

Reading Dewey's *Letters from China and Japan* (1): Politics, Education, Art and Religion – Dewey's First Observations of Japan –

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1. About this session

John Dewey stayed in Japan for about two months from 9 February to 27 April 1919, and then in China for over two years from 30 April 1919 to 11 June 1921. This session will examine Dewey's philosophy and its significance based on *Letters from China and Japan* (edited by Evelyn Dewey, 1920). These letters were written by Dewey and his wife Alice to their daughters during this period.

At that time, Japan was in the so-called "Taisho Democracy" period. In the same period, independence movements were rising both in Korea and China, namely the "March First Movement" and the "May Fourth Movement". It could be said that Dewey's *Letters from China and Japan* is one of valuable documents from this period when Japanese politics were criticised both at home and abroad.

This session consists of four presentations presented by Naoyuki Yamada, Associate Professor at Kansai University, Xing Liu, Assistant Professor at Hiroshima University, Masaki Onuma, Ph.D from Beijing Normal University, and myself, Takao Ito, Professor at Soka University. We will be dealing with Dewey's letters in four parts. Firstly, I will discuss the first half of Dewey's letters from Japan, then Mr. Yamada will discuss the second half. The first half of Dewey's letters from China will be handled by Mr. Liu, and the second half by Mr. Onuma.

2. About *Letters from China and Japan*

The book has an "Introduction" written by Dewey's daughter, Evelyn. The summary of her introduction is as follows: Dewey had always been interested in Japan and had a wish to visit Japan. He then received the invitation to lecture at the Imperial University at Tokyo from Japanese researchers such as Inazo Nitobe. Later, he was also invited to visit China by Takao Ito (Professor, Faculty of Letters, Soka University)

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his student, Hu Tian. As he very much enjoyed his stay in China, he decided to extend his stay there.¹

As an overview, it could be said that Dewey saw the dangers of imperialism in Japan and the possibilities of democracy in China during his visit to the two countries from 1919 onwards. However, the situation was more complicated when we look at the details.² He took note of, not only the political situation and school education in Japan, but also the culture, philosophy and religion of the Japanese people.

The theme of our international symposium is “Restoring Learning in Daily Life”. In keeping with this theme, my interest is to find and trace Dewey's philosophy in his daily life. We can read Dewey's unique way of observing matters around him and we can even find the seeds of his later philosophy in those letters although most of them are insignificant reports of his daily life.

3. Letters from 10 February to 20 March

The part assigned to me contains 14 letters, in the period from 10 February to 20 March. According to Hickman (2002), some were written by Dewey and others were by Alice, but they were generally together in visiting places and meeting people. Below are the main points I have listed from each letter to reveal how Dewey observed Japan. After the date of each letter, the writer's name is noted in square brackets [] (“Dewey” refers to John Dewey).

Tokyo, Monday, February [10]. [Alice]

The day after arriving in Japan, Alice wrote, “if you want to see one mammoth, muddy masquerade just see Tokyo to-day.”³ The letter seems to convey that she had a strong impression of the energy of Asia from sights such as terribly muddy streets and people running energetically even though they were covered in mud in winter when it might have been snowing.

Tuesday, February 11 (Tokyo). [Alice & Dewey]

In this letter Mr. and Mrs. Dewey state, “It is not fully true that the Japanese are not interested in their history.”⁴ At the time, the Deweys probably heard that the Japanese

¹ Dewey, J., Dewey, H. A. C., & Dewey, E., *Letters from China and Japan*, pp. v-vi.

² For an overview of Dewey's activities during his stay in Japan, see Dykhuizen (1973, Chapter 10), Miura (1969) and Kitamura (2010), while Tsurumi (1952), Kasamatsu (2010), Hayakawa (2010) and Konishi (2012) provide detailed information on Dewey's criticism of Japanese politics.

³ Dewey, J., Dewey, H. A. C., & Dewey, E., *Letters from China and Japan*, p.1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

were not interested in history and had simply become Europeanized. However, when the Deweys actually came to Japan, they found that at least educated people were as interested in Japan as they were in other countries. For example, they described that an “interest in the tea ceremony”⁵ had been revived and a story of a millionaire who purchased a tea ceremony utensil for 160,000 yen (\$80,000) was heard.

Tokyo, Thursday, February 13. [Dewey]

On this day, Dewey met with a famous businessman called Eiichi Shibusawa. Shibusawa was 80 years old at the time and the two men discussed labor problems in Japan. According to Dewey, “he [Shibusawa] thinks the modern factory employers can be brought to take the old paternal attitude to the employees and thus forestall the class struggle here.”⁶ Other information Dewey gathered from his surroundings was as follows: Japan had little problems with labor and capital but the great wealth created by the war and the increasing prosperity of the workers were beginning to change society (e.g. “labor unions”⁷ were then authorized).

Tokyo, February [16 or 18]. [Alice]

The day before they wrote the letter as mentioned above, Dewey and his wife visited an educator called Jinzo Naruse. Naruse was known for his promotion of female education in Japan and he was on his deathbed from cancer at the time. While lying in bed, Naruse conversed with them clearly and normally. Naruse and Dewey had met before in the United States and Naruse had a respect for Dewey. Naruse passed away shortly after their visit and the Deweys attended his funeral.

There was a Japanese woman who took care of the personal affairs of the Deweys, and she asked Alice to teach her English after she offered to show her around the city. When Alice asked her, “Do you go to church?” she replied, “I am not a Christian.” Alice wrote “what a funny sound that has,”⁸ recalling the conversation. Alice must have wondered why she was not a Christian as this Japanese woman was a student at a Christian university and Nitobe’s secretary.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

February 22 (Saturday) [Dewey]

Dewey visited Homei Elementary School, a school founded by Naruse. (Dewey requested this visit to observe a class in order to see how far the points he raised in *The School and Society* were feasible in Japan. Naruse was one of the most enthusiastic introducers of Dewey's educational theory in Japan). Dewey was impressed when he saw children drawing freely at this elementary school. "I never saw so much variety and so little similarity in drawings and other hand work."⁹ He was surprised to hear that children can memorize a thousand Chinese characters by the age of ten, and noted that Japanese children are very diligent.

At this elementary school, a welcome party was held for Mr. and Mrs. Dewey. They firstly enjoyed a demonstration of flower arrangement, followed by a Koto ("a thirteen-stringed harp that lies on the floor"¹⁰) performance. Dewey wrote about the Koto player: "He is blind and said to be the best player in Japan"¹¹ and he played "Cotton Bleaching in the Brook"¹². This player was Michio Miyagi who was 25 years old at the time. Miyagi had been famous as a Koto virtuoso since his youth, and it was around this time that he made his debut as a composer. Dewey was so impressed by Miyagi's playing. He also said that the sound of the Koto suited his ears better than Western music. He also watched the old women's sword and spear exercises and said, "I have an enormous respect now for the old etiquette and ceremonies regarded as physical culture."¹³ This report typically expresses Dewey's emphasis on holistic education that incorporates physical exercise.

Tokyo, Friday, February 28. [Dewey & Alice]

In this letter, he observes that Japanese religious beliefs are in some ways similar to traditional Italian Catholic ritualism, but Japanese beliefs are "slightly more naïve."¹⁴

Sunday Morning, March 2. [Dewey]

The day before he wrote this letter, Dewey gave his first lecture to teaching staff. He wrote about his concern that there were 500 people in his audience but only 25 of them were women (about 5%). After delivering the lecture, he attended a reception for the English Speech Society of Japan (ESS), the driving force behind the ESS in Japan. Here, the president

⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

of the association said that “when Japanese met for sociable purposes they were reserved and stiff,”¹⁵ but “speaking English brought back the habits they got in America and thawed them out.”¹⁶ Dewey described this assertion as “an interesting psychological observation on the effect of language.”¹⁷

Tokyo, Tuesday, March 4. [Alice]

This letter is an important record. According to Alice, “The representation in elections here now does not seem to extend much further, if any, than to include those large taxpayers who would under any system be a force in forming policy.”¹⁸ Alice criticized the fact that Japanese democracy was, after all, only for the wealthy. The other thing Alice was very concerned about was male-centeredness in Japan. For example, new vocational schools were designed only for men; 440 students were sent overseas but not even one of them was a woman. “No women are mentioned in any of the new appropriation bills. Not even a mention of the need for women.”¹⁹ These were some of the issues that Alice pointed out about Japan.

Tokyo, Tuesday, March 4. [Dewey]

Dewey heard a sermon given by Soyen Shaku, a Rinzai Buddhist monk. Shaku died later that year. Dewey found his talk highly metaphysical. “He [the Reverend Shaku Soyen] was more modern than Royce in one respect; he said God is the moral ideal in man and as man develops the divine principle does also.”²⁰ One could say that Dewey felt something close to what he later referred to as “a common faith”.

March 5. (Wednesday) [Dewey]

Dewey wrote that major changes were taking place in Japan. However, he also observed that this movement toward democracy would depend on how other countries behave. This was because unless they act in accordance with peaceful and democratic declarations, Japan’s conservative bureaucrats and militarists would say, “Didn’t we tell you so?” and react to it. Dewey writes, “But if other countries, and especially our own, behave decently, the democratizing here will go on as steadily and as rapidly as is desirable.”²¹

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 49.

²¹ Ibid., p. 52.

Tokyo, Monday, March 10. [Dewey]

At this time, the “March 1 Movement” had already taken place in Korea. Dewey wrote that there were disagreements among Japanese missionaries because the independence movement was initiated by Koreans in missionary schools. For example, some said, “they [the activists] will bring Christianity into disrepute everywhere in Japan,”²² while others said, “it will have a good effect in improving conditions, leading to foreign criticism and publicity, and causing the Japanese to modify their colonial policy.”²³

Tokyo, Thursday, March 14. [Dewey]

In this letter, Dewey writes about children in public schools. However, this is not about a classroom visit, but rather a report on his impressions of children playing around the school gate. He writes, “never yet have I seen a case of bullying or even of teasing.”²⁴ Dewey also speculates that the Japanese are well educated at home as adults do not scold or curse children in public and children have “amiable exterior and cheerfulness and courtesy.”²⁵

Tokyo, March 14th. (Thursday) [Alice]

Alice suddenly had to cancel her plans to go to a private kindergarten for their Dolls' Festival. Children at the kindergarten were disappointed to hear that and wrote her a letter saying, “We made cakes and prepared for your coming and we were in the depths of despair when you did not come. Please come another time.”²⁶ Alice was touched by this and wrote that she would not be able to find such kindness in any other countries.

Tokyo, Thursday, March 20. [Dewey]

The day before, Dewey had heard a lecture on “Social Aspects of Shinto,”²⁷ which stated that “Shinto is the official cult though not the established religion of Japan.”²⁸ Dewey also said, “On one side the Imperial Government is theocratic, and this is the most sensitive side, so that historical criticism or analysis of old documents is not indulged in, the Ancestors being Gods or the Gods being Ancestors.”²⁹ He is very observant about Shinto's relationship with the

²² Ibid., p. 55.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 58.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 71.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

Japanese politics.

4. What we can understand from Dewey's letters

In conclusion, let me summarize the characteristics of Dewey's first observation of Japan (limited to the first half of his stay in Japan) from the above letters.

Dewey certainly took note of the immaturity of democracy and the problems of education in Japan. However, he did not criticize them unilaterally. He said that the future of democracy in Japan depends on the actions of other countries, including the United States. He also noted that Japanese children are earnest, friendly, and creative.

More noteworthy than these, however, is Dewey's interest in traditional Japanese arts and religion. He was fascinated by the scales of the Koto and the movement of the long sword performance. He also saw rationality in the Buddhist view of the world. On the other hand, he criticized the lack of women's social advancement and the restriction of thought through Shintoism. These perspectives can be seen in his later works such as *Art as Experience* (1934) and *A Common Faith* (1934).

Dewey's academic achievements during his visit to Japan were published in the form of a series of lectures at Tokyo Imperial University, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920), and in reviews such as "Liberalism in Japan" (1919), which appeared in *The Dial*. *Letters from China and Japan* is valuable as a record of his daily life that formed the basis of those of his public discourse. Moreover, according to his daughter, Evelyn, since letters were private, they were not intended for publication.³⁰ Because of that, by comparing Dewey's scholarly writings with those of his private letters, we can get a glimpse of how his philosophical thought was developed. It could be said that Dewey was trying to deepen his own philosophy while expanding his own perspectives through detailed observations of the "daily life" of the Japanese people.

However, Dewey's view of Japan was forced to change from a critical perspective, mainly on the political side, during his month-long stay in Japan and especially during his subsequent visit to China, where he stayed for two years. Mr. Yamada, Mr. Liu, and Mr. Onuma will talk about how that happened through referring to the rest of *Letters from China and Japan*.

Thank you very much for your attention.

³⁰ Ibid., p. vi.

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