

*Vera SCHWARCZ*

## Between Russell and Confucius: China's Russell Expert, Zhang Shenfu (Chang Sung-Nian)<sup>1</sup>

The longing to resemble is an incipient resemblance. The word which we shall make our own is the word whose echo we have already heard within ourselves. (Maurice Friedman, *To Deny Our Nothingness*)

**O**n a chilly, mid-November afternoon in 1979, Zhang Shenfu was allowed to meet with a Western scholar for the first time in over twenty years. Good fortune and China's new policy of openness to the West enabled me to be the American researcher chosen to interview this octogenarian philosopher. Our conversation took place in the reception room of the National Beijing Library – the official unit to which Zhang Shenfu belonged in his capacity as “senior researcher”. The meeting of November 12 turned out to be the first in a series of sixty hours of taped interviews, all the rest conducted in Zhang's own home over the next four years. From our initial encounter, it became clear that Zhang considered himself to be China's

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1 The text was originally issued in *Russell: The Journal of the Bertrand Russell Archives*, 11 (Winter 1991-92): 117-46.

foremost Russell expert. The more I listened to Zhang Shenfu's story, the more I checked its details against the documents and memories of the intellectuals of the same generation (the most cosmopolitan of all the generations of twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals), the greater the mystery of why this eminent philosopher should have been overlooked in the history of modern Chinese thought.

*17 December 1979:* My third visit to Wang Fucang Lane. Zhang Shenfu is drawing me deeper and deeper into the crevices of his philosophical system. I feel lost, unprepared, over my head. In just one month we have strayed far from the political events of his life. Nothing in my training as a historian of modern China has prepared me for this. We have left behind the May Fourth Movement of 1919. We have been over his role in the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1920. We have already explored his political associations with China's Premier, Zhou Enlai.

Today, Zhang Shenfu wants to talk about the virtues of traditional Chinese philosophy. He is using our conversation to work out his ideas. He wants to find a place for himself in native Chinese thought. Zhang is looking for a world view that he can claim his own.

Today, Zhang Shenfu fills the page in front of me with synonyms for his favourite idea in Chinese philosophy – *zhong*, the golden mean. He is struggling to explain to me the connection between this ideal and a psychological state of mind that he calls *rong*, “forbearance”. This “*rong*”, Zhang believes, must accompany the quest for a genuinely balanced world view. At one point, he goes off on a long tangent criticizing Chinese Marxism. He likens the effort to emulate Soviet models of thought and economic development to a man who enters a river without knowing how to swim: “He can do nothing but drown.” As in every conversation since we met in the National Library, Zhang Shenfu comes back to Russell. Russell is his private raft, as it were. This is what seems to have kept Zhang afloat over the years—even when China became submerged in wave after wave of revolutionary fervour. But today, he adds something new:

I believe I understand Russell. Maybe I am the only one in China who really does.... Russell himself did not understand Confucius. But, in fact his thought is very close to Confucius. I see this similarity even if nobody else does. Even if Russell were to deny it. My philosophy brings them together. I am like a bridge (*qiaoliang*), you might say.

I try to make sense of these water metaphors – “bridge”, “drowning”. I try to hear what lies beneath Zhang's unabashed arrogance, beneath his claim that

he alone understands Russell in modern China. Zhang has a vision of himself as linking the unlinkable. If, as we both know, China is still struggling with the dilemma of modernization, with the challenge of crossing over from Confucian politics and values into a world shaped by Western technology and revolutionary ideas – can Zhang Shenfu alone have solved these problems?

I look up from my notes to see Zhang's ironical smile. He knows his claims sound extravagant. He wants to see how far I will travel along his thought paths. In the end, what seems to matter is not whether I accept or reject his version of himself as the most important philosopher in twentieth-century China. Rather, what he looks for in my face is a sign that I sympathize with the problem of bridging East and West. Zhang Shenfu feels misunderstood, forlorn among his contemporaries. Of all the parts of Zhang's long life that were swept under the rug of public amnesia, his philosophical efforts matter to him the most. And for this, there seems to be the least amount of time in public interviews these days. And too little publishing space, even in China's current climate of reform.

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Russell and Confucius—the more we go on, the more I understand them as the objects of Zhang's love: "Among all philosophers I have read, and there have been so many, those two are the ones I respect and admire the most." Before they became objects of thought, before Zhang embarked on the difficult task of distilling the best from each, Russell and Confucius captured Zhang Shenfu's imagination. They echoed and expanded his own concerns. They were life-saving devices when all else appeared unmoored, in flux around him. To this day, they remain a source of endless interest for him because they matter in a deep, personal way.

*Winter 1930*: Zhang has finished the introduction to his first book of philosophy, *Suosi (Thought as Such)*. Two previous books – a lengthy translation in 1926 of C. E. M. Joad's *Introduction to Modern Philosophy*, and in 1927 of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* – are behind him. These two were books about other thinkers. This time, Zhang Shenfu has collected his own episodic essays written over a dozen years – from 1919 to 1930. He is about to publish them as his own philosophical statement. At thirty-seven, he appears ready to cast a glance backward, to sum up the main themes of his work. The introduction to *Thought as Such* identifies two themes: "humanism" and "the scientific method". These, Zhang writes: "are what I believe to be the two most precious things in the world."<sup>2</sup>

The introduction leaves little doubt about the sources of Zhang Shenfu's

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2 *Suosi (Thought as Such)* (Shanghai: 1931): p. 2.

values. Humanism is “what Confucius wrote about.” Scientific method is “rooted in Bertrand Russell’s philosophy of logical analysis.” With these roots acknowledged, the author moves off in a direction all his own. This he describes by using an English phrase, “polarity”, and a Chinese concept, “*chun keguan*”, pure objectivism.

These odd twists of tongue enable Zhang Shenfu to look at issues—such as dialectical materialism that Russell never considered. He can also write about sexual intimacy and the problem of philosophical certainty that Confucius ignored or considered immoral.

By 1930, Zhang Shenfu was swimming in alien waters. He had strayed far from Chinese contemporaries, as well as from Western and ancient Chinese mentors that had guided his philosophical maturation. By the end of the brief introduction to *Thought as Such*, Zhang pleaded with the reader:

Whenever you do not understand my words, I hope you will look around, especially at the facts of your own existence. I hope you will expend a bit of energy to integrate them concretely. That facts of one life, however, are just a fragment and cannot be substituted for the totality of facts that exist out there in the world. (p. 3)

Fragments and totalities, these constitute Zhang Shenfu’s subject. Bits and pieces is what *Thought as Such* is all about. Its form—that of the fragmentary episodic essay—Zhang acknowledges, is informed by the precedents of Pascal and Novalis. The content, Zhang affirms, is unmistakably his own. And if a reader wants to make sense of these fragments, there is no other way but to retrace the idiosyncratic itinerary of Zhang Shenfu’s philosophical loves and hates.

## 1 The Making of Russell Admirer

9 November 1920: Zhang Shenfu is writing his most impassioned letter to Bertrand Russell. He has been reading the British logician’s work for more than half a decade. During the past few weeks, he has met him in Shanghai and heard his lectures in Beijing.

But today, Zhang is after something far more personal. Today, he confesses a deep admiration for Russell tinged with the imminent loss of a still un consummated friendship. With awkwardness, Zhang writes in English:

Probably I will leave Peking for France on the 17th, or later. I am very sorry we would separate so soon. But even I go to France, I will continually study your philosophy and as I always attempt to read anything you

write, henceforward when you publish books or articles (even reviews), please kindly make me knowing at once. Thank you in anticipation for the trouble you will take.

May you favour me with a copy of your photograph with your autograph? I only wish this because I worship you.<sup>3</sup>

Sixty-three years later in 1983, I read this letter in the Russell Archives. Zhang's fervent admiration for Russell leaps off the yellowed page undiminished by the passage of time. It foreshadows Zhang's enduring attachment to Russell over the course of his long life.

The letter also puzzles me. What did Zhang Shenfu really mean by "worship you"? I first read these words in a 1982 article by a colleague, Suzanne Ogden, "The Sage. in the Inkpot: Bertrand Russell and China's Social Reconstruction in the 1920s". Ogden never met Zhang Shenfu but used his letter to show how carried away some of Russell's Chinese admirers were on the eve of his China visit. In a footnote on Zhang Shenfu, Ogden suggests that he was "China's Russell's specialist" at the time of May Fourth and that he was "instrumental" in bringing Russell to China. The quotation "worship you" is then added to suggest a kind of blind admiration.

Now with the original letter in my hand, with Zhang's face and words fresh in mind, I am less convinced this was blind admiration.

*11 May 1983:* A few days ago, I gave Zhang Shenfu a copy of Suzanne Ogden's article. Today, Zhang tells me that Ogden – like Russell's biographer Ronald Clark – overestimates his role in inviting Russell to China. Zhang himself gives credit to Liang Qichao, a more senior scholar-official, who provided the money and organized Russell's itinerary. His view mirrors a photograph in the Clark biography of Russell – the one that shows Zhang Shenfu almost off the page while Russell and Dora Black take centre stage in front of the entrance to Beijing University. Zhang's own narrative, like the photograph, shows him to be marginal to the managerial aspects of Russell's China journey:

I did not invite Russell to China – Liang Qichao did. I did not translate his public lectures. Zhao Yuanren, an American-educated young man, did. I did not even translate Russell's lecture notes. A member of the New Tide society, Sun Fuyuan did. I was not even involved in the founding of the Chinese "Russell Society" in 1921. I had already gone to France. Your friend does not tell my story but that of others who

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3 9 Nov. 1920 (RA). This letter is used and quoted in Suzanne P. Ogden, "The Sage in the Inkpot", *Modern Asian Studies*, 16 (1982): 533-4.

stayed on in China after I left. I did something else, something maybe more important. I translated Russell's philosophy. I introduced him to Chinese readers as an important modern thinker. I think I set the stage for informed appreciation.

Zhang's self-presentation contradicts Ogden's use of "I worship you." If Zhang did "worship" Russell, it was not like an idol or infallible god. Zhang Shenfu was, by 1920, deeply involved in the iconoclastic New Culture Movement. He had already allied himself with those who challenged idolatry, both Chinese and Western.

When he writes "I worship you", Zhang Shenfu is trying to say something new to Russell, and to himself—something about the self-expanding possibilities that informed admiration can open in the "worshipper". I think that Zhang wanted a signed photograph from Russell to help him along his own path of becoming an iconoclastic philosopher. In "worshipping" Russell, Zhang was looking to explore possibilities that were already immanent within himself.

Why then, did he use the English word "worship"? One of Zhang Shenfu's short essays from 1928 finally answers this question. Entitled "A Free Man's Worship", this essay is a distillation and defence of Russell's 1903 work by the same title. Although Zhang did not translate this key text until he had returned from France, until after he left the Chinese Communist Party (in 1925), until after he witnessed the collapse of the social revolution in the summer of 1927—Zhang's 1928 essay makes it clear that he had read and loved "A Free Man's Worship" many years earlier.

*15 January 1928:* The Shanghai based *World (Shijie)* magazine publishes Zhang Shenfu's essay "A Free Man's Worship", consciously echoing the 1903 text with the same title by Bertrand Russell. Two and a half decades earlier, the British philosopher had wrestled with a personal spiritual crisis. In 1903, Russell's conclusion was that "true freedom" is found "In the determination to worship only the God created by our own love of the good, to respect only the heaven which inspires the insight of our best moments."<sup>4</sup>

For Zhang Shenfu, however, the spiritual crisis is both personal and social. Russell's words are particularly timely, Zhang argues:

because they 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

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4 *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, ed. L. E. Denonn and R. E. Egner (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), pp. 66-72; *Papers* 12: 66-72.

creativity inherent in one's own thoughts, especially in what is most noble and spirited in one's thinking.<sup>5</sup>

Zhang Shenfu's spiritual crisis, unlike Russell's, was not about Christianity. It did not revolve around notions of God but rather around Confucianism, women, personal freedom and the right to define truth in keeping with one's own inner lights.

In 1920, Zhang had begged Russell for a personal memento. Since he was getting ready to leave China and the charmed intimacy of Russell's conversations, Zhang Shenfu needed a reminder of what "free worship" was all about. By 1928, however, after Zhang Shenfu had had his own share of dogmatic faiths – including Marxism–Leninism – the need to worship freely had grown stronger.

*February 1983:* Zhang Shenfu is dictating an essay to his daughter Zhang Yan-ni. It is called "My Admiration for and Understanding of Bertrand Russell". He hopes it might serve as an introduction to a collection of his essays about Russell. I read the draft of this essay in 1986, two months after Zhang died. The book of essays on Russell remains bogged down in a publishing house plagued by new pressures to show quick profits. For the moment, a book of essays on Russell is not deemed to be profitable enough.

Still, the 1983 essay brings *me* some profit. It helps me understand what Zhang Shenfu – as distinct from Russell – meant by "a free man's worship". The concept of "free worship" is, not surprisingly, dealt with indirectly in a text meant for circulation in the People's Republic of China. There is no room here for the passionate defence of "*ziyou chongbai*" – the explicitly religious and iconoclastic phrase that Zhang Shenfu had used in 1928. Instead, Zhang gives this essay a more cautious title. He writes of his *zanpei* – "admiration", or "esteem" – of Russell. And yet, in spite of this shift in connotation, Zhang's approach is the same. His 1983 essay, like that of 1928, leaves no doubt that in discovering Russell, in cultivating admiration for him as a man and as a thinker, Zhang Shenfu had cultivated his own commitment to critical thought.

The story of his own "free worship" begins in 1913, when Zhang Shenfu was a student in the preparatory programme of Beijing University. It describes the spiritual awakening of a young man in love with books:

At that time, the library was nothing but a space for storing books located in the innermost courtyard of the university campus. The books

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5 Zhang Songnian (Shenfu), "Ziyou ren de chongbai" (A Free Man's Worship), *Shijie*, 15 Jan. 1928, p. 2.

could be borrowed, but there were few readers. In the following year (1914), when I entered Beida's undergraduate school, the library finally opened a reading room. Books in Western languages were placed on bookshelves along the walls. But the shelves were locked up most of the time. Still, I came often. Because of my frequent appearances, I became very familiar and friendly with the librarian. So, I was allowed to read whatever I wanted from the locked shelves. There were very few books in the reading room at the time. Other than a few texts on engineering, there was almost nothing that I did not read.

One day, I found a very interesting book, published in the us in 1914. The title was *Our Knowledge of the External World* written by Russell. From the first time I read it, I sensed that it was full of new meaning for me. Then, I read it two more times growing more interested in its author, Bertrand Russell.<sup>6</sup>

What started out as a seemingly accidental encounter among the engineering books developed into a passion. Zhang was not satisfied with one book by Russell. He wanted more-anything he could get his hands on. The quest for Russell's texts opened the door for Zhang Shenfu onto a new world of periodicals published by the Chicago based Open Court Book Store: "This book store published two periodicals, the *Monist* and *Open Court*, in which there were always some articles by Russell. I subscribed and read them all" (p. 5).

Snippets from the *Monist* and *Open Court*, however, did not satisfy Zhang's deepening interest in Russell the man. And like so many others among Russell's admirers, Zhang Shenfu found his way to *The Problems of Philosophy*. Published in 1912, this slim volume had been commissioned by a popular press with the express purpose of widening readership for modern philosophy. It was meant as a "handbook for shop assistants" – a simplified but intelligible version of the philosophical issues that Russell had been struggling with over a decade.<sup>7</sup>

Zhang Shenfu was no shop assistant. By this time, he was a sophomore majoring in mathematics at the National Beijing University. With the aid of

6 "Wo dui Losu de zanpei yu liaojie" (*My Admiration for and Understanding of Russell*), unpublished ms., completed 2 March 1983, pp. 3-4. This ms. and the circumstances of its composition were conveyed to me by Zhang Shenfu's daughter, Miss Zhang Yanni, in August 1986. This essay was finally printed as an introduction to Zhang Shenfu's posthumous book of essays, *Luosu zhexue yishu ji* (Collected Translations of Russell's Philosophy) (Beijing: Jiaoju Kexue Chubanshe, 1989), pp. vii-xiv.

7 Clark, pp. 153-4.



Russell's *Problems*, Zhang Shenfu developed an even stronger interest in logic. Russell's simple, lucid text opened up for Zhang a new way of looking at philosophy. It suddenly appeared worthy of scholarly study. Russell's book, in this sense, occasioned a conversion from mathematics to philosophy. Seventy years later, Zhang Shenfu recalls as follows how *The Problems of Philosophy* clenched his commitment to walk in Russell's footsteps, how he decided to become a philosopher himself:

In this book, 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. Arbitrary self-righteousness, Russell wrote, is difficult to undo. More difficult than acquiring Reason. Still, this is the most important object of philosophy. It is concerned with nothing less than the universe as a whole. The subject is so great that it must, by necessity, stretch our minds as well. To put it simply; it is possible for us to strive to obtain truth – a truth that is part of the great objective truth of the universe. (p. 3)

In the wake of this realization, Zhang Shenfu changed his major from mathematics to philosophy and plunged himself more deeply into reading and translating Russell. The tide of Zhang's interest in Russell crested in 1919 and 1920 – during which he translated, annotated, and wrote more than ten articles on Bertrand Russell. In this sense, Zhang Shenfu did contribute to the invitation Russell received to visit China in 1920. Zhang created a climate of interest, of appreciation for Russell as a technical philosopher and social activist.

On 8 October 1920, when Russell arrived in Shanghai, Zhang Shenfu was on hand to welcome him to China. He had, by that time, already made plans to go to France on the same boat as Beijing University President Cai Yuanpei. The month and a half that remained before his departure was all the more intense. It tested, and confirmed, Zhang Shenfu's fervent admiration of Russell. After their public meeting in Shanghai, Zhang Shenfu and Russell continued conversation over tea in Beijing in November. They developed

a mutual respect that lasted through 1962, even though Zhang never met Russell face to face again.<sup>8</sup>

For Zhang Shenfu, Russell's voice was as exciting as his mind. In 1920, Zhang had the opportunity to hear Russell explain his philosophy in his own words. This left an enduring impression on the young Chinese philosopher. In 1983, Zhang recalled:

Russell's speeches were easy to understand, fluent, humorous and inspiring. When analyzing a problem, Russell explained the problem in simple terms. His reasoning powers were penetrating, but not without irony. But it was not a hurting sort of irony. To me, his voice sounded like spring water from a sacred mountain. It cools and calms. It also leaves one with a chilly, alert, pleasant sensation.<sup>9</sup>

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*January 1988:* One of Zhang Shenfu's students, Sun Dunheng who took Zhang Shenfu's logic courses at Qinghua University in the mid-1930s is recollecting his teacher's lecture style. Sun describes his impression of Zhang in ways that echo Zhang Shenfu's own recollections of Bertrand Russell. No accident, here. In the decade after he met Russell, Zhang Shenfu went on to fashion himself into a philosopher on the Russell model. In his own teaching, Zhang mirrored the approach of the British logician who first opened him up to the everyday significance of philosophy:

8 The last letter from Russell to Zhang Shenfu preserved in the Russell Archives is dated 17 September 1962. It is a response to Zhang's congratulations on the occasion of Russell's ninetieth birthday.

In 1962, China was undergoing a brief period of political liberalization during which Zhou Enlai could, and did, acknowledge his political debt to Zhang Shenfu. Zhang Shenfu thus felt free to contact his Western mentor. With the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the possibility of correspondence with Russell ended.

In his 17 September 1962 letter, Russell writes: "It was very rewarding for me to receive your thoughtful and kind letter. I am enclosing to you a copy of a programme given to me on the occasion of my ninetieth birthday, which I value and should wish you to have. I am also sending you a copy of my "History of the World in Epitome", which I hope you will like. ...

I should very much like to see you again to discuss all that has happened in the years since we last met. Naturally, those who write about one have their own particular Veltanchaug [*sic*], which affects their vision of oneself. I am not publishing my autobiography until after my death, because there is so much that affects contemporary events, and because there is much that I am hoping to add to it.

The danger of nuclear war is overwhelming and terrifying, and I feel that I must do anything I am able to prevent it.... I hope that you will write again, because it was a source of pleasure for me to hear from you."

9 "Wo dui Luosu ...", p. 7.

In his logic classes, Mr. Zhang Shenfu sat in the centre of the dais. With his glasses on, he never stopped looking at us while he lectured. With a piece of chalk in his right hand, he would cover the blackboard with abstract signs like a circle, or a plus or a minus sign, or with formula such as AEIOPQ. Often he dwelt at length on the thought of the great English philosopher, Russell.

In general, the study of logic dealt with abstract concepts. But Professor Zhang Shenfu's knowledge was broad, many-sided, mind-expanding. He would always enrich his subject with examples from everyday life, from commonplace existence. This made things easier to understand. For example, he would say: "Logic is the study of propositions, the study of form, the science of all sciences. To see how its reasoning works, let me give you a commonplace example: If it rains the ground gets wet. So rain seems to imply a wet ground. If it rains, the ground is definitely wet. But if the ground is wet, it is not necessarily because it rains. It could be wet because the street cleaner has just sprayed water over the ground."

Each of Mr. Zhang's sentences was like a piece of crystal sugar. It could be pondered with increasing pleasure for a long time. Each class was full of "asides". These consisted of leisurely digressions from the dry subject of logic. They were anything but useless diversions. They were the harvest of his own truth-seeking that he used to make his lectures more lively.<sup>10</sup>

Here, a student pays unwitting tribute to the teacher's teacher. Zhang Shenfu, the dispenser of "crystal sugar" in the 1930s, had received his first-taste of lucid, earth-bound philosophizing while drinking from Russell's "mountain spring" in 1920.

21 May 1942: Zhang Shenfu continues to savour the pleasures of Russell's thought. He continues to relish the "cool and calming" effect of the British logician's philosophy even in war-torn China. Though the Japanese invasion has forced him to leave Beijing and resettle in Chunqing, Zhang continues to read as much as possible of Russell.

On this day, writing for a Communist-supported newspaper, *New China Daily*, Zhang takes the opportunity to mark his mentor's seventieth birthday. He takes space out of a special column dedicated to science and dialectical materialism to comment on the enduring significance of Russell for philosophers, and for the world in general:

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10 Sun Dunheng, "Zhang Shenfu jiaoshou zai Qinghua" (Professor Zhang Shenfu's Years at Qinghua), *Beijing wenshi ziliao*, Jan. 1988, pp. 30-1.

Bertrand Russell is the greatest philosopher of mathematical logic. He is a veteran soldier of the new enlightenment trend that has brought science to the study of human nature. Every new philosophy has its own methodology. Russell's pathbreaking method is that of logical analysis. If you want to truly understand Russell's philosophy, you have to understand the tradition of British empiricism out of which Russell emerges. His goal was to set mathematics on a firm foundation of logical proof. In this he succeeded admirably.<sup>11</sup>

*12 April 1940:* The anti-Japanese war has been over for about a year. Zhang Shenfu is deeply involved in negotiations about the future form of China's national government. Still, he takes time out again to write about Bertrand Russell. Unrestrained by Communist sponsorship, he now published an essay entitled "Russell: The Greatest Philosopher Alive Today". Published in *New Criticism (Xinwen Pinglun)* this essay allows Zhang to speak even more effusively than he had in 1942.

Russell, the great scholar of enlightenment realism is the most well-known modern thinker in the world of Western philosophy. Russell's works have been translated into more foreign languages than that of any philosopher alive today. Russell's philosophy is complex and cannot be explained in a few simple terms. The source of his original contribution must be traced to his masterwork, the *Principia Mathematica*, which opened up a new page in both mathematical logic and philosophy. Russell has often said, and I always agreed with him: "No problem in philosophy can be truly solved unless there is a breakthrough in mathematical logic."

Currently Russell is working on an autobiography that is eagerly awaited by readers all over the world. His thought, like his personal demeanour; is thoroughly revolutionary. He is capable of evoking intense admiration. This can be seen in the powerful loyalties he has generated among the women who have shared his life. Since Russell is a powerful and attractive personality, he has been, naturally, envied, and even hated by some people. His commitment to science and democracy have not always received a supportive response. Some people hate him, just because others love him too much, especially women.<sup>12</sup>

After this tribute to his philosophical mentor, Zhang goes on to praise himself as the conduit through which Russell has reached Chinese readers:

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11 "Zhu Luosu qishi" (To Russell, on His 70th), *Xinhua ribao*, 21 May 1942., p. 4.

12 "Luosu – Xiandai shengcun zui weida de zhexuejia" (Russell – the Greatest Philosopher Alive in the Modern Age), *Xinwen pinglun*, 12 April 1946. p. 16.

In China, some of the most important new theories and new personalities (from the West) have been introduced first by me. Not a few new names and works were first translated and explained in my writings, and then became more popular later on. This is especially the case with Romain Rolland, August Rodin, Barbusse, and many others. This was even more apparent in the circumstances surrounding Russell's reception in China. Here was one of my main contributions to the nation. This is what I myself consider most glorious. Now these seeds have been scattered into the broad public. But, naturally, I have no way of knowing what kind of significance, if any, they will have in the world at large. (p. 22)

*February 1983:* Thirty-seven years after the essay on "Russell: The Greatest Philosopher Alive Today", Zhang Shenfu is less doubt-ridden about the impact of his own "glorious" contribution to the nation. Now, Zhang is less worried about Russell's impact on China ("already proven!") and more interested in Russell's significance for himself. Dictating to his daughter, Zhang's tone is unequivocally admiring. At the same time, the octogenarian's words continue the search for self justification:

To be a great philosopher, a person must be creative. He must have something original to say about the human condition and have a noble purpose in philosophizing. Russell did not fail to meet all of these criteria. To sum up Russell's life: he was not only a great philosopher, but also a theorist of education. He also fought for justice and peace. He was tireless in his appeal to critical reason and in the fight against Fascism. His great achievements in mathematical logic have transformed the entire philosophical world. Thus I write this article to show my admiration and respect for Russell.<sup>13</sup>

Zhang Shenfu was, from beginning to end, a fervent admirer of Russell. In 1920, he "worshipped" Russell as a model. By 1983, he acknowledged Russell as a creative philosopher beyond himself. Zhang Shenfu rested on his laurels as Russell's expert.

## 2 The Making of a Russell Expert

*10 November 1920:* The day before Russell is to have tea with Zhang Shenfu at the Continental Hotel. Also, the day before Russell drafts a letter to his French disciple Jean Nicod describing Zhang as one: "who knows my writings, all of them, far better than I do and has constructed an inconceivably

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13 "Wo Dui Luosu ...", p. 1.

complete bibliography of them.” This day, too, in spite of Zhang’s intense admiration, indeed “worship” of Russell, a gap opens between the two men.

Russell’s letter inviting Zhang Shenfu for tea concedes the gulf. In response to Zhang Shenfu’s earlier questions about the importance of biology to philosophy, Russell writes: “Yes, philosophy depends, as you say, especially upon biology, but, at the moment even more on physics.”

This, at first glance is a brief, mild reference to Russell’s current interest in physics, and in the work of Albert Einstein. Zhang Shenfu adopted these interests in the following decade. And yet there is a premonition here of a more significant difference: for Zhang, biology and philosophy will remain related concerns. They will, in time, open the door to a further divergence from Bertrand Russell as Zhang moves closer to dialectical materialism.

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Dialectical materialism is not yet on Zhang’s intellectual agenda in 1920. Nonetheless Russell senses its shadow. He closes the November 10th letter to Zhang Shenfu with the following words: “I am very sorry you are going away so soon. I would have made more attempts to see you, but was persuaded you hated me on account of my criticism of Bolshevism.”

Zhang Shenfu answers on the same day. He accepts the invitation to tea but takes issue with Russell’s letter. With effort, in English, he writes:

Many thanks for your reply. I will see you tomorrow at the time requested. I am delighted very much by your so estimable reply.

Its last sentence surprises me also very much. Not only I never hated you at all, but I hope eagerly that there would be no hatred at all. Even Mr. Anatole France’s saying “to hate the hatred”, for me, is not quite right. Your criticism of Bolshevism are all right, and valuable, I believe.

Even if not so, there would be no reason for me to hate only on account of this. You said, “If I be a Russian, I would defend the socialist gov’t” (cited from memory). This attitude, I quite admire. Though I consider Russia as the most advanced country in the world at the present, and though I believe in communism, I am not a Bolshevik. This is of course also your opinion. I believe I agree with you at nearly every point and believe myself I can *almost* always understand you quite correctly.<sup>14</sup>

Before sending the letter, Zhang Shenfu added the word “almost” just before “always”. This was his only acknowledgement that there might be a gulf between himself and Russell. It was, however, a momentary concession. Over

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14 Dated 10 Nov. 1910 (RA).

all, Zhang believed that he understood Russell fully. More importantly, he was convinced he had found in Russell's philosophy a key to a new Chinese thought. In 1920 Zhang Shenfu was convinced that the British logician's lectures and writings were true and sufficient onto themselves. That conviction would erode over the years that followed their 1920 meeting.

*11 June 1981:* Today is our most extensive conversation about mathematical logic. Zhang Shenfu is explaining, line by line, a narrative "poem" he wrote in 1960. As a diversion from illness and political repression Zhang had composed this ten-page overview of the entire history of mathematical logic.

As always, our conversation – and the "poem" – starts and ends with Bertrand Russell. Even as Zhang reviews his appreciation for the contributions of Leibniz, Boole, Pierce, Jevons and other pioneers in mathematical logic, he reserves highest praise for Russell: "It is Russell who sets the whole field of mathematical logic on a firm theoretical foundation. His contribution is the greatest. He has expended great effort to rebuild philosophy through the theory of types, through the theory of descriptions and through the logic of relations."

I have a hard time following his list of technical developments in logic. It is hard enough to thread my way through the thickets of Zhang's political career. This material on mathematical logic is tougher still. How am I to make sense of Chinese words for Russell's *Principia Mathematica* – when I don't even understand them in English? All the names of Westerners who have moved forward the history of mathematical philosophy are now in front of me – in Chinese! An almost hopeless puzzle.

I am not even sure what all these names mean to Zhang Shenfu now in his late old age. Leibniz, Boole, Pierce, and Gödel appear as so many logical symbols in Zhang's condensed history of mathematical logic. Sometimes I have the feeling that these names are like mantras, incantations· that Zhang Shenfu uses to maintain some philosophical lucidity in old age.

But this is not the case with Russell. Russell's work remains real, detailed and richly nuanced in Zhang Shenfu's mind. And today, he wants to underscore his own contribution to clarifying Russell's thought in China:

I was the first to translate most of Russell's key texts into Chinese. Others followed with longer books, more technical works. But I introduced all the key phrases, all the key themes. I was the first to notice and to emphasize what was new in Russell's thought. For example, I was the first to emphasize the concept of philosophy as "the science of the possible" – though I

am not sure where this concept appears in Russell's work. I was also the first to translate and interpret the logical concept of *guilun* – from the English “falsification” – which is fundamental for all of logical analysis.

I also translated the concept of “analysis” very differently from all others. I used the Chinese term *jiexi* instead of the more commonly used *fenxi*. Why, you wonder? Because I believe *jiexi* is more logical. It also sounds more new somehow. *Fenxi* suggests something being cut up, scattered, severed – as if by one blow. *Jiexi*, by contrast is not so simple.

How is it more complex, you ask? I feel that there are many more steps involved in *jiexi*. When something is subjected to logical analysis, it is a slow, systematic operation. *Fenxi* was widely accepted as a synonym for “analysis” when I began my work on Russell. But I did not think it conveys the full implications of Russell's thought. It was too simple. So I made an innovation through translation. Maybe this is my most important contribution to clarifying Russell's work in twentieth-century China.

*Fenxi* vs. *jiexi* – this strikes me, at first, as a very simplistic claim by a man who wants to convince me of his grasp of the “complexities” of Russell's thought. But, the more I listen to Zhang Shenfu, the more I read about him, the more I understand that his philosophical commitment revolves around words, around specific turns of phrase. He is nothing if not a philosopher of the word. And in Russell – through Russell – Zhang Shenfu has found a new vocabulary of his thought.

So, I go back to 1920, to the year in which Zhang Shenfu made the most concentrated effort to introduce Russell's vocabulary to Chinese readers. This is the year in which he chose to translate logical “analysis:” as *jiexi* instead of *fenxi*. This is the year that he became convinced that Russell's logic opened up a new path in scientific philosophy. This is the year in which Zhang became convinced that philosophy is the science of the possible. This is also the year in which he began to develop a more independent philosophical outlook. From 1920 on, Zhang Shenfu expressed his thoughts by clarifying words. He believed that truth lay in words. In words, too, lay the significance of Russell for China.

*16 March 1920:* Russell has not yet landed in Shanghai, but already Zhang Shenfu is defending him in Beijing. Seven months before his mentor began to lecture on philosophy, logic and social issues in China, in Chinese intellectual life, Zhang is already on the alert against any possible misreadings. He is especially concerned with how John Dewey – currently lecturing in China – might distort or eclipse Russell's philosophy in China.



In a letter to the editor of the most influential newspaper in North China, the *Chenbao*, Zhang Shenfu takes issue with Dewey's characterization of Russell:

The night before last, Mr. Dewey talked about Russell as a despairing pessimist. In fact, Russell stands for ethical neutrality (*lunli zhongli*). Russell stands beyond judgement in all categories of thought. ... Furthermore, Dewey is thoroughly mistaken when he describes Russell's philosophy as elitist. This leads us to think of him as somehow anti-democratic. In fact, Russell is a thorough realist who upholds logical atomism (*duoli yuanzi lun*) and the principle of absolute pluralism (*duoyuan lun*). Russell's philosophical method is to dissect all categories of thought, be they political, scientific or philosophical. To make this clear I have translated his piece on "Dreams and Facts" which appeared first in the January issue of *Athenaeum* and was reprinted again in the February, 1920 issue of *Dial*.<sup>15</sup>

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Less than two months after Russell publishes something in the West, Zhang Shenfu was ready to defend and explain his position in Beijing. Zhang's vigilant alertness testifies to his admiration for Russell. Admiration, in turn, enables Zhang to quarrel with the ignorance of his contemporaries.

30 October 1920: Zhang Shenfu enters the fray of public debate again. He is defending Russell's philosophical position once more. Now that his British mentor has set foot on Chinese soil, interest in his ideas is spreading like wildfire among young Chinese intellectuals. Zhang Shenfu is even more on guard against distortions. On this day, Zhang is picking a bone with a young Chinese philosopher, Zhang Dongsun.

Though not much older than Zhang Shenfu, Zhang Dongsun has an already established reputation as political activist. He is an associate of Liang Qichao and editor of the Shanghai based *Shishi xin bao*. By October 1920, Zhang Dongsun had produced Chinese translations of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*. He was also looking for a spiritual ally in the battle against Bolshevism. Having heard about Russell's negative reaction to the Soviet Union, and about Russell's reservations about the applicability of Marxist analysis to the Chinese situation, Zhang Dongsun is beginning to take an interest in Russell's philosophy. Zhang Shenfu lost no time in taking Zhang Dongsun to task for misreading Russell. Anti-Bolshevik ideas could not be taken as a common ground. Zhang Shenfu is convinced that Russell is far more complex than Zhang Dongsun would like to believe. In yet another letter to the editor of the North China daily, *Chenbao*, Zhang Shenfu

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15 "Ji bianzhe" (Letter to the Editor), *Chenbao*, 16 March 1910, p. 4. [Dewey's lecture is "Russell's Philosophy", *Russell* no. II (autumn 1973): 3-9. – Ed.]

quarrels with Zhang Dongsun's interpretation of Russell's philosophical realism. As always, his argument revolves around words:

Mr. Zhang Dongsun's is thoroughly misreading Russell when he describes his philosophy with the Chinese words *shiyong zhuyi*. The English equivalent for this is "pragmatism" not "realism". This is a major, fundamental mistake. Anyone who knows anything about contemporary philosophy and about Russell's work knows that Russell is a firm opponent of pragmatism. His view is very different from Bergson and Dewey, in the same way that his mathematics is fundamentally different from that of Galileo.

Since last year, when he began to study modern psychology, Russell has developed a new theory which suggests that there is no difference between mind and matter. They are both part of a continuum of varied perception. In this respect, Russell's theories are quite close to those of William James. Russell's idea that "truth propositions correspond to actual facts" is nonetheless different from James' notion that "truth is an assumption we need in order to proceed with the work of philosophy." It is also very different from Dewey's notion that "truth is an assumption about what works in a given situation." The difference in their positions is amply evident in the *Principia Mathematica* and in other of Russell's works. So how can one of our so-called illustrious commentators make such a fundamental mistake?<sup>16</sup>

Setting words straight – this was Zhang Shenfu's philosophical ambition in 1920. And has remained ever since. Defending Russell's "realism" in the public gave Zhang an opportunity to defend his own philosophical position. Each time he translated a work by or wrote about the British logician, Zhang was, in effect, stretching the limits of his own language and thought.

In the same month that he took on Zhang Dongsun, Zhang Shenfu also edited a special issue of *New Youth* dedicated to Bertrand Russell. This was a rare opportunity to make an enduring impact on the most inquisitive minds in China. *New Youth* – the most cosmopolitan publication of the day – had only three special issues in its entire publishing history: one dedicated to Ibsen in June 1918, one dedicated to Marx and Marxism in May 1919, and the one dedicated to Russell in October 1920. As special editor of the October issue, Zhang Shenfu had an opportunity to set the tone for subsequent Chinese discussions of Russell.

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16 "Ji bianzhe" (Letter to the Editor), *Chenbao*, 30 Oct. 1920, p. 4.

*October 1920:* Zhang's introduction to the Russell bibliography in *New Youth* is focused on linguistic and philosophical issues. The emphasis is a bit odd in light of the fact that Zhang Shenfu, like other young Chinese, was amply aware of Russell as a social theorist and activist for peace. Russell's views on free marriage, women's rights and socialism were of immediate interest to young radicals of the May Fourth era.

Nonetheless, Zhang Shenfu's introduction to *New Youth* emphasizes Russell's contribution to scientific philosophy. This essay dwells on the significance of "new realism" in British philosophy and traces its evolution from G. E. Moore to Russell. In it, Zhang takes great care to explain Russell's "key dictum" that: "whenever possible, logical constructions are to be substituted for inferred entities." Zhang is clearly at great pain to find the right Chinese word for Russell's method of "logical atomism".

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He finally hits upon the rather cumbersome but evocative Chinese expression "*mingli yuanzi lun*". With this in mind, he argues that philosophy can be placed on a realistic foundation. Unlike other philosophers in the past-and even contemporaries – Russell does not use logical analysis to examine only philosophical statements. For him, logical atomism is a powerful method of investigation and justification beyond philosophy. It takes philosophy out into the world. Logical analysis (*mingli jixifa*) is the most important recent invention. "It makes philosophy truly scientific."<sup>17</sup>

With this essay on Russell, Zhang Shenfu established himself as a Russell expert, not just a Russell admirer. His mission, however, would not remain unchallenged. Many others became more expert, such as the Western trained logician, Jin Yuelin. Some, very close to Zhang Shenfu as Liang Shuming, called into question Zhang's admiration for Russell.

*March 1921, Shanghai:* Zhang Shenfu is in Paris organizing a small cell for the Chinese Communist Party. Russell is lying ill in Beijing, given up for dead according to one Japanese newspaper. Zhang's boyhood friend, Liang Shuming goes public with his reservations about Russell as a philosopher and moralist. Liang's essay is published in a major Shanghai daily, under the title "My Reservations about Russell".

Liang starts the critique of Zhang Shenfu's philosophical mentor with the following acknowledgement:

To my friend Zhang Shenfu who already loves Russell's theories. Over the past, seven, eight years he has not stopped talking about and praising

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17 Zhang Shenfu, "Luosu" (Russell), *Xin qingnian*, 8, no. 2, Oct. 1920, p. 1.

Russell's theories. Following Mr. Zhang's urgings, I have also tried to read Russell's works and to like them. And in fact found that some aspects of his theories accord well with my own thought – such as his social psychology. Also his theory of impulsion [here Liang uses the English word] is quite coherent.

I also found Russell's theories of cognition and of the essential continuity of all matter very suggestive. Last year, when Russell passed through Nanjing, he gave a very convincing lecture on the subject using the example of the concept of "hat" to prove that hats seen by people in the present are nothing more than extensions of hats that they have seen before-though they might not actually be the hats bought originally. So I accept some of Russell's theories. But my dissatisfaction with Russell's thought is more serious. I am full of doubt about its foundation.

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What gives me great unease about Russell is the way he criticizes-quite unfairly and ignorantly the theories of Bergson. [Liang's favourite Western thinker.] Although I do not know much about mathematical logic, still, I have deep reservations about Russell's unscholarly attitude in intellectual debate. It is well known that Russell opposes Bergson. But he has never bothered to understand the other's point of view. In Beijing, he attacked Bergson for "mythical idealism" without any basis at all.

In conclusion, Liang again pays tribute to Zhang Shenfu's overview of Western thought-while continuing his critique of the philosopher Zhang admired:

Finally, I also want to warn my readers about the quest for an all encompassing, comprehensive philosophy. Truths attained through such comprehensive philosophies might sound good. Indeed, they appear to be perfect in their claim to certainty. But the real truth is always more complex. It is neither as pleasant nor as fine sounding as Russell likes to claim.

A scholar is an expert only in his own field. Outside of it, he is just a commoner. Zhang Shenfu is right in saying that "Today's philosophy belongs either to the Russell's school or to that of Bergson." One is a leader in rationalism, the other is a leader in non-rational thought. Russell and Bergson are the two greatest contemporary philosophers. Although they are different, each has a claim to truth.

But from Russell's short-sighted words it is evident he is not open to learning. He seeks for truth, but cannot attain it. In this Russell has forsaken the outlook of a true scholar. I write this not only to criticize Russell.

There are many people who discuss philosophical issues the same way as Russell does. I have been feeling pity for them for a long time now. The reason that such persons cannot be true scholars is they are not prudent in their outlook. They do not know that only one who is calm, careful and insightful can be a truly great philosopher.<sup>18</sup>

Was Liang Shuming talking about Zhang Shenfu here? Did he sense already in 1921 that Zhang – China's foremost Russell expert and public defender of the British logician – did not have the inner justification of a "great philosopher"? Liang Shuming said as much to me during our first meeting on 29 April 1983. In 1921, however, Liang did not yet have the evidence of Zhang's life – a lifetime spent in the teaching of logic and political activism. Nonetheless, Liang was already emphasizing the need for "calm" and "prudence". Zhang never treasured these as much as Liang, and never did produce a single coherent work of original philosophy. By 1921, Zhang Shenfu, unlike Liang Shuming, was deeply attracted to comprehensive philosophies. He was already embarked on the search for an encompassing answer. Mathematical logic seemed to promise this through its formulas and step by step process of deductive reasoning. Mathematical logic eventually gave way to dialectical materialism, and finally, to an idiosyncratic combination of Russell and Confucius.

To the end of his life in 1986, Zhang Shenfu was aware of his failure to convert Liang Shuming to Russell's point of view. Nonetheless, he took endless pride in having exposed Liang to the works of Bertrand Russell. Zhang remained a critically minded Russell expert while Liang went on to become a philosopher in his own right.

The evolution of Zhang Shenfu's own writing and teaching career, however, shows that he – like Liang – was far from blind to Russell's shortcomings. Although Zhang never wrote a detailed critique of his British mentor, his philosophical journeys took him far from Russell's arrogant certainties. In all the far-flung journeys through Confucianism and dialectical materialism, however, Zhang maintained his interest in Russell's thought. Over and over again he translated or abstracted the latest book by the prolific Englishman. Over and over again, he expresses his admiration for the political courage manifested in Russell's stand against war and Fascism. Over and over again, Zhang showed that he enjoyed "Bertie", the irreverent private man inside Russell, the public philosopher.

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18 Liang Shuming, "Dui Luosu zhi buman" (My Reservations about Russell), in *Shuming sahou wenlu* (Liang Shuming's Writings after the Age of Thirty) (Shanghai: 1930; Taiwan reprint, 1971), pp. 103-5.

1 May 1931: Zhang Shenfu is writing his most personal essay about Russell. It is a confession of his enduring interest in the man who invited him to tea in Beijing in November 1920. The essay is a meditation on “What Russell Loves and What Russell Hates”. It is also an oblique recognition that Zhang’s interest in the man behind the thought might not be enough to nurture prolonged philosophical work in the Chinese context.

By 1931, Zhang had made his imprint as a Russell expert on Chinese intellectual life. He had produced translations and interpretations of Russell’s works in two distinctive periods: the first during the May Fourth Movement, 1919-20, the second in the wake of the failure of political revolution, in 1927-28. Whereas the first period was marked by careful introduction of key terms in Russell’s analytical logic, the second was marked by an attempt to delve into the scientific and social foundations of Russell’s work. It began with a translation of Russell’s 1927 essay “Is Science Superstitious?” and went on with essays on “The Meaning of Meaning”, on “A Free Man’s Worship”, on “The ABC of Relativity” and on “Russell’s New Views of the Atom”.

But translation is one thing. Writing a book about Russell is quite another. And this is exactly what Zhang Shenfu kept putting off and putting off. In May 1931 – recently appointed Professor of Logic to the prestigious Philosophy Department of Qinghua University – he is still imagining that he is going to write such a book. He never did.

Instead, Zhang Shenfu wrote yet another translation – essay published in the *Qinghua University Weekly*. This piece centres around a recent interview in *The Little Review* in which Russell spoke about his loves and hates.<sup>19</sup> Zhang’s preface to the Russell interview contains his confession of a frustrated desire:

I have been wanting to write something about Russell for a long time. He will be 60 years old next May. I very much wanted to write a big, thick book about his thought by way of congratulation. What I have here instead, is sort of a foreword to that project. It is only an expression of my personal interest in Russell.

But actually if you stop to think about, what other criteria is there for truth but that of interest, or rather beauty. What is life for, if not for the expression, the fulfilment of interest? But whether my interests will find an echo among readers is beyond my ability to predict.<sup>20</sup>

19 “Confessions”, *The Little Review*, 12, no. 2. (May 1929): pp. 72-3.

20 “Guanyu Luosu” (About Russell), *Qinghua zhoukan*, 1 May 1931, pp. 8-9.

Zhang's self-doubt here is coloured by the conflict between the desire to write a "big, thick book" about his British mentor and the proclivity to follow a wide array of "interests". Zhang Shenfu never did write that "big, thick" book. Not on Russell or any other subject. This set him apart from Liang Shuming, whose many books won him an assured place in the annals of twentieth-century Chinese philosophy.

The *Little Review* piece, nonetheless, allowed Zhang Shenfu to look behind the solemn aura of Russell as the public philosopher. Zhang excerpted the interview for Chinese readers because he was convinced that "among the fifty famous people interviewed by this journal, Russell's answers were most interesting, most profound, and humorous."

To make his point more concrete, Zhang goes on:

When asked what do you like best and would have liked to be Russell answered: "I would have liked to know physics best and be a physicist."

"What are you most afraid of? I fear most becoming a boring companion to my friends. When was the happiest and the most unhappy time in your life? The unhappiest was the time of my birth. The happiest will probably be when I die."

"What do you like most and least about yourself? What I like the most about myself is that many people like me. What I dislike is that I hate myself." (*Ibid.*)

Even with Zhang Shenfu's appreciative introduction, Chinese readers could not but raise eyebrows at the kind of man revealed in the answers to the *Little Review*. Zhang himself concludes on a critical note. On the face of it, he is troubled by Russell's repeated praise of physics – the source of their old disagreement from 1920, when Zhang was quite taken by psychology and biology:

Russell says that physics is the most important realm of theoretical research, and that it helps us to understand everything including social phenomena. But ten years ago, I already discussed with Russell the importance of psychology for philosophy. Even then, he told me, philosophy must rely more on physics. It is a pity, though, that he never developed the specific reasons for his preference of physics. (p. 10)

The question of Russell's infatuation with physics is but the tip of the iceberg. Beneath it lies a host of buried doubts about the social usefulness of the kind of cool, mocking rationalism that informed Russell's answers to the *Little Review*.

How useful could such rationalism be for a thinker like Zhang Shenfu – or for a country like China – that needed a more compassionate analysis of society and a more comprehensive view of. The dynamics of social change?

*Spring 1897:* Using the pen name Orlando, the twenty-five-year-old Bertrand Russell writes a brief essay entitled “Self-Appreciation”. In it he lays bare his likes and dislikes even more sharply than in his subsequent answers to the *Little Review*:

I am quite indifferent to the mass of human creatures, though I wish, as a purely intellectual person, to discover some way in which they might all be happy. I wouldn't sacrifice myself to them, though their unhappiness, at moments, about once every three months, gives me a feeling of discomfort. ... I care for very few people and have several enemies-two or three at least whose pain is delightful to me.<sup>21</sup>

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Zhang Shenfu did not read this extreme version of Russell's antihumanism. But he sensed it in the answers to the *Little Review*. Zhang had a glimpse of Russell's anti-humanism even earlier, in 1920, when he had tried to convince Russell of the importance of biology – the science of living, changing human beings. Russell, on his side, remained firmly committed to the razor-sharp approach of analytical logic. It helped to cut away, not through, the muddy problems of social life.

Through his long life, Zhang Shenfu never lost his interest in Russell the man, or even in Russell the philosopher. But the chilly, formalistic core in his mentor's world view forced Zhang to look beyond Russell. Though he did not say as much in 1931, Zhang Shenfu could not deny the truth in Liang Shuming's 1921 accusation: Russell *was* arrogant and one-sided. For a corrective, Zhang Shenfu, like Liang Shuming, turned to the rich traditions of native Chinese social thought.

### 3 Chinese Roots

*16 June 1981:* We are talking about the connection between materialism and realism. Most of it is above my head – partly because Zhang Shenfu tends to drift off into a low mumble whenever we circle back to the ideas that have become code words for him more. than five decades ago. Once in a while, however, his voice clears. It rises out of his chest unencumbered by old

21 In *Papers I*: 72. It is discussed at length from a critical perspective by Sidney Hook in his review “The Philosopher as a Young Man”, *The New York Times Book Review*, 29 Jan. 1984, pp. 7-8.



battles. Then he surprises himself, and me, with something new about the evolution of his philosophical world view.

Today, Zhang stops in the middle of a sentence about the utility of Western logic in fostering a scientific, realistic view of the world. He adds:

But Russell, you see, ended up so one-sided in his philosophical outlook. His philosophy is useful in seeing only discrete parts of a problem. I wanted to think about the whole. In many ways Russell was biased. He opposed materialism. But materialism and idealism are just two sides of the same coin. Materialism does not see the heart (or "mind", *xin*) while idealism fails to appreciate outward realities.

My own philosophy seeks for a more comprehensive view of experience, for a more thorough realism, for an expansive objectivity. So I went back to certain ideas in Chinese philosophy – especially to the Confucian notions of *ren* (tolerance, humanism) and *zhong* (the unprejudiced golden mean).

"But didn't Russell himself hold Confucianism in contempt?" I ask. I remind Zhang Shenfu that the British logician himself wrote in *The Problem of China* that he was "unable to appreciate the merits of Confucius." Russell went as far as to say that: "His writings are largely occupied with trivial points of etiquette" and "his main concern is to teach people how to behave correctly on various occasions."<sup>22</sup> Zhang loses no time in answering me: "Yes, it is true Russell did not understand or respect Confucius much. But that is just another example of his one-sided view of things. My philosophy took the best in each, but never blindly. And to this day, the two philosophers I admire most deeply are Russell and Confucius."

The problem of the "worship" of Confucianism did not begin – or end – in 1934 with Jiang Kaishek's New Life campaign or with Puyi mounting the throne of Manchukuo. It did not subside until the war against Japan was over. Zhang Shenfu, himself, never tired of worrying about what it would take to build "national confidence" in a protracted war of resistance to Japan. He continued to write essays about the need to bring back Confucius – but always with critical eye. The problem in Zhang's view, was political. The solution lay in something personal: Zhang Shenfu's own quest for a philosophical world view that modified the cold, harsh edge of Russell's dissective genius.

*27 September 1932:* Zhang Shenfu has just edited the fourth instalment of his special column for the North China daily, *Da Gong Bao*. Entitled "Trends in World Thought", the new project brings Zhang a national readership and new

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22 *The Problem of China* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1922), p. 190.

social contacts (Sun Junquan among them). For the moment, Zhang Shenfu is concentrating on introducing readers to the latest and the best of Western and Marxist philosophy. In this column he also takes the opportunity to continue his episodic essays that began in his 1931 book, *Thought as Such*. The new essay series is entitled “Thought as Such – Continued”. In this series, Zhang allows himself to explore anything that comes to his mind.

In today’s instalment, Zhang recalls a passage by the ancient Taoist relativist, Zhuangzi. Then he proceeds to muse about Russell’s extreme scepticism and how it prevents Russell from penetrating the emotional component of reality. Finally, Zhang concludes, Eastern and Western philosophy have their own disparate genius:

Oneness and universality are the strong points of Eastern philosophy. Multiplicity and distinction are what is prized in Eastern philosophy. Russell is certainly the most inspired among those who talk of the many and who distinguishes himself by analyzing differences between them. He believes that oneness and universality are nothing but superstitions.

Someone who seeks to understand multiplicity and distinctions cannot but emphasize logic, cannot but seek absolute certainty.

My own goal is to glimpse the One among the many. I seek, through distinctions, to arrive at what is truly universal. When thinking of One I try not to forget the many. I moderate what exists with an understanding of what is universal.

Then, as if the implicit reputation of Russell’s dissective genius were not enough, Zhang asks rhetorically: “Is absolute knowledge anything but superstition?”<sup>23</sup>

The man who was once so taken by Russell’s claims for absolute certainty in the 1910s, now uses Russell’s own criticism of “superstition” to indict as “vain” the quest for absolute certainty.

*8 April 1980:* My first meeting with Zhang Shenfu’s younger brother Zhang Dainian – a tall, grey-haired man, who is a well-known expert on traditional Chinese thought in the Beijing University Philosophy Department. He’s a more traditional scholar than Zhang Shenfu. Nonetheless, Zhang Dainian has shared the political fate of his revolutionary older brother. Both were condemned as “rightists” in 1957.

23 “Ji suosi, 4” (Thought as Such – Continued, No. 4), 1932, reprinted in *Suosi* (Beijing: 1986), p. 135.

Like the first-born son, Zhang Dainian has made a professional career of philosophy. He teaches and writes about traditional Chinese thought. Today, he recalls his first articles about philosophy published in 1933-34. Under Zhang Shenfu's guidance these pieces appeared in the special column "Trends in World Thought". Like Zhang Shenfu, Zhang Dainian, wrote a great deal about Russell:

In fact I translated some of the most technical parts of Russell's work into Chinese. Then, I decided to turn all my attention to the history of China's own traditions of thought. My brother also became interested in Chinese philosophy. Later, and never whole-heartedly.

Our conversation drifts back and forth over Zhang Shenfu's philosophical maturation. His younger brother, an urbane, highly trained, careful historian of philosophy is now helping me to untangle the various, often contradictory threads in Zhang Shenfu's work. He points out how important Russell was in deepening Zhang Shenfu's interest in mathematical logic. Then, Zhang Dainian adds, "Zhang Shenfu also gained a great deal by not cutting himself off from traditional Chinese ideas."

In our conversation today, Zhang Dainian makes a great effort to explain to me the significance of Zhang Shenfu's attachment to the Confucian idea of *ren* – active humanness:

This was not easy to do in the ideologically torn world of Chinese philosophy in the 1930s. Among dogmatic materialists and narrow-minded Confucians, Zhang Shenfu stood out like a light. He was conversant with the latest ideas from the West. And yet he found it possible – indeed necessary – to affirm the value of certain key ideas from Confucian thought.

Zhang Dainian tells me where to find Zhang Shenfu's scattered remarks on the ideal of *ren*:

The best place to start is in the introduction to *Thought as Such*. There, the mathematical logician already credits Confucius with a truly balanced view of the world. There you can see how Zhang Shenfu passed beyond his early infatuation with narrowly scientific rationality.

Zhang Shenfu insisted that a true understanding of the Confucian "middle" necessarily demanded struggle against injustice in contemporary society. By the mid-1930s, Zhang Shenfu's quarrel with a socially conformist Confucianism had escalated into full-fledged war. He was now more convinced than ever that true equanimity required an active commitment to see the world as it really was. He had made the leap from "benevolence" to "objectivity".

By 1932, Zhang Shenfu believed himself to be a resident of the “abode of objectivity”. He had a new concept, a world view of his own making. *Da keguan*, however, the phrase as well as the expansive state of mind that nurtured it, was short-lived. Zhang Shenfu was swept up in a new wave of political activism. As Japanese aggression mounted in North China, it was less and less feasible to maintain the lofty standpoint of either “pure” or “expansive” objectivity. By 1935 Zhang Shenfu was pulled – or rather, rushed – into the fray of yet another patriotic movement. This time it was the movement for national salvation. Political activism, in turn, opened up new philosophical questions for him. During the war with Japan, Zhang became increasingly drawn to dialectical materialism. The graceful bridge he had wanted to build between Russell and Confucius, between Chinese humanism and analytical logic, collapsed under the pressure of political events.