Russell and China—100 Years of a Meaningful Intercultural Interaction

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Russell and China—100 Years of a Meaningful Intercultural Interaction

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When I went to China, I went to teach; but every day that I stayed I thought less of what I had to teach them and more of what I had to learn from them. (Bertrand Russell, 1921)

Introduction

Bertrand Russell is one of the most important scholars in the foundation and development of modern epistemology and logic, especially mathematical logic, in the 20th century. It is well known that his studies in these fields have had a remarkable impact in both Europe and the United States. However, the extremely significant role he played in stimulating Chinese interest in these subjects is still virtually unknown. As we will see from numerous contributions to this special issue of Contemporary Chinese Thought, his visit to China also had a major impact on the development of modern Chinese humanism. By presenting various aspects of his visit to China, which took place in 1920 and 1921, this issue thus introduces the background and important intellectual and theoretical legacy of Russell’s work in China.

On the threshold of the 20th century, in an era of sweeping changes in human apprehension of social and material reality, Bertrand Russell was invited to China by some of the most influential Chinese intellectuals of the time. In Russell’s life, this was already a relatively mature period, for by this time he had already published some of his most important works, such as The Problems of Philosophy (1912), Principia Mathematica (1913), Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy (2014), Principles of Social Reconstruction (1916), Proposed Roads to Freedom: Socialism, Anarchism, and Syndicalism (1918), and Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy (1919). At the time of his visit, these works had already made him an established scholar and theoretician, not only in Europe, but also in the United States and, as we will see, also in Asia, especially China and Japan.

Russell arrived in China in the autumn of 1920 and stayed there for almost a year before continuing his visit to Eastern Asia and heading for Japan. In the first two decades of the century, China had already established all the necessary components for a fruitful dialogue and a vital meeting of Europe and the Middle Kingdom. In China, this was a period of all-embracing and all-pervading renewal, but also one in which the first confrontations with Western ideas and Western philosophy began to bear fruit. The origins of these exchanges, however, were not only difficult and sometimes painful for China, but also linked to an urgent need for a new cultural self-identification.
These circumstances had much to do with the specific political, economic, and ideational crisis in which China found itself on the edge between the 19th and 20th centuries. In order to better understand the full impact of Russell’s visit to China, we must first explore some of the key social and political circumstances that led up to this crucial historical moment.

**The “sick man of Asia” and the last breaths of the empire**

The all-encompassing social transformation that shaped China at the time of Russell’s visit was rooted in the second half of the 19th century. China’s defeat in the two Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) signaled the beginning of the end of its imperial status, as well as political, economic, and cultural sovereignty (Lipušček 2013, 38). The Treaty of Nanjing (1842), which was signed immediately after the conclusion of the first Opium War, forced open the doors of the Middle Kingdom, which had always insulated it from foreign interference. Because China’s own industrial revolution was still in its infancy, the domestic economy quickly succumbed to the pressure of foreign products and competition. At the same time, the traditional class of landlords and officials sought to preserve its political and economic privileges, resulting in an astronomical increase in taxes and rents for the mostly agrarian population. As described by contemporary Chinese historians, the general population now had to support a twofold burden:

the Chinese in the interior still had to endure the yoke of feudal burdens, while at the same time being victimized by the violent invasion of foreign imperialism. It thus lived in infinite misery. (Liu Wenying 2002 part 2, 655)

This situation led to numerous revolts and uprisings in the latter half of the 19th century, directed against either the Manchurian government or Western colonial forces. The Taiping Rebellion (*Taiping Tianguo geming* 太平天国革命, 1858–1864) led by Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 further weakened the Manchurian government and contributed to an estimated 70 million deaths. The Self-Strengthening Movement (*zì qiáng yùn dòng*, 1861–1895) went on to have a tremendous impact upon the later development of Chinese thought by destabilizing the Sinocentric confidence of traditional Chinese moral, political, and philosophical ideals. Figures like Kang Youwei (康有为), Liang Qichao (梁啟超), and Tan Sitong (覃嗣同) all helped prepare the way for modern philosophical methods and attitudes and thus provided the modern intellectual foundation for reception of Bertrand Russell’s ideas in China later in the 20th century. While both the Tai Ping rebels and the advocates of the Self-Strengthening Movement were successfully suppressed by the Manchurian government, they directly contributed to its collapse in 1911, and thus to the eventual victory of the anti-imperial revolution (*Xinhai geming* 辛亥革命) and the founding of China’s first parliamentary republic (*Zhonghua minguo* 中华民国, 1911–1949). Periods of political and economic crisis in China have often created the conditions for tremendous innovation in Chinese thought, and the same was true at the dawn of the 20th century (Rošker 2008, 120).

In the wake of the tremendous challenges to traditional Chinese values, the Chinese intelligentsia initially found itself on the horns of a dilemma: In order to renew the nation’s cultural and political independence and sovereignty, it would need to acquire
modern Western technical and scientific knowledge. The path to cultural rebirth thus had to leave the traditional system of values and thought behind for one reconstructed from those thought to be better suited to modern conditions. Thus, there arose a paradox wherein the ideas being spread by Western usurpers paradoxically became prerequisites for China’s liberation.

Traditional philosophy could no longer offer a way to independence, prosperity and power, although it was impossible to completely sever the historical ties to its ideas; at the same time, the Chinese were confronted with the violent eruption of the West, while also being forced to learn from it. (Liu Wenying 2002, 656)

A fierce debate thus ensued among Chinese intellectuals on how best to appropriate Western thought without losing the essence of the Chinese tradition and the cultural identity connected with it. Faced with this dilemma, many scholars adopted the position of the conservative political theorist Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909), who coined the phrase “Chinese Learning as Substance, Western Learning for Application” (Zhong ti xi yong中體西用). Meanwhile, the wealthier classes had begun to educate their children abroad, especially in Europe and Japan, with the latter having come to represent an important bridge between China and the West. This Western-educated youth gradually came to form a new social class, the so-called “New Intellectuals,” who would play an important role in the political and cultural transformations of the first half of the 20th century and a key constituency for extended Russell’s influence in China.

As we approach the years of Russell’s arrival in China, we see two more radical currents taking shape among the Chinese intellectuals of this period. The first of these advocated the complete elimination of the Chinese tradition and a complete Westernization of culture and thought (Quan pan Xihua全盤西化), while the second advocated the renewal and rebirth (fu gu復古) of the Chinese tradition in the form of a new, leading culture (Zhongguo benwei wenhua中國本位文化).

The Republican period was characterized by pervasive instability. Under the guise of parliamentary democracy, government policies were determined by authoritarian ambitions and power struggles among rival generals, and with the start of World War I, Chinese intellectuals were further confronted with the bankruptcy of European political theories, with the major Western powers entering their own protracted spiral of devastation and bloodshed. With global events dampening the previous enthusiasm for progressive European thought, Chinese intellectuals began to demand a sweeping reform of thought and culture that finally exploded in the May Fourth Movement (Wusi yundong五四運動). Beginning on May 4, 1919, with student demonstrations in the Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the movement came to play a crucial role in the cultural, political, and intellectual modernization of Chinese society. Its main publication, The New Youth (Xin qingnian 新青年), which was founded by Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 in 1915, soon became the most influential journal of its kind for a new generation of Chinese intellectuals. The spirit of the new China was expressed in its demands for the abolition of obsolete Confucian thought and conservative structures, which were seen as hindering the free development of individuals and society. It also advocated equality between the sexes and free love, and the end of economic and political domination by the privileged classes. For the New Intellectuals, these demands formed the basis and preconditions for a more equitable distribution of the material and intellectual resources across
Chinese society. All these demands were naturally connected to the need for fundamental changes in the nation’s general mentality. The editors of The New Youth published articles in colloquial Chinese (Baihua 白話), and thus challenged the long-standing prestige language of classical Chinese (Wenyan 文言) as the only acceptable form of public writing. For this new class of Chinese thinkers, classical Chinese was seen not only as an anachronistic practice, but as a symbol of wasted national resources, as it required a lengthy and costly process of a classical education wholly disconnected from modern science and social thought. Furthermore, the exclusive use of classical Chinese meant that only a small minority of the privileged classes could read, let alone contribute to, written culture. Thus the “colloquial movement” (Baihua yundong 白話運動) became a cornerstone of the new Chinese culture, leading to a flowering of a new colloquial literature influenced by Western literary forms and canons and differing greatly from traditional literary form and content.

While the May 4th Movement would lay the foundation of Russell’s Chinese reception, there is one more set of crucial historical events that contribute to the overall historical context of his work in China. Not long after this new generation of scholars had hammered the final nails into the classical Chinese intellectual tradition, the nation was swallowed up in the struggle between the Communist (Gongchan dang 共產黨) and Nationalist (Guomin dang 國民黨) parties (Rosker 2008, 221) and the Japanese occupation of Manchuria (1931) and later invasion six years later. And as is well known, by the end of World War II (which in China was known as the Anti-Japanese War, Kangri zhanzheng 抗日戰爭) China erupted into civil war, which ended in 1949 with the victory of the Communists and the founding of the People’s Republic of China under the leadership of Mao Zedong (毛澤東) (1893–1976).

**Intellectual atmosphere in China by the time of Russell’s visit**

As we have seen, the 20th century was a period of continuous upheaval and sweeping social change for China. At the end of the 19th century, the nation found itself on the margins of the modern world, as part of its semicolonial periphery. While Western culture manifested itself at its most violent and aggressive in the form of economic and military invasions, Western philosophy, which entered China in the wake of Western capital and its troops, was seen mainly as an cultural challenge to be faced (Cheng 2002, 371).

The Western challenge was best expressed in the language of modern formal logic and analysis, and in the social function of reason as embodied in modern science and technology, as well as in Western ideas of the state, law, and democracy. At a more technical level, it also appeared in the form of Cartesian dualism and the structure of mutually contradictory polarities and in the formal frame of traditional European dialectics, as well as in the concepts and categories specific to the Western history of thought, such as the notions of substance, objectivity, truth, and so forth. Especially challenging were the elementary methodological conditions that determined this confusing set of new, mostly unknown categories and concepts, such as the demand for evidence or the formally flawless establishment of essential assumptions and conclusions, explicit argumentation, and accurately formulated definitions.
Despite the need to understand, explore, and apply Western ideas and ideals, the acceptance of these foreign theories was essentially a superficial phenomenon and the Chinese tradition of thought proved to be much more resistant and flexible than it had first appeared to be.

Although the Sinicized Marxism–Leninism that prevailed in China during the latter half of the 20th century was adopted as the new state ideology derived from Western theories, social functions continued to be regulated to a great extent by traditional Confucian concepts.

In traditional China, Confucianism served as a state doctrine, based upon ethical paradigms that were declared to derive directly from Confucius’s thoughts, as formulated in the 4th century BC. In this respect, the formal critique of all other ideologies was absolutely logical, due to their incompatibility with this paradigmatic “truth,” while on a symbolic level the “genuine” teachings of Confucius represented that legal instance that ensured, in the context of traditional culture, the generally accepted “propriety” (zheng 正) of social interactions, and especially the “proper” implementation of government policies. Based on this view of society, and its ideologies and values systems, it appears as perfectly logical that the educated elite should, during periods of crisis, seek a solution to social chaos by exploring and correcting the “implementation” of this ideological foundation of the state.

Although a dogmatism of this kind resembles the ideological functions of state religions in Western societies, the difference lies in the fundamental pragmatism of Confucian ethics, while the consequences of this difference are much more far-reaching than may first appear. And while it is definitely true that institutionalized Confucianism did not permit any critical questioning of the prevailing doctrine in the social sphere (i.e., in the area to which it actually referred), its neglect of the metaphysical sphere and the absence of any imperative to prove the accuracy of its ethical premises with nonsozial arguments meant that Confucianism—as opposed to Christian or Islamic religious systems—at least tolerated a certain subjective freedom.

With respect to comparative studies, the Chinese thinkers who lived and worked at the start of the century, and who were confronting Western discourses, set themselves two major tasks in terms of application. The first was to understand and interpret the old in the new, and the traditional in the modern. Because for them the West represented the new and modern, the second task was to understand and interpret Chinese tradition in the light of the West and to understand and interpret Western tradition in the light of China (Cheng 2002, 372).

Thus, the reinterpretation, renewed awareness, and reflection upon traditional values, adapted for the present time, were of crucial importance for the preservation of cultural identity, in terms of a system of ideational and ethical assumptions. Here, the New Intellectuals also had to deal with the need to research and create new frameworks of traditional systems of thought, especially with respect to the following three aspects (ibid., 374):

a. The reintegration of those theoretical patterns, methods, and categories of the autochthonous Chinese philosophical tradition that cannot be explained and understood within social and ideational contexts that do not belong to the
discourses of this tradition. This aspect, which is the most important of the three, implies the need for an adequate transformation of those traditional discourses that cannot be comprehended, applied, reproduced, or developed beyond the specific frameworks of the Chinese tradition. Hence, this aspect has been connected to the need for the analytical reconstruction of traditional concepts in the context of the modernization of social developments.

b. This process of self-understanding can only take place based on a twofold (and, in part, reciprocal) interpretation of philosophical terms and concepts, by which those that belong to the ancient Chinese tradition are interpreted in the context of modern Western paradigms, and vice versa.

c. After establishing the elementary commensurability of this sort for both systems, the results of this integral synthesis of both basic paradigms must be evaluated in intellectual and critical terms.

This final aspect may be the most problematic, since a paradigmatic evaluation requires “objective” or generally valid valuation criteria. More appropriate approaches, which would enable a more consistent, flexible, and autonomous axiology of philosophical theory suited to the era, might be found within the system of situationally determined interrelativeness, as contained in the philosophical discourses of the classical Daoists (Dao jia 道家) and Dialecticians (Bianzhe 辯者).

Clearly, however, a detailed survey of all the influential Chinese philosophers of the early 20th century would far exceed the scope and intention of the present introduction, which has as its principal aim the elucidation of the social and intellectual conditions defining the rise and growth of modern Chinese scientific and social theories as these pertain to Russell’s Chinese reception.

Chinese philosophy in the first half of the 20th century was still determined by the conditions of the decline of the premodern era. Almost all the theorists of this period were forced to deal with the ideas and contradictions imposed by the technologically incomparably more advanced Western countries. While the radical pro-Western intellectuals (Quan pan Xihua pai 全盤西化派) engaged in the iconoclastic repudiation of all traditional culture and sought to resolve China’s crisis through the complete Westernization of Chinese society, the more conservative intellectuals (Fugu pai 复古派) argued for a modernization of ancient, especially Confucian, thought, which they believed provided the only possible spiritual basis for reestablishing an independent and sovereign Chinese state. However, ultimately the majority of the intelligentsia preferred to follow a middle course, focusing their efforts on a possible synthesis of both traditions. Based on their command of Western philosophy, they tried to reinterpret their own tradition through the most appropriate methods for integrating Western systems of thought into the framework of traditional Chinese discourses. During this period, which lasted approximately until the outbreak of World War II, Chinese philosophy was distinguished by two main currents:

1. The first was characterized by a faith in progress and in the redemptive potential of reason and the natural sciences; in social terms it manifested itself in a wide
range of liberal ideologies, while philosophically it tended toward the neo-realistic and pragmatic discourses of the recent American philosophical schools.

2. The second current was instead distinguished by a comprehensive attempt to revitalize traditional (particularly Confucian and Neo-Confucian) thought by means of new influences borrowed or derived from Western systems. In this search for synthesis, the spirit of German idealism was especially important, while certain approaches of the Viennese circle also attracted a number of exponents of this current.²

In spite of all the complexity brought about by the encounters of two very different patterns of thought, semantic approaches, and methodological paradigms, the intellectual intermingling between China and the Euro-American regions grew continuously and almost explosively (Ogden 1982, 531). Chinese scholars of that time were struggling to consolidate a state that could appropriate the best and most suitable ideas of Western modernity, and a very important part of these explosive intercultural impacts and developments was Russell’s visit to China and the interactions he had with many of the most brilliant and influential Chinese intellectuals of the time. However, for many different reasons, his tour in China was often evaluated in a rather ambiguous manner:

Other thinkers, other ideas, left in their wake a cohesive coterie of Chinese devotees, determined to incorporate new insights, new methods, into their own plans for China’s future, committed to keeping contact with the source of inspiration. By contrast, Russell’s visit produced rapid disillusionment for many Chinese, widespread confusion among others, and a kind of half-hearted admiration on the part of a few, which seemed to spring as much from inertia, embarrassment, or the wish to be polite, as from intellectual or political commitment. (Ibid.)

However, in spite of the manifold and complex problems encountered in the process of transferring concepts and ideas that required a certain minimal level of social unity and modernity for their application, in a disrupted and technologically and scientifically underdeveloped country, many of Russell’s theoretical influences, especially those in the fields of logic and epistemology, but to a certain extent also in sociopolitical studies, had a lasting impact on the Chinese intelligentsia and their later ideational innovations. But the introduction of mathematical logic was perhaps his most important contribution to the further development of the scientific and intellectual bases of Chinese modernization.

It was indeed through Russell’s visit to China that interest in mathematical logic among Chinese scholars like Zhang Shenfu, Fu Zhongsun, and Zhang Bangming was kindled. It was also through Fu and Zhang’s translation of Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy that more scholars and students alike could get an excellent introduction to mathematical logic. And thanks to translation of Russell’s Principia Mathematica, mathematical logic was finally taught in China’s most prestigious universities. (Xu 2003, 193)

In a certain sense, Russell was the perfect guest for the Chinese academic world at that historical moment, due to his accomplishments in both mathematics and philosophy, and especially logic.
Russell’s encounter with China

Although, as we have seen, the adoption of Western scientific and theoretical thought was of crucial importance for China, Russell’s mission was not only to educate Chinese intellectuals and to impart new knowledge to the country. While it is certainly true that China at that time desperately needed Western scientific thought logic and technology, Russell was convinced that classical Chinese civilization could also offer the Western world a vision of the good life that differed from its own exaggerated and ultimately destructive dynamic of so-called “progress” under capitalism. He was profoundly interested in finding “a ‘third way’, as an alternative to both western capitalism and revolutionary socialism, which he had observed up close during an earlier visit to the Soviet Union” (“Bertrand Russell in China” 2017, 1). Hence, it is by no means coincidental that he closely followed the heated intellectual debates about the selection of the best political governance structure for China, which were coming out nationwide at the time of his visit (ibid.).

After returning to Europe, Russell wrote a booklet entitled The Problem of China. In this short work, he described his personal experiences in the country, offering readers many new insights and visions about this great, interesting, and at the time relatively unknown nation, which had in his view the potential to become one of the greatest powers in the world. He described the sociopolitical context of the country in great detail and offered a rigorous analysis of China’s political situation during the early 1920s, aiming to propose some practical answers to the most pressing questions of the day. In this context, he pointed out the importance of the constitution and legislation, but also the need for a strong and stable government. Only on such a basis could China, in his view, embark on a steady journey toward industrialization and technological progress.

On the other hand, Russell also devoted much of his time in China to learning about its culture. For him, it was clear that China was a profoundly civilized society with an esteemed history. He saw great potential in an intercultural exchange between Europe and China: “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” (ibid.).

He was convinced that China had a distinctive contribution to make to human civilization, and something more than mere quantity to add to the world’s mental possessions:

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)

On the other hand, however, Russell often pointed out that traditional Chinese culture was inadequate with regard to meeting current needs, and must give way to something radically new (Simpson 2020, 3). He also warned his Chinese friends against the dangers of colonial domination, pointing out that all the great powers were anxious to secure a share in the exploitation of China’s resources, and advising the government to
urgently develop more national strength than it had hitherto shown. Otherwise China would be—in his eyes—unable to withstand aggressions fomented by foreign industrialists (ibid., 4).

However, what China needed most was undoubtedly science and technology. Russell knew that the lack of science was most unfortunate for China. He often emphasized that in art and literature, as well as in manners and customs, China was at least the equal of Europe. At the time of the Renaissance, Europe would not have been in any way the superior of the Middle Kingdom:

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 was well aware of the fact that it would be fruitless and unproductive to attempt to decide which of the two cultures or civilizations, China or Europe, was "greater" or "better." But he often warned his own countrymen to cease regarding themselves as missionaries of a superior civilization, if they wanted to establish a fruitful interaction and exchange with China. He was indignant when seeing the attitude of some of the Westerners who thought they had a right to exploit, oppress, and swindle the Chinese because the Chinese were an "inferior race."

For Russell, the central question was, why did modern science flourish in Europe and not China? He believed that one reason was the lack of a comprehensive and systematic education system. This deficiency was a product of the outdated Confucian system, which meant that the learning of the ancient classics “ossified” Chinese thought. But on the other hand, he also assumed that the Chinese quality of life offered people less motivation for change. He thought of China as a civilization that had already reached a high level of sophistication and had managed to exist for several millennia. According to Russell, it was therefore more difficult to think of anything that might be improved. Besides, the idea of “progress” did not fit well with a culture that strove for balance and harmony and that had an inclination to look back to the past rather than ahead to the future.

However, education remained the most pressing issue, for any kind of radical and permanent solution of China’s all-encompassing crisis depended on education, which had to be universal and scientific. Moreover, the science that had to be taught should not be merely theoretical, but tightly connected with modern industry and economics. In Russell’s view, the problem of education could be solved relatively quickly, although he soon recognized that it would take a generation or more for China to develop an effective system of mass education. Yet he believed that even though Chinese educational systems and institutions suffered from lack of funds and absence of libraries, they did not suffer from any lack of the “finest human material” (Russell 1993, 193). In this context, he also pointed out that even though Chinese civilization had until then been deficient in science, it never contained anything hostile to science. Therefore, the spread of scientific knowledge would not encounter any obstacles comparable to those the Church put in its way in European history. He wrote: “I have no doubt that if the
Chinese could get a stable government and sufficient funds, they would, within the next thirty years, begin to produce remarkable work in science” (ibid.). He even thought that in this they could easily outdo the Westerners, because they possessed the fresh enthusiasm and passion of a renaissance. He observed that among the Chinese youth there was a zealous aspiration to acquire Western knowledge, together with an intense awareness of the many shortcomings of instrumental rationality. In Russell’s eyes, Chinese students desired to be scientific but not mechanical, industrial but not capitalistic. He was amazed by the long Chinese ethical tradition and the humanistic spirit that pervaded the country in spite of the difficult situation into which it had fallen.

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)

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 defense, 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 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.

Conclusion

The Chinese translation of Russell’s *Principia Mathematica* led to an increasing number of scholars and students alike getting to mathematical logic, which gradually led to the systematic teaching of this subject in China’s most prestigious universities (Xu 2003, 193). However, Russell’s 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, and he retained this cosmopolitan position for the rest of his exceptionally long life (Simpson 2020, 2). In this sense, Russell’s time in China stands as a powerful example of genuine intercultural communication. According to the usual understanding, intercultural communication (or even normal everyday conversations between members of one and the same culture) is successful when information can traverse the gap between the mind of the transmitter and that of the receiver without any distortions or hindrances (Defoort 2001, 398). However, Russell himself once claimed that genuinely productive and prolific intercultural communication was based upon exactly opposite ground—It should result precisely from the discontinuity between the different contexts in which a certain idea is formulated and from the new and fresh associations to which it may give rise (ibid.).

The richness of such associations, with new ideas and fresh insights into the situation, space, and time of the “Other,” whoever she or he might be, is what makes this visit even more important. It is precisely because of such principled openness that this creative encounter became a milestone for the future intercultural exchanges, not only between China and Europe, but also between those who write and read, who teach and study about them. It is my sincere hope that this special issue, in which Russell’s visit to China is presented, described, and analyzed, can also represent such a bridging milestone.

Notes

1. In the full and unabbreviated form, the slogan reads: “Taking the Chinese teachings as the essence, and the Western ones as the function” (Zhongxue wei ti, Xixue wei yong 中學為體, 西學為用).
2. During the first 25 years of the People’s Republic this current, at least officially, was reduced to silence; however, its main concerns continued to be developed by Taiwanese theorists and, to a certain extent, by those from Hong Kong. Over the last two decades, with the explosive economic liberalization of China, this current had been gradually rehabilitated and its
tendency to revitalize traditional thought, generally known as Modern Confucianism (Xin ruxue 新儒學), still forms one of the main streams of contemporary Chinese theory (Sigurðsson 2014, 26–27).

3. Russell defined the quality of life as being people’s happiness, as well as the fulfillment of their material needs.

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