

## Reading Dewey's *Letters from China and Japan* (2): John Dewey's View of Japan's Budding Democracy in 1919 from March 27 to April 28

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### 1. Introduction

John Dewey's visit to Japan was a far more revealing one than described by records available in Japanese. He certainly recognized the limits of democracy in Japan in 1919, when feudalism and monarchy still prevailed, but he also discovered the potential for a unique Japanese democracy in the physicality and ethnicity of the country's unique culture. This not only promotes a comprehensive understanding of Dewey's thought in his studies but also supports the claim that the seeds of Japan's rapid democratization after World War II already existed in the interwar period. This paper is an attempt to clarify the previously stated ideas using 13 letters from March 27 to April 28, collected in *Letters from China and Japan*, as evidence.

### 2. Introduction: The Features of the Letters (1)

John and Alice Dewey wrote letters to their children during their time traveling in Japan and China. The 13 letters in question describe the latter part of their stay in Japan traveling through Tokyo, Kamakura, Nara, and Kyoto.

### 3. Introduction: The Features of the Letters (2)

Both John and Alice wrote about their experiences. According to Hickman, who edited the letters, the following is a list showing who wrote each letter:

March 27, 1919, Kamakura, <u>Dewey</u>	April 1, 1919, Tokyo, <u>Alice</u>
March 28, 1919, Kamakura, <u>Dewey</u>	April 1, 1919, Tokyo, <u>Dewey</u>

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This paper is based on my presentation given at the session "Reading Dewey's Letters from China and Japan" at the 1st International Symposium on Global Citizenship Education "Restoring Learning to Daily Living: Global Citizenship and John Dewey" (22 October 2022, at Soka University). The original PowerPoint file can be found in the Appendix.

April 2, 1919, Tokyo, <u>Dewey &amp; Alice</u>	April 15, 1919, Kyoto, <u>Alice</u>
April 4, 1919, Tokyo, <u>Dewey (?)</u>	April 19, 1919, Kyoto, <u>Alice</u>
April 8, 1919, Tokyo, <u>Dewey</u>	April 22, 1919, Kyoto, <u>Dewey</u>
April 12, 1919, Nara, <u>Alice</u>	April 28, 1919, Ship, <u>Alice</u>
April 15, 1919, Kyoto, <u>Dewey</u>	※ Dewey = John Dewey

#### 4. Introduction: The Features of the Letters (3)

Alice's letters are characterized by detailed descriptions of everyday life activities, such as shopping and eating, while Dewey's letters locate the characteristics of the Japanese people they meet within events and world affairs at the time. For example, he addresses Japanese public opinion and makes the following statement:

There is a great anti-American drive on now; seems to be largely confined to newspapers, but also stimulated artificially somewhat, presumably by the militaristic faction, which has lost more prestige in the last few months than in years, with a corresponding gain in liberal sentiment.<sup>1</sup>

#### 5. Introduction: The Dewey Perspective (1)

One of the key works that reveal how Dewey perceives Japan is his essay *Liberalism in Japan*, which was part of *The Dial*, a compilation of essays, in 1919. One of the few articles that examine the letter in Japanese, which is the subject of this presentation, states that "Dewey saw the growth of democracy in Japan as being hindered by Germanism" (p. 24), referring to *Liberalism in Japan*. In other words, Japan had its own budding democracy, but, following the example of Germany (considered an adversary in World War I), it "created a constitution that did not make the people sovereign, and a nationwide primary education designed to make the young Japanese docile" (p. 26), so that "secondary and higher education was also the combination of these factors," which Dewey concluded, "curtailed the progress of liberalism" (p. 26).

#### 6. Introduction: The Dewey Perspective (2)

Indeed, the democracy that Dewey aspired to was not very compatible with Japan at the time, where monarchy and militarism prevailed. This can be seen from the audience of his lectures at Tokyo Imperial University which started with 1,000 attendees on the first day,

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<sup>1</sup> John Dewey. *Letters from China and Japan* (Kindle No.591-595). E. P. Dutton Company. Kindle.

fell to 500 on the third day, and dropped to only 30–40 on the last day. Japan was strongly influenced by German idealism, so Dewey's ideas must have been difficult to accept. In 1915, in *German Philosophy and Politics*, Dewey historically positioned and criticized German militarist and imperialist nationalism.

In addition, the letter also describes Japan's own form of democracy and its affinity with Dewey's ideas. This is probably due to Dewey's approach to and view of Japan. He states:

On the whole, America ought to feel sorry for Japan, or at least sympathetic with it, and not afraid. When we have so many problems it seems absurd to say they have more, but they certainly have fewer resources, material and human, in dealing with theirs than we have, and they have still to take almost the first step in dealing with many of them. It is very unfortunate for them that they have become a first-class power so rapidly and with so little preparation in many ways; it is a terrible task for them to live up to their position and reputation and they may crack under the strain.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike academia and industry in Japan, Dewey felt there were still many other systems that were not rapidly modernizing. However, Dewey viewed many elements of the traditional Japanese culture favorably.

## 7. Question

This paper will focus on how Japan's budding democracy, as described by Dewey, was based on the principle of "living with others." What possibilities did Dewey envision for Japanese society at the time? To approach this question and introduce the general features of the letters and the relevant passages, text mining is used.

## 8. The Nature of the Letters: The Letter Dated March 27

The word cloud shown on slide 8 of the presentation highlights the main themes of Dewey's letters. Negative language is also prevalent in his letter dated March 27, such as militarism, in line with the deterioration of Japanese feelings toward the US and the UK, as introduced earlier.

## 9. The Letter Dated March 28

The following day, on March 28, Dewey and his wife enjoy a visit to the tourist

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<sup>2</sup> John Dewey. *Letters from China and Japan* (Kindle No.629-635). E. P. Dutton Company. Kindle.

destination of Kamakura. There they learn a lot about seafood dishes and provide other descriptive information.

#### **10. The Letter Dated April 1 (1)**

On April 1, Alice writes a letter with some interesting descriptions, including being able to see the emperor in person. John writes about a visit to a Judo hall.

#### **11. The Letter Dated April 1 (2)**

In his letter about Judo, Dewey mentions Alexander who influenced his philosophy, as well as traditional Japanese physical techniques and etiquette that had taken root in the army:

My other experience that I have not written about is seeing Judo. The great Judo expert is president of a normal school, and he arranged a special exhibition by experts for my benefit, he explaining the theory of each part of it in advance. ...It is really an art.

Tell Mr. Alexander to get a book by Harrison—a compatriot of his—out of the library, called “The Fighting Spirit of Japan.” It is a journalist’s book, not meant to be deep, but is interesting and said to be reliable as far as it goes.<sup>3</sup>

I noticed at the Judo the small waists of all these people; they breathe always from the abdomen. (...) In the army they have an indirect method of getting deep breathing which really goes back to the Buddhist Zen teaching of the old Samurai.<sup>4</sup>

#### **12. The Letter Dated April 4 (1)**

In a letter written on April 4, we can see more of Dewey’s appreciation of traditional culture, in this case, theater.

#### **13. The Letter Dated April 4 (2)**

Dewey was impressed by the plays performed by a well-known actor of the time named Ganjiro. His graceful behavior and physicality are described in a letter as follows:

You will never realize what the human hand and arm can do until you see this.

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<sup>3</sup> John Dewey. *Letters from China and Japan* (Kindle No. 731–733). E. P. Dutton Company. Kindle.

<sup>4</sup> John Dewey. *Letters from China and Japan* (Kindle No. 733–735). E. P. Dutton Company. Kindle.

He can do an animal's motions without any clawing—as graceful and lithe as a cat.

#### **14. The Letter Dated April 8 (1)**

In his letter dated April 8, Dewey describes his visit to the Imperial Theater and enjoys another hanami (cherry blossom viewing). He observes people's daily lives.

#### **15. The Letter Dated April 8 (2)**

Dewey states:

There are few external signs of a change, but Japan is nearly in the condition she was in during the first years of contact and opening up of things fifty or so years ago, so far as the mental readiness for change is concerned, and the next few years may see rapid social changes.<sup>5</sup>

This portrayal focuses on the inner lives of the people. Dewey, who visited Japan for the primary purpose of traveling rather than to give lectures, seems to have devoted time and effort to observing the people of the city, as he intended.

#### **16. The Letter Dated April 15 (1)**

On April 15, the Deweys visited Kyoto, where Dewey greatly enjoyed sightseeing.

#### **17. The Letter Dated April 15 (2)**

It could be said that Dewey was largely impressed by Japan's view of nature as he wrote "the earth is paradise now" describing the seasonal changing color of the leaves.

#### **18. The Letter Dated April 22 (1)**

In his last letter dated April 22, also from Kyoto, Dewey enjoys visiting a school. The school welcomes him by playing Japanese drums and raising the American flag. However, even here, Dewey finds Japan compliant toward Germany.

#### **19. The Letter Dated April 22 (2)**

Dewey states:

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<sup>5</sup> John Dewey. Letters from China and Japan (Kindle No.857-859). E. P. Dutton Company. Kindle.

The machines were old, German, and out of date. In fact, it all looked as if it had been worked off on them second hand by some Germans who did not want them ever to amount to anything.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps an important topic related to this presentation is the description of the banquet after leaving the school. Dewey states that Alice would be the only woman to attend that banquet and mentions the exploits of the oppressed but able women in Japan. On April 28, Alice writes on board a ship bound for China, which is the final entry covered in the presentation.

## 20. Conclusion

This paper attempts to rediscover Dewey's findings, which can be viewed as a concrete embodiment of social democracy, such as the physical culture that survived the modernization of Japan at the time. Dewey discovered the etiquette of the Japanese people, "samurai" culture, the roots of Judo and the modernized army, and the graceful, nimble movements preserved in theater.

## 21. Implications of the Conclusion

Therefore, if the Japanese physical culture that survived the modern era, as Dewey saw it, was still alive after World War II, it shows that the rapid democratization of Japan from that point onwards was not brought about solely by external imposition. This perspective will be useful as a viewpoint to analyze the present day and these letters demonstrate this.

## References

- Dewey, J. (1979 = 1915). *German Philosophy and Politics. The Middle Works*, 8. Southern Illinois Univ. Press.
- Dewey, J., Dewey, H. A. C., & Dewey, E. (2010 = 1919). *Letters from China and Japan*. Nabu Press.
- Dewey, J. (1982 = 1919). *Liberalism in Japan. The Middle Works*, 11. Southern Illinois Univ. Press.
- Hickman, L. (2002). *The Correspondence of John Dewey*. Charlottesville: InteLex.
- Kitamura, M. (2010). 1919nen no Dewey to Nihon. *Komazawa Educational Review*, 26, 5-32.

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<sup>6</sup> John Dewey. *Letters from China and Japan* (Kindle No.1080-1081). E. P. Dutton Company. Kindle.

## Appendix

1

### John Dewey's view of Japan's budding democracy in 1919

From March 27 to April 28.

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2022.10.22.

[Parallel Sessions 3] On John Dewey's "Letters from China and Japan"  
International Symposium on Global Citizenship Education @ SOKA University

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#### 1. Introduction: Features of the letters (1)

- My area covered a total of 13 letters. These were written during their travels in Tokyo, Kamakura, Nara and Kyoto.



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#### 1. Introduction: Features of the letters (2)

27 March 1919, Kamakura, [Dewey](#)

28 March 1919, Kamakura, [Dewey](#)

1 April 1919, Tokyo, [Alice](#)

1 April 1919, Tokyo, [Dewey](#)

2 April 1919, Tokyo, [Dewey & Alice](#)

4 April 1919, Tokyo, [Dewey \(?\)](#)

8 April 1919, Tokyo, [Dewey](#)

12 April 1919, Nara, [Alice](#)

15 April 1919, Kyoto, [Dewey](#)

15 April 1919, Kyoto, [Alice](#)

19 April 1919, Kyoto, [Alice](#)

22 April 1919, Kyoto, [Dewey](#)

28 April 1919, Ship, [Alice](#)

※ Dewey=John Dewey

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#### 1. Introduction: Features of the letters (3)

Alice's letters are characterized by detailed descriptions of everyday life, such as shopping and eating, whilst Dewey's letters locates the characteristics of the Japanese people they meet within current events and world affairs. For example, he addresses Japanese public opinion and makes the following statement:

*There is a great anti-American drive on now; seems to be largely confined to newspapers, but also stimulated artificially somewhat, presumably by the militaristic faction, which has lost more prestige in the last few months than in years, with a corresponding gain in liberal sentiment.*

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#### 1. Introduction: The Dewey's perspective

- John Dewey, "Liberalism in Japan" originally in *the Dial*, Oct. 4, 1919, compiled in John Dewey, *Characters and Events* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1929, pp.168-169.)
- "Dewey saw the growth of democracy in Japan as being hindered by Germanism" (Kitamura 2010, p.24)
- In other words, Japan had its own budding democracy, but, following the example of Germany (which was supposed to have been an adversary in World War I), it "created a constitution that did not make the people sovereign, and a nationwide primary education designed to make the young Japanese docile" (p. 26), so that "secondary and higher education was also the combination of these factors," which Dewey concluded, curtailed the progress of liberalism (p.26).

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#### 1. Introduction: The Dewey's perspective (2)

- It is true that the democracy that Dewey aspired to was not very compatible with Japan at the time, where monarchy and militarism prevailed.
- In Japan, which was strongly influenced by German idealism. Dewey's ideas must have been difficult to accept. In 1915, in *German Philosophy and Politics*, Dewey historically positioned and criticized German militarist and imperialist nationalism.

*On the whole, America ought to feel sorry for Japan, or at least sympathetic with it, and not afraid. When we have so many problems it seems absurd to say they have more, but they certainly have fewer resources, material and human, in dealing with theirs than we have, and they have still to take almost the first step in dealing with many of them. It is very unfortunate for them that they have become a first-class power so rapidly and with so little preparation in many ways; it is a terrible task for them to live up to their position and reputation and they may crack under the strain.*

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## 2. Question

- What aspects of Japan's budding democracy did Dewey see?
- What possibilities did Dewey envision for Japanese society at the time?

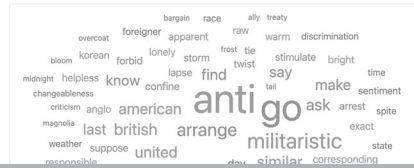


<https://www.ndl.go.jp/scenery/data/34/>

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### 3. The nature of the letters:

Letter dated 27 March



Negative language is also prevalent in his letter dated 27 March, such as militarism, in line with the deterioration of Japanese feelings towards the US and the UK, as introduced earlier.

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### 3. The nature of the letters:

Letter dated 28 March



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### 3. The nature of the letters:

Letter dated 1 April



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- Here he mentions Alexander, who also influenced Dewey's philosophy, as well as traditional Japanese physical techniques and etiquette that had taken root in the army.

*My other experience that I have not written about is seeing Judo. The great Judo expert is president of a normal school, and he arranged a special exhibition by experts for my benefit, he explaining the theory of each part of it in advance. ...It is really an art.*

*Tell Mr. Alexander to get a book by Harrison—a compatriot of his—out of the library, called "The Fighting Spirit of Japan." It is a journalist's book, not meant to be deep, but is interesting and said to be reliable as far as it goes.*

*I noticed at the Judo the small waists of all these people; they breathe always from the abdomen. (...) In the army they have an indirect method of getting deep breathing which really goes back to the Buddhist Zen teaching of the old Samurai.*

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### 3. The nature of the letters:

Letter dated 4 April



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Dewey was impressed by the plays performed by a well-known actor of the time named Ganjiro. Above all, he was impressed by Ganjiro's graceful behaviour and physicality, described in a letter as follows.



*You will never realize what the human hand and arm can do until you see this.*

*He can do an animal's motions without any clawing—as graceful and lithe as a cat. He is a son of an old man Ganjiro.*

[https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E6%9D%91%E9%B4%88%E6%B2%BB%E9%83%8E\\_\(%E5%88%9D%E4%BB%A3\)](https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E6%9D%91%E9%B4%88%E6%B2%BB%E9%83%8E_(%E5%88%9D%E4%BB%A3))

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### 3. The nature of the letters:

Letter dated 8 April



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*There are few external signs of a change, but Japan is nearly in the condition she was in during the first years of contact and opening up of things fifty or so years ago, so far as the mental readiness for change is concerned, and the next few years may see rapid social changes.*

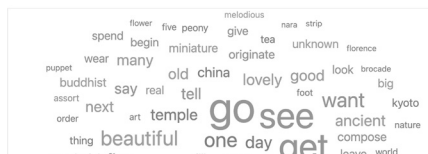
This portrayal focuses on the inner lives of the people, rather than superficial changes. Dewey, who visited Japan for the primary purpose of travelling rather than to give lectures, seems to have devoted time and effort to observing the people of the city, as he intended.

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### 3. The nature of the letters:

Letter dated 15 April



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*The weather and the spring time are superb. Cherry blossoms were gone when we got here, but the young leaves of the maples are lovely green or red and the whole earth is paradise now. The hills are nearer than in Florence, the mountains higher, so that Kyoto has every natural beauty.*



<https://blog.goo.ne.jp/mapfan01/e/c28131c568b2eb904146896e1c4d7bf6>

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### 3. The nature of the letters:

Letter dated 22 April



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Dewey finds Japan compliant towards Germany.

*The machines were old, German and out of date. In fact, it all looked as if it had been worked off on them second hand by some Germans who didn't want them ever to amount to anything.*

Perhaps more important to this presentation is the description of the banquet after she leaves school. Dewey states that Alice would be the only woman to attend that banquet, and mentions the exploits of the oppressed, but able, women in Japan.

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## 4. Conclusion

Dewey stated that "You would be surprised to see how free from all affectations this country has remained" and that "There is a social democracy here that we do not know".

My presentation was an attempt to rediscover Dewey's findings, which can be viewed as the concrete embodiment of this social democracy.

One of these is the physical culture that survived the modernization of Japan at the time. Dewey discovered the etiquette of the Japanese people, the "samurai" culture, which is the base of judo and the modernized army, as well as the graceful, nimble movements preserved in theatre.

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## 5. Implications of the conclusions

If the Japanese physical culture that survived the modern era, as Dewey saw it, was still alive after the Second World War, it shows that the rapid democratization of Japan from that point onwards was not brought about solely by external imposition.

This perspective may also be useful as a viewpoint to analyze the present day and these letters will reflect on it.

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## 6. Reference

- Dewey, J. (1979=1915). *German Philosophy and Politics. The Middle Works*, 8. Southern Illinois Univ Press.
- Dewey, J., Dewey, H. A. C., & Dewey, E. (2010=1919). *Letters from China and Japan*. Nabu Press.
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Thank you very much for your attention.

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