

Helena Motoh\*

## Between Problems (*Wenti*) and -Isms (*Zhuyi*), a Hundred Years Since

China will be celebrating an important anniversary in 2019. One hundred years ago, on 4 May 1919, a movement broke out over the disappointment with the results of the Versailles Peace Conference. Although it was on the winning side, China had to give up some of its territories to Japan and this only proved the unequal relationship between the two neighbouring countries. While Japan was a modernized reformed monarchy with big ambitions, China was paralyzed in its newly obtained republic, while the modernizing processes seemed not yet to bear any fruit. Demonstrations from the first students and later a much more heterogeneous crowd started in the centre of Beijing to protest the weak position of the Chinese government after World War I and its failure or inability to protect the interests of Chinese nation at the Versailles conference. While the so-called “May Fourth” movement (*wusi yundong*) mostly focused on the political aspect of the situation, a related movement questioned the broader cultural causes for such an unflattering situation of China. It could be said that, compared to the political uprising of May Fourth, this other related trend, the “New Culture Movement”, as it was later called, was not only developing longer than its political counterpart, but also had much longer lasting implications. The protagonists of the New Culture Movement pinpointed traditional Chinese culture as the cause of China’s failure, and blamed it for the limits it imposed upon the Chinese society and nation. The ethical philosophy and political ideology of Confucius and Confucians were seen as responsible for the failure of the “Sick man of East Asia” (*Dongya bingfu*), the image that critical Chinese intellectuals adopted for their country and its international position.

253

In the shade of these ground-breaking events, a seemingly minor debate took place among people who were all supporters of the New Culture viewpoints. It turned out, however, that this disagreement was a marker of a historically important split, where the protagonists of the two sides went their separate ways and their ideas were only put in dialogue again more than half century later. Both main protagonists were also editors of the key magazine of the movement,

\* Institute of Philosophical Studies, Science and Research Centre Koper

which was issued under the telling title “New Youth”. Debate began with an article that one of them, 28-year-old Hu Shi, published in the *Weekly Review* (*Mei zhou pinglun*), another publication issued by the same group of New Culture intellectuals. On 20 July 1919 they published Hu’s commentary with the title “More Study of Problems, Less Talk of ‘Isms’” (Duo yanjiu xie wenti, shao tan ‘zhuyi’)<sup>1</sup>. A month later the same journal published a response by Li Dazhao, its 31-year old editor with the title “More Debate about Problems and ‘Isms’” (Zai lun wenti yu zhuyi)<sup>2</sup>. However tiny the volume of the texts was, this debate in the *Weekly Review* broke the spell of the unity of the New Culture Movement irreparably. Not only did the movement split, but the two protagonists’ paths also diverged to the greatest extent. Li Dazhao went on to become one of the founders of the Communist Party of China and was executed in one of the warlord raids in 1927, while Hu Shi took to Taiwan after 1949 and was president of Academia Sinica until his death in 1962. The debate about the correct relationship between ideology and pragmatism became commonplace again much after their time. It was not until Deng Xiaoping took over leadership after the end of the Cultural Revolution that a debate on how to think about those notions separately and together could be revived. Deng’s famous metaphor on the colour of cats being irrelevant if they catch mice was a signpost for a newly revived pragmatism of the late 20th century China, where ideology came to play only a supporting role. In the last decade, however, with Xi Jinping’s presidential terms, it seems that the relationship between the two is again reconsidered and rethought, also invoking again the old debate between Hu and Li. The present paper will focus on the 1919 debate by an analysis of the two main texts, Hu Shi’s “More Study of Problems, Less Talk of ‘Isms’” and Li Dazhao’s “More Debate about Problems and ‘Isms’”. In order to explain the background of these two viewpoints, I will present beforehand an overview of the intellectual contexts that brought Li Dazhao and Hu Shi together and that later pulled them apart. In the final part of the paper I will reflect on the contemporary relevance of the controversy.

<sup>1</sup> All references to and quotations from Hu Shi’s text “More Study of Problems, Less Talk of ‘Isms’” are taken from the electronic version at: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/多研究些问题，少谈些主义> (acc. 1 September 2018).

<sup>2</sup> All references to and quotations from Li Dazhao’s text “More Debate about Problems and ‘Isms’” are taken from the electronic version at: <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/li-dazhao/marxist-org-chinese-lee-19190817.htm> (acc. 5 September 2018).

## New Ideas Coming to China

The paths along which Marxist and Leninist ideas arrived to China are complex, mostly because the early decades of the 20th century were a rather puzzling time for intellectuals in China. Following the first introduction of “Western” ideas in the late Qing dynasty, different groups of Chinese scholars were open to philosophy and science coming from outside of China. The form it came in, however, was an amalgam, often ahistorical, of different ideas and streams of thought. The paths through which it arrived were also manifold, since they mostly relied on the influence of Chinese students and young intellectuals who were returning to China after their studies abroad. After the famous first student in the United States, the 1854 Yale graduate Yung Wing<sup>3</sup>, a series of young Chinese students attended universities in Europe and US and brought back the new intellectual trends, along with a more or less profound knowledge of Euro-American intellectual traditions. 120 students were subsequently invited to the United States on the Chinese Educational Mission and more attempts like that followed even before the collapse of the Qing dynasty<sup>4</sup>. A similar initiative started towards the East by establishing an educational link with Japan after the end of the Sino-Japanese war. In a more organized fashion than those going to USA, following the bilateral agreement between the two countries this enterprise had a clearer political goal in mind. The quickly modernized Japan sought for more influence over the developing China, especially in the light of other Euro-American ambitions to do the same.<sup>5</sup> However uneasy and complex this political alliance was, it still produced one of the most influential intellectual exchanges in China’s recent history, which also largely shaped the intellectual premises that still define China today. The rapidly absorbed, condensed version of “Western” knowledge that became readily available in Japanese educational institutions after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 was an important source for the arriving Chinese students. As Ishikawa Yoshihiro points out, “Japan served as middleman to China’s intellectual Westernization”<sup>6</sup>. Under this im-

<sup>3</sup> Qian Ning, *Chinese Students Encounter America*, University of Washington Press, 2012, p. ix.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Chih-Ming Wang, *Transpacific Articulations: Student Migration and the Remaking of Asian America*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Paula Harrell, *Sowing the Seeds of Change: Chinese Students, Japanese Teachers, 1895-1905*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Ishikawa Yoshihiro, “Chinese Marxism in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Japan”, quoted from: <https://chinajapan.org/articles/14/14.24-34ishikawa.pdf> (30 August 2018), p. 25.

pact, Chinese theoretical vocabulary also changed completely, especially under the influence of translations from Japanese (or from Japanese translations of “Western” authors), which were extremely widespread<sup>7</sup>. The vocabulary that Japanese translators of “Western” texts used had to first be invented, and these neologisms, often themselves inspired by collocations in classical Chinese or Japanese sources, were seen as new words for Chinese readers of Japanese translations. It is difficult to imagine the Chinese theoretical language today without those “inventions”, neologisms such as “history” (*lishi*), “philosophy” (*zhexue*), “revolution” (*geming*), “culture” (*wenhua*), and “nation” (*minzu*). Because the characters Japanese used were of the *kanji* type, i.e. of Chinese origin, the Chinese intellectuals could simply use the Chinese reading of the same characters and imported the neologisms without translation.

However, there was much more than terminology; for the topic of the present paper it is most important to see how Japan served as a crucial route for the introduction of socialist ideas to China. This is especially true for the early years, before a direct link was established between the new Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic and Chinese intellectuals. The first wave of this influence came to China when the Japanese socialist movement was at its peak at the beginning of the 20th century and the second one came after 1919, when it was revived again after the Meiji state tried to suppress them in 1910.<sup>8</sup> One of the two protagonists in the debate on problems and -isms, Li Dazhao, was himself under the especially strong influence of early Japanese socialism. He was a student in Japan and most of the works he published in his rather short life were written under evident influence of the Japanese authors and translations. Notably, his key text *My Views on Marxism* (*Wo de Makesi zhuyi guan*) was an adaptation of a text by an important Japanese Marxist scholar Kawakami Hajime,<sup>9</sup> which Li also repeatedly referred to in his other writings.

256

After the Russian revolution, however, the Bolshevik version of Marxism started coming to China and becoming a more prominent intellectual source. This shift towards the Soviet version of Marxism can also be traced within the most

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Karen Steffen Chung, “Some Returned Loans: Japanese Loanwords in Taiwan Mandarin”, in: T. E. McAuley (ed.), *Language Change in East Asia*, Curzon, Richmond, Surrey 2001, chap. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ishikawa, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

influential intellectual movement at the time, the New Culture Movement, mentioned above. In the main intellectual journal of the movement, *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian*), which had been published since 1915, Marxist ideas were virtually absent for the first few years, even after the revolution happened in Russia.<sup>10</sup> The ideas of Marxism-Leninism were only introduced in 1919, when the April issue included an article “The philosophical foundation of the Russian revolution” (Eguo geming zhi zhaxue de jichu). The May issue then published two critical articles about Marxism and it was unclear what direction the *New Youth* would opt for until it fully started to support the Marxist-Leninist position in May 1920.<sup>11</sup> The main shift thus happened in the year after the May Fourth movement, when two of the main protagonists of the New Culture Movement, who were the dean of the Beijing University Chen Duxiu and professor of philosophy Hu Shi, respectively, started to differ in their views. Chen, the editor of *New Youth*, was boldly radical in his views and uncompromising in his critique of the traditional Confucian mind-set, which he blamed for the lack of the modern perception of an independent individual.<sup>12</sup> As the editor of *New Youth*, he summarized, in the January 1919 edition, a few months before the political movement began, the goals of this movement in what became one of the most famous metaphors of Chinese modernisation:

Those who oppose the *New Youth*, that is only because we are destroying Confucianism, we are destroying ceremonial etiquette, we are destroying national essence, we are destroying chastity, we are destroying old ethics, we are destroying old art, we are destroying old religions, we are destroying old literature, we are destroying old politics, these crimes. We can admit the guilt of those crimes. But we only committed those crimes because we support those two gentlemen, Mr. De Moukelaxi (Democracy) and Mr. Sai Yinsi (Science). Because we support Mr. De, we can't avoid opposing Confucianism, ceremonial etiquette, chastity, and old ethics. Because we support Mr. Sai, we can't avoid opposing old art and

257

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jen Ch'o-Hsüan and Ignatius J. H. Ts'ao, “The Introduction of Marxism-Leninism into China: The Early Years, 1919–1924”, *Studies in Soviet Thought*. Vol. 10, no. 2 (1970), pp. 144–145.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., W. W. Norton, New York 1999, p. 303.

old religions. Because we support Mr. De and Mr. Sai, we can't avoid opposing national essence and old literature.<sup>13</sup>

Democracy and science being the hallmarks of New Culture Movement, the members of it still varied greatly in how they envisioned this should be achieved. Over the course of 1919, the answer for Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao became a Marxist-Leninist revolution and the Chinese Communist Party was formally established the following year. The despair after the May Fourth movement faded away without much consequence led many to seek for more radical ways of bringing about the necessary changes. The disillusionment was also related to the new phenomena that sprung up following the ideals of the movement. One of them, which was ridiculed as “movement of constitutions” (*zhangcheng yundong*) was a trend among students to establish small factions, mostly preoccupied by drafting their own manifestoes. The other phenomenon that Chen saw as a problem was an experiment with local self-ruled government, led by Tan Yankai in Hunan (i.e. *Xiang ren zijue zhuyi*, “Hunanese self-determinism”), which instead of a bottom-up democratic change brought about the perpetuation of old elites in the countryside.<sup>14</sup>

As part of the attempt to organize an independent Hunan, Tan Yankai organized a conference in Changsha, at which he aimed to bring together the most educated and prominent thinkers to talk about the possibilities of the future Hunan constitution. At this conference, held between 27 October and 20 November, there were a series of events, meetings, talks, and opportunities for scholars to meet.<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly, two famous scholars met in Changsha for the first time, although they were rivals for a long time before that. John Dewey and Bertrand Russell were both invited to the Changsha conference, and while the latter hurried through with a lack of courtesy that did not go overlooked, the former lingered longer. Despite their disagreements, the two scholars followed a similar path. Russell was in China between October 1919 and July 1920, while Dewey visited for two years between late April 1919 and July 1921. For the pres-

<sup>13</sup> Yu Yingshi (余英時), *Renwen yu lixing de Zhongguo*, Lian jing chubanshiye gongsi, 2008, p. 522.

<sup>14</sup> Hans J. van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade: The Founding of the Chinese Communist Party, 1920-1927*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1992, pp. 19–20.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen R. Platt, *Provincial Patriots: The Hunanese and Modern China*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2007, p. 205.

ent topic we will mostly focus on the impact of Dewey's visit, although Russell's lectures also resonated among learned circles.

John Dewey was invited to China by Hu Shi, one of his students at Columbia University. Between 1909 and 1929, 1300 Chinese students participated in the Boxer Rebellion Indemnity Scholarship Program (*geng zi peikuan jiangxuejin*),<sup>16</sup> an attempt by the United States to seemingly alleviate the unreasonably high rebellion reparations. Apart from Hu Shi, many other important scholars were Dewey's students at Columbia: the education reformer Jiang Menglin, the founders of Nanjing University and Nankai University Guo Bingwen and Zhang Boling, and even the renowned philosopher Feng Youlan. Upon this invitation, Dewey arrived to Shanghai on April 30 1919. He remarked prophetically on 1 May for his wife and himself, that they were "very obviously in the hands of young China"<sup>17</sup> and just a few days later the May Fourth demonstrations began. Beyond the romanticism and exoticism of imaginary Asia that one might have expected before, China struck him as the place where history was happening at the very moment, and this feeling enticed him to prolong his stay for one more year.<sup>18</sup>

After finally reaching Beijing at the end of May, he started a series of around sixty lectures.<sup>19</sup> The main topics of those lectures were social and political philosophy and the philosophy of education, arguably also the fields where his thought had the largest impact in China.<sup>20</sup> He also held many lectures on ethics and other aspects of philosophical thinking, while also devoting special lectures to William James, Henri Bergson, and Bertrand Russell. Being in China in one of the most turbulent periods, his lectures also obtained much more than mere scholarly attention. The impact, often dubbed *Duweihua*, i.e. "Deweyization", was preconditioned by his prior influence on the Chinese intellectual circles and their activities in the modernizing of China's political and

<sup>16</sup> Vanessa Künemann and Ruth Mayer, *Trans-Pacific Interactions: The United States and China, 1880-1950*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2009, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, *John Dewey in China: To Teach and to Learn*, SUNY Press, Albany 2012, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> For more details, cf.: Zhixin Su, "A Critical Evaluation of John Dewey's Influence on Chinese Education", *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 103, No. 3 (May, 1995), pp. 302-325.

<sup>20</sup> Ding Zijiang, "A Comparison of Dewey's and Russell's Influences on China", *Dao* (2007) 6, pp. 149-165.

educational system. The applicability of his thought and the particular relation between universalism and interculturality<sup>21</sup> that marked his work, made this transplantation of ideas extremely important for 1920s China and beyond. One of the most evident fields of his influence was education, which in China was in dire need of reform. He saw education as a prerequisite for democracy, which resonated strongly in the minds of Chinese scholars. There can be no political change without social and cultural change, which was a lesson the Chinese citizens had just learned painfully with the failed republican revolution.

An important factor in the popularity of Dewey's thought were the efforts of his Columbia students, most notably Hu Shi. Hu saw Dewey's experimentalism as an optimal method for China's reform. Dewey's method provided a model for Hu Shi in his gradual split with the advocates of the revolutionary change. Instead, interpreting on Dewey, he stood for gradual progression and peaceful change, i.e. reformation, while avoiding the Russian style of a violent and radical transformation of the society, i.e. revolution.<sup>22</sup> As Spence notes, "his boldness in some cultural and historical matters existed side by side with his caution over speedy solutions",<sup>23</sup> a contradiction he resolved by resorting to Dewey's notion of the enduring process of perfecting – and not perfection.

## The Debate

In July 1919, two months after the May demonstrations in Beijing and while Dewey was in Beijing, Hu Shi openly declared his views on reform in the 31<sup>st</sup> issue of *Weekly Review*, a weekly newspaper of the New Culture movement. The short text clarified what Hu had started to formulate as some kind of a "third" (or even "fourth") way for China. He lists a number of views that he accuses of "relying on paper doctrines":

Those that advocate for the respect for Confucius and for the worship of the Sky don't understand the needs of our present society. Those that blindly follow nationalism or anarchism – do they understand the needs of the present society?

<sup>21</sup> For more on this topic, see: Lenart Škof, "Thinking between Cultures: Pragmatism, Rorty and Intercultural Philosophy", *Ideas y Valores: Revista Colombiana de Filosofía* 57: 138 (2008), p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Ding, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

<sup>23</sup> Spence, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

In the following text, Hu presents three arguments against relying on ideologies, the term he famously uses for that, is “-ism” (*zhuyi*). He criticized a recent development, when one of the current corrupt political leaders wanted to get some credibility by advocating a well sounding -ism, namely the seemingly socialist doctrine on human welfare (*minshengzhuyi*) of Sun Yatsen, by saying:

Vaguely talking about a nice-sounding “-isms” is a very simple matter, something anyone can do; this can be done by a parrot or a gramophone.

Furthermore, he adds, the exploitation of paper ideologies can also be dangerous. Not even a year after the end of the Great War, he bitterly adds:

Relying on paper “-isms” is dangerous. Repeating such mantras can be used by the shameless politicians to do harmful things. It is well known how European politicians and capitalists poison people with nationalism.

Another argument, which seems a bit unusual with regard to Hu’s personal experience of adapting the philosophy of an American scholar, is that importing doctrines is a dangerous undertaking. It is not, of course, that Hu advocates the priority of “domestic”, traditional Chinese ideas and thought systems. The reason for this argument is pragmatic. The type of universalism that “-isms” offer is a false one. The only worthy pursuit within Hu’s framework is solving the issues that a certain real society faces, and, in order to do that, it is insufficient to talk merely about ideological concepts, but one needs to go, metaphorically speaking or not, to the actual location and explore. This exploration, research, or study (*yanjiu*) is set as an antidote to mere talking (*tan*) and hence the title of Hu’s article, which advocates for more “study” and less “talk”. What is studied is the circumstances in actual *loci* of the society and the questions or problems (*wenti*) that need to be answered. Mere talking on the other hand focuses on the ideas within the grand scheme of things, namely on ideologies or “-isms”. In Hu’s pragmatist interpretation even the ideologies develop from an experimentalist setting. In the beginning, every “-ism” is a study:

All “-isms” are aspirations of people from a certain time and place, offering solutions to help society in that time and place.

[...]

Every “-ism” begins as a response to circumstances. Every society, in every period of time, is under a certain influence and exhibits certain dissatisfying circumstances. ... This is how “-isms” start; mostly they are some sort of a concrete view in times of need.

In the process of spreading the doctrine, these concrete views and solutions are simplified, summarized, as Hu says, down to “one or two words”, and then start to be known as “this-or-that-ism” (*mou mou zhuyi*). When a view becomes an “-ism”, the concrete plan becomes an abstract notion, and subsuming different concrete views under the umbrella term of an “-ism” is both lacking and dangerous:

For example the term “socialism”: Marx’s socialism and Wang Yitang’s<sup>24</sup> socialism are not the same; your socialism and my socialism are not the same (and) this cannot be comprised into one abstract notion. ... There may be seven or eight centuries in between, or twenty or thirty thousand miles, but you and me and Wang Yitang call ourselves socialists (and) we can all deceive people with this abstract term.

Instead of resorting to these general terms under the pretence that we are discussing the “fundamental solutions” (*genben jiejie*), Hu advocates for concrete measures to alleviate societal problems, “the livelihood of rickshaw drivers”, “the emancipation of women”, etc. The refusal to do so, he said, is a sign of a moral laziness:

Why so many discuss “-isms” and so few study problems? This all comes down to the notion of laziness. The definition of laziness is avoiding difficulties and resorting to what is easy. Studying problems is a difficult thing; a lofty discussion about “-isms” is an easy thing.

Studying, continues Hu, demands a lot of sacrifice and suffering, while on the other hand, lofty debates only require a “reading of one or two anarchist pamphlets written in western languages and leafing through the Encyclopaedia Britannica”. “-Isms”, concludes Hu, should not be a replacement for the study of

<sup>24</sup> One of the corrupt Anhui clique, which Hu previously mentions as those who misuse the allegedly socialist Sun Yatsen’s notion of human welfare (*minshengzhuyi*).

real problems of society, but only a “reference material in the back of the brain” while solving them.

In this short article by Hu we can see that the distinction he wants to make between the advocates of “-isms” and himself is a fundamental one. While responding to a current situation, the abuse of the term “socialism” in recent political intrigues, he nonetheless sees that as a symptom of the dangerous prevalence of “-isms” over the solving of problems. The reply, however, starts in a seemingly more reconciliatory tone. Li Dazhao, the editor of the *Weekly Review*, published his reply in the August 17<sup>th</sup> issue under the title “More Debate about Problems and ‘Isms’”. Firmly in the support of radical revolutionary change, he tries to first negate Hu’s criticism by a methodological insight, arguing that his view of “-isms” is too narrow. The distinction Hu made, is, according to Li, ungrounded:

I think that “problems” and “-isms” are related in a way that cannot be completely separated.

The fundamental difference between the two is perhaps in the perception of how problems are to be solved – and, even more importantly, by whom. Solving society’s problems, argues Li Dazhao, can only be done by the majority of the members of this society, and if something is not a common problem, it has to become one:

Because the solution for a societal problem has to rely on the common dynamics of the majority of the people in that society. If we therefore want to solve a problem, we must make it into a common problem for the majority of the people in that society.

The idealist approach of an ideology, i.e. of an “-ism”, is a prerequisite for achieving this. An “-ism” gives people “a measure (a tool) with which they can test whether they are satisfied with their life or not”. Only with this fulfilled do people reach the point of having the desire to change the conditions of their life. Otherwise, all attempts to change society are pointless:

... you can endlessly research the social phenomena, but the majority of people will not have any relation to that; such research into social problems has no influence on reality.

By claiming this, Li puts the relationship between Hu's opposites into another perspective. Research and ideology are namely both necessary for social change:

Therefore our movement, although on one hand researching real problems, must on the other hand spread an idealistic “-ism”. This functions mutually and is not exclusive.

Li argues that there is also a utopian function of ideology and underlines this with examples of closed utopian communities, such as those created following Owen's or Fourier's ideas or Mushanokōji's more recent “new village” in Japan. In these examples people or their followers unite and “establish a community where they can put to practice their ideal social system and make a specimen of the ideal society, which then causes average people to realize that it is possible to hope for a life in new society”.

Li also rejects Hu's view that the multitude of different streams of thought and practice that call themselves socialist is a dangerous phenomenon. He claims instead that these are just “forms in which the spirit [of socialism] is put into practice and adapted to the necessary attempts”. It is not the ideology's fault if it is misused, adds Li:

This can show that it is the fundamental nature of ideology to be able to adapt to reality, but if it is used by professional lofty speakers, it becomes void. I'm afraid that Mr. Hu therefore saw as the danger of the “-ism” does not originate in the “-ism”, but in the void speaking person.

At the end of his “friendly” argument against Hu's criticism, Li also addresses the main issue between them: why would one prefer to solve “fundamental solutions” when problems must be addressed, a decision Hu ascribed to laziness. This might not be a necessary tactic in a developed country, or what Li calls “a society that is organized and alive”. In China, however, such a condition had not been met, and the debate about the fundamental issues is a prerequisite for any other change. For fundamental problems, fundamental solutions should be used and an ideological framework consulted rather than a small-scale experimentalist reform of the Deweyan type. He explains that with the classical Marxist model of base and superstructure:

The solution to the economic problem is a fundamental solution. When the economic problems are solved, any political problems, legal problems, problems in the family system, women's liberation problems, and workers' liberation problem can (all) be resolved.

## The Aftermath

After the debate in *Weekly Review*, the paths of Chen Duxiu's and Li Dazhao's group started to differ from those of Hu Shi and other Deweyans. What in 1919 was a theoretical distinction became a gravely serious matter after the revolution. The Chinese communist party, established in 1921 by Chen and Li, set the scene for the victory in the civil war in 1949 and the subsequent decades. Hu Shi left the country and was severely criticized *in absentia*, especially in the 1950s.<sup>25</sup> His teacher's reputation also dwindled. The protagonists of the revolutionary part of the New Culture Movement had no issues with Dewey at the time of his stay in China, he had a good relationship with Chen Duxiu and Zhou Enlai, and even Mao went to listen to his lectures in Changsha. A few decades later, his openly harsh opposition to revolution as a solution for China's problems – a view shared by Hu – made him a target of discreditation. His students were harassed and criticized, he was labelled a “class-enemy”, a “counter-revolutionary”, and a “reactionary capitalist”, his thought was deconstructed as “anti-scientific”, and he himself was accused of deliberately introducing a depoliticized educational system.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly enough, as Bruno-Jofré and Schriewer point out in their book on the global reception of Dewey's thought, it was only during the cultural revolution that the criticism of pragmatism and Dewey was completely silenced, perhaps due to the fact that the methods of the Gang of Four had many similarities with the Deweyan principles of “open-door education”. Furthermore, a comparison of the Gang of Four with Dewey, whose views were deemed as wrong, became a useful tool to criticize their policies indirectly. A more positive reappraisal of Dewey's pragmatism then followed, first through praise for his student Tao Xingzhi. This second twist of views re-interpreted Dewey's thought as anti-capitalist (especially because of his idea of

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Chan Lien, “Chinese Communism versus Pragmatism: The Criticism of Hu Shih's Philosophy, 1950-1958”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (May, 1968), pp. 551-570.

<sup>26</sup> Rosa Bruno-Jofré, Jürgen Schriewer, *The Global Reception of John Dewey's Thought: Multiple Refractions Through Time and Space*, London, Routledge, 2012.

classless equality in schools) and praised him anew for his seemingly useful and balanced views on the relation between the individual and society.

When pragmatism became an almost ideological view in China with the late 1970s with the policies of Deng Xiaoping and his famously doctrine of the “colour of cats”, the pragmatist position of Dewey and Hu also became a commonplace reference again. The same is partly true for the current political atmosphere, where it seems that pragmatism still provides a welcome combination of the atheist ethics and social experimentalism, which is not alien to the synthesis between Mao and Confucius that the Chinese Communist Party advocates today. The last period of Xi Jinping, however, signifies a new shift on the spectrum between problems and -isms, the two notions of the hundred years’ old debate. Since Deng Xiaoping and his pragmatic shift, it seemed for a few decades that the solving of problems or seeking of solutions prevailed, while ideology was pushed aside, except for a few brief episodes of ideological rigour in late 1970s and late 1980s. The common claim that ideology had been slowly disappearing from the picture since 1978, however, is misleading. As Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova point out,<sup>27</sup> the ideology of the CPC did not disappear, but it changed and became more flexible, refined, and indirect. Since the beginning of Xi Jinping’s presidency, however, we can trace another change, from the focus on economic matters to political issues. It is precisely in this shift that we can see an echo of the same early 20th-century debate. In his speech at the Central Party School on 5 January 2013, Xi asserted that there is a necessary continuity between the reform era post-1976 and the time before.

There are two historical periods, one before the Reform and opening up, and the other after it; these are two mutually interconnected, but also very different time periods, but in essence, all this was a practical attempt of the Communist party at leading the people to build socialism.<sup>28</sup>

According to Xi, the choice is not which one to follow and which one to reject. There would not be a reform without the period of revolutionary fervour before it:

<sup>27</sup> Kerry Brown and Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, “Ideology in the Era of Xi Jinping”, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, September 2018, Volume 23, Issue 3, pp. 323–339.

<sup>28</sup> Xi Jinping’s speech is quoted from: <http://news.sohu.com/20130106/n362503875.shtml> (acc. 20 September 2018).

The Socialism with Chinese Characteristics was created during the historical period of Reform and opening up, but it was also created on the basis of the New China, which has built a socialist system and maintained it for 70 years.

It is interesting to note how much does Xi's position, so different in content and style from those of his immediate predecessors, goes back to the debate about the correct relationship between ideology and practice, between "-isms" and "problems". Even more, the summarizing phrase on the topic, which became the new slogan for negotiating ideology and pragmatism in Xi's China, almost echoes Li Dazhao's 1919 response to Hu Shi, namely, that "none of the two can be denied" (*liang ge bu neng fouding*).<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*