

# China's Road to Freedom

*Bertrand Russell*

*Russell's farewell address was delivered at the Board of Education, Beijing, on 6 July 1921, and published the next day in The Peking Leader.*

The foreigner who ventures to have an opinion on any Chinese question incurs a great risk of complete folly, particularly if, as in my case, his stay in the country has been short and his knowledge of the language is nil. China has an ancient and complex civilization, the most ancient now existing in the world. The traditions of China are quite different from those of Europe. China has in the past achieved great things in philosophy, in art and in music, but in all these respects, what has been done has been practically independent of European influence and widely different from all that issued out of the Hellenic culture. The mere effort to understand a society whose religion and morals have been framed in independence of Christianity requires for a European no small amount of psychological imagination. When one adds to all this the difficulty of ascertaining the facts concerning modern China, it is evident that any European is likely to go far astray in an attempt to lay down a programme of reform for the Chinese nation. For all these reasons, I am persuaded that those Chinese who have the welfare of their country at heart will have to frame their own programme and not rely too much upon the intellectual assistance of foreigners. Nevertheless, I am venturing to put before you some considerations as to the state of China and the way in which it might be improved – considerations which have grown up in me slowly during my stay among you and were by no means present to my mind when I first landed.

Two things of a very general nature seem to me evident: the first that it is not to be desired that China should adopt the

civilization of Europe in its entirety; the second, that the traditional civilization of China is inadequate to present needs and must give way to something radically new.

The evils of European civilization have been made obvious to all thoughtful observers by the Great War and its outcome. In the early days of the war most Europeans imagined that these evils were not inherent in our system, but would be eradicated by the victory of one's own side, whichever that might be. This has proved to be a delusion. The basis of our civilization is capitalistic industrialism, a system, which, though in its early stages it brings about immensely rapid technical and material progress, cannot but lead on to increasingly destructive wars, first for markets and then for raw materials. It is by no means improbable that our Western civilization may go under in the course of these wars and of the class conflicts due to the opposition of capital and labour. Even if our civilization should survive, it is to be feared that it will become increasingly mechanical, with a constantly augmenting disregard for the individual and his idiosyncrasies. From such a civilization little that is of value is to be expected. It is, therefore, not by mere imitation of Western ways that the Chinese can do most for the welfare of their own country or of the world.

On the other hand, the traditional civilization of China based upon Confucianism tempered by Buddhism has worn itself out, and is no longer capable either of inspiring individual achievement or of solving the internal and external political problems with which China is beset. For the last thousand years or so this civilization has been decaying, slowly losing vigour as the Graeco-Roman civilization lost vigour in the centuries preceding the barbarian invasion. I think these evils are inseparable from an ancient tradition which is greatly respected, no matter what that tradition may be. It is necessary for each generation to think and feel for itself, and not to seek wisdom in the utterances of ancestors, however wise their ancestors may have been in their own time. I hear it said by Europeans that China would go to pieces morally if respect for the teaching of Confucius were lost. Perhaps this might be the case if a mere vacuum were left in the mental region from which that teaching had been removed, but it would most certainly not be the case if a newer doctrine, more suited to modern problems, could inspire the same belief and the same enthusiasm as must have been inspired by Confucianism in its creative period. The Chinese reformer, therefore, if I am not mistaken, will be no more willing to uphold what is traditional in his own country than to seek novelty by slavish imitation of the West. I am convinced that China,

in the future as in the past, has a distinctive contribution to make to civilization, and something more than mere quantity to add to the world's mental possessions.

Passing from these generalizations to the actual state of your affairs, every reasonable man is convinced of the necessity of putting an end to the present condition of anarchic militarism. This is common ground among all reformers, from the mildest to the most extreme; but the method by which it is to be achieved is a matter of endless controversy. Among Europeans especially there is a tendency to favour restoration of the monarchy, but such a step can hardly be expected to appeal to the progressive Chinese. It is not by restoring old conditions that new problems can be solved.

It is clear, of course, that a radical and permanent solution must depend upon education. But education is a somewhat vague word, and any education worthy of the name is difficult to secure under the present political conditions, as the course of the teachers' strike has indicated. The education that China needs must be at once widespread and modern. It must not be, as in the past, the privilege of a favoured minority, nor the mere learning of ancient books and their commentators. It must be universal and must be scientific and the science must not be merely theoretical, but in close touch with modern industry and economics. So long as the bulk of your population is uneducated it will be incapable of supporting an industrial state or of resisting the ambitions of ruthless adventurers.

But the building up of such a system of education in a country such as yours is an immense task, requiring a generation for its fulfilment, even with all possible good will on the part of the government. You would not, to begin with, have the necessary supply of teachers, nor would the State be able to support the expense without a much greater development of industrialism than has hitherto taken place in China. And until you have a better government than you have now, you will not be able to secure even the preliminary measures. All that can be done at present in the way of education is to the good, and is, as the mathematicians say, necessary, but not sufficient. Thus the need for education brings us back to economic and political problems as its pre-conditions.

I think it must be taken as nearly certain that your industrial resources will lead in the near future to a great development of industrialism. I am by no means convinced that industrialism will be a boon to China, or can ever be anything but a misfortune to any country, but if, as I believe, industrial development is in any case inevitable, it is a mere waste of time

to argue whether it is desirable or undesirable. The only problem of practical importance for you is the problem of developing industrialism with the minimum of attendant evils and the maximum of national and cultural advantage.

All the Great Powers are anxious to secure a share in the exploitation of your resources, and unless you develop more national strength than you have hitherto shown, you will be unable to withstand aggressions fomented by foreign industrialists.

I see that the American ex-Minister, Mr. Crane, has been advocating international control for China on the ground that the Chinese government cannot keep order, a prospect which grows not unnaturally out of the Consortium. There is much to be said for international control, not only in China but also in other countries. If England were subject to it, there would be an end to the reign of rapine and murder in Ireland. In America also Mr. Crane's proposal might be adopted with advantage. In that country there are constantly recurring Boxer risings – against the negroes. Under international control these rising might be put down by contingents of black troops drawn from all parts of Africa, and Fifth Avenue might be enlivened by memorial arches erected to the most prominent victims. International control of all nations must be the ultimate goal of all who wish to further the cessation of war which is only possible by substituting law for the present anarchy in relations between States. But international control, when it comes, must recognize the citizens of different states as equals, and not subject some of them to a despotism exerted by a league of certain others. No doubt the Chinese government is bad, but so are all other governments, and I doubt whether the Chinese government does as much harm as those of the Powers which were victors in the war. International control cannot, I am convinced, be a boon to China until the existence of a national State in China is fully assured, and until this state is strong enough to repel all attempts at exploitation by foreign capitalists backed by armies and warships.

I think the most urgent need of China is the development of active patriotism, especially among those who, by their education, are the natural teachers of public opinion. Japanese aggression has begun to produce a movement of this kind, but something much more active, instinctive, and widespread is necessary if China is to be saved from subjugation. Your Empire subsisted for thousands of years without coming into contact with any really formidable enemies. Even the Tartars and Manchus who acquired dominion were few and made a comparatively small mark upon Chinese civilization.

Consequently patriotism, which is chiefly evoked by the need of self-

defence, plays little part in Chinese traditional morality. Its place was taken, more or less inadequately, by respect for the Emperor. And this substitute for patriotism has been destroyed since you became a Republic. Unfortunately you now for the first time in your history are faced with the danger of foreign aggression on the part of really formidable nations, and therefore the necessity of patriotism has become urgent. If your independence is to be preserved, it is necessary to transfer to the nation the kind of devotion which has hitherto been given to the family. The family is too narrow a group for modern needs, and a race which upholds the family as strongly as it is upheld in China, cannot develop that integrity and zeal in the public service without which no modern state can prosper.

It would of course be absurd to hope that public spirit could in a short time be diffused among the bulk of the population, but this is by no means necessary for the beginning of regeneration. Ten thousand resolute men, inspired by an ideal and willing to risk their lives, could acquire control of the government, regenerate Chinese institutions, and institute an industrial development which should be free from the evils associated with capitalism in the West. Such men would have to be honest, energetic and intelligent, incapable of corruption, unwearying in work, willing to assimilate whatever is good in the West, and yet not the slaves of mechanism like most Europeans and Americans. The powers of evil in China are not strong; they only seem so because the opposition to them is too theoretical.

There is one question which I find on the lips of almost all the thoughtful Chinese whom I have met and that is the question: 'How can we develop industry without at the same time developing capitalism and all its evils?' This is a very difficult question, and I do not know whether you will in fact succeed in solving it. When I first came to China I thought it insoluble, but I am now of the opinion that if you create such a band of resolute men as I have mentioned it would be possible to solve the problem. But it is useless in China to approach the economic problem directly; the political problem must be solved first. Until you have a strong and honest State, with able and incorruptible administration, you cannot institute any form of genuine socialism or communism. Suppose, for example, that your mines were now nominally nationalized; it is as clear as noon day that the profits to be derived from them would go to the Tuchuns [warlords] and their armies, not to the people. Political reform must precede any desirable economic development in China.

Political reform in China cannot for many years to come take the form of democracy after the Western model. Democracy presupposes a population that can read and write and that has some degree of knowledge

as to political affairs. These conditions cannot be satisfied in China until at least a generation after the establishment of a government devoted to the public welfare. You will have to pass through a stage analogous to that of the dictatorship of the communist party in Russia, because it is only by some such means that the necessary education of the people can be carried through, and the non-capitalistic development of industry effected. The Russian Bolsheviks, as is natural to pioneers, have made many mistakes, more especially in the measures which antagonized the peasants. They are now, very wisely, repealing these measures, and those who follow them on the same road will be able to profit by their experience. When I was in Russia, I was much concerned with the Bolshevik attempt to introduce their methods and aims into Western countries. I believe this to be a quite useless attempt. Where there is already a developed industry and an educated proletariat, different methods must be adopted, and democracy must be preserved. But where, as in Russia and China, these conditions are absent, where there is a population which is neither educated nor accustomed to industrial processes, the methods adopted by the Russian communists seem, in broad outline, the best possible.

Various ways of organizing non-capitalistic industry have been suggested by various schools. There is anarchist communism, where, as in ancient Poland and in the League of Nations, no decision can be taken unless it is unanimous. There is syndicalism, which is a kind of federation of trade unions; there is State Socialism, which is the system adopted in Russia; and there is Guild Socialism, which is a blend of syndicalism and State Socialism. Anarchist communism, syndicalism, and Guild Socialism all presuppose a developed industry and the habits of industrialism. They are therefore impossible as the first step towards socialism in an undeveloped country. The early developments of industry must – so it seems to me – be either capitalistic or state-socialistic. Accordingly, if I am confronted by the problem: ‘How can China develop her industries without capitalism?’ I must reply: ‘In the first instance only by State Socialism.’ State Socialism has grave drawbacks, and in an undeveloped country reproduces many of the evils of capitalism. But I believe it is easier to pass from it to a better system, when industrial and educational progress makes it possible, than it is to eradicate capitalism when once it has acquired the hold it has in England and America.

There is much that is not essential in the practice of the Bolsheviks, and in non-essentials I do not desire to see them imitated. The essential thing is the State ownership and exploitation of mines, railways, waterways, and all urban and industrial land. (Theoretically, agricultural land should also

belong to the State, but this raises such difficulties with the peasants that in a country of small proprietors it is not politically feasible on any large scale.) If this system is to avoid the inequalities of wealth which are among the evils of capitalism, the officials who direct industry must not use their power, as capitalists do, to extort vast fortunes out of the workers. This requires a degree of self-denial which can only be secured by a great enthusiasm and a great devotion to an ideal. Further, if the system of State Socialism is not to remain a bureaucratic tyranny, those who carry it out must be imbued with the love of democracy and liberty, and must direct their efforts to the realization of these as soon as the people can be sufficiently educated. It is mainly in this that I think the Russian communist party open to criticism: a system which gives all power to the communist party seems to its members quite satisfactory, and they are in no hurry to pave the way for a greater freedom and a wider distribution of power.

It is customary among communists to maintain that economic factors are the only ones of importance in the life of a community. This seems to me an entire delusion. I believe that ethical factors are at least as important. Consider the ethical qualities required of the men who are to bring about such an economic revolution in China as I have been suggesting. Such men, in the first place, will have to be intellectuals by training, but largely soldiers by profession. They will have to fight anarchic militarism within, and the whole might of capitalistic Powers without. What this means can be seen from what Russia has had to endure from the hostility of reactionary governments. In the course of the fighting, many will lose their lives, and all will have to endure hardships and the persecution of mankind. Assuming the victory won, the victors will be in a position to secure wealth and a long term of power for themselves; but they will have to forego wealth and prepare for the abolition of their power in favour of a more democratic system at the earliest possible moment. To pursue this course steadfastly to the end requires ethical qualities of the highest order. Especially rare is the willingness to abrogate power secured after a bitter struggle.

The great difficulty of the Bolshevik method of introducing Socialism lies in the severity of its ethical demands. The Russian Bolsheviks seem, on the whole, successful in resisting the temptation to wealth, but likely to succumb to the temptation to prolongation of their power. All their talk against democracy and in favour of the dictatorship of what they call the proletariat is, in essence, merely camouflage for their love of power. In China, so far as I have been able to observe the national character, one might expect the opposite failure, because the love of money seems to be stronger than the love of power. The love of money is, I think, the greatest

danger you will have to combat if you attempt a non-capitalistic development of industry.

The ethical difficulties of the line of action I have been suggesting are so great that I cannot feel any confidence in its practicability. China is ruled at present by a set of Tutchuns whose dominant passion is money. You can only defeat them if you love the welfare of China more passionately and more energetically than they love money. This is a high standard, but what I have seen of Young China makes me not despair of its attainment.

If you cannot realize a moral and economic revolution, the alternative is a gradually increasing foreign control, perhaps leaving China's nominal sovereignty intact, but securing all real power to foreigners through possession of economic resources. Such a system would produce a growth of industrial capitalism, and the training of a population accustomed to industrial work – at first only in its lower grades, but later on probably in higher grades also. This process might lead after about a century to a movement for national liberation. But the movement would find success just as difficult then as now, and a century would have been wasted. Meanwhile the habits of capitalism would have been acquired, and would probably prevent the establishment of socialism even if national independence were achieved. From every point of view, therefore, a vigorous movement in the near future is infinitely preferable to the policy of drifting while foreign nations act.

Industry and the economic side of life have been thought of in the West too much as the ends of existence. They are not ends, but mere means to a good life. The ideal to be aimed at is a community where industry is the servant of man, not his master; where there is sufficiency and leisure for all; where economic aims are not dominant; where leisure is used for art and science and friendship, instead of being sacrificed to the production of an excess of commodities. China has many of the qualities required for realizing this ideal, particularly the artistic sense and the capacity for civilized enjoyment without which leisure has little value. These qualities make it possible to hope that China may lead the world in the next stage of development, and give back to the restless West something of that inner calm without which we must perish in frantic madness. In this way not only China, but the whole world, may be regenerated by your achievements.

*Source: The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Volume 15, Uncertain Paths to Freedom: Russia and China, 1919-22, edited by Richard A Rempel, Beryl Haslam, with the assistance of Andrew Bone, Albert C Lewis, Routledge 2000*