Philosophical Tours of China, from Dewey to Derrida

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By Jeffrey Wasserstrom

Peter Zarrow’s piece last month on Bertrand Russell’s writing on and travels to China may have gotten some of our readers curious about the other two members of the triumverate of famous philosophers mentioned in the introduction to that post: the Indian poet and thinker Rabindranath Tagore and the American pragmatist and educational theorist John Dewey. What each of these two men thought about and did while in China could be well worth a posting. And perhaps in 2009 the blog will run such pieces, as it would be a very appropriate year to do so, at least in Dewey’s case, marking as it will the 90th anniversary of his first lectures in China. Also of interest would be a comparative look at the ways Chinese intellectuals of the day responded to Russell, Dewey, and Tagore.

One thing likely to emerge from such a comparison would be that it was the philosopher who came from the country closest to China who met with the most opposition. This was partly due to Tagore arriving at a time, 1924, when New Culture Movement iconoclasm was still going strong and his message was seen as traditionalist. There may now be a statue at Peking University honoring Tagore’s visit to that campus, but as Stephen N. Hay stresses in Asian Ideas of East and West, and as Pankaj Mishra points out in a recent New York Review of Books essay, there was a good deal of resistance to his ideas among intellectuals in Shanghai and Beijing during the 1920s.
Rabindranath Tagore

Here’s how Mishra puts it, noting the irony that sometimes what an Asian thinker has to say finds more who welcome it in Western than Eastern settings:

“His message—that modern civilization, built upon a cult of money and power, was inherently destructive, and needed to be tempered by the wisdom of the East—had a receptive audience among many people in the West who had been forced by World War I to question their faith in science and progress. But when, traveling in the East, he exhorted Asians not to abandon their traditional culture, he was often heckled and booed.”

Another theme that we could pick up on in 2009 would be whether there have been international thinkers of more recent decades whose lectures at Chinese institutions have parallels to those given in the late 1910s and 1920s by Russell, Dewey, and Tagore. One possible set of names to float, which would have a certain symmetry, if only because two are Westerners and one a South Asian, would be Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida (who both gave high profile speeches in China in 2001 at a time when their works were thought of as fashionable in some intellectual circles there) and Amartya Sen (who gave a keynote address at the 2006 Beijing Forum). This would also underscore that the early twenty-first century and the immediate aftermath of World War I saw increased links between foreign and Chinese scholars.

I’ll leave it to others to figure out how far we’d want to push the notion of parallels between Sen and Tagore (these might be interesting) or between either Derrida or Habermas and Russell (these might be less so), but I think for a contemporary counterpart to Dewey, we need to look to a late twentieth century visitor to China rather than an early twenty-first century one. The person I am thinking of is Frederic Jameson, who is, like Dewey was, an American. More to the point, like Dewey, but as far as I know unlike Habermas and Derrida, his influence on Chinese intellectuals has taken many forms, thanks to people who have studied with him rather than just heard a lecture or two. And his interest in China, like Dewey’s, lasted well beyond the time of his first visit in the mid-1980s.
It is also fitting to get to Jameson before 2008 ends for two reasons. The main one is that the influential theorist of the postmodern was given a very special award this year, the Holbergprisen (or Holberg Prize). And, interestingly, not only did the prize organization’s summary of his achievements mention his writings on Chinese topics (among many other subjects) and the extraordinary impact his work has had in Asia, but one of the presentations included in a symposium about his work that was held to mark the occasion was called “Frederic R. Jameson in China” and given by an unusually high-profile Chinese intellectual, Wang Hui. In addition, 2008 was when the latest—but not the first and perhaps not the last—book on Chinese studies appeared that included an acknowledgment to the prize winner: Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement, a work by Xiaobing Tang, who heard the theorist lecture in Beijing and then went on to get a doctorate at Duke, Jameson’s home institution.

Tags: Bertrand Russell, Frederic Jameson, John Dewey, Rabindranath Tagore