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Russell's visit to China and the Significance of Intercultural Encounters

After his return to Great Britain, Russell wrote a pamphlet entitled *The Problem of China*. In this short book, he described his private encounters with the ancient Middle Kingdom and offered readers numerous novel perceptions and images about this great, interesting, and then still unknown, almost mysterious country, which he believed had the potential to become one of the world's greatest powers. He wrote about the socio-political context of the country in great detail and offered a laborious analysis of China's political situation in the early 1920s, with the aim of proposing some practical replies to the most topical problems of the time. In this framework, he exposed the importance of the constitution and the rule of law, but also the necessity of a powerful and balanced leadership. Only on such a foundation could China, in his view, embark on a steady path towards industrial development and technological progress.

However, he also devoted much of his time in China to understanding its great and fascinating culture. It was obvious to him that China was an intensely civilized society with an admired history. Russell saw great opportunities

in intercultural exchange between China and Europe: "While China needed Western science, he believed that traditional Chinese civilization offered a vision of the good life that might discipline the destructive dynamism of the Western world" (Xu 2003, 193).

He firmly believed that China made a unique contribution to the birth of human civilization and had something more than quantity to add to the intellectual and spiritual possessions of the world:

The Chinese have discovered, and have practised for many centuries, a way of life which, if it could be adopted by all the world, would make all the world happy. We Europeans have not. Our way of life demands strife, exploitation, restless change, discontent and destruction. Efficiency directed to destruction can only end in annihilation, and it is to this consummation that our civilization is tending, if it cannot learn some of that wisdom for which it despises the East. (Russell 1993, 17)

Despite this fascination, Russell often stressed that traditional Chinese culture could not meet contemporary social, economic, and political demands and had to find a new path to something radically different (Simpson 2020, 3). He also advised his Chinese friends to be aware of the perils of colonial dominance, exposing that all great powers were keen to guarantee their own divide in the exploitation of China's resources. Russell wanted to recommend the Chinese government to instantly develop more nationwide force than it had shown so far. Otherwise, in his eyes, China could not be capable to withstand the violence fostered by overseas capitalists (*ibid.*, 4).

What the country needed most, however, was undoubtedly science and technology. Bertrand Russell recognized that what was most fatal to China was the lack and underdevelopment of science. He often emphasized that China was at least equal to Europe in art and literature as well as in customs and traditions. At the time of the Renaissance, Europe would not have been in any way superior to the ancient and admirable culture of this great civilization:

The fact that Britain has produced Shakespeare and Milton, Locke and Hume, and all the other men who have adorned literature and the arts, does not make us superior to the Chinese. What makes us superior is Newton and Robert Boyle and their scientific successors. They make us superior by giving us greater proficiency in the art of killing. It is easier for an Englishman to kill a Chinaman than for a Chinaman to kill an Englishman. Therefore, our civilization is superior to that of China... (Russell 1993, 52)

Russell understood it would be fruitless and unproductive to try to decide which of the two cultures or civilizations, China or Europe, was “greater” or “better.” But he often admonished his own countrymen to stop thinking of themselves as missionaries of a superior civilization if they wanted to establish fruitful interaction and exchange with China. He was outraged by the attitude of some Westerners who thought they had a right to exploit, oppress and cheat the Chinese because they belonged to an “inferior race.”

For him the central query was, why did modern science flourish in Europe and not in China? He was convinced that one reason was the lack of a comprehensive and systematic educational system in traditional China. This weakness was a consequence of the outmoded Confucian ideology; the uncritical learning of the old classics, in his view, petrified Chinese thought. On the other hand, he also understood that the Chinese quality of life offered people fewer impulses to adapt. He saw China as a culture that had already achieved a high degree of classicism and had known how to exist for several millennia. It was therefore rather difficult for them to imagine anything that could be improved. Moreover, the idea of “progress” did not fit well with a culture that strove for balance and harmony and looked to the past rather than the future.

Nevertheless, education remained the most pressing problem, for any kind of radical and lasting solution to China’s all-encompassing crisis depended on education, which had to be universal and scientific. Moreover, the science that had to be thought of should not be merely theoretical, but should be closely connected with modern industry and economics. In Russell’s view, the problem of education could be solved relatively quickly, although he soon realized that it would take a generation or more for China to develop an effective system of mass education.

Still, he was convinced that although Chinese educational systems and institutions suffered from a lack of money and libraries, they did not suffer from a lack of “finest human material” (Russell 1993, 193). In this context, he also pointed out that although Chinese civilization until then had a lack of science, it never contained anything hostile to science. Therefore, the spread of scientific knowledge would not encounter any obstacles comparable to those that the Church had put in the way in European history. He wrote, “I have no doubt that if the Chinese could obtain a stable government and sufficient means, they would within the next thirty years begin to produce remarkable work in science” (ibid.). He even believed that they could easily surpass Westerners in this because they possessed the fresh enthusiasm and

passion of a renaissance. He observed that there was an eager desire among Chinese youth to acquire Western knowledge, along with an intense awareness of the many shortcomings of instrumental rationality. In Russell's eyes, Chinese students wanted to be scientific but not mechanical, industrial but not capitalistic. He was amazed at the long Chinese ethical tradition and the humanistic spirit that pervaded the country despite the difficult situation it had fallen into.

It is very remarkable, as distinguishing the Chinese from the Japanese, that the things they wish to learn from us are not those that bring wealth or military strength, but rather those that have either an ethical and social value, or a purely intellectual interest. (Russell 1993, 193)

228 He was much inspired by the "profoundly humanistic attitude to life" (*ibid.*, 223) that was formed through education in the Chinese students. This humanistic spirit was – among other things – also expressed in progressive tendencies such as gender equality. Russell pointed out that the position of women at Peking University was better than at Cambridge, and emphasized that women were admitted to examinations and degrees, and that there were women teachers in the university (*ibid.*, 224).

On the other hand, he was certainly aware of the great differences between the social strata. The modern students who were marked by the fashionable outcomes of new urban civilization stood in an extremely harsh contrast to the poor and completely uneducated population of many underdeveloped areas in the Chinese countryside. Therefore, a thorough spread of modern education could – according to Russell – only be achieved through radical political change. Hence, the political problem should be addressed even before the economic one:

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. (Russell, cf Simpson 2020, 4)

However, Russell by no means advocated a long-lasting dictatorship, but instead suggested an ethical and resolute leadership. Although Russell envisioned a rather paternalistic kind of government for China, he certainly did not have in mind an authoritarian dictatorship.

He was also convinced that in order to allow China to liberate itself from the yoke of foreign powers, patriotism was necessary. However, the patriotism he had in mind was not the dogmatic and intolerably anti-foreign spirit of the Boxers, but one that had an enlightened attitude, that was willing to learn from other cultures while not willing to allow foreign powers to colonize or dominate China. But he also saw the dangers of patriotism, because as soon as it proved itself strong enough for successful defence, it could also automatically turn to aggression directed against everything that is foreign.

China, by her resources and her population, is capable of being the greatest power in the world after the United States. It is much to be feared that, in the process of becoming strong enough to preserve their independence, the Chinese may become strong enough to embark upon a career of imperialism. (Russell 1993, 241)

This vision, which less than a hundred years later seems strangely accurate, was certainly not a mere product of what has Russell projected in his works on epistemology; instead, it was a result of the intellectual, aesthetic, and personal contacts between him and the Chinese people. Such encounters are doubtless still the best groundwork for any kind of intercultural understanding.

In sum, it is precisely the question of intercultural understanding that may be even more significant for the lasting fruits of Russell's visit to China than merely his introduction of mathematical logic.

This said, I must of course emphasise that it is by no means my intention to diminish the importance of this crucial task, which was undoubtedly at the heart of his encounters with China. It is certainly true that Russell's visit aroused a great interest in mathematical logic among Chinese intellectuals. It is also true that through the Chinese translation of his *Principia Mathematica* a growing number of scholars and students alike were able to receive an excellent introduction to mathematical logic, gradually leading to the systematic teaching of the subject in China's most prestigious universities (Xu 2003, 193).

At least as important, however, was his attitude toward the people and culture of the millennia-old Middle Kingdom. His visit from October 1920 to July 1921 proved to be a transformative experience, not only for the "new Chinese intellectuals" but also for Russell himself, for it was to shift his outlook significantly from a Eurocentric to a global perspective, which he maintained for the rest of his extraordinarily long life (Simpson 2020, 2). Along with this, it also shifted and transformed something else, namely our prevailing notion

of genuine intercultural communication. According to the usual understanding, intercultural communication (or even normal everyday conversations between members of the same culture) is successful when information can cross the gap between the mind of the sender and that of the receiver without distortions or obstacles (Defoort 2001, 398). But Russell himself once claimed that truly productive and fruitful communication is based on exactly opposite grounds. It should result precisely from the discontinuity between the different contexts in which a given idea is formulated and from the new and fresh associations it can evoke (*ibid.*). The fruitfulness of such relationships, new ways of seeing and understanding the circumstances, space, and time of the “other,” whoever that may be, makes this visit even more significant. It is precisely because of the openness of this creative encounter that it became a historic milestone for future intercultural exchange, not only between China and Europe, but also between writers and readers who remember and study it, each in their own way. Therefore, I sincerely hope that this short book describing, explaining, and introducing Russell’s visit to China can also become a small but bridge-building and thus important stone in the mosaic of such memories.

Sources and Literature

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