

II. Genealogy of Modern Philosophy in East Asia

Pragmatism and Modern Chinese Philosophy

The “genetic method” of John Dewey and Hu Shi

1. Hu Shi: the “genetic method” as “historical attitude”

Hu Shi (胡適 1891–1962) was strongly influenced throughout his life by the pragmatism of John Dewey. It is the latter’s “genetic method” that especially determined Hu Shi’s methodology—a methodology applied in his *Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy (Volume I)* [OHCP], and published in 1919. But, Hu Shi’s comprehension was somewhat different from Dewey’s. In Hu’s article “On pragmatism,” which appeared two months after OHCP, he said:

Although the idea of evolution, since Darwin, influenced all sorts of sciences, philosophy was the most conservative. In these 60 years, the idea of “evolution” in the philosophical sense remained a Hegelian one, which was different from the Darwinian conception in *On the Origin of Species*. But, at last, it was philosophers of pragmatism who began to apply the Darwinian idea of evolution to philosophy. They used it in every field: critique of philosophical problems; discussion of truth; inquiry into morality. As a result of the application of the idea of evolution to philosophy, the “historical attitude” (i.e., the genetic method) came into being. What is the historical attitude? It is nothing other than a consideration of how things have come into being, how they have presented themselves, and how they have changed to become what they are now.¹

1. Hu Shi, “On pragmatism,” in *Collections of Hu Shi: Philosophy and Culture*: 5–6.

For Hu Shi, who rejected the Japanese translation of pragmatism as “practicalism 實際主義” [which was valid only for the thought of William James] in favor of “experimentalism 實驗主義,” the “historical method” [a translation of “genetic method”] was an important element of experimentalism in so far as it considered genesis as the generation and the transformation of things.²

This understanding of pragmatism of Hu Shi is not mistaken, at least regarding the inclination of the thought of John Dewey. For Dewey, the “genetic method” was an indispensable aspect of his pragmatism.

2. Dewey: the “genetic method” as a revealing “process”

John Dewey was born in 1859, the year Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was published. 50 years later, Dewey held a conference to commemorate the publication of Darwin’s great work and said:

The influence of Darwin upon philosophy resides in his having conquered the phenomena of life for the principle of transition, and thereby freed the new logic for application to mind and morals and life. When he said of species what Galileo had said of the earth, *e pur se muove*, he emancipated, once for all, genetic and experimental ideas as an organon for asking questions and looking for explanations.³

Dewey regarded Darwinism as a criticism of past philosophy that had comprehended the world in the light of the strong connection between *arche* and *telos*; Darwinism enabled us to consider concrete and accidental transitions that are irreducible to a causality determined by cause and end. The title of *On the Origin of Species* itself told of such an inversion. Species [*eidōs* in Greek] had been considered “a fixed form and final cause” or “antecedent” from which “consequence” was “derived” or “deduced” teleologically.⁴ But, Darwin, by inquiring into its “origin,”

2. Ibid: 6.

3. John Dewey, “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” in *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought*: 8–9.

4. Ibid: 6.

deconstructed the concept of species and saved philosophy from determinism. It was necessary to look for a new historicity, i.e., a way of generation. In this regard, Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was a revolutionary book that permitted us to think about other lineages of generation by deconstructing the concept of species.

Thus, the “genetic method” is a way of looking for a historicity other than that of fixed causality. Dewey then applied this method to the field of morality. Morality should not be founded upon transcendent principles, but must be traced rather to the specific conditions of generation.⁵ Set apart from fixed causality, this new logic could then be capable of introducing “responsibility” into intellectual life.⁶

In his article “The Evolutionary Method as applied to Morality” (1902), Dewey said:

The simple fact of the case is that the genetic method, whether used in experimental or historical science, does not “derive” or “deduce” a consequent from an antecedent, in the sense of resolving it, or dissolving it, into what has gone before.⁷

It is important that the “genetic method” does not “‘derive’ or ‘deduce’ a consequent from an antecedent,” but rather grasps a generating process and its conditions in its concreteness.⁸ Dewey went on:

5. Ibid: 17.

6. Ibid.

7. John Dewey, “The Evolutionary Method as applied to Morality,” in *Essays on Logical Theory 1902–1903*: 10.

8. The genetic method, when used in historical science, is paraphrased below:

History, as viewed from the evolutionary standpoint, is not a mere collection of incidents or external changes, which something fixed (whether spiritual or physical) has passed through, but it is a process that reveals to us the conditions under which moral practices and ideas have originated. (“The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy”: 9.)

Or again, when used in experimental science, it functions as follows:

What experimentation does is to let us see into water in the process of making. Through generating water we single out the precise and sole conditions which have to be fulfilled that water may present itself as an experienced fact. If this case be typical, then the exper-

The fallacy assumes that the earlier datum has some sort of fixity and finality of its own. Even those who assert most positively that causation is a simple matter of antecedent and consequent, are still given to speaking as if the antecedent supplied the sole stamp of meaning and reality to the consequent... Indeed, the entire significance of the experimental method is that attention centres upon either antecedent or consequent simply because of interest in a process. The antecedent is of worth because it defines one term of the process of becoming; the consequent because it defines the other term. Both are strictly subordinated to the process to which they give terms, limits.⁹

For Dewey, “process” took priority over antecedent and consequent. Antecedent and consequent were not strongly regulative, and furthermore were said to be “incomprehensible”¹⁰ or “absolutely unknown.”¹¹

However, it seems that the “genetic method” of Dewey still remains ambiguous. To be sure, it emphasizes the generating process, but as long as it presupposes “antecedents” and “consequents” for constituting the generation of things, how does a sort of teleology not steal into it? Dewey said: “We get a more thorough and adequate experience of the antecedents, H and O, and of the consequent, water, in finding out how water is generated.”¹² But, such antecedents as “H and O” and the consequent “water” are not “absolutely unknown.” Without teleology, can one determine “a more thorough and adequate experience”?

3. Did Hu Shi misread Dewey?

The suspicion that teleology remains unpurged is reinforced by a so-called misreading of Dewey’s disciple Hu Shi. Two years after the 1919

imental method is entitled to rank as genetic method; it is concerned with the manner or process by which anything comes into experienced existence. (ibid: 5.)

9. “The Evolutionary Method as Applied to Morality”: 11.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid: 12.

12. Ibid: 16.

article on pragmatism mentioned above, Hu Shi surprisingly rephrased the term “historical attitude” to “the ancestor-descendant method,” and reintroduced the concept of causality in its strong sense.

Dewey’s philosophical method can be generically called an “experimentalism.” I will describe it in its two aspects: as a historical method, and as an experimental method.

1 Historical method: the ancestor-descendant method

Dewey does not regard an institution or a theory in isolation, but as something in-between. That is, on the one side there is its genetic cause and on the other side there is its consequent. In other words, above it is its ancestor and below it is its descendant. Once we have a firm grasp of these two ends, the middle will not escape us.¹³

Probably because “antecedent” also means “ancestor” and the “genetic” calls to mind images of generation and heredity, Hu Shi strongly translated the “genetic method” as a way of revealing familial lineage. This is clearly in variance with Dewey’s “critical motivation,”¹⁴ which refuted a biological genealogy that falls into a closed circle.¹⁵ One might well say that this is a “misreading” by Hu Shi of Dewey’s historical method.

Gu Hongliang, for example, maintains that there is a difference in historical method between Hu Shi and Dewey. On the one hand, Hu Shi

13. Hu Shi, “Professor John Dewey and China,” in *Collections of Hu Shi: Philosophy and Culture*: 51.

14. Ibid.

15. Dewey criticized the concept of a germ:

In living beings, changes do not happen as they seem to happen elsewhere, any which way; the earlier changes are regulated in view of later results. This progressive organization does not cease till there is achieved a true final term, a τελος, a completed, perfected end. This final form exercises in turn a plenitude of functions, not the least noteworthy of which is production of germs like those from which it took its own origin, germs capable of the same cycle of self-fulfilling activity. (“The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy”: 4.)

takes an external spectatorial position with regard to process. On the other hand, Dewey takes an internal participatory position. Thus Hu Shi inclines towards essentialism that never influences the process itself.¹⁶

But, it is not sufficient to distinguish Hu Shi's external historical method from Dewey's internal one, because Hu Shi himself also carefully paid attention to the "inner process." It was also his fundamental methodology in constituting his "History of Chinese Philosophy." Moreover, Dewey himself seemed aware of the dangers of his own "genetic method," which could easily lapse into a historicism.

4. *The Historicity of "genesis": Dewey's Criticism of the "genetic method"*

Before discussing Hu Shi's "inner process," we will cast a glance at the relationship between the "genetic method" and teleology. Dewey wrote:

Philosophically speaking, the problem with which we are confronted is the relation of the discrete and the continuous. Both of them are stubborn facts, and yet they have to meet and blend in any human association that rises above the level of brute intercourse. In order to justify continuity, historians have often resorted to a falsely named "genetic" method, wherein there is no genuine genesis, because everything is resolved into what went before. But Egyptian civilization and art were not just a preparation for Greek, nor were Greek thought and art mere reedited versions of the civilizations from which they so freely borrowed. Each culture has its own individuality and has a pattern that binds its parts together.

Nevertheless, when the art of another culture enters into attitudes that determine our experience, genuine continuity is effected. Our own experience does not thereby lose its individuality, but it takes unto itself and weds elements that expand its significance. A community and continuity that do not exist physically are created. The attempt to establish continuity by methods which resolve one set of events and one of insti-

16. Gu Hongliang, *Misreading of Pragmatism: Influence of Philosophy of Dewey on Modern Chinese Philosophy*, 125–28.

tutions into those which preceded it in time is doomed to defeat. Only an expansion of experience that absorbs into itself the values experienced because of life-attitudes, other than those resulting from our own human environment, dissolves the effect of discontinuity.¹⁷

Egyptian civilization and art did not exist for the purpose of Greece, and Greek civilization cannot be reduced into preceding civilizations. They each had their own individuality. But, they were not to be abandoned in their discontinuity. Through "human association," people have created continuity as a "genuine genesis." In order to establish this continuity in discontinuities, Dewey said that the "genetic method" was *not appropriate*, because "it resolves all into what had passed since." He warned against the dangers of the "genetic method" which he had once resorted to.¹⁸ He considered it to over-value continuity, and to pass over the accidental element of a meeting with another culture.

However, could he avoid falling into a bad "genetic method" in the end? By dreaming of a "genuine genesis" through an "expansion of experience," he might surely have succeeded in fending off the concept of a strong "antecedent." But, at the same time, inasmuch as he continued to desire "continuity" built over the "discontinuities" of "human society," his position seems to have maintained a "consequent," and retrospectively found a "process" that turned towards this "consequent" as a *telos*.

This sort of difficulty would not be incidental. The historicity of "genesis" is related neither to ideological tradition nor to "a mere collection of incidents or external changes." It is, as Dewey said: "a process that reveals to us the conditions under which moral practices and ideas have originated." That is, it retires from the plane of "fact" and constitutes "process" as the plane of condition. Therefore, one could rephrase it as transcendental history. Of course, it is not adequate to directly apply the Husserlian problem to Dewey. But, as another attempt to constitute the historicity of "genesis," the attempt of Husserl, born in the same year as Dewey, is worth referring to across the waters of the Atlantic.

17. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953* vol. 10: 338.

18. Cf. Sidney Ratner, "Dewey's Contribution to Historical Theory," in *John Dewey: Philosopher of Science and Freedom*, The Dial Press, 1950: 142–3.

5. *Historical Teleology in Dewey's Contemporary, Husserl*

At the end of the *zigzag* course of his phenomenological movement, Husserl turned to the problem of a “genetic phenomenology,” which was to inquire into the historicity of “transcendental subjectivity” and our world that is co-constituted with other transcendental egos. However, his genetic historicity was nothing but a historicity of ideas or inner historicity, so that he could hardly escape from a teleological stance. The result was that he founded “*the concept of Europe as the historical teleology of the infinite goals of reason.*”¹⁹ Thus, he declared that “the European ‘world’ was born out of the idea of reason, i.e., out of the spirit of philosophy,”²⁰ while he decisively excluded the other and other cultures.

Philosophy and science would accordingly be the historical movement through which universal reason, “inborn” in humanity as such, is revealed.

This would be the case if the as yet unconcluded movement [of modern philosophy] had proved to be the entelechy, properly started on the way to pure realization, or if reason had in fact become manifest, fully conscious of itself in its own essential form, i.e., the form of a universal philosophy that grows through consistent apodictic insight, and supplies its own norms through an apodictic method. Only then could it be decided whether European humanity bears within itself an absolute idea, rather than being merely an empirical anthropological type like “China” or “India;” it could be decided whether the spectacle of the Europeanization of all other civilizations bears witness to the rule of an absolute meaning, one which is proper to the sense, rather than to a historical non-sense, of the world.²¹

Husserl maintained the need to decide whether “the *telos* was inborn in European humanity at the birth of Greek philosophy” or if “this *telos*,

19. Edmund Husserl, “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity,” in Appendixes of *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*: 299.

20. Ibid.

21. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*: 15–16.

then, is merely a factual, historical delusion, the accidental acquisition of merely one among many other civilizations and histories.”²² But Husserl was never undecided. He unflinchingly chose the former conclusion. To support this decision, he appealed to the inner and spiritual history of European philosophy inherited from Greek philosophy.

This we seek to discern not from the outside, from facts, as if the temporal becoming in which we ourselves have evolved were merely an external causal series. Rather, we seek to discern it from the *inside*. Only in this way can we, who not only have a spiritual heritage but have become what we are thoroughly and exclusively in a historical-spiritual manner, have a task that is truly our own. We obtain it not through the critique of some present or handed-down system, of some scientific or pre-scientific *Weltanschauung* (which might as well be Chinese, in the end), but only through a critical understanding of the total unity of history-our history.²³

Nevertheless, it would be unfair not to point out a chance of escaping from teleology in Husserlian historicity, for Husserl was clearly aware of the historicity of *Urfaktum*. *Urfaktum* is a transcendental fact that is prior to empirical fact, but in being a fact, is also prior to transcendental subjectivity. In short, *Urfaktum* is in itself the absolute difference between the empirical and the transcendental, so that it cannot be completely consumed in teleological historicity. For example, Greek philosophy was “not just a preparation for” Europe. We can find other histories of succession or de-succession, even between Europe and China.

Similarly, Dewey’s genetic historicity of “process” may be said to have two faces. On the one hand, when Dewey overly stresses a created “continuity,” the “process” becomes teleologically fixed. But, on the other hand, when he makes “antecedent” and “consequent” remain “absolutely unknown” and he is aware of the otherness of matters, his concept of “process” remains open to contingency. If these two faces are inherent in the “genetic method,” an abrupt inheritor from another culture can

22. Ibid: 15.

23. Ibid: 70–71.

consciously or unconsciously exploit it for a reconstitution of Chinese civilization.

6. *Hu Shi at the Junction of Genealogies of Western Philosophy and Chinese Hanxue*

Hu Shi did not write a Book of Philosophy or Chinese philosophy. For him, it was more important to write a “History of Chinese Philosophy.” In his OHCP, Hu Shi defined the role of the history of philosophy with three points. The first is to explicate the “線索 process (or lineage)” of thought; the second is to find the cause of differences in thought; the third is to criticize thought.²⁴ Moreover he described the “系統 genealogical” picture of Chinese philosophy as a World philosophy.²⁵

At that time in China, the concepts of process (lineage) and genealogy were highly valued.²⁶ For example, Cai Yuanbei, who was president of Beijing University, wrote an introduction to OHCP, in which he emphasized the importance of genealogy several times. He said that there were currently two difficulties in compiling a history of ancient Chinese philosophy. The first was the difficulty of text critique and the second was in “compiling a genealogy.” For the former, it was necessary to master the traditional Chinese science called *Hanxue*; for the latter, one must depend on the Western history of philosophy. Therefore, in order to write a history of ancient Chinese philosophy, one should retain the “heredity” of *Hanxue*, and at the same time comprehend the genealogical system of the Western history of philosophy. It was Hu Shi who satisfied these two conditions, said Cai Yuanbei. He was fit to compile a history of ancient Chinese philosophy.²⁷

24. OHCP, in *Collections of Hu Shi: History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1: 10.

25. Ibid: 11.

26. Feng Youlan, who was a rival of Hu Shi and who published another History of Chinese Philosophy, also thought them important.

Cf. Feng Youlan, “Autobiography of Sansongtang,” in *Complete Works of Sansongtang* [Feng Youlan], vol. 1: 199–209.

27. Cai Yuanbei, “Introduction to the History of Ancient Chinese Philosophy,” in *Collections of Hu Shi: History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1: 1.

However, or therefore, Hu Shi’s “History of Chinese Philosophy” turned away from the “genetic method” and was easily absorbed into teleology. In accounting for this “misreading” or “misunderstanding” of Dewey, Zhang Rulun mentions “evolutionary thought.” He says that “Hu Shi’s historical view was in fact based on evolutionary thought;”²⁸ “strictly speaking, Hu Shi’s evolutionary historical view was in fact a historical view without any sensitivity to history;”²⁹ “Hu Shi’s historical view and the modern Western historical view that Dewey devoted himself to criticizing were basically the same.”³⁰ This conclusion is too strong for us to comprehend the reason for the divorce of Hu Shi from Dewey, if indeed there was such a divorce. It is certain that Hu Shi understood the meaning of the “genetic method,” and wanted to marry two different cultures. He believed that without the pragmatism of Dewey as a new philosophy there could be no marriage between Western and Chinese civilizations, and particularly between Western philosophy and Chinese *Hanxue* as history.³¹

Yu Yingshi stresses “the heredity of *Hanxue*” in Hu Shi. He claims:

Hu Shi had a partiality for the term “history.” In this respect, his Chinese background is clearly exposed. Before he was converted to Dewey’s pragmatism, his own views on science and his inclination of thought had already been formed.³²

He further claims that Hu Shi’s comprehension of Dewey’s philosophy was not insufficient, but that he approached it from a Chinese background, and grasped it at the level of its basic spirit, attitude, and methodology.³³

This seems to be an acceptable account. But, it is not sufficient to

28. Zhang Rulun, “Hu Shi and Dewey: Research in the Comparative History of Thought,” in *Research of Modern Chinese Thought*: 358.

29. Ibid: 360.

30. Ibid: 365.

31. Cf. Hu Shi, “Philosophy of Dai Dongyuan” in *Collections of Hu Shi: History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 2.

32. Yu Yingshi, “Hu Shi in the History of Modern Chinese Thought,” in *Analysis of Hu Shi*, edited by Ouyang Zhesheng, Shehui Kexue Wenxiang Chubanshe, 2000: 107.

33. Ibid: 110.

explain how Hu Shi understood the base of pragmatism, and from what kind of “Chinese background” he approached it. It is necessary to explore the form of the marriage between Dewey and Hu Shi.

7. “Inner process” as a Teleological Genealogy

In an article called “The Process of Chinese Philosophy” (1921), Hu Shi distinguished between “outer process” and “inner process.” The former is a process in which currents of thought are produced by politico-sociological situations; the latter is “a sort of method, a philosophical method, what is called Logic in foreign countries.”³⁴ He went on to add that the “outer process is nothing but change; but the inner process, even if it changes, never runs off the fixed route.”³⁵ This “fixed route” goes between the two poles or two origins of Chinese philosophy, which are the revolutionary Laozi and the conservative Confucius.³⁶ For Hu Shi, before Laozi and Confucius, philosophy had never appeared.

Chinese philosophy did not attain “philosophy” until Laozi and Confucius appeared. It is not that there was no thought before Laozi, but there was no genealogically systematized thought.³⁷

Hu Shi defined philosophy as such by being a “系統 genealogically” systematized thought. The thought of Laozi could become philosophy in so far as it was aware of a genealogy of thought and was systematized. This is why the philosophy of Laozi as the origin of Chinese philosophy would be carried on through the “inner process” of the history of Chinese philosophy. In other words, “philosophy” in China was settled to be equivalent to the “history of Chinese philosophy.”

At the end of this article, Hu Shi asserted:

[Philosophical] thought is to receive a precedent and to open the way

34. Hu Shi, “The Process of Chinese Philosophy,” in *Collections of Hu Shi: History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1: 520. Chinese Philosophy, vol. 1: 520.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid: 520–521.

37. Ibid: 520.

for the following. It has a fixed process, therefore, it does not run here and there, and is far from having no order.³⁸

In other words, for Hu Shi, philosophical thought is but a thought including genealogically systematized thought within itself. He presupposed historicity in his definition of philosophy. That is why he borrowed the idea of historicity from Dewey and his genetic method.

30 years later, in December 1952, Hu Shi evoked the philosophy of Dewey and said:

Naturally, there are different kinds of thought: simple thought, complicated thought, fantastic thought, illogical thought, and logical thought. Professor Dewey thought that the genesis of logical thought had five steps. That was his great contribution.³⁹

Hu Shi thus restricted Dewey’s genesis to the “genesis of logical thought.” He continued:

The first step: the origin or starting point of thought. Thought does not float in the air. Fantastic thought is not thought. All true and logical thought surely has an origin, background, and starting point.⁴⁰

And, the last step was the following:

The fifth step: the end or the terminus of thought. It is verification... At the final place of verification, we can say that this thought results in resolving a problem. Therefore a supposition becomes truth; imagination becomes a sufficiently useful tool. This is the terminus of thought.⁴¹

From the origin of logical thought to the terminus of truth the “genetic method” was limited to finding such a “fixed route” of logical thought.

38. Ibid: 524.

39. Hu Shi, “Philosophy of Dewey,” in *Collections of Hu Shi: Philosophy and Culture*: 115.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid: 117–18.

8. Liberating the “genetic method” again

However, we cannot blame Hu Shi for “misunderstanding” Dewey. Instead, he might be said to have understood Dewey’s basic spirit and extended it in his own way toward a teleological history of philosophy. Undoubtedly his way was an exaggeration of Dewey’s thought. And, it also exposed his Chinese background, which was not only tied to the “heredity of *Hanxue*,” but also to a deep desire for “統 succession/unification”: “正統 successional legitimacy” and “道統 succession of *Dao*” as the ideal succession or traditions on which the foundation of science, politics and moral are to be based. Nevertheless, we cannot forget Hu Shi’s struggle against *Hanxue* and the traditional use of “succession.” In fact he wrote a history of Chinese philosophy that was considerably different from *Hanxue* and “道統.”

Fortunately or unfortunately, his “History of Chinese Philosophy” as a history of logos or “inner process” is the direct descendent of a teleological Western philosophy and of the Chinese idea of succession. There is a profound complicity here far beyond “misunderstanding.” We must further explore other genealogies of the “History of Chinese Philosophy” and ways of constituting it other than genealogically or teleologically. For that, it will be necessary to liberate the “genetic method” beyond Hu Shi’s understanding and Dewey’s limitations.

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