

## ABSTRACT

The article deals with an unusual critique of Dewey, written by Chou Jung-hsin, China's Minister of Education in 1975. The article shows that the significance of the Minister's criticisms lay in the fact that he was resorting to a traditional Chinese technique of "attack by analogy", and that his real aim was to protest against ultra-leftism in Chinese educational policy.

John Gardner\*

### John Dewey as "Negative Example": A Chinese Story

John Dewey's influence on Chinese educational thought in the Republican period is well known. He lectured at Peking University in 1912 and 1931, and Hu Shih studied under him at Columbia University, before returning to China in 1917 to play a leading role in the intellectual renaissance of the "May 4 Movement". Even Warlords were not immune from Dewey's ideas. For, after he had lectured in Shansi province in 1919, Yen Hsi-shan created an educational system which reflected Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism.<sup>1</sup>

With the nationwide victory of the Chinese Communist Party, however, "bourgeois" ideas were condemned. Dewey was criticised and western-trained intellectuals were required to undergo "ideological transformation" to purge themselves of the "incorrect" notions they had earlier espoused. The educational system was reorganised along Marxist lines and the educational philosophies of Mao Tse-tung and Soviet pedagogues provided the basis for the new orthodoxy. Then, in the Cultural Revolution, the Soviet heritage was completely rejected, and pedagogues like Kairov were reviled as incurably "revisionist". "Mao Tse-tung Thought" became the only acceptable guide for action in the "Revolution in Education" which then took place.

In October 1975, however, Dewey's name appeared again, in an article written by Chou Jung-hsin, the Minister of Education. The circumstances surrounding this are intriguing, and the article is a fascinating and unusual footnote on Dewey's role in Chinese education.

The article was published, under a pseudonym, in the *Bulletin of the Revolution in Education*. (*Chiao-yü ko-ming t'ung-hsün*). This journal was one of many which are classified as "internal" (*nei-pu*) publications. It is known to have existed since at least 1973, and appears to have replaced *People's Education* (*Jen-min chiao-yü*), the principal educational journal of the pre-Cultural Revolution era. Although openly on sale in China, foreigners were not officially allowed to purchase it. Consequently, very few issues have ever left China.

Fortunately, the issue containing the article on Dewey is one of those which slipped through the net. It was brought out by a foreign student who published the text in an Italian Journal.<sup>2</sup> To the best of my knowledge it is the only substantial critique

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\*Faculty of Economic & Social Studies, University of Manchester, Manchester, England.

of him to be written in China for many years. Its importance, however, lies in what it tells us about Chinese education, not what it says about Dewey.

Nineteen seventy-five was a year of change in Chinese education. In January, the Fourth National People's Congress re-established the Ministry of Education which had ceased to function by 1967. Chou Jung-hsin was appointed as Minister. A distinguished administrator, Chou's previous career had included spells as a university principal, a deputy Minister of Education and a "leading member" of the Academy of Sciences. In the Cultural Revolution he had been disgraced as a "capitalist roader" but had been restored to favour through the good offices of Premier Chou En-lai with whom he had enjoyed a close and cordial relationship.

His appointment as Minister coincided with, and was connected to, the Premier's attempt to reverse the excesses resulting from the Cultural Revolution. In January 1975, he launched a drive to achieve the complete modernisation of agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology by the end of the century. The role of education was clearly crucial for the "four modernisations", and this was a field in which the Left wing of the Chinese leadership had enjoyed considerable influence. Whether one regards their activities as "Maoist" or as an ultra-leftist distortion of Mao's educational principles is a difficult question which goes far beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that many Chinese officials and educators believed that the pendulum had swung too far, and Chou Jung-hsin stepped in to redress the balance.

In a series of speeches and conference discussions he condemned the decline in academic standards since the Cultural Revolution. He complained of the neglect of theoretical research and formal teaching, the misuse of qualified manpower and the excessive attention given to practical work and political activities. He called for more respect to be shown to intellectuals and urged that they be allowed to work without constant interference and criticism. He blamed "ultra-leftists" for "metaphysically" distorting Mao's teachings.<sup>3</sup>

Chou's remarks were widely disseminated on the academic "grapevine", but were not published in the press. A reading of *People's Daily* or *Red Flag* for the Spring and Summer of 1975 gives virtually no hint that criticisms were being made in the highest quarters. The media, on the contrary, continued to lavish praise on the developments which had taken place since the Cultural Revolution, and to repeat the old refrain, "the situation is excellent".

This news "blackout" was not only a consequence of the Chinese practice of shrouding controversial matters with a cloak of secrecy. It was also the result of the influence of the "gang of four" and their supporters. For the "gang" (which is a convenient and symbolic shorthand for the Left) dominated the media. Many of its supporters held editorial positions and an extremely well-organised network of "writing groups" churned out a steady stream of articles on Leftist themes. Thus, although, as we now know, the Right was far more powerful in terms of controlling key positions in the Party, State and Army, it had great difficulty in making its views known through the normal communications channels.

It was this fact which, one assumes, made Chou Jung-hsin take up his pen. The *Bulletin* was a serious journal read by professional educators and seems to have been less amenable to Leftist influence than many others. The Minister wrote one article for it, in which he cautiously offered criticisms and suggestions. But it was his second article, on Dewey, which contained his most devastating attacks on the "gang of four".

For, although the article hardly mentioned China, Dewey was not the main target of attack. By that time almost ninety per cent of China's teachers were people who had been educated since 1949. Most of these who had been influenced by him had died or retired, and the few remaining were elderly individuals who did little teaching. The Minister, in fact, was resorting to the ancient Chinese device of attack by analogy. Just as the Left were publishing hundreds of articles reviling Confucius in order to savage Chou En-lai, the criticism of Dewey was aimed at those who pursued extremist educational policies in China. The article, then, is polemic rather than serious analysis and, in discussing it, I shall make no attempt to comment on obvious biases and errors therein. My concern is to show that Dewey was used to criticise two "ultra-left" deviations which were prevalent at the time, and which were having an extremely detrimental effect upon Chinese education.

The first of these was the excessive amount of time students at all levels were required to spend at practical work. Not only were they expected to go to the communes or factories to engage in labour activities, but schools ran their own small farms and workshops. Moreover, such classroom instruction as was given often centred around practical subjects. This was, of course, contrary to Mao's injunction that theory and practice must be combined; one should never supercede the other.

To link this to Dewey, Chou began with the observation that a contradiction had arisen in capitalist society.

"In the Imperialist era, in order to obtain the maximum margin of profit and to wring even more blood and sweat from the workers, the monopolistic bourgeoisie demands that the workers possess certain knowledge and techniques. Nevertheless, the bourgeoisie is also afraid of scientific truth. It considers the workers to be gunpowder and knowledge and education a spark."<sup>4</sup>

Dewey had served capitalism by providing a theoretical justification for an educational system which would keep the workers in their place. He had argued that only a minority (the children of the ruling class) had a capacity for intellectual work. The majority (the children of the working class) had "only the impulse, the inclination and the taste for limited practicalities". According to Chou, Dewey had alleged that making it possible for workers' children "to acquire pure knowledge does not present any advantage for society". He considered it sufficient that such children should gain practical experience and that their education should consist of "learning by doing". This concept was "the ideological reflection of the bourgeois fear of science and of its hatred for the truth", and Dewey had developed it "to prevent the spark of truth falling on the gunpowder of revolution".

"Learning by doing" was "opposed to the elevation of theoretical matters" in educational work. It was an approach which would "not allow the pupils to know the nature and laws of objective things". Although pupils would master some useful techniques, "this does not go beyond fragmentary, unilateral and superficial experiment".

Lenin, of course, had seen through such machinations from the start. He had pointed out that in bourgeois schools the children of workers and peasants were simply trained as servants who would make profits for their masters while remaining powerless to disturb the latter's "peace and idleness". Dewey's pragmatism poisoned the minds of the young by making them believe that only "usefulness is truth" and that there was no need to integrate "book knowledge" and practical life.

Chou was, therefore, arguing that those responsible for the over-emphasis on

practice in Chinese schools were not simply misguided. They were deliberately seeking to keep the masses in ignorance, so that they would remain docile and malleable, unable to resist manipulation by unscrupulous leaders. This charge has been levelled at Mao's widow and her followers on many occasions in the past year. It is understandable why Chou used Dewey as a surrogate while Mao was alive. To a Chinese audience, which of necessity is highly skilled at reading between the lines, the analogy was unmistakable.

So, too, was Chou's attack on "child-centred" education for, by 1975, many teachers were having great difficulties in making students work. This was not a problem in universities as access to higher education was a very rare privilege and the insistence that students be recruited after spending at least two years in "productive labour" before admission ensured that most of them were mature and highly motivated. But in the middle schools the position was often different, for several reasons. First, as a result of the Cultural Revolution, secondary education was expanded but special emphasis was placed on providing it for children of "good" class background. Such students often came from homes which lacked any educational tradition, and in the large cities especially, there were many cadres' children who arrogantly assumed that they were "born Red" and, therefore, were beyond criticism.

Second, there was little incentive to do well at anything other than politics. On graduation almost all students would be assigned to menial jobs. As mentioned above, they could apply to university at a later date, but the competition was enormous. Some idea of the "bottleneck" at this stage may be gauged by the fact that, in 1976, there were over 46 million students in middle schools and only 500,000 in universities. Moreover, the selection criteria stressed class background, "political consciousness" and recommendation by "the masses" with whom one worked, just as much as academic ability. Add to this the scorn heaped upon "book knowledge" in these years, and it is small wonder that many adolescents did not apply themselves.

Third, many teachers were afraid to make students work. Criticised, humiliated and sometimes physically abused in the Cultural Revolution, they were reluctant to be again accused of "putting intellectual education in first place". And matters were made worse by a Leftist campaign which had raged in 1974. Based on a genuine case of a primary school girl who had been harshly treated,<sup>5</sup> those leading the campaign claimed that such "bourgeois repression" was widespread. It was not,<sup>6</sup> but under a slogan of opposing the Confucian concept of the "absolute authority of the teacher", impressionable youngsters were encouraged to resist any real or imagined sign of conservative methods in the classroom.

This campaign, therefore, gave legitimacy to students who did not wish to work. In some schools there was considerable disruption, hooliganism and vandalism, and teachers were unable to prevent it. In attacking the "child-centred" approach Chou was really addressing himself to this issue.

Dewey, he asserted, had failed to realize that the teacher-pupil relationship was a partnership in which the teacher was, most emphatically, the senior partner. It was the teacher's job to ensure that learning took place within a properly structured environment. Dewey, however, had taught that:

"It is necessary to place the activities of the child in the centre, it is necessary to let the child develop freely according to its instincts and interests; schools must only arrange the atmosphere, provide the materials and permit the free activity of the child, starting from the child's interests and special needs".<sup>7</sup>

In order to “deceive the masses” he opposed “books at the centre” and “teacher at the centre”, claiming that his pedagogy was a “Copernican Revolution” in which “the child becomes the sun and educational matters revolve around him”. To Dewey, the teacher was nothing more than an observer and assistant. His approach differed from that of traditional pedagogues in that it substituted for coercion a spurious “kindness”. It was, however, equally a form of suppression because it denied the child access to knowledge. Although he did not say so on this occasion, the Minister was clearly a believer in the old Chinese proverb: “Strictness shows love, leniency brings harm”.

Chou’s words infuriated the “gang of four” and their supporters. In November 1975, while he was on a visit to Zaire, a wallposter campaign was mounted against him. From the radical stronghold of Tsinghua University it spread to other campuses and, by the beginning of 1976, Leftist writing groups were producing a plethora of articles attacking him for launching a “Right deviationist wind to reverse correct verdicts on the Cultural Revolution”. He was never named, however, and remained Minister until his death of April 13, 1976. It is sad to report that his passing was officially ignored.<sup>8</sup>

It was not until seventeen months later that the Chinese people were officially told of it. On August 28, 1977, a solemn meeting was held at Peking’s Cemetery for Revolutionaries. Hua Kuo-feng sent a wreath, Teng Hsiao-p’ing was among the thousand leaders and colleagues who were present, and the late Minister was posthumously rehabilitated.<sup>9</sup> The “gang of four” now stands accused of fabricating the charges against him and of hounding him to his grave at the age of 59.

His opinions, however, remain. As details of China’s new educational strategy begin to appear it is absolutely clear that the policies now being adopted are the ones for which he fought in 1975. Admirers of Dewey will no doubt regard Chou’s distortion and manipulation of his views with distaste. But as “pragmatists” we can find some satisfaction in noting that Dewey’s work, even when used as what the Chinese call a “negative example”, is still playing a role in China’s educational advance. For the work of Chou Jung-hsin is largely responsible for the emergence of a more balanced educational strategy through which to achieve the “four modernisations”, and its impact on the 200 million young people who are now in schools and universities will be considerable.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>J.E. Sheridan, *China in Disintegration*, (London: Collier Macmillan, 1975), p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>“Analisi del pensiero pedagogico pragmatista” (“Analysis of Pragmatist Pedagogical Thought”), in *Vento dell’est (East Wind)*, March 1976, Milan, pp. 128-135.

<sup>3</sup>Snippets of Chou’s remarks appeared in a host of articles in the Chinese Press when he was attacked in 1976. The most detailed accounts, however, were given in wallposters on the Peking campuses. The best compilations in European languages are to be found in *Vento dell’est*, pp. 112-127; *Tel Quel*, No. 66, 1976, Paris, pp. 22-24.

<sup>4</sup>*Vento dell’est*, p. 133.

<sup>5</sup>*Jen-min jih-pao (People’s Daily)*, December 28, 1973.

<sup>6</sup>A Chinese informant, who was in Peking at the time, was absolutely adamant in insisting that the teacher in the case must have had an impeccable class background, as no one else would have dared to treat a student harshly after the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>7</sup>*Vento dell’est*, p. 131.

<sup>8</sup>The Minister was last mentioned in the Chinese press when he attended the memorial meeting for Chou En-lai on January 15, 1976. At the time of his death I was in China with a delegation hosted by his Ministry. No one told us that he had passed away.

<sup>9</sup>*New China News Agency, August 28, 1977.*

*Résumé*

L'article rapporte une critique inusitée de Dewey, faite par Chow Jung-hsin, ministre de l'Éducation en Chine en 1975. L'importance des critiques du ministre réside dans le fait qu'il recourt à une technique traditionnelle en Chine: l' "attaque par analogie" et que son vrai but est de protester contre un gauchisme excessif dans la politique chinoise de l'éducation.