

# The Influence of John Dewey's Pragmatic Educational Philosophy on Higher Education in China

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## Abstract

**John Dewey's pragmatic educational philosophy has had a profound impact on higher education in China. Pragmatic education emphasizes student-centered learning and focuses on fostering students' practical abilities and problem-solving skills. In Chinese higher education, Dewey's pragmatic ideas have propelled the process of educational reform, introducing teaching methods and curriculum designs that emphasize practicality and application. Schools and educators prioritize the cultivation of students' practical skills and abilities, encouraging active participation in practical activities and social experiences to enhance their practical application capabilities. Through Dewey's pragmatic educational philosophy, higher education in China is gradually transitioning from traditional theoretical instruction to a more practical and applied approach.**

## Keywords

**John Dewey, Pragmatic education, Higher education in China, Student capacity building, Educational reform.**

## 1. Introduction

Due to the coupling of various factors, the pragmatic educational trend centered around John Dewey was introduced to China before the 1920s and quickly gained momentum, exerting a profound influence on the practice and theoretical development of higher education in China. It is worth noting that the dissemination of a new ideology in China is not a simple cultural transplant; it requires a suitable cultural environment. Moreover, the local cultural context inevitably imposes corresponding requirements on the transplantation of foreign cultures, compelling the adopters to undergo localization and transformation. Through the efforts of modern educators such as Jiang Menglin, Hu Shi, and Tao Xingzhi, who embraced and adapted the ideas, numerous insights were generated, which can serve as valuable references and sources of inspiration for the ongoing exploration of higher education reform in contemporary China.

## 2. Analysis of John Dewey's Educational Philosophy

Pragmatism originated in the United States and is generally believed to have been initially proposed by the scientist Charles Sanders Peirce (Gu H, 2016). It was further developed by philosopher William James and consolidated into a comprehensive framework by educator John Dewey, ultimately becoming a significant force that profoundly influenced higher education in 20th-century America. Unlike Marxism, pragmatism advocates a developmental perspective rooted in reformism, which serves as a fundamental theoretical basis of its educational philosophy.

Dewey integrated the viewpoints of his predecessors and formulated his unique and comprehensive theory of pragmatism. He placed great emphasis on practical application and

was not merely a philosopher confined to the study. Rather, he was an educator actively involved in educational practice (Gu H. 2015). In terms of philosophy, Dewey proposed that democracy should be measured by the standard of "conscious and cooperative sharing of many common interests and contact with others in many varied and free ways." In his work "How We Think," he presented a methodological approach to problem-solving. In the field of education, he put forth the idea in "Democracy and Education" that "education is life, education is growth, education is the transformation of experience." He also noted, "The shift of emphasis in education is from the teacher to the learner. It is a revolution, and, like the revolution by which Copernicus and Galileo transferred the center of the solar system from the earth to the sun, it is a revolution in the center of reference and standard of value" (Dewey J, 2005).

The learner became the focal point, and education revolved around this central figure. However, it did not neglect society. On the contrary, each subject was taught in a manner that enabled learners to adapt to social life. Dewey's remarkable contributions to the field of education popularized pragmatism in the American educational sphere for half a century.

### **3. The Impact of Pragmatic Educational Philosophy on Higher Education in China**

In the early 20th century, there was a wave of Chinese students studying in the United States, with Tsinghua University serving as a preparatory institution for these students. Many notable individuals, such as Tao Xingzhi and Hu Shi, went abroad to study and later returned to China to work in universities, laying the foundation for the dissemination of pragmatic philosophy in China. In 1919, Columbia University professor John Dewey visited Japan, and his student Tao Xingzhi, along with Cai Yuanpei, who was the president of Peking University at the time, extended an invitation for Dewey to visit and study in China, ultimately extending his stay to two years (Dewey J, 1990). During this period, Dewey delivered lectures across various regions in China, conducted in-depth observations of Chinese society, and disseminated cutting-edge pragmatic ideas, profoundly influencing education at all levels in China, particularly in the realm of higher education.

#### **3.1. In the practice of higher education**

##### **3.1.1. The Impact of Pragmatic Educational Philosophy on the New System of Higher Education in China**

In modern China, the educational system has undergone several changes, from the "Ren Yin" system in 1902, the "Gui Mao" system in 1904, to the "Ren Zi Gui Chou" system in 1912-1913, and finally improved to the "Ren Xu" system in 1922. During this period, education witnessed a transformation in the target of learning and the focus of education, coinciding with the practicality-oriented education wave that originated in the United States and spread globally (Yang W, 2011). Yang Wenhai (2011) from Nanjing University pointed out that the Ren Xu system showed significant progress and superiority in terms of guiding principles, overall structure, basic content, and curriculum standards.

In terms of guiding principles, the Ren Xu system had seven principles: promoting the spirit of popular education, adapting to the needs of social evolution, seeking personal development, emphasizing national economic strength, focusing on life education, making education easily accessible, and allowing flexibility in local practices. The principle of "popular education spirit" reflected both the domestic context of popular education and the spirit of pragmatism, as pragmatism emphasizes the individual and the popularization of individual education. The influence of Dewey's philosophy is evident in the principle of "adapting to the needs of social evolution." American philosopher John Dewey, considered to be between Hegel and Darwin, emphasized the idea of evolution and closely linked it with learning (Gu H, 2016). "Emphasizing

life education" is also a practical approach, as pragmatism sets aside theoretical truths and emphasizes experiential learning in everyday life.

In terms of overall structure, the Ren Xu system advocated a learner-centered, activity-centered, and learning-through-doing approach, based on the spirit of pragmatism. It transformed the principles of teacher-centeredness, textbook-centeredness, and curriculum-centeredness introduced by Herbert, bringing in a fresh perspective that aligned with the global educational trend. This shift played a positive role in breaking traditional constraints and pursuing democracy and freedom in old China.

In terms of basic content, the Ren Xu system specified education at various levels, including primary and secondary schools, vocational schools, colleges, and teacher training. It divided school education into three stages: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Higher education, corresponding to the adult stage, targeted individuals between the ages of 18 and 24. College education was set to last for 4 to 6 years, including the undergraduate level, with the elimination of the preparatory stage. Above the college level, there were graduate schools without a fixed duration. Colleges could offer multiple disciplines with elective courses, as well as specialized programs (Yang W, 2011). These provisions not only clarified the status of universities but also considered the individuality of students, aligning with the international context of that time. The formulation of the Ren Xu system took nearly a decade of effort. During this period, various provinces laid the groundwork for educational reforms, educational organizations provided impetus, and educators played a leading role. Around 1915, educational reforms began in Hunan, with the proposal of the "Reform School System Plan," increased education funding, and the promotion of practical education. Lessons were drawn from the Ren Zi Gui Chou system, leading to a surge in educational activities in Changsha. In 1921, the National Education Federation held a conference in Guangzhou, with the central agenda being the new educational system. Guangdong specifically studied higher vocational schools and university education matters.

The birth of the new educational system was a significant achievement in the localization of pragmatism in China. It not only stood out in terms of ideology but also withstood the test of history, exerting a profound influence on modern Chinese education.

### **3.1.2. The Impact of Pragmatic Education Thought on Textbook and Teaching Method Reforms in China**

The textbooks used in traditional Chinese education were severely disconnected from the actual lives and realities of students due to the educational policy that prioritized loyalty and filial piety, relying heavily on Chinese classics. This resulted in generations of students receiving an education that seemed to resist change, with outdated textbooks that failed to reflect their practical and real-life experiences. However, the rise of Dewey's educational ideas, such as the "child-centered approach," "education as a reflection of life," "school as a microcosm of society," and "learning through practical experiences," gained widespread popularity and acceptance in the Chinese education community during the "Dewey fever." As a result, dissatisfaction with the outdated textbooks that were disconnected from actual life and the needs of children grew. Recognizing the necessity of textbook reform to implement the "new educational system" and uphold the true essence of "new education," education reformists embarked on the task of transforming the textbooks. McElory's research in "Transforming China through education: YanXiu, ZhangBoling, and the effort to build a new school system, 1901-1927" highlights the shift from the confined focus on Confucian classics in 1901 to the establishment of a completely new educational system by 1927.

In terms of teaching methodologies, Dewey-inspired approaches such as "learning by doing" and the Dalton Plan were introduced in China. These innovative methods, widely promoted by the National Education Association, found their way into various cities like Nanjing, Suzhou,

and Nantong, where advocates like Yu Ziyi and Shu Xincheng actively promoted the "Sinicized" Dewey school experiments. These experiments challenged traditional disciplinary boundaries, restructured the curriculum with a focus on children, updated teaching content, and transformed teaching methods. Emphasizing student independence and autonomy, these experiments left a significant impact on the national education community.

Moreover, Hu Shih's introduction of the paradigm "bold assumptions, cautious verification" revolutionized academic methodology. This approach, rooted in pragmatism, encouraged scholars to boldly formulate academic hypotheses based on limited existing clues, followed by thorough verification and exploratory research. By posing questions through hypotheses and using them as a guiding force in academic research, Hu Shih's paradigm broke free from outdated textual research and exegesis, energized by the spirit of the younger generation. This paradigm continues to exert a broad influence and is widely transmitted among scholars (Peng J, 2008).

Furthermore, during his tenure at the National Central University in Nanjing, Tao Xingzhi transformed teaching methods by redefining them as "teaching methodologies." This shift from the conventional term "teaching methods" emphasized the active role of learners. Tao Xingzhi's influence, influenced by pragmatism, quickly popularized the term "teaching methodologies," which became ingrained in everyday language. This change highlighted the mutual growth inherent in teaching, the importance of educational democracy, and the focus on learning outcomes. It encapsulated the wisdom of Tao Xingzhi and his contemporaries, signifying a departure from the one-sided transmission of knowledge to a collaborative effort involving multiple parties. Additionally, it conveyed a constructive meaning, as knowledge is gradually shaped through ongoing communication rather than being transmitted as a static entity. In the knowledge economy era, education serves as both an inheritance and exploration (Gao S, 2004).

Huang yan pei

### **3.1.3. The Influence of Pragmatist Educational Thought on Curriculum Reform in China**

John Dewey's Theory of Active Curriculum advocates for student-centered learning, allowing students to adapt their learning pace based on their individual physical and mental development. It suggests that different schools should offer a variety of subjects tailored to student's interests, hobbies, and practical needs, taking into account the available faculty, resources, and local requirements. A significant outcome of the 1920s curriculum reform in China was the adoption of a credit system and comprehensive curriculum in secondary schools. To complement this reform, a substantial number of elective courses were introduced. These reforms demonstrate the influence of Dewey's educational philosophy on the theory of active curriculum. However, due to challenges such as insufficient faculty, the reform initiative did not achieve the expected outcomes at the time. Nevertheless, the provision of an active curriculum has consistently been a focus in 20th-century China's curriculum reforms.

During his tenure at Fudan University, Lee Teng-hui pursued a pragmatic approach to education. Being situated in Shanghai, a city at the forefront of modern industrial and commercial development in China, Lee advocated for the establishment of practical disciplines and departments to cultivate talent in high-demand fields. Following the upgrade of Fudan Public School to Fudan University in 1917, Lee proposed the addition of a business school, transforming Fudan into a comprehensive university offering programs in humanities, sciences, and commerce (Chen T, 2012). Subsequently, departments in banking, accounting, and other practical disciplines were established in response to national demands (Xu et Liu, 2005). Lee also emphasized the development of emergency disciplines, such as political science and law, civil engineering, and journalism, to meet economic and societal needs. Additionally, in alignment with both domestic and international practices, courses like home economics and household management were introduced to provide higher education opportunities for women

(Zhang L, 2018). These curriculum reforms brought about significant advancements in China's higher education landscape.

In her work titled "Analysis of Art Education Thoughts and Practices in the Republican Era," Zhang Liping sheds light on the changes in art education and the corresponding innovative educational ideas during the Republican period in China. By exploring the viewpoints of the New Culture Movement in the field of art, Zhang illustrates the progress of aesthetic education and the integration of art in higher education, drawing upon the perspectives of influential figures such as Chen Duxiu and Cai Yuanpei. The development of art education in higher education during the Republican era holds substantial significance and warrants further examination (Yan et Hou, 2018).

Regarding curriculum, Zhang Boling placed great emphasis on the cultivation of physical education and advocated for the acquisition of scientific knowledge. However, a challenge known as "repetitive education" emerged, where outstanding students from Nankai University would study abroad only to return and teach future students to pursue education overseas, perpetuating a cycle. Zhang Boling addressed this issue by advocating for localized education that was grounded in and aligned with the Chinese national context. Nankai University not only prioritized physical education but also provided a diverse range of extracurricular activities. Various student associations thrived, with notable figures like Zhou Enlai actively participating in drama societies. Zhang Boling also encouraged students to conduct research in factories, banks, and other institutions to broaden their social experiences. His contributions to promoting the Olympic movement during the Republican era were noteworthy as well (Zhu et Ye, 2007).

### 3.2. In higher education theory

Before the rise of pragmatist educational thought, China's new educational theories were primarily introduced from Japan, particularly the theories of Herbert, which were influential. However, with the emergence of pragmatist educational thought, Chinese educational theorists began applying pragmatist theories to explain educational issues and gradually developed their own educational theories based on this foundation. This development was deeply influenced by pragmatist educational ideas. Pragmatist educational thought played a significant role in the establishment of modern educational theories by Chinese educators. In their research titled "Exploration of Modern Indigenous Educational Theories in China by Educators Returning from the United States," Zhou Hongyu and Chen Jingrong (2010) studied the origins and transformations of the higher education ideas of Chinese educators who studied in the United States in the first half of the 20th century. They pointed out that Tao Xingzhi's advocacy of "life as education" shifted towards mass education, while Chen Heqin's "active education," although derived from progressivism, aimed to transform individuals into being Chinese. When promoting livelihood education, Tang Shuangqiu adhered to the concept of combining theoretical education with practical training. Zhuang Zexuan's educational practices consistently revolved around the theme of "Sinicization."

Tao Xingzhi experimented with Dewey's theories in China but faced numerous obstacles (Chen J R, 2011). He stated, "I have been accompanying this trend in China since the sixth year of the Republic, and eight years of experience have told me that 'this path is not feasible' (Jia P, 2011)." Dewey's theories were developed to suit the American context of the early 20th century, catering to American individualism and democratic values. The practical application of Dewey's theories required certain material conditions and cultural soil, which were lacking in China at that time due to widespread educational deficiencies and economic hardships. Tao Xingzhi did not abandon pragmatism but instead transformed it. Specifically, he advocated "life as education" and "society as a school." "Life as education" expanded the scope of education to encompass daily activities and emphasized that one's education should be aligned with their

way of life, reflecting the influence of behavior on shaping individuals. This concept is reminiscent of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, where individuals play different roles and receive different educations and expectations depending on their roles. Workers living a worker's life receive a worker's education, as their roles dictate. This idea is also in line with Confucius' statement, "One must be consistent with one's name," highlighting the consistency between education and life in practice. "Society as a school" suggests that introducing elements of society into schools alone is insufficient, akin to peering through a tube. Moreover, China at that time lacked laboratory conditions, among other resources. Thus, Tao Xingzhi advocated learning in society by breaking down the walls of schools. As a result, he established the Half-Work Half-Study Movement, which was regarded as a "lifelong social university" and "people's university" for ongoing education (Zhang J, 2010).

Hu Shi was a follower of Dewey's theories, remaining devoted to pragmatism throughout his life. However, he also developed and interpreted the theory in a personal and profound manner. Hu Shi wrote a series of articles introducing pragmatism and applied this thought to higher education practices. He advocated conducting extensive research on problems because problems are concrete and real. He proposed a five-step thinking method for problem-solving, which involved clarifying the situation, identifying difficulties, exploring all possibilities, narrowing down options, and implementing conclusions. Additionally, he advocated "bold assumptions and cautious verification" in academic research. For instance, in his study of "Dream of the Red Chamber," he was the first to propose that Baoyu symbolized the author, Cao Xueqin, although some evidence did not emerge instantly. This academic paradigm bears resemblance to constructivism. Furthermore, in response to the trend of studying abroad, Hu Shi wrote, "Studying abroad is a temporary measure, while revitalizing domestic higher education is a long-term goal (Ge M, 1981)." He made practical demands for higher education and advocated transforming society through self-reflection, stating, "If you cannot liberate the bound feet of your sisters, you are not worthy of discussing women's liberation... If you cannot intervene in the opium in your village, you are not worthy of intervening in the affairs of the nation (Hua D, 2018)." This viewpoint aligns with the Marxist perspective on the people's stance. Hu Shi encouraged student movements but not at the expense of their studies. He aimed to build a Harvard or Oxford in China through education and nurturing individuals.

Chen Heqin referred to Dewey's "learning by doing" and proposed the pedagogical methodology of "teaching through doing, learning through doing, and progressing through doing." In the process of teaching others, knowledge can be systematized, and one's understanding becomes deeper. Learning is not the goal; progress is the objective. Every learning experience should be compared to one's past self, as Confucius said, "If a person does not learn something new every day, then they are losing something." Learning is an accumulative process. Although Chen Heqin's theories such as "five-finger education" primarily targeted children, his educational ideas can be partially transferred and have guiding significance for higher education. Chen Heqin introduced the concept of "active education," emphasizing the learner's initiative. He advocated using positive guidance to help learners discover their own world, thereby facilitating continuous growth.

Tang Shuangqiu proposed the theory of livelihood education, emphasizing the practicality of education and advocating the integration of education with practice. Zhuang Zexuan wrote the first comparative education work, "Comparative Education of Various Countries," and, based on extensive knowledge, completed "Sinicization of New Education." Starting from a practical perspective, he explored China's education through the angles of international experiments, expert research, local examples, and national needs.

Jiang Menglin, who studied in the United States in 1908 and arrived at Peking University in 1917, inherited Cai Yuanpei's philosophy and promoted the concepts of "presidential governance" in higher education management and "student autonomy" in student

administration. These concepts embody the spirit of democracy. He emphasized the importance of cultivating individual talents and advocated scientific research. Although he remained neutral in the debate between the "metaphysics faction" and the "science faction," he effectively promoted the application of democracy and science in higher education (Hua D, 2018).

Many other educators also proposed theories regarding pragmatism in higher education. For example, Wang Fengjie emphasized the practicality of normal education (Gao Y, 2019), Zheng Hesheng focused on the pragmatism of university history education (Wang J, 2018), and Zhu Jiahua's core idea was "seeking development through reform (Lu et Jiang, 2015)." The goal of universities is to cultivate talents capable of leading national activities in academic and cultural fields to achieve revitalization. Zhu Jiahua advocated practicality.

## **4. The Practical Significance of Pragmatism in Higher Education**

### **4.1. Advocating the Integration of Scientific and Humanistic Education**

Within Chinese higher education, John Dewey's pragmatism provides important guidance for the integration of scientific and humanistic education. Traditionally, scientific and humanistic education have been viewed as opposing fields, but pragmatism emphasizes their complementarity. Scientific education focuses on developing students' logical thinking, empirical research, and technological application abilities, while humanistic education emphasizes students' humanities literacy, critical thinking, and values. By integrating the two, Chinese higher education can cultivate students with comprehensive development, who possess not only professional skills but also humanistic care, social responsibility, and interdisciplinary thinking abilities. This integration of comprehensive education can help students better understand and address complex social problems, fostering innovative and socially impactful talents. In today's world, where science and technology have become the primary productive forces, these ideas undoubtedly hold great practical significance for how we embody humanistic care and integrate humanistic meaning into scientific education, achieving the integration of scientific and humanistic education.

### **4.2. Emphasizing the Connection between Learning and Social Practice**

Dewey's pragmatism argues that learning should be connected to social practice, deepening the effectiveness of learning through practical experiences. Within Chinese higher education, this viewpoint can be implemented through internships, practical projects, community service, and other means. By actively participating in authentic social activities, students apply their acquired knowledge and theories to practical problem-solving, cultivating practical abilities and innovative thinking. Such experiential learning not only enhances students' problem-solving and application skills but also deepens their understanding and memory of the knowledge, preparing them for future career development. Furthermore, through interacting with society, students can better understand social needs and issues, fostering a sense of social responsibility and civic consciousness.

### **4.3. Balancing Individual Development and Social Responsibility**

Dewey's pragmatism emphasizes the balance between fostering students' individual development and their sense of social responsibility. Within Chinese higher education, this means that students should not only acquire professional knowledge and skills but also cultivate autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking. Students should be encouraged to pursue their personal interests and goals, develop their unique talents and potential. Simultaneously, they should recognize their responsibilities as members of society, care about social issues, and actively engage in their resolution. By combining individual development with social responsibility, Chinese higher education can cultivate citizens with social concern and public

awareness. Students will learn to integrate their own strengths with societal needs, making positive contributions to society. Moreover, nurturing students' innovation and leadership abilities can also promote self-realization and career development. By balancing individual development and social responsibility, Chinese higher education can cultivate well-rounded talents who contribute to the sustainable development and progress of society.

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