

China and Bertrand Russell

In 1920 Bertrand Russell was one of the most famous philosophers in the world. His reputation as a logician had been established by *Principia Mathematica*, examining the logical roots of mathematics. But his public fame came more from his outspoken atheism, his support for socialism, and his opposition to the First World War. In 1918 he was imprisoned in the UK for his beliefs. This was despite the fact that he was a British earl and the grandson of a prime minister.

Wanting to spend time outside the UK, Bertrand Russell spent 9 months in China from October 1920 to July 1921. He spoke widely throughout China and was enthusiastically welcomed by Chinese intellectuals and students. There was a strong mutual connection between his thinking and the issues facing China.

Russell thought that China had what Europe lacked, a strong moral philosophy independent of both Christianity and the overly materialistic values associated with capitalism. His Chinese associates thought that Russell had what China lacked, a coherent way to integrate modern science into philosophy while preserving core human values.



Russell in China, 1920

After returning to the UK from China, Russell explained the situation to an English-speaking audience in his 1922 book, *The Problem of China*.

He summarized the issue in language with which his Chinese friends would definitely agree.

The distinctive merit of our civilization, I should say, is the scientific method; the distinctive merit of the Chinese is a just conception of the ends of life. It is these two that one must hope to see gradually uniting.

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It is science that makes the difference between our intellectual outlook and that of the Chinese intelligentsia. „What we have to teach the Chinese is not morals, or ethical maxims about government, but science and technical skill. The real problem for the Chinese intellectuals is to acquire Western knowledge without acquiring the mechanistic outlook. Perhaps it is not clear what I mean by "the mechanistic outlook." I mean something which exists equally in Imperialism, Bolshevism and the Y.M.C.A.; something which distinguishes all these from the Chinese outlook, and which I, for my part, consider very evil. What I mean is the habit of regarding mankind as raw material, to be moulded by

our scientific manipulation into whatever form may happen to suit our fancy. The essence of the matter, from the point of view of the individual who has this point of view, is the cultivation of will at the expense of perception, the fervent moral belief that it is our duty to force other people to realize our conception of the world. The Chinese intellectual is not much troubled by Imperialism as a creed, but is vigorously assailed by Bolshevism and the Y.M.C.A., to one or other of which he is too apt to fall a victim, learning a belief from the one in the class-war and the dictatorship of the communists, from the other in the mystic efficacy of cold baths and dumb-bells. Both these creeds, in their Western adepts, involve a contempt for the rest of mankind except as potential converts, and the belief that progress consists in the spread of a doctrine. They both involve a belief in government and a life against Nature. This view, though I have called it mechanistic, is as old as religion, though mechanism has given it new and more virulent forms. The first of Chinese philosophers, Lao-Tze, wrote his book to protest against it, and his disciple Chuang-Tze put his criticism into a fable.

Chuang-Tze (~300 BC):

The potter says: "I can do what I will with clay. If I want it round, I use compasses; if rectangular, a square."

The carpenter says: "I can do what I will with wood. If I want it curved, I use an arc; if straight, a line"

But on what grounds can we think that the natures of clay and wood desire this application of compasses and square, of arc and line? Nevertheless, every age extols... potters and carpenters for their skill with clay and wood. Those who govern the Empire make the same mistake.

Russell is quoting Chuang-Tze who is referring to one of the most famous sayings of Confucius (~500 BC):

君子不器

A person is not a pot

Confucius and Chuang-Tze are making the point that people should never be used as means to an end but are always ends in themselves. Russell finds this far more uplifting than key Bible sayings like:

God: Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Russell continues:

There is one traditional Chinese belief which dies very hard, and that is the belief that correct ethical sentiments are more important than detailed scientific knowledge. This view is, of course, derived from the Confucian tradition, and is more or less true in a pre-industrial society. It would have been upheld by Rousseau or Dr. Johnson, and broadly speaking by everybody before the Benthamites [English utilitarians of the 1800s]. We, in the West, have now swung to the opposite extreme: we tend to think that technical efficiency is everything and moral purpose nothing. A battleship may be taken as the concrete embodiment of this view. When we read, say, of some new poison-gas by means of which one bomb from an aeroplane can exterminate a whole town, we have a thrill of what we fondly believe to be horror, but it is really delight in scientific skill. Science is our god; we say to it, "Though thou slay me, yet will I trust in thee." And so it slays us. The Chinese have not this defect, but they have the opposite one, of believing that good intentions are the only thing really necessary.

We see why Russell liked China. But why did so many Chinese like Russell? On May 4, 1919, a little over a year before Russell's arrival, Chinese students had demonstrated against the imperialist treatment of China by the European Treaty of Versailles. The slogan of the protestors was "Science and Democracy".

The problem for many Chinese was that the science they wanted, the science which had enabled the European powers to have such a military advantage, seemed connected to a dismal, materialistic philosophy.



May 4 protestors

Russell offered a way out. He was the most prominent logician in Europe, famous for his *Principia Mathematica* defining the logical basis for math. Yet he was very clear that he did not support the mechanistic interpretation of science. He believed that modern science was entirely compatible with traditional Confucian humanism. One of Russell's greatest admirers was the philosopher Zhang Shenfu. Zhang was a founder of the Communist party, although he quit in 1925. Zhang wrote:

Zhang: Russell's words remind us that a free person must think freely. A free person's worship transcends all religions, all idols. It transcends all desire to rely on supernatural forces. It is nothing more than the worship of the creativity inherent in one's own thoughts, especially in what is most noble and spirited in one's thinking.

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Mr. Russell uses the example of the painter to talk about how an artist becomes interested in the appearance of things. By contrast, the practical person wants to know what things are really like. The philosopher, in turn, is moved by an even more profound desire to know the inner quality (benri) of things. According to Russell, philosophy is not the process through which one finds concrete, definite answers to this or that question. Unlike the physicist, the philosopher studies the questions themselves. Philosophical questions broaden our conception of reality. They enrich our inner feelings and imagination and diminish arbitrary self-righteousness.



The above picture, taken in Berlin in 1921, shows future Communist leader Zhou Enlai (1898-1976) holding an oar. To Zhou's right is Lui Qingyang (1894-1977). Liu was a leader of the Chinese women's movement and one of the first woman Chinese Communists. To Liu's right is Zhang Shenfu (1893-1983), who was a strong advocate of Bertrand Russell's philosophy. Liu and Zhang had recruited Zhou to join the Communist Party. Liu and Zhang were married for 28 years. Both stayed in China after the revolution, although they had quit the Communist Party. Both were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.

Russell in 1922 was cautiously optimistic about the future of China. He concluded his book with:

Russell: If the Chinese were to adopt the Western philosophy of life, they would, as soon as they had made themselves safe against foreign aggression, embark upon aggression on

their own account. They would repeat the campaigns of the Han and Tang dynasties in Central Asia, and perhaps emulate Kublai by the invasion of Japan. They would exploit their material resources with a view to producing a few bloated plutocrats at home and millions dying of hunger abroad. Such are the results which the West achieves by the application of science. If China were led astray by the lure of brutal power, she might repel her enemies outwardly, but would have yielded to them inwardly. It is not unlikely that the great military nations of the modern world will bring about their own destruction by their inability to abstain from war, which will become, with every year that passes, more scientific and more devastating. If China joins in this madness, China will perish like the rest. But if Chinese reformers can have the moderation to stop when they have made China capable of self-defence, and to abstain from the further step of foreign conquest; if, when they have become safe at home, they can turn aside from the materialistic activities imposed by the Powers, and devote their freedom to science and art and the inauguration of a better economic system—then China will have played the part in the world for which she is fitted, and will have given to mankind as a whole new hope in the moment of greatest need. It is this hope that I wish to see inspiring Young China. This hope is realizable; and because it is realizable, China deserves a foremost place in the esteem of every lover of mankind.

It didn't work out the way Zhang, Liu and Russell had hoped. The liberal humanists who were inspired by Russell were overwhelmed by the totalitarian philosophy of Mao Zedong. (Mao had attended Russell's lectures, but was not converted. As a librarian at the University of Peking, Mao knew Zhang, Liu et al. personally.). There is no record that Russell met Mao but Russell seems to have appreciated the danger that someone like Mao represented. In his 1922 book, before the optimistic conclusion, Russell warned:

I have been speaking of the Chinese as they are in ordinary life, when they appear as men of active and skeptical intelligence... There is, however, another side to them: they are capable of wild excitement, often of a collective kind. I saw little of this myself, but there can be no doubt of the fact. The Boxer rising was a case in point, and one which particularly affected Europeans. But their history is full of more or less analogous disturbances. It is this element in their character that makes them incalculable, and makes it impossible even to guess at their future. One can imagine a section of them becoming fanatically Bolshevik, or anti-Japanese, or Christian, or devoted to some leader who would ultimately declare himself Emperor.

Mao fulfilled that dismal prophecy. Where China is moving today, who can say? But there are many Chinese today who remember Russell and the optimistic period in Chinese history with which he was associated.