

China and Russell

Tony Simpson

The Commercial Press, Bertrand Russell's publisher in China for almost a century, will mark the 120th anniversary of its establishment in 2017. As part of its preparations, Commercial Press kindly invited the Russell Foundation to make a presentation to editors about Russell's visit to China in 1920-21, and how it impacted on Russell's worldview and subsequent actions. The Spokesman visited Commercial Press at their offices in central Beijing, whence they travelled south to the Western Lake at Hangzhou, which so impressed Russell and Dora on their arrival in China, 95 years earlier.

'I should love to go to China,' Bertrand Russell wrote to Lucy Donnelly, an American friend, in July 1915. Five years later, in autumn 1920, Russell arrived in Shanghai with Dora Black, a young companion from England. The intervening years marked a turning point in Russell's long and eventful life, from the personal to the public, as Nicholas Griffin has characterised it.*

In November 1918, the long and terrible First World War, which Russell had opposed from the outset, had ended rather suddenly. The high hopes of the Bolshevik Revolution of the previous year, which Russell initially shared, had given way to civil war and famine in Russia. Russell saw this cruel suffering at first hand when he joined a Labour Party delegation to Russia in May 1920. During six weeks, they travelled extensively in the vast country, visiting Petrograd (St Petersburg), Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, and sailing down the River Volga as far as Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea. Russell met Lenin, Trotsky and Gorky. A committed socialist himself, Russell was profoundly sceptical that Bolshevism would endure and that 'by this method a stable or desirable form of Socialism can be established'.**

Out of the blue, on 30 June 1920 on return to London, Russell found an invitation to lecture in China. In a matter of weeks, he had decided to accept. How was it that Russell was invited to China at this time?

For several decades, a trickle of students from China had been studying abroad and looking outwards for guidance about their country's political and economic



*Zhang Yuanji's memorial at
Commercial Press, Beijing*

development. This process gathered pace with the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911. It was accelerated further by the First World War and what followed. The old order was passing.

On 4 May 1919 in Beijing, demonstrations were triggered by developments far away at the Paris Peace Conference. It became clear that, following the Allies' victory, China would not recover sovereignty over the parts of Shandong Province that had been previously colonised by defeated Germany. Instead, they would be handed to Japan. On that day, some 3,000 students

gathered in central Beijing and marched to the house of a government minister closely associated with Japan. The demonstrators broke in, destroyed the house, and some of them badly beat a visiting official. As Rana Mitter*** points out, the student demonstration of 4 May 1919 came to symbolise a much wider shift in Chinese society and politics:

‘The new republic had been declared less than eight years earlier, yet already the country seemed to be falling apart because of imperialist pressure from outside and warlord government within China that had destroyed its fragile parliamentary democracy. The May Fourth Movement, as it became known, was associated closely with the “New Culture” which intellectuals and radical thinkers proposed for China, to be underpinned by the twin panaceas of “Mr Science” and “Mr Democracy”.’

It was in the wake of such events that Liang Qichao, the distinguished journalist, political activist and founder of the Chinese Lecture Association, had suggested that Russell be invited to China. In this he was strongly supported by Mr Zhang Yuanji, who was in charge of The Commercial Press based in Shanghai. Commercial Press put up a considerable sum of money, some 5,000 yuan or £2,000, to pay for the trip. Russell's invitation was handwritten by Fu Tong, Professor of Philosophy,

on letterhead of The Government University, Peking (see illustration), and sent care of Fu's old Professor in England, J H Muirhead:

'Will you kindly ask Mr Bertrand Russell for me whether he can accept such an invitation as to come to China for a year to give us some lectures.'

Russell and Dora duly arrived in China whilst this huge country was in the midst of great changes and seeking direction. Science and democracy were high on Russell's list of personal priorities; democracy in the workplace figured centrally in Russell's quest for creative impulses as described in *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, written in 1915 in response to the unfolding horrors of the First World War, delivered early in 1916, and first published that year under the same title. Had this work been noticed by Chinese scholars?



Bertrand Russell and Dora Black in China

In his invitation, Professor Fu wrote:

'Mr John Dewey has promised to lecture here for another year, and Mr Henri Bergson will come in two years' time. The former has been lecturing on the three great philosophers of our day, "James, Bergson and Russell".'

Fu added that there was an 'earnest desire among the young' to know the 'tendencies' of philosophy and science in the West, and that, as far as he knew, Russell's political views would be 'greatly welcome to us'. Fu felt the need to write care of Muirhead because, although he had seen Russell at a conference the previous year, Russell had left before Fu had a chance to introduce himself.

William James' inclusion in this trio of 'great philosophers' may surprise some readers. It suggests, in part, the significance of the recent war as Russell's invitation to China was prepared in 1920. Russell had cited James' 'admirable' address on 'The Moral Equivalent of War' in

1189

北京大學

THE GOVERNMENT UNIVERSITY.

PEKING, CHINA.

191

Dear Professor Russell,

Will you kindly ask Mr. Richard Russell for me whether he can accept such an invitation as to come to China for a year to join an "action"? He would still be about 42 years, besides traveling expenses of such a trip.

Mr. John Dewey has promised to lecture here for another year, and Mr. Henri Poincaré will come in next year. The paper has been talking on

the three great philosophies of our day - James, Bergson, and Russell. There is a very smart debate every day going to know the leaders of the world in philosophy and science. The choice of the subjects of the lecture will be chiefly left to the student. Russell. He can easily arrange that when he agrees this political view will be, is for us? Now, just welcome to us. The last way for him to come will be the day cannot wait. He will be out on board as soon as he arrives

北京大學

THE GOVERNMENT UNIVERSITY.

PEKING, CHINA.

191

Shanghai. If he can come in the immediate future perhaps he will not mind being so short an acceptance of our invitation, as to be made to be prepared for it one of the way for which philosophy should be done with the organization with whom I had been last summer at our first conference but as I did not think he would leave the conference so soon I did not take to him. Perhaps I can get in the picture of writing to him directly if it be the best thing for us to correspond directly, perhaps we can do so by some other kind of introduction.

I just have an idea of inviting R. Tagore, but I think it should wait what before I hear about this.

With best wishes,
your very sincerely,

T. F. W.

Principles of Social Reconstruction:

‘His statement of the problem could not be bettered; and so far as I know, he is the only writer who has faced the problem adequately. But his solution is not adequate; perhaps no adequate solution is possible.’

Russell himself was seeking more adequate solutions in avoiding recourse to war. In this connection, his visit to China appears to have shifted significantly his outlook from a Eurocentric to a global perspective, which he retained for the rest of his long life. His nine months in the country, from October 1920 to July 1921, proved to be something of a transformative experience.

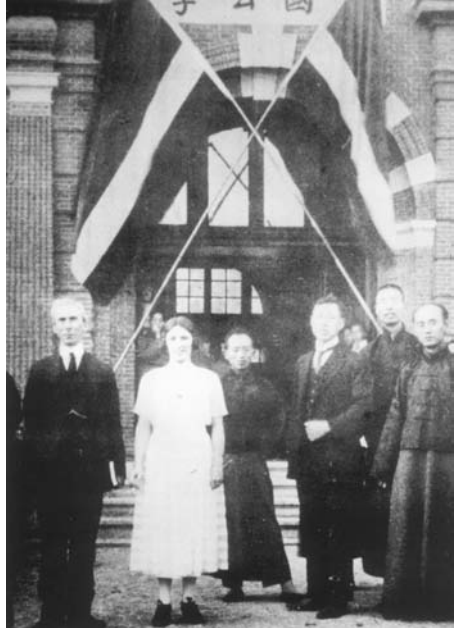
Russell’s first impressions of China and its people were favourable. As he wrote later in his *Autobiography*, he and Dora

‘were somewhat surprised by their wit and fluency. I had not realised until then that a civilised Chinese

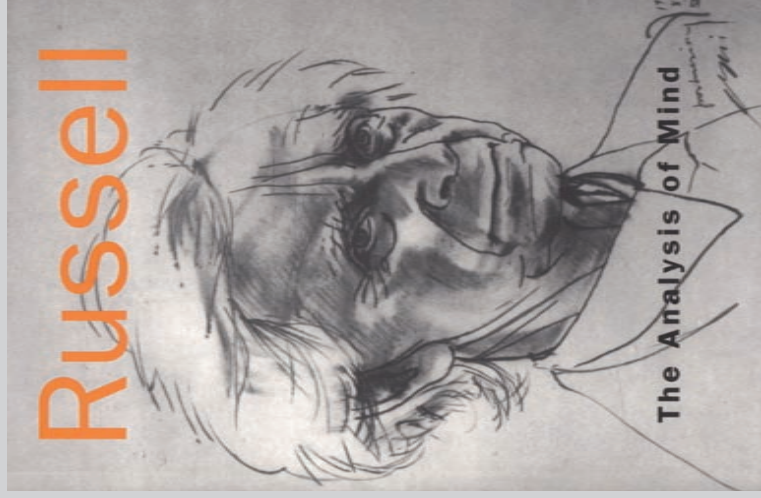
is the most civilised person in the world ... Our Chinese friends took us for two days to Hangchow [Hangzhou] to see the Western Lake. The first day we went round it by boat, and the second day in chairs. It was marvellously beautiful, with the beauty of ancient civilisation, surpassing even that of Italy.’

With the passage of decades, Russell clearly had good memories of his extended stay in China, as reflected in another passage from his *Autobiography* (p363):

‘Many Chinese have that refinement of humour which consists in enjoying a joke more when the other person cannot see it. As I was leaving Peking a Chinese friend gave me a long classical passage microscopically engraved by hand on a very small surface; he also gave me the same passage written out in exquisite calligraphy. When I asked what it said, he replied: “Ask Professor Giles when you get home”. I took his advice, and found that it was “The Consultation of the Wizard”, in which the wizard merely advises his clients to do whatever they like. He was poking fun at me because I always refused to give advice to the Chinese as to their immediate political difficulties.’



At the National University of Peking



Russell wrote his preface to Analysis of the Mind whilst in Beijing.

‘There are a few allusions to China in this book, all of which were written before I had been to China, and are not intended to be taken by the reader as geographically accurate. I used “China” merely as a synonym for “a distant country”, when I wanted illustrations of unfamiliar things.’

Russell Monthly (above) also began to appear in 1920, published by Commercial Press.

Many Chinese desperately wanted clear advice. And the import of Russell's intervention in China continues to be debated to this day, as I found on a visit to Zhejiang University where historians and classicists probed the legacy. Notwithstanding 'The Consultation of the Wizard', in his farewell address Russell did venture some broad opinions about what he had learnt during his stay in China:

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

Russell affirmed:

'I am convinced that China, in the future as in the past, has a distinctive contribution to make to civilisation, and something more than mere quantity to add to the world's mental possessions.'

He emphasised that:

'... a radical and permanent solution must depend upon education ... It must be universal and it must be scientific and the science must not be merely theoretical, but in close touch with modern industry and economics.'

Russell recognised that it would take a generation or more for China to develop an effective system of mass education. By contrast, he anticipated that China's 'industrial resources will lead in the near future to the great development of industrialism', warning that:

'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.'

Somewhat surprisingly to modern readers, Russell urged the development of 'active patriotism' in China. He added:

'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.'

Russell posed one question which he found 'on the lips of almost all the thoughtful Chinese whom I have met':

'How can we develop industry without at the same time developing capitalism and all its evils?'

Russell urged that the political problem be addressed before the economic one:

‘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 antagonised 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.’

In this issue of *The Spokesman* we reprint in full Russell’s farewell address as it sums up his experiences in China and Russia in 1920-21. These were controversial topics. Amongst many people who heard Russell speak during his time in China was Mao Tse-tung who, like others hungry for change, could also read Russell’s lectures and speeches in a new journal, *Russell Monthly*, published by Commercial Press. In October 1920 whilst visiting Changsha in Hunan Province, Russell had given lectures on Bolshevism, Communism, and Russia. Mao was not at all persuaded by Russell’s view. He wrote:

‘In his lecture in Changsha, Russell ... took a position in favour of communism but against the dictatorship of the workers and peasants. He said that one should employ the method of education to change the consciousness of the propertied classes, and that in this way it would be necessary to limit freedom or to have recourse to war and bloody revolution ... My objections to Russell’s viewpoint can be stated in a few words: “This is all very well as a theory, but it is unfeasible in practice”.’

By the time he gave his farewell address in July 1921, Russell was indeed speaking of China passing through ‘a stage analogous to that of the dictatorship of the communist party in Russia’ for the purposes of education and non-capitalistic industrialisation.

Russell also lectured on relativity at Peking University in 1921, the year that Albert Einstein was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics. Einstein had published his theory of general relativity in 1915, and Russell’s lectures helped generate great interest, not least in Einstein’s own forthcoming visit to China. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, Einstein had to curtail his visit to the ‘cradle of East Asian civilisation’, as he described it, and stayed



Albert Einstein followed Russell to China in 1922, albeit briefly.

in Shanghai only a few days, in late 1922 and early 1923, although long enough to be told by the Swedish consul that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize. As a result, as Hu Danian of Yale University has written:

‘Mass publications, including books, translated books, journal articles, and news reports on the theory of relativity and its author were produced in China within a short period of time. Consequently the theory of relativity was not only quickly introduced into China, but also widely disseminated in the early 1920s. The introduction and dissemination of relativity were significant events in the Chinese history of modern physics.’

The Commercial Press played a significant role in this process.

Nine months in China saw some significant milestones passed in Russell’s personal life. Initially, his Chinese hosts were somewhat bemused



In the foreground are Bertrand Russell, Edith Russell and Y. R. Chao, a Chinese-American scholar of distinction who nearly fifty years previously had acted as Russell's interpreter in China. (Date of photo: 1968)

by Dora Black's presence, but evidently accommodated the couple happily enough. During the early months of 1921, Dora became pregnant, which fulfilled Russell's long-held wish to become a father. In September, they married in London, shortly before John was born, days after Russell's divorce from his first wife, Alys Pearsall-Smith, came through.

Before he and Dora knew they were to be parents, Russell suffered a near-death experience. In March 1921, he contracted pneumonia after bathing in hot springs near Beijing and was close to death on several occasions during the weeks that followed. His life was saved by the great efforts of a young doctor at the German Hospital, Franz Esser, with Dora's help and the administration of some vital medication. Dr Esser renewed contact with Russell in 1956, by which time he had also been teaching philosophy in China, using Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy* as a textbook, though not in Chinese translation, it seems.

Commercial Press recently reprinted tens of thousands of copies of *A History of Western Philosophy*. It is recommended reading for high school and university students in China. They may not read all of it, but Russell has a growing following among the new generation of young adults, just as he has amongst their parents. 'What I have lived for' was the spontaneous response, when suggestions of memorable and accessible

Russell texts were sought from young publishers. This short text is to be published in *The World of English*, Commercial Press's monthly magazine for young people who want to improve their English. Written in longhand in July 1956, this was the prologue to Russell's *Autobiography*.

References

**The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell, Volume 1, The Private Years, 1884-1914, Volume 2, The Public Years, 1914-1970*, edited by Nicholas Griffin, Routledge, 2001

** *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, page x, Spokesman, 1995

*** *Modern China: A Very Short Introduction*, Rana Mitter, Oxford University Press, 2008

With grateful acknowledgements to Commercial Press in China and to Kenneth Blackwell and the Russell Archives at McMaster University, Canada, especially for their generous help with illustrations.

The Commercial Press began life as a printing company in Shanghai, in 1897. Five years later, in 1902, the Chinese scholar, Zhang Yuanji, joined with the founders of the printing press to set up an editorial and translation department, thus launching Commercial Press as China's first modern publishing house. Since then it has published more than 30,000 titles. In addition to translations, since its earliest days, Commercial Press has made a great contribution to documenting and developing Chinese culture. In 1954, Commercial Press moved to its current premises in the centre of Beijing, where it compiles and translates academic works in philosophy, politics, economics, history and geography, as well as dictionaries, reference books in Chinese and other languages, research works, textbooks, and popular books. Widely acknowledged as China's pioneering publisher, the high quality of its output endures as Commercial Press prepares for its 120th anniversary in 2017.

* * *

'In Shanghai we were taken to Commercial Press, an impressive publishing venture, which was bringing out translations into Chinese of modern books.' Dora Russell, *The Tamarisk Tree*