



Week in China

Others

A man ahead of his time

Bertrand Russell made uncannily accurate China predictions 90 years ago

Jul 29, 2011 (WiC 117)

Many of the books written about China have a shelf life measured in months. The country changes so rapidly that by the time the author publishes, the information often looks out of date.

So it is all the more remarkable that a book written in 1922 still has relevance today.

That was the year Bertrand Russell published his own insights on China. The British philosopher had taught in the country and observed the transition it was going through. He then produced a slim volume called *The Problem of China*.

The title might imply an anti-Chinese tone. Far from it. Instead Russell predicts China's resurgence and looks at the strengths of its civilisation. Written at a time when China was still viewed by most Europeans as weak and degenerate, Russell's achievement is to rise above the prejudices of his era.

In the last chapter he notes: "China, by her resources and her population, is capable of being the greatest Power in the world after the United States."

He has been proved right, albeit 90 years after publication.

Russell's book has largely been forgotten (WiC had never heard of it until one of our readers recommended it). Perhaps that's because much of its focus centres on events happening in the twenties – such as the negotiations for control of the Shandong Railway – and these are of less interest to readers today. But Russell also discusses China's intellectual history and how it had shaped its economic development. It is these insights that recommend the book to the modern reader.

Previously, WiC has discussed Joseph Needham's books on China (see WiC23). He was interested in answering the question: why did modern science flourish in Europe and not China? Intriguingly, Russell also touches on that question, a full 20 years before Needham.

Russell thinks one reason was the education system – he describes how the learning of the ancient classics ossified Chinese thought, in some cases by 2000 years or more.

Yet he also suspects the nation's quality of life (defined by Russell as its people's happiness, as well

as their material needs) provided less motivation for change. If a civilisation has already attained a high level of sophistication and has existed for millennia, it's harder to think anything might be bettered, he argues. Moreover the notion of 'progress' did not fit well with a society that thought in terms of attaining balance (*yin* and *yang*), and had a tendency to look backwards in time (via ancestor worship).

That said, Russell compares the China he encounters – he arrived in 1920 and lived in the country a year – favourably with the West.

“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,” he notes.

He quickly grasped a key cultural difference: “The typical Westerner wishes to be the cause of as many changes as possible in his environment; the typical Chinaman wishes to enjoy as much and as delicately as possible.”

He offers an example: “A European, in recommending a place of residence, will tell you that it has a good train service; the best quality he can conceive in any place is that it should be easy to get away from... A Chinese tells you that there is a palace built by an ancient emperor, and a retreat in a lake for scholars weary of the world, founded by a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty. It is this that strikes the Westerner as barbaric.”

This leads him to chide the patronising attitudes of many of his contemporaries: “There are Europeans one comes across who suffer under the delusion that China is not a civilised country. Such men have quite forgotten what constitutes civilisation.”

Russell then describes the divergent origins of Chinese and Western civilisation.

Western Europe and America have a “practically homogeneous mental life”, judges the Nobel Prize winner, “which I should trace to three sources: 1, Greek culture; 2, Jewish religion and ethics; 3, modern industrialism, which in itself is an outcome of modern science. We may take Plato, the Old Testament and Galileo as representing the three elements.”

Chinese civilisation, on the contrary, contained none of these strands. Russell believes it was defined instead by codes of behaviour (thanks to Confucianism) and by passivity, as a result of Taoism, and Buddhism.

“The result,” he notes “is that for many ages the government of China has been in the hands of literary sceptics, whose administration has been lacking in those qualities of energy and destructiveness which Western nations demand of their rulers. In fact, they have conformed very closely to the maxims of Zhuangzhi [a Taoist philosopher]. The result has been that the population has been happy except where civil war brought misery; that subject nations have been allowed autonomy; and that foreign nations have had no need to fear China, in spite of its immense population and resources.” (A line that would have the Politburo nodding in agreement today.)

Classical China produced an outlook on how *life should be lived* that the English polymath thought “more civilised than our own”, being based more on “the enjoyment of beauty and the contemplative virtues”.

In observing Chinese society in the 1920s, Russell comments: “They have retained, as industrial nations have not, the capacity for civilised enjoyment, for leisure and laughter, for pleasure in sunshine and philosophical discourse... I think they are the only people in the world who quite genuinely believe that wisdom is more practical than rubies. That is why the West regards them as uncivilised.”

To his mind, the polar opposite of Confucian China was the modern West: industrialised and wed to capitalism. Russell (a socialist and a pacifist) says the Western industrialist talks only of ‘progress’.

“We in the West make a fetish of ‘progress’, which is the ethical camouflage of the desire to be the cause of changes. What we believe to be a love of progress is really, in nine cases out of ten, a love of power, an enjoyment that by our fiat we can make things different. For the sake of this pleasure, a young American will work so hard that, by the time he has acquired his millions, he has become a victim of dyspepsia, compelled to live on toast and water, and be a mere spectator of the feast he offers to his guests. But he consoles himself with the thought that he controls politics, and can provoke or prevent wars as may suit his investment. It is this temperament that makes Western nations ‘progressive’.”

But for Russell, progress does not necessarily equate with happiness (he would no doubt be a fan of Bhutan’s measurement of gross national happiness – or news that President Sarkozy of France is establishing a Beyond GDP commission).

Then again, much as he admired China, Russell is forthright in pointing out its flaws too.

The three worst qualities of the Chinese national character, he concludes, are avarice, callousness and cowardice. For the sake of money, “all but a few will be guilty of corruption”.

Back in 1922, Russell’s greatest fear was that the China of the future would merge its society’s worst qualities with the worst aspects of ‘progress’ – ie denuding itself of its spiritual and cultural core in favour of a more efficient economy and more belligerent military.

Russell died in 1970, so he would have seen some of what followed. China became even more chaotic in the three decades that followed his book’s publication but then reunified in 1949 after Mao Zedong won the civil war.

However, Mao hated Confucius and wanted to decimate the very Chinese culture Russell so admired (indeed, which other nation has had a ‘Cultural Revolution’ of such scale and ferocity?)

Mao declared war on the ‘Four Olds’ (habits, culture, ideas and customs) in the name of modernity and industrialisation. But he did not create a strong economy: he was too keen on permanent revolution.

This brings to play another of Russell’s interesting forecasts.

In *The Problem of China* he wrote: “I have no doubt that if the Chinese could get a stable government and sufficient funds, they would, within the next 30 years, begin to produce remarkable work in science.”

His prediction of a “30 years” timeframe is uncannily accurate. Remember that in 1978, a humble Deng Xiaoping visited Japan to learn its production methods; just over three decades later, the Chinese economy would be bigger than Japan’s.

Deng, of course, embraced the market economy and lifted millions out of poverty. His legacy is everywhere – not least in a landscape dotted by ever-taller skyscrapers, yet shorn of its hutongs and pagodas. So what would Russell make of today’s China and its rapid transformation?

It’s an interesting question, not least because the Chinese are increasingly asking it too. One conclusion is that modern China has been too quick to jettison its past. And as WiC has reported in earlier issues, there are some who have started to question the course China has taken. A growing number of Chinese intellectuals see its current growth model as a hollow substitute for something much deeper that’s being lost: some say it’s the moral core or the civilised, mannered and contemplative behaviour that Russell thought the nation’s greatest asset.

The result? There has been a revival of interest in Buddhism and Taoism and likewise in study of the ancient classics. Some businesspeople have embraced *guoxue* (see WiC5), paying to take special Confucian study courses at the likes of Fudan University. There is also a renewed interest in the benefits of Chinese traditional medicine and practices like *feng shui*.

Russell’s great hope was that the ancient wisdom of China could be infused with Western science, producing a better society than anything he saw in the Europe or America of his day.

So he would probably be happy that the Chinese themselves have started to show a renewed interest in their cultural legacy – and how to apply it to contemporary problems.

To take one pertinent example: traditionally, Chinese sages taught that it was best not to fight the natural world but to live in harmony with it – a sentiment that modern environmentalists share.

As our Talking Point also discusses this week, last Saturday’s high-speed train crash has prompted widespread debate about modern China and its direction. Some have used the tragedy as a metaphor for the high-speed growth model promoted by Deng. One of the netizens even called for China to slow down and rediscover the country’s ‘soul, its morals and its conscience’ – a sentiment Russell would have approved of.

The Briton was ahead of his time in understanding China and its importance. When he penned *The Problem of China*, his peers were far more concerned with the political consequences of the First World War and the Russian Revolution. The year 1922 saw Mussolini take power and trigger the rise of European Fascism. Against this backdrop, China would have looked backward and insignificant. But not to Russell. “All the world will be vitally affected by the development of Chinese affairs, which may prove a decisive factor, for good or evil, during the next two centuries,” he predicted.

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