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Atoms of Logic Across Space and Time: How Bertrand Russell's visit to China changed history both East and West

*Must one who holds to expansive objectivity
Dwell in the abode of impartiality all alone?*

Zhang Shenfu, "Random Thoughts on Russell," 1932

One hundred years may just be enough time to piece together what history has torn asunder: In this case, a unique moment of cultural connection between China and the West which had been fought over and forgotten without due attention to seeds which continue to nourish freedom of thought even today. The scholarly community and the public at large are indebted to the pioneering efforts of Jana S. Rošker and Jan Vrhovski, two Central European sinologists, ideally situated to excavate the significance of this pivotal encounter in world history.

Both Bertrand Russell and his Chinese interlocutors in 1920-21 would be delighted to know that their meeting became the focus of *Studia Humanitas Asiatica*—a series coming out of the small and broadly-cultured nation of

Slovenia. There has been much writing in English and Chinese about John Dewey and Rabindranath Tagore—two other important philosophers who visited Beijing around Russell’s sojourn. Retrospectively, one might argue that the British mathematician and logician had a more enduring impact upon questions of mind, matter and human freedom than the other two “sages” lionized by young Chinese intellectuals during late 1910s.

Jana S. Rošker and Jan Vrhovski have provided a new historical context for understanding the Russell visit by careful analysis of the events that preceded and followed the lectures of 1920-21. Those familiar with the May 4th Movement and its New Culture aspirations will find a shift in paradigm here, which honors the complexity of thought and ideologies of that crucial time. While “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy” were strongly admired by students and faculty who took part in the movement, the foundation for reasoning about these key concepts remained flimsy indeed.

Enter Bertrand Russell (accompanied by his outspoken feminist lover Dora Black), who for nearly a year gave talks, held meetings, wrote essays attended dinners—all in the hope of placing China’s radical changes upon a more solid philosophical, scientific footing. As Rošker and Vrhovski document so well, Russell was learning as much as he was teaching. He called himself a “Communist” yet spoke out against the atrocities of the nascent Soviet regime. He called himself an objectivist, yet he was just learning to incorporate the theories of psychology and psychoanalysis into a rigorous analysis of mind. He called himself a mathematician who had probed atoms of logic with new symbolism while also grappling with Einstein’s theory of gravity and quantum mechanics.

The encounter between this renowned-yet-still-questing philosopher and the seasoned heirs of Confucius upon China’s changing political landscape provides a marvelous example of mutual influence, cross cultural respect and the birth of a new lexicon for science and human freedom. To be sure, the ceaseless and brutal revolutions which followed Russell’s visit to China left little time or space for thinking about the utility of mathematical logic for the advancement of critical thought. Mindless loyalty became the required diet for intellectuals during the long Mao regime.

All along, Bertrand Russell’s ideas continued to ferment beneath the surface. Now, the time is ripe to acknowledge the formative impact of the 1920-21 visit and how it continues to vitalize philosophy both in China and in the West. During the New Cultural Movement of 1916-1921, there were only three special issues published by the flagship journal entitled *Xin Qing Nian—La*

Jeunesse—New Youth. The first was on Ibsen, edited by Hu Shi; the second on Karl Marx, edited by Li Dazhao; and the last on Bertrand Russell edited by Zhang Shenfu. When I first met Zhang on November 12th, 1979, he made sure that I (and all the Chinese Party officials who surrounded us in the reception room of the Peking National Library) understood that Russell was the most important thinker for China in the 20th century. Over the course of the following five years (during which I wrote an oral history of Zhang Shenfu), I came to grasp more deeply the loneliness of intellectuals who had sought to reform their country with the aid of critical reflection.

Unappreciated at first, and later actively persecuted by Communist authorities, thinkers like Zhang Shenfu longed for companions in the abode of “expansive objectivity.”

Now a century later, they have been found. Jana S. Rožker and Jan Vrhovski are two trailblazers in a global effort to reconstruct the genuine complexity of history in a way that opens pathways for political hope and further scholarly research both in China, and abroad. Rožker and Vrhovski are our guides in a journey that calls to mind T.S. Eliot’s words in the last of his “Four Quartets:”

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

A century after Bertrand Russell arrived in Shanghai, we are finally hearing the original voices, qualms and debates that help us understand this unique moment in intellectual and world history, truly for the first time.