>41</sup> Hu, *Hu Shih’s Diary of Studying Abroad*, 538.

<sup>42</sup> Hu Shih, “The Renaissance in China,” in Chou Chih-Ping (Ed.), *English Writing of Hu Shih*, (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2012), 28.

<sup>43</sup> Hu Shih, “John Dewey’s Educational Idea,” in Zhang Baogui (Ed.), *John Dewey and China*, (Shi Jiazhuang: Hebei People Press, 2012), 131.

<sup>44</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, in Jo Ann Boydston (Ed.), *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, 9, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981).

<sup>45</sup> John Dewey, “Education in Democracy,” in Yuan Gang, Sun Jiexiang, and Rn Bingang (Eds.), *Democracy and Modern Society: John Dewey’s Lecture in China* (民治主义与现代社会: 杜威在华讲演集), (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2004), 354.

<sup>46</sup> Dewey, “Education in Democracy,” 353.

revolution” ... Therefore, we can say that all the literary revolutions in history have been revolutions in literary instruments.<sup>47</sup>

To support his advocacy of literary reformation, Hu Shih therefore adopted Dewey’s claim that science, with its emphasis on experimentation and facts, could be applied to all aspects of social reality.

His diaries from his time in the United States frequently displayed his efforts to apply the scientific method to reforming Chinese literature. On July 30, 1916, Hu Shih articulated his idea of Chinese literary reformation:

The question of whether Chinese vernacular language can be used to create poetry or not depends greatly upon our efforts to find answers. It is impossible to find out the way of resolving this problem from ancient Chinese scholars . . . Instead, we need to examine it through a scientific method. Why don’t we try for another time after the first failure? If we truly follow scientific spirit, we are not supposed to give up our efforts if we only fail once.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, on August 4, 1916, Hu Shih wrote in his diary:

Shi Nai’an and Cao Xueqing<sup>49</sup> already proved the fact that Chinese vernacular language can be used to write novels. Nowadays we need to examine whether Chinese

vernacular can be used to write Chinese prose by an experimental method or not.<sup>50</sup>

In his diary on August 21 of the same year, after listing the eight necessary prerequisites for the literary revolution, Hu Shih made a strong connection between the scientific method and Chinese literature reformation, again emphasizing that the “Chinese vernacular language will be my own laboratory to examine the applicability of new Chinese literature.”<sup>51</sup>

More than 20 years later, Hu Shih made this point clearer while explaining his thoughts about Chinese literature reformation. As he recalled:

The reason why I made a decision to examine the feasibility of vernacular language poetry is because of the triggering of the debates between I and my friends, as well as the influence of pragmatic philosophy on me. Dewey’s pragmatism teaches us: any theory should be only a hypothesis before it is under scrutiny ... My thought about vernacular literature is indeed a hypothesis. One part of the hypothesis, such as traditional novel and opera, has already been examined by our history. Nevertheless, vernacular poetry ... still needs to be testified. Therefore, I am willing to apply the theory of pragmatism into the verification of the feasibility of Chinese vernacular poetry ... As a result, I call the book of my vernacular poetry *Tentative Proposal*.<sup>52</sup>

During his later years, Hu Shih again recalled the influence of Dewey’s pragmatism upon his

<sup>47</sup> Hu, *Autobiography of My Forty Years*, 105.

<sup>48</sup> Hu, *Hu Shih’s Diary of Studying Abroad*, 555.

<sup>49</sup> Shi Naian (1296-1372) is the author of *The Story of Water Margin* (水浒传), one of the four greatest classic novels of Chinese literature. Cao Xueqin (1715-1763) is the author of *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦), another of the four greatest classic novels.

<sup>50</sup> Hu, *Hu Shih’s Diary of Studying Abroad*, 558.

<sup>51</sup> Hu, *Hu Shih’s Diary of Studying Abroad*, 558.

<sup>52</sup> Hu, *Autobiography of My Forty Years*, 124-125.

proposal of the Chinese literary revolution. In his discussion of *Tentative Proposal*, he maintained that:

this book [*Tentative Proposal*] obviously indicates the impact of John Dewey's pragmatism on me, so that I tried to apply his pragmatism into Chinese literary revolution. According to this school, any theory should be a hypothesis before we examine it. Only experiment is the sole criteria of inspecting the truth.<sup>53</sup>

Inspired by Dewey's ideas, Hu Shih endeavored in practice to bring Chinese literature into contact with modern scientific standards. For Hu Shih, in Chinese history, the great writers, the people, the street singers, the rustic lovers, and the tavern entertainers have all accepted and used this living language to express their feelings and their aims, but there had been in the past no conscious experimentation to adopt the vernacular language, no conscious experimentation to defend it.<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, the leaders of the literary revolution, including Hu Shih, tried to meet this need by resolving never to write anything except in this new language. In addition, while writing *Tentative Proposal*, Hu Shih gradually extended his experiments to novels, prose, and opera. During the period of the May Fourth/New Cultural Movement, influenced by Hu Shih, an increasing number of young writers succeeded in producing presentable specimens of literary experiment.

As a result, directed by scientific procedure from Dewey's pragmatism, the Literary Revolution Movement eventually established the legitimacy of the Chinese spoken language in all aspects of Chinese society. According to

Hu Shih, the Chinese vernacular language movement succeeded in revolutionizing all the school texts, and it also made the school life of millions of children easier than that of their fathers. Simultaneously, the spread of the Chinese spoken language gave the nation's youth a new channel for expressing their emotions and ideas.<sup>55</sup> It is perhaps accurate to say that the triumph of the Chinese vernacular language during the May Fourth/New Cultural period was a result of Hu Shih's absorption of Dewey's pragmatism.<sup>56</sup>

In Hu Shih's view, Chinese literature is not created for the sake of literature itself: "I believe that literature should be closely related to humans' real life. Only literature that deeply influences social reality and people's minds can enjoy permanent honor."<sup>57</sup> Hu Shih emphasizes that the rise of England, France, Italy, and Germany benefited from the emergence of new literature and new values in those countries. Likewise, the literary revolution was also conducive to the cause of national salvation in China.<sup>58</sup> Apparently, the ultimate goal of Hu Shih's dedication to the Chinese literary revolution was to strengthen and empower China.

<sup>53</sup> Hu, "The Renaissance in China," 29.

<sup>56</sup> However, the literary reformation's effect on progress in Chinese society was also a legacy left by earlier Confucian scholars. For instance, within both the Tang and Ming dynasties, Confucian literati made painstaking efforts to reform the literary style in order to purify Chinese people's character and strengthen Confucian codes. Literature's duty to serve only instructive moral and political purposes was implemented by ancient scholars. In other words, Chinese literature embraced the idea of "learning of practical use to society."

<sup>57</sup> Hu, *Hu Shih's Diary of Studying Abroad*, 538.

<sup>58</sup> Hu, *Autobiography of My Forty Years*, 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Hu, *Autobiography of My Forty Years*, 204.

<sup>54</sup> Hu, "The Renaissance in China," 29.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is appropriate here to remark on several significant implications. Dewey's pragmatism, filtered by Hu Shih, exerted a strong impact on the May Fourth/New Cultural Movement period. As my research demonstrates, Hu Shih's dedication to Dewey's pragmatism was not merely the result of Western education's influence. In fact, his Confucian educational experiences virtually forged a solid foundation on which Chinese intellectuals and educators learned from Dewey's philosophy. Both Neo-Confucian atheistic ideals and the Confucian School of Evidential Investigation provided connections that enabled Hu Shih to approach Dewey's philosophy. Simultaneously, the notion of "learning of practical use to society" in Confucianism became a driving force behind Hu Shih's introduction of Dewey's philosophy to China.

Consequently, for Hu Shih, Western learning, in particular Dewey's philosophy, became a useful method to holistically resolve social and political crises in Chinese society. In this way, Hu Shih's Confucian education and his Deweyan learning both serve a utilitarian goal. He believed that the value of any form of education resided in its usefulness for China.

When Dewey departed China for the United States in July 1921, Hu Shih wrote:

Dr. Dewey did not leave us some special ideas, such as Communism, Anarchism, the idea of free love, etc. The only thing he gave us is a way of philosophic thinking, so that we can use this method to resolve our specific problems. We call this way pragmatism.<sup>59</sup>

During his later years, Hu Shih again confirmed his practical perspective regarding Dewey's thought: "My variety of works of Chinese thought and history revolve around the idea of 'method,' which actually has dominated all of my writings for forty years. Basically speaking, this idea definitely benefited from John Dewey's influence."<sup>60</sup>

In light of this argument, Hu Shih simplified Dewey's pragmatic philosophy using the notion of "instrument," which can deal with a diversity of problems. As a result, Hu Shih's access to Dewey's philosophy showed his perspective of "philosophical instrumentalism."

As noted above, during Dewey's visit, the Confucian legacy and foreign ideas competed and interacted in Chinese society. Consequently, it is not surprising that many Chinese intellectuals, including some who had attacked Confucian tradition, explored a pathway toward synthesizing their Confucian education and Western learnings, whether intentionally or not. By examining the ways in which Hu Shih traversed between his Confucian and Deweyan learnings in order to transport Dewey's philosophy to Chinese literary reformation, scholars may understand how Chinese educators during the May Fourth period navigated the relationship between their Confucian past and their Deweyan learning in their efforts to reform Chinese society.

*James Z. Yang is an assistant professor of the Chinese Language and Culture Center at Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United*

(杜威先生与中国)," in Yuan Gang, Sun Jiexiang, and Ren Bingang (Eds.), *Democracy and Modern Society: Dewey's Lecture in China*

(民治主义与现代社会: 杜威在华讲演集), (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2004), 743.

<sup>60</sup> Hu, *An Autobiography*, 135.

<sup>59</sup> Hu Shih, "Mr. Dewey and China

*International College. James earned his Ph.D. from Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education at the University of Oklahoma in 2016. Before pursuing his doctoral studies, Dr. Yang received his master's degree from the Department of Political Science at the same institution. His research interests focus on a comparative study between the educational philosophies of Confucius and John Dewey, Chinese intellectual history, and education and culture of the Chinese republican period. He is also very interested in studying how education can shape citizen's national identity and the interaction of education and nationalism.*