The Problem of China: A Revisitation

Peter Zarrow
Institute of Modern History

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/312

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Peter Zarrow on Rereading Russell’s *The Problem of China*

*Even though Dewey and Tagore have gotten more attention lately in scholarly works on Chinese education and ruminations of Chinese interactions with other countries, we at China Beat remain equally interested in the third famous foreign philosopher who gave a high profile set of lectures to audiences in Beijing and other cities during the aftermath of World War I: Bertrand Russell.*

*We thought about him when running our series on Jonathan Spence’s Reith Lectures, since Russell gave the inaugural ones sixty years before that. And we think of him when perusing the sections of Chinese bookstores devoted to philosophical matters or the history of ideas, for a translation of his famous History of Western Philosophy is often prominently displayed there. Ironically, whereas Russell once sold a lot of books in Europe and America, from the English language edition of that tome to works on many other topics (including what he thought about China), his biggest readership now is likely in the PRC. With these things in mind, we’re delighted to be able to bring you historian Peter Zarrow’s take on how Russell’s 1922 book-long commentary on China has stood the test of time.*

In 1920 Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) visited China, based in Beijing and giving lectures across the country. One of the founders of analytic philosophy and a trenchant radical, upon his return to Britain Russell quickly came out with a book on China conditions called *The Problem of China* (London: George Allen, 1922). I looked at it to see what Russell had to say about his trip. It turned out that the book has only passing references to his own experiences in China—it’s more of a high-toned journalistic overview. Russell offers many generalizations and predictions about China. Naturally some did not work out, but many were prescient. Looking at them almost 90 years later, it occurred to me that when Russell was wrong, he was wrong in a way that illuminates the problem as much as if he had been right.

Witnessing a China in turmoil—warlords, demonstrations, strikes, the ever-present imperialist threats—Russell was both sympathetic and empathetic. For their part, Chinese looked to Russell partly for ideas about what they should be doing and partly as a mirror. Russell’s trip overlapped with John Dewey’s extended lecture tour, and there were short visits by Margaret Sanger, Albert Einstein, Rabindranath Tagore, and many more at about the same time.

Yet Russell was a special case. Unlike his backers in “Young China,” he had a great fondness for many aspect of the traditional culture; he regarded with great skepticism plans to build up modern industry without taking into account of how it would actually benefit workers and ordinary consumers. (The only full-length study is Feng Chongyi’s *Lousu yu Zhongguo: Xifang xiansheng bei Zhongguo de yici jingli* [Russell and China: A case of Western thought in China; Beijing: Sanlian, 1994] though there are several articles in English). Russell began his book with some scene-setting boilerplate that is even true today than it was then:

*Chinese problems, even if they affect no one outside China, would be of vast importance, since the Chinese are estimated to constitute about a quarter of the human race. In fact, however, all the world will be vitally affected by the development of Chinese affairs, which may well prove a decisive factor, for good or evil, during the next two centuries* (p. 9).

Then he set out to prove it.

*The position of China among the nations of the world is quite peculiar, because in population and potential strength China is the greatest nation in the world, while in actual strength at the moment it is one of the least* (p. 63).

This was to foresee Chinese reunification and the creation of a strong government. Russell was not alone in this view, and it was certainly what the Chinese he met strongly desired, but outsiders often deemed it unachievable. Russell’s point, however, was not simply Napoleon’s apocryphal warning that
the sleeping dragon had better be left to sleep. Rather, China would either become more like the industrialized West or Russia, or else the West would change. Russell hoped for the latter.

*The Chinese, though as yet incompetent in politics and backward in economic development, have, in other respects, a civilization at least as good as our own, containing elements which the world greatly needs, and which we shall destroy at our peril* (63).

Russell’s socialism, then, did not blind him to what he saw as the good points of the Chinese tradition—an argument that then as now had both adherents and critics in China itself. By the traditional civilization, Russell meant courtesy, harmony, understatement, tolerance, a certain unworldliness—features that Russell directly contrasted to the Western lust for domination and that have perhaps become Orientalist tropes of a certain kind. Russell did find one trait that China shared with Britain, noting that the Manchu Qing conquerors of the seventeenth century

*set to work to induce Chinese men to wear pigtails and Chinese women to have big feet. After a time a statesmanlike compromise was arranged: pigtails were adopted but big feet were rejected; the new absurdity was accepted and the old one retained. This characteristic compromise shows how much England and China have in common* (p. 64).

Russell had every reason to like China. He was lionized while he was there; he could use Chinese civilization to criticize the West; he liked Chinese reformers, whom he hoped would lead China in a direction ultimately different from the capitalist-industrial-imperialist civilization of the West. However, Communist revolution, Russell thought, would not solve China’s problems. He had visited Russia earlier in 1920, coming to the conclusion that the Bolsheviks, whatever their skills at industrializing a backward nation, were leading Russia toward dictatorship that was bound to be disastrous. This was not to say capitalism had any solutions for China, as Russell proclaimed in a passage anticipating some of today’s descriptions of China.

*I expect to see, if the Americans are successful in the Far East, China compelled to be orderly so as to afford a field for foreign commerce and industry; a government which the West will consider good substitute for the present go-as-you-please anarchy; a gradually increasing flow of wealth from China to the investing countries, the chief of which is America; the development of a sweated proletariat; the spread of Christianity; and substitution of the American civilization for the Chinese; the destruction of traditional beauty, except for such objets d’art as millionaires may think it worth while to buy; the gradual awakening of China to her exploitation by the foreign; and one day, fifty or a hundred years hence, the massacre of every white man throughout the Celestial Empire at a signal from some vast secret society…. It will be done in order that rich men may grow richer,… government that yields fat dividends to capitalists* (p. 166).

As it happened, China’s full induction into the world economic system was to await the war with Japan (1937-45), the Communist Revolution (1949), and three decades of real but autarkic development under Maoism. Racial massacres and vast secret societies notwithstanding, Russell understood that forces were emerging that would ensure China would not remain a victim of exploitation and poverty forever. Yet, again, he was not comforted by the possibility of a strong and capitalist China.

*In the long run, the Chinese cannot escape economic domination by foreign Powers unless China becomes military or the foreign Powers become Socialistic, because the capitalist system involves in its very essence a predatory relation of the strong towards the weak, internationally as well as nationally. A strong military China would be a disaster; therefore Socialism in Europe and America affords the only ultimate solution* (64).

Russell did not look to China to solve the world’s problems. But he saw a chance, however slim, of a patriotic and stable form of socialism coming to the fore there. Otherwise:

*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 accounts…. 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 with the West achieves by the application of science (p. 251).

Arriving in China in October 1920, Russell stayed until July 1921. Russell of course spoke no Chinese. His primary interpreter was Yuen Ren Chao [Zhao Yuanren], later known as a distinguished linguist and then in the midst of translating of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* into Chinese. It seems somehow appropriate for the translator of Lewis Carroll to interpret the lectures of the world’s foremost mathematical logician, albeit a logician who displayed a shocking set of beliefs in women’s equality, birth control, worker’s organizations, and experimental schools; and a man who thought the capitalists and state war machines of the West were destroying the world.

*Peter Zarrow is a historian at the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica. His work focuses on modern China and he is the author, most recently, of China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949.*

**Tags:** Bertrand Russell