

THE PROBLEM OF CHINA: ORIENTALISM, “YOUNG CHINA”, AND RUSSELL’S WESTERN AUDIENCE

CHARLES ARGON
East Asian Studies / Princeton U.
Princeton, NJ 08544, USA
CARGON@PRINCETON.EDU

Bertrand Russell’s trip to China (1920–21) led him to write numerous articles about China culminating in *The Problem of China*. This paper reconsiders *The Problem of China* using Edward Said’s discussion of Orientalism and contextualizes it with Russell’s other published and unpublished writings on China and the reactions of his Chinese contemporaries. I argue that Russell’s views reflect his prior philosophy and Western influences more than an analysis of his trip and reveal that this was what his Western readers wanted. Moreover, his reliance on the research of other scholars and popular writers was unusual, even at the time. He was an intellectually honest but relatively unqualified and imprecise interpreter, not a Said-style Orientalist. He recognized Orientalism, but was unable to avoid reproducing Orientalist stereotypes. These findings help us understand both how Russell processed foreign phenomena and the origins of Western perceptions of China in the 1920s.

In 1916 Bertrand Russell was fired.¹ His employer, Cambridge University, would not tolerate his breaking the law to protest British involvement in the First World War.² So he continued writing, and visited Russia to see Bolshevism first hand. By 1920, he had received an invitation from Beijing University’s “Lecture Society” (*jiang xue she*), whose membership included premier Chinese intellectual Liang Qichao, to lecture in Beijing.³ This invitation began a relationship between Russell and China that led to Russell’s *The Problem of China* (1922), which was well received but has been largely

¹ HARDY, *Bertrand Russell and Trinity* (1970), p. 1.

² MONK, *Bertrand Russell: the Spirit of Solitude* (1996), p. 465.

³ OGDEN, “The Sage in the Inkpot: Bertrand Russell and China’s Social Reconstruction in the 1920s” (1982), p. 529.

ignored by scholars. This paper reinterprets it in its Western context.

1919 was a critical year in Chinese history. The May 4th Movement began “an explosive stage in the expansion ... of the audience for the themes of the New Culture”,⁴ which advocated modernity and Westernization instead of what was seen as traditional Confucian culture. Russell arrived in Beijing, the hotbed of reform, a year later. This context has led scholars to analyze Russell’s views of China, their accuracy, and their impact. Many modern Chinese scholars attempt to determine what Russell thought of Chinese culture.⁵ Others, both Chinese and Western, push further, attempting to evaluate his views as culturally sensitive or callous⁶ and to assess their accuracy.⁷ These scholars often treat Russell as an independent thinker and analyze his views of China in isolation. Finally, and most centrally, scholars have attempted to contextualize Russell’s trip in the contemporary Chinese intellectual environment, and to assess his impact.⁸ In short, some view Russell as a critical catalyst, and others view him as entirely ancillary.⁹

But most of Russell’s work was meant for Western readers, not Chinese ones. Russell’s biographers brush past this, ignoring *The Problem of China*, Russell’s central work on China.¹⁰ Eric Hayot does consider

⁴ SCHWARTZ, “Themes in Intellectual History: May Fourth and After” (1983), p. 427.

⁵ For example, see LIU JIAN, “Luosu De Zhongguo Wenhua guan” [Russell’s View of Chinese Culture] (2011), and FENG CHONGYI, *Luosu Yu Zhongguo* [Russell and China] (1994).

⁶ See CHOU CHIH-P’ING, *Xiandai renwu yu wenhua fansi* [Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Reflections on Culture] (2013), and HAYOT, “Bertrand Russell’s Chinese Eyes; or, Modernism’s Double Vision” (2009).

⁷ See YU DONG, “Russell on Chinese Civilization” (1992), p. 24; FENG CHONGYI, p. 5; ZHANG HENG AND FAN SHUKUN, “Zhongguo Wenti he Luosu de Zhongguo guan” [*The Problem of China* and Russell’s view of China] (2013).

⁸ ZHENG WEI PENG, “Bertrand Russell on Chinese Education” (2008); LIU JIAN; ZHU XUEQIN, “Rang ren wei nan de Luosu” [Russell, Who Made People Feel Uncomfortable] (1996); DING ZIJIANG, *Luosu yu Zhonghua wenhua: dongxifang sixiang de yi chang zhijie duihua* [Russell and Chinese Culture: a Direct East–West Dialogue] (2015).

⁹ Advocates for the “large impact” view include ZHENG SHIQU, “The Renowned Foreign Philosophers’ China Lectures during the May Fourth Era and China’s ‘Taking Russia as the Teacher’” (2011); V. K. TING to *The Peking Leader*, 5 Aug. 1921 (Russell Archives, McMaster U.). For examples of the “ancillary” view, see FENG and OGDEN.

¹⁰ CLARK, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (1976); and MONK. These few years constitute a tiny portion of his long life, but even so the coverage of them is disproportionately

Russell's writings in the broader context of Western discourses, but he radically simplifies Russell's encounter with China and its broader implications for our understanding of Russell.¹¹ Moreover, these writers ignore how his views evolved over time.

Russell's engagement with China therefore requires a new understanding. First, *The Problem of China* is the synthesis of Russell's earlier China writings, which have largely been ignored. This rereading, in turn, prompts a new theoretical understanding of Russell's writings in the context of East–West relations, as approximated by Orientalism. “Orientalism”, according to Edward Said's classic of the same name, is a cultural system through which Western politicians, businessmen, and intellectuals came (and come) to know, and through this to control, the East.¹² This intellectual system and general Western attitude help explain the historical tradition Russell stepped into when he went to and wrote about China. Said's generalizations, however, would be incomplete without considering the specific historical tradition of Western advisors to China as described in Jonathan Spence's *To Change China*. Spence writes that from the “1620s through the 1950s ... men placed their technical skills at the disposal of the Chinese.... Their cumulative lives have a curious continuity.”¹³ To spread their ideologies to China, they wrapped them in useful technical expertise. The Chinese used this expertise without swallowing ideology.¹⁴ We should understand Russell's China writings in the broad historical context of Orientalism and Western advisors in China, especially since both John Dewey (who visited China contemporaneously) and Chinese intellectual Lin Yutang have received such scholarly reinterpretation since *Orientalism* was first published.¹⁵

Although Russell reproduced intellectual condescension and cultural essentialism like other Orientalists, he was decidedly anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist, which separates him from them. Similarly,

meagre. They treat this time as an insignificant effort to publish for money.

¹¹ See HAYOT.

¹² SAID, *Orientalism* (1994), pp. 2–5. This paper takes Said's findings as hypotheses and considers Russell's views in light of these hypotheses. This, together with a comparative method, helps differentiate unique viewpoints from hackneyed ones.

¹³ SPENCE, *To Change China* (1969), Introduction.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

¹⁵ See WANG, *John Dewey in China* (2007), and QIAN SUOQIAO, *Liberal Cosmopolitan* (2010), respectively.

Russell's reasons for going were as Western-oriented as other Western advisors in China, but were not tied to Western institutions. Instead, they were more personal. Russell's views of China before, during, and after his trip reflect his prior philosophy and Western influences more than an analysis of new information from China and reveal that this was what his Western readers wanted. Bertrand Russell was an intellectually honest but relatively unqualified and imprecise interpreter, not an Orientalist China advisor.

TO SEEK A NEW HOPE

The results of Russell's trip had their roots in the trip's beginning: its reason and context. Russell first, if not foremost, needed a salary, a job, and material for saleable journalism. His former lovers, in addition, expected "riveting travelogue writing".¹⁶ Liang Qichao's invitation offered all of the above. At a personal level, he also went to search for answers to Western problems.

As he told it in *The Problem of China*, on his trip down the Volga before going to China:

... something lonely and unspoken remained in my heart throughout all the comfortable familiar intellectual talk... But I found no answer ... [it] left me with a terrible questioning pain in which Occidental hopefulness grew pale. It was in this mood that I set out for China to seek a new hope. (PC, pp. 19–20)

This hope was moderated by scepticism: Russell feared that his invitation was a joke (*Auto.* 2: 125). Through his hesitancy, he hoped and believed that he had something to offer China.¹⁷ Practical necessity and philosophical answers, hope and scepticism—these mixed moods marked the beginning of Russell's tenuous relationship with China.

Russell's preconceptions of China were largely Orientalist, but his independence of thought was still present. In 1919, before leaving for China, Russell reviewed a book on China by a fellow Englishman. The

¹⁶ MONK, pp. 596, 589.

¹⁷ Dora Russell reflects this retrospectively in writing to David Harley, 20 Feb. 1976 (RA Rec. Acq. 649). Upon arriving in China, Russell wrote back home: "I long to help them" ("On the Yangtse"; to Ottoline Morrell, 28 Oct. 1920; *Papers* 15: 47).

review praises the book as an account of Chinese “national and social life”.¹⁸ But Russell’s comments hint at the beginning of his later critique. He acknowledges “feeling as if [he was] being told the truth”; he does not praise it as fact. This presages later scholars, like Said, who have critiqued Western knowledge of the East for being warped by imperialism, arrogance, and market forces. Russell also critiques the author’s methodology, noting that classical texts cannot be used as a proxy for people’s contemporary lives, again echoing Said 60 years early.¹⁹ This contested position between approving of and intellectually surpassing Orientalism is largely consistent with Russell’s own interaction with China.

The historical moment that he stumbled into, however, was anything but typical. In 1911, the Qing dynasty collapsed. Eight years later, in 1919, Chinese politicians and intellectuals were still struggling to determine how to move forward. During the May 4th Movement, this questioning rose to a shout, and students protested that, in the aftermath of World War I, the Western powers affirmed Japan’s rights to Shandong province.²⁰ Hu Shi, a New Culture Movement leader and one of China’s premier public intellectuals, wrote an article titled “Intellectual China in 1919” that captures the moment. New periodicals, he wrote, argued for modernization, scientific inquiry, and scepticism.²¹ He described them as places for heated intellectual debates about how to modernize China, especially its government, language, and education. Hu Shi and his contemporaries confronted difficult questions, so they were eager to hear Western advice.²² Since Russell was perceived as one of the world’s premier social philosophers, expectations were particularly high for his visit.²³ Russell’s trip, in this light, was set to be one of the major Orientalist encounters of the twentieth century.

¹⁸ “An Englishman’s China” (1919; *Papers* 15: 15).

¹⁹ SAID, *Orientalism*, p. 93.

²⁰ FURTH, “Intellectual Change: from the Reform Movement to the May Fourth Movement, 1895–1920” (1983), p. 407.

²¹ HU SHI, “Intellectual China in 1919” (1995; 1st published, 1919).

²² KWOK, *Scientism in Chinese Thought* (1965); quoted in FURTH, p. 398.

²³ OGDEN, p. 542, and *Auto.* 2: 136.

PRETENDING TO BE A SAGE

Upon arrival, Russell's plans collapsed: he could not simply give the Chinese a few technical lectures. He was surprised to find that his hosts wanted his advice on social issues, not technical philosophy. While in China, he wrote to Constance Malleison that "they don't want technical philosophy, they want practical advice, social reconstruction." This required him, as he described it, to go around "pretending to be a Sage" because "they [the Chinese] seem to think I must know by inspiration what they need."²⁴ Immediately, Russell's initial confidence disappeared, and he found himself grasping for wisdom to fill the Chinese demand. His frustration comes out in a letter to the editor of the *Shanghai Life*, an English-language Chinese magazine. Russell echoed his aforementioned sentiment, writing that "I was invited to lecture on philosophy ... and I came prepared with purely academic lectures on psychology and the principles of physics. But when I landed, to my surprise, those who had invited me insisted on my lecturing on social questions."²⁵ He could not, of course, refuse. So he fell back on his old methods and ideas to produce analysis quickly.

First, Russell returned to the style of his popular writings.²⁶ His philosophical writings applied rigorous logical analysis, and his social and political writings also broke reality into discrete categories and analyzed them.²⁷ This was part and parcel of Russell's confidence in the scientific method, which pervades his recommendations for China. He brought to China his fundamental belief that Western-style education was needed to produce men with wisdom and scientific knowledge,²⁸ because "science ... [is] a thing which is good and delightful on its own account" (*PC*, p. 11). This scientific method, at first glance, is in line with contemporary Chinese methods. Hu Shi,

²⁴ Russell to Malleison, 18 Oct. 1920, RA 711.200708.

²⁵ RUSSELL to *Shanghai Life*, 19 Dec. 1920 (*Papers* 15: 38).

²⁶ DENNETT, Introduction to RUSSELL, *CH*. Dennett implicitly splits Russell's work into two rough categories: his social and political writings, often written for a popular audience, and his technical philosophy. By 1920, Russell had established both.

²⁷ See RUSSELL, "Industry in Undeveloped Countries" (1920; *Papers* 15: 37). He splits development into three sub-problems, each with a binary choice, and offers solutions with a precision reminiscent of *The Problems of Philosophy*.

²⁸ RUSSELL, "The Uses of Education" (1920; *Papers* 15: 40).

one of the leading intellectuals receiving Russell, advocated a similar approach to China's problems, namely researching and solving specific problems scientifically, in his landmark essay "Problems and -Isms".²⁹ Both methods share a categorical approach to reality, namely splitting bigger problems into smaller ones, creating a finite choice set, and roughly optimizing the outcome within each choice. In fact, however, Russell's proposed scientific education is much more general than Hu Shi's recommendation: whereas Hu Shi advocated solving specific material problems, Russell advocated certain theories and approaches, like the scientific method. This also reflects Russell's broader methodology in his social and political writings, which analyze and recommend certain abstract concepts and categories over others (e.g. socialism *versus* capitalism, economic *versus* social determinism).³⁰ This general analytic method structures Russell's China writings.

Although Russell made general claims, he did acknowledge his ignorance to his Chinese audience. Russell began many lectures and articles with some recognition that he was not an expert and so his claims were only tentative. In a 1920 article for the English-language *Peking Leader* titled "First Impressions", Russell closed by admitting that it was difficult to weigh in without a knowledge of Mandarin because of the "complexity and difficulty of [China's] problems". He repeated this when speaking with China experts. In one 1920 lecture to the Chinese Political and Social Science Association, Russell began by acknowledging his non-expert status.³¹ He admitted, therefore, that his analysis might be "superficial and ignorant".³² Even at the end of his stay, Russell began a lecture to the Beijing Board of Education by noting the danger of speaking about China despite not speaking Chinese.³³ While a cynic would call this warranted, given Russell's

²⁹ HU SHI, "Wenti yu zhuyi" [Problems and -Isms] (1961; 1st published, 1919). This transnational comparison is complicated by the fact that Hu Shi was heavily influenced by John Dewey's pragmatism.

³⁰ For example, see RUSSELL, "Why I Am Not a Christian", in *WINC*₂; originally a lecture "under the auspices of the South London Branch of the National Secular Society" on 6 March 1927. He separates Christianity into sub-issues, but treats each generally.

³¹ "Industry in Undeveloped Countries".

³² "First Impressions of China" (1920; *Papers* 15: 46).

³³ "China's Road to Freedom" (1921; *Papers* 15: 261).

lack of qualifications, it does reflect Russell's admirable intellectual honesty, for which he has not received due credit.

For these statements, he was commended. At least some of his audience members admired his reasonableness, and he was explicitly remembered as having never given "advice to the Chinese as to their immediate political difficulties".³⁴ This stance, we could reasonably predict, would prohibit Russell from writing authoritatively about China for the West. Indeed, he himself wrote in 1921, after a few months in China, that "I don't think I shall write on China—it is a complex country, with an old civilization, very hard to fathom."³⁵

In China, Russell maintained his general stance against religion and tradition. He voiced his stance in *The Problems of Philosophy*, writing that philosophy (and by extension, all rational thought) can "free us from the tyranny of custom" (*PP*, p. 243), and similarly in *Why I Am Not a Christian*: religion is not only untrue, it is also harmful.³⁶ Russell believed this very consistently. On this point, many of Russell's Chinese contemporaries agreed with him. They also hoped that China would "escape from"³⁷ "a mass of China's bad traditions".³⁸ Both Russell and his Chinese counterparts lived in a broader intellectual climate critical of religion and tradition. More importantly, in the absence of specific knowledge about tradition and religion in China, Russell leveraged his preexisting beliefs to come to quick conclusions about the new material he encountered.

This tactic acquired political implications when Russell recommended that China first and foremost needed Western scientific education. Russell did not come to this belief based on an understanding of China specifically; he advocated it from nearly the day he arrived. Although Russell privately acknowledged that he was "pretending to be a sage", he still claimed to know "they need chiefly education".³⁹

³⁴ TING to *The Peking Leader*, 5 Aug. 1921, and *Auto*. 2: 130, respectively. Dora Russell additionally mentions this fact in her final lecture in China as if to set the record straight. See DORA RUSSELL, "Young China: Hints on Building the New Civilization" (farewell speech to China), *Japan Chronicle*, c. July 1921.

³⁵ Russell to Colette O'Neil (C. Malleison), 6 Jan. 1921 (*SLBR* 2: #343).

³⁶ *WINC*₂, Preface, p. vi.

³⁷ *Auto*. 2: 128.

³⁸ RUSSELL, "Is Chinese Independence Possible?" (1921; *Papers* 15: 60). LU XUN, for example, argued against tradition and religion. For example, see LU XUN, "Wusheng de Zhongguo" [Silent China] (1927–28).

³⁹ To Malleison, 18 Oct. 1920.

From this letter written in his first month in China, the need for education became one of Russell's published "First Impressions" of China.⁴⁰ After he applied this preexisting opinion to China, he generalized it into a theory of education. In 1920, Russell lectured to the Jiangsu Educational Society on "The Uses of Education".⁴¹ He later published what seems to be the same lecture as a general article on education.⁴² Even Russell's recommendations on Chinese education were new versions of his pre-existing beliefs. This new paradigm superseded his prior admissions of uncertainty.

Russell's published and private views of Chinese education contradict each other, further suggesting that his China writings diverged from his private thoughts. Privately, Russell found the students in his Beijing lectures "ignorant and untrained and lazy",⁴³ "and stupid" (1920).⁴⁴ He found that the Chinese generally "have too much respect for their ancient sages" and are "intellectually not grown up" (1920).⁴⁵ This contempt was not published, probably to avoid offending his Chinese friends and admirers. In print, he describes them thus: his students "could not have been surpassed anywhere for keenness, candour, and fearlessness" (Dec. 1921).⁴⁶ These compliments may reflect a change of heart during his stay, but they certainly reflect an ambivalent perspective. Additionally, these comments effectively increased Russell's stature among Chinese nationalists and enabled him to criticize China on other points without seeming harsh.⁴⁷ Russell's contempt for any epistemology but a Western scientific one marks his attitude as a historical continuation of the attitude that condescending Christian missionaries had towards China while there.⁴⁸ Generally, Russell's writings on education and his Chinese acquaintances reveal

⁴⁰ "First Impressions of China" (*Papers* 15: 46).

⁴¹ "The Uses of Education" (*Papers* 15: 40).

⁴² *Papers* 15: 218.

⁴³ Russell to Morrell, 17 Dec. 1920 (*SLBR* 2: #342).

⁴⁴ Russell to Clifford Allen, 13 Dec. 1920 (*SLBR* 2: #341).

⁴⁵ Russell to Malleson, 25 Oct. 1920, RA.

⁴⁶ "Higher Education in China", *The Dial*, Dec. 1921 (*Problem of China*, Ch. 13).

⁴⁷ For example, see SUN YAT-SEN, *The Principle of Nationalism* (1953), Lecture 6, p. 60; quoted in OGDEN, p. 578.

⁴⁸ SAID, *Orientalism*, p. 290, and SPENCE, particularly the latter's initial chapters on missionaries.

that he could not simply publish the opinions he expressed in his letters.

Russell's views, sometimes inconsistent with his private opinions, gained geopolitical significance when he discussed Chinese politics and industrialization. These two fields lie at the intersection of academic study, general concern, and the assertion of power—an intersection at which Western scholarship became a tool of imperialism.⁴⁹ China, for Russell, was essentially an undeveloped country with a horribly corrupt government.⁵⁰ This general view did not distinguish him from his contemporaries, who also called for economic development and governmental reform or, for that matter, from Westerners writing about China today.⁵¹ The real debate, as Russell himself characterized it, was *how* these processes would unfold. Russell, although he advised China to follow the Western path of industrialization, did advocate for domestic development and international socialism in place of development by Western powers.⁵² Paradoxically, he viewed this development as only possible through Western-style education. China, he wrote, would need Western-style education to succeed. Russell's writing here implies a paradoxical power relationship in which China needed to develop to avoid Western domination, but could only do so through accepting Western methods and help.

If this double bind reflects reality, it is an astute observation; if it is Russell's projection, it is imperialism asserted. Whereas discussions of culture could be viewed as subjective, and discussions of education had lower stakes, Russell's political and economic views were particularly divisive. Parts of the New Culture Movement agreed with his emphasis on socialism and economic independence, but Russell was critiqued by both the left and the right for disagreeing with them.⁵³

⁴⁹ SAID, *Orientalism*, p. 206.

⁵⁰ On development, see "Industry in Undeveloped Countries". On corruption, see Russell to Malleson, 18 Oct. 1920.

⁵¹ For example, see HU SHI, "Women duiyu Xiyang jindai wenming de taidu" [Our Attitude towards Modern Western Civilization] (1964; 1st published, 1926); DEWEY, "What Holds China Back?" (1920). To a degree, Russell's Chinese contemporaries orientalized themselves. For a theoretical discussion of this phenomenon, see DIRLIK, "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism" (1996).

⁵² This is a summary. See "Industry in Undeveloped Countries", "First Impressions of China", and "China's Road to Freedom" (*Papers* 15: 37, 46, 50).

⁵³ For an example of tacit agreement, see HU SHI, "Women zou na tiao lu" [Which Road Shall We Take?] (1937; 1st published, 1930); for a discussion of this, see DING

His political and economic recommendations made his pronouncements politically consequential and created a demand for his China writings.

Politicians and intellectuals lent Russell their ears, but many ultimately disagreed with him. These disagreements, though, were largely based on whether Russell agreed with their prior beliefs. While he was in China, his visit was widely publicized in important journals like *Xin qing nian* [New Youth] and *Dongfang zazhi* [Eastern Miscellany].⁵⁴ His supporters also published *Luosu yue kan* [Russell Monthly], which ran for four issues during his stay, and his friends, such as his translator Chao Yuanren, sang his praises.⁵⁵ After his visit, however, interest waned. Mao Zedong, who may have attended one of Russell's lectures in Changsha, disagreed with his political recommendations for China.⁵⁶ But Mao's point of contention, at its root, was that Russell did not agree with him, specifically on the need for a Communist-style redistribution of material resources.⁵⁷ Likewise Lu Xun, in a 1925 essay, criticized Russell's rosy picture of Chinese peasant contentment, claiming that this contentment is what made China weak and conquerable. But this statement reflects more on Lu Xun's critical view of so-called "traditional Chinese life" than on Russell specifically.⁵⁸ Russell's encounter with China's intellectuals was somewhat predetermined: many minds were not changed, and opinions of Russell reflected prior beliefs in addition to reasoned analysis. None of these reactions questioned his ability as an analyst except Russell himself, who continually articulated his ignorance. In short, Russell was able to overcome his initial shock only by drawing on his prior writings and

ZIJIANG, "A Comparison of Dewey's and Russell's Influences on China" (2007).

⁵⁴ See PAN GONGZHAN, "Luosu lun zhexue wenti" [Russell on the Problems of Philosophy] (1920). *Xin qing nian*, the premier magazine of the era, devoted major portions of its October and November 1920 issues to Russell. The bulk of their coverage, however, was devoted to translating his works and lectures. See *Xin qing nian* [New Youth], 8, nos. 2 and 3 (1 Oct., 1 Nov. 1920).

⁵⁵ See QU SHI YING, "Luo su" [Russell] and CHAO YUEN REN, "Luosu zhexue de jingshen" [The Spirit of Russell's Philosophy] (1921).

⁵⁶ DORA RUSSELL, *The Tamarisk Tree* (1975), p. 116. Her report remains unverified. See CHI-CHUN HU, "Did Mao or Chou attend Russell's Lectures in China?" (1983).

⁵⁷ SCHRAM, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (1969), pp. 296–9, and SCHRAM, "Mao Tse-tung's Thought to 1949" (1986), p. 792.

⁵⁸ LU XUN, "Deng xia man bi" [Notes from under the Lamplight] (1925–26), p. 122.

methods, stroking his audience's egos, and restating Western stereotypes about the Orient.

RUSSELL'S ARTICLES AFTER CHINA

When Russell returned from China, he wrote. Although he had initially said he would not—could not—write about China, he wrote a book and roughly 50 articles about the country. This is consistent with the longstanding Western tendency to write about, for, and in place of the Orient for a Western audience.⁵⁹ Second, Russell returned to a robust demand for writing about China.⁶⁰ The Washington Naval Conference (1921–22) was about to begin what has been seen as a new era of “internationalist cooperation” and settle issues surrounding Chinese “tariffs, spheres of influence, the Open Door [trading policies], and ... military supplies”.⁶¹ Just as he did upon arriving in China, Russell worked to reformulate his earlier ideas and writings to answer the questions of the moment.

Russell's statements about education in China are largely the same as they were in his first writings on the topic, showing that they were a result of his theoretical beliefs, not his trip to China. In a 1922 article for the *Chinese Students' Monthly* in Baltimore, Russell argued that China needed education, “both technical and elementary”.⁶² He had initially relied on his general penchant for education, and this recommendation lasted past his stay in China. This type of continuity was very common to Russell's transitions both to and back from China.

Russell's two primary tasks in his articles on China were to explain China to the West and, on this basis, to launch a critique of Western society. Russell both demystified and remystified China for his readers. He denied that China could be seen as a museum because the contemporary Chinese wanted to have more than a past.⁶³ Here,

⁵⁹ SAID, *Orientalism*, p. 34.

⁶⁰ WHEELER, the Secretary of the Faculty of Peking University, described the “world-wide attention” brought to the East around 1920 and the consequent explosion of published materials, in his “A 1919 Book Shelf on Far Eastern Politics” (1920).

⁶¹ SHINKICHI ETŌ, “China's International Relations 1911–1931” (1986). The editor of *The Manchester Guardian*, C. P. Scott, expressly asked Russell to write for this reason. See *Papers* 15: 288.

⁶² “Reconstruction in China” (1922; *Papers* 15: 63).

⁶³ “Higher Education in China”, *PC*, Ch. 13.

Russell tried to de-Orientalize the East and alter his readers' possible misconceptions. But to fill out his portrait of China for his readers, he wrote "sketches".⁶⁴ These were more generalities than anecdotes, probably because Russell spent less than a year in China and did not learn Chinese. He made these generalizations tantalizing with rare anecdotes, like one in his comments on Chinese tea. He describes the tea server mystically, as "some kind person, like a genie in the *The Arabian Nights*, [bringing] tea in little cups."⁶⁵ This fantasticizes China for his audience, even as he tried to make China familiar with anecdotes.⁶⁶

What distinguishes Russell is that he used China to launch a non-trivial critique of Western political and cultural values. Although this fits into the mould of "seeking answers in the East", Russell's intellectual independence is again notable. In a sentence, Russell calls China "ancient and weak", but explains this by its relatively inefficient killing machines compared to those of the West.⁶⁷ The West, by contrast, is simple: "skill in homicide is, in the last analysis, the only thing that secures tolerable courtesy from a white man."⁶⁸ China, in these articles, functions for Russell as a launch pad from which to critique the West, making the problem of China once again more about Western political debates than about China's situation itself.

Russell's explanation of China and critique of Europe converge in his writing about the Washington Conference, in which he becomes the advocate for, and an authoritative voice on, China's perspective. As Russell wrote in a 1921 letter, "everybody wants articles on China because of the Washington Conference, so the wealth keeps pouring in."⁶⁹ To capitalize on this demand, he wrote articles about the conference. In order to contextualize his political recommendations, Russell had to explain Chinese history, that the Chinese people were

⁶⁴ "Sketches of Modern China" (1921; *Papers* 15: 61).

⁶⁵ "Sketches of Modern China", p. 308.

⁶⁶ "The Problems of China" (1921; *Papers* 15: 59).

⁶⁷ "China and the Powers" (1921; *Papers* 15: 55); "A Plea for China" (1921; *Papers* 15: 57); "China and Chinese Influence" (1921; *Papers* 15: 58); "The Problems of China" and "Is Chinese Independence Possible?" (1921; *Papers* 15: 59, 60).

⁶⁸ "How Washington Could Help China" (1921; *Papers* 15: 62).

⁶⁹ Russell to Morrell, 23 Nov. 1921, RA.

“homogenous in race and culture”,⁷⁰ and that China was comparable “to Rome at the time of barbarian invasions”.⁷¹ His description is mixed: the Chinese are weak, but humane as a result.⁷² This completed his first task: to generalize and essentialize China, to fix it upon the political map. Next, he advocated for China on this basis, against the Western powers.⁷³ Russell’s generalizations morph into a critique of the West; these are, in fact, two sides of one coin. When he advocated for China’s interest at the Washington Conference,⁷⁴ then, he was genuinely of help in critiquing the Western powers, and an Orientalist speaking for China. Russell consistently shaped his general theories to his audience’s demanded format. The next demand was a book.

“THE PROBLEM OF CHINA”

Whereas Russell’s China articles were more the product of general theories than political and economic realities, *The Problem of China* reflects Russell’s expanded China bookshelf. These books, however, could have been acquired by many of his Western readers. For example, his statistics are derived not from primary sources but from others’ syntheses of them.⁷⁵ Second, many of his sources are other popular introductions to China, such as *China Awakened*. This book, which came with “special honorific endorsement” from top-ranking Chinese and English officials, was written by Min-Ch’ien T. Z. Tyau, the founder of *The Peking Leader* and a Tsinghua College lecturer.⁷⁶ Likewise, Frederic Coleman’s *The Far East Unveiled*, as evidenced by its title, tried to introduce readers to the “Far East”.⁷⁷ Both it and *China Awakened* were oriented towards the educated public and based on original research. *The Problem of China*, by citing these works, is marked as a derivative of previous scholarship. Given these new

⁷⁰ This statement is incorrect. It hides a history of racial and ethnic thinking and conflict, as has been shown in DIKÖTTER, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (2015).

⁷¹ “China and Chinese Influence” (*Papers* 15: 58).

⁷² “China and the Powers” (*Papers* 15: 55).

⁷³ “The Problems of China” (*Papers* 15: 59).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ For examples, see *PC*, pp. 227, 232, 243.

⁷⁶ MIN-CH’IEN T. Z. TYAU, *China Awakened* (1922).

⁷⁷ COLEMAN, *The Far East Unveiled* (1918).

sources, we could expect Russell's views to change.

Russell's view of education in China is, once again, the primary example of how his recommendations did not change. He writes that China's primary task would be to "secure practical and intellectual training from the white nations without becoming their slaves" (*PC*, pp. 55–6). The reform of education, he later reiterated, had to be Western, because Western scientific knowledge was more useful than traditional Chinese learning (*ibid.*, p. 21). Scholars have considered Russell's views as reflected in *The Problem of China*, but none have recognized the degree to which his important beliefs overpowered China-specific understanding that he could have acquired during or after his trip. In fact, everything but a few insertions in the chapter "Higher Education in China" is copied directly from Russell's article of the same title published midway through his stay in China. This chapter should once again lead us to question the source of Russell's ideas.

The bulk of *The Problem of China* discusses geopolitics based on a static, monolithic image of Chinese culture. First, Russell surveys Chinese history based on Western writings on the topic in the brief chapter "China before the Nineteenth Century".⁷⁸ This chapter synthesizes the work of preminent sinologists such as James Legge for a mass audience; it does not represent original research.⁷⁹ Citing expert opinions and explaining Chinese culture as a product of its "ideographic" writing system appear to be thoughtful considerations to a casual reader, but are in fact Orientalist tropes.⁸⁰

The following chapters set China on a Western map by measuring it against European marks of civilization: democracy, economic development, and liberal values. Chapter 3, "China and the Western Powers", lays out the same basic relationship outlined above: China must learn from the West (*PC*, pp. 55–6). Next, Russell places "Modern China" (Ch. 4) in contrast to Europe, and arrives at a surprisingly

⁷⁸ This chapter's citations show that Russell drew from almost exclusively Western sources.

⁷⁹ On Legge, see PFISTER, "The Legacy of James Legge" (1998).

⁸⁰ See *PC*, p. 30. Many Western scholars have explained Chinese culture as a product of its character-based writing system, erroneously calling it ideographic. For example, see FENOLLOSA AND POUND, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1964). The ideographic myth is debunked in DEFRANCIS, "The Ideographic Myth" (1984).

unoriginal conclusion: “though as yet incompetent in politics and backwards in economic development, [the Chinese] have, in other respects, a civilization at least as good as our own” (*ibid.*, p. 61). In Russell’s defence, the Chinese scholar Zhang Zhidong expressed a similar opinion with his concept of *zhongxue wei ti, xixue wei yong* [use Chinese learning as the basis and Western learning for applications].⁸¹ But Zhang’s position was one of many among his peers, and cannot be taken as the general position of May 4th-era intellectuals. By taking this as a universal perspective, Russell paves over the roaring debates among Chinese intellectuals of the era and calls them “Young China”,⁸² casting China as an undeveloped, lesser version of the West. Russell betrays this fact by calling “the fight against the family” [system, i.e. “Confucian culture”] “inevitable” (*PC*, p. 76). Just as he adapted his general theories for a Chinese audience, these three chapters are an addition necessary to complete a comprehensive introduction to China for Westerners in a form familiar to them.

Because Japan was geopolitically connected to China, Russell then turns to Japan’s history, culture, and political situation, giving us a unique comparison with the work’s comments on China. Japanese history is unique, and Russell addresses it as such, but again through Western scholarship. Russell’s account of Japanese history, in fact, is almost completely based on a series of citations from James Murdoch, a Westerner. Particularly, Japan’s task comes down, in Russell’s account, to modernizing through Western education (*PC*, pp. 119–20). This recommendation also includes cultural changes, however, because Russell critiques the elements of Western culture he saw in Japan (*ibid.*). Both sets of recommendations view the East in reference to the merits and faults of the West, and try to move China and Japan, respectively, to embody the best of Western progress and Eastern wisdom.

Based on this historical understanding, Russell discusses current events. To the extent that these chapters are encyclopedic and speculative, they are irrefutable or unremarkable. He reviews “the decisions arrived at in” the Washington Conference, focusing the future of China on Western soil and in Western hands (*ibid.*, p. 156). Originality picks up again in the following chapters, which discuss Chinese

⁸¹ QIAN SUOQIAO, *Liberal Cosmopolitan*, pp. 26–30.

⁸² This phrase appears throughout the book.

culture and compare it to Western culture. To properly understand this originality, we must compare this chapter with similar writings about China.

Russell, like his peers within China, wrote with a critical eye towards improving China, its culture, and its people, particularly through science. Lack of science, for Russell, is the defining deficiency of Chinese civilization (*PC*, p. 48). For all his compliments, science is for Russell practically the definition of knowledge, and China's lack of it is damning. Despite this, Russell paints China as something to be "ruined",⁸³ which portrays the East as unchanging and passive, in a comment critiqued even at the time by his counterpart, John Dewey.⁸⁴ Russell's treatment of Chinese culture is in service of discussions on economic systems and political ideology, which gives his cultural discussion political import. If Hu Shi's scholarship makes this critical political attitude seem inevitable, it is not, and Lin Yutang's emphasis on culture proves that.⁸⁵ But *The Problem of China* reproduces classic Western impressions of China.

Orientalizing China and reproducing Orientalist tropes made *The Problem of China* a success. One notable reaction was Lin Yutang's praise and use of *The Problem of China's* findings in *My Country and My People*.⁸⁶ Lin Yutang praised Russell, calling him one of a few exceptions to the generally ignorant "Old China Hand".⁸⁷ His compliments, however, are more for Russell's ability to be culturally sensitive than for the accuracy of his scholarship or the insight of advice.⁸⁸ As when Russell was in China, his claims and analysis went largely unquestioned when compiled in *The Problem of China*.

The Problem's Western reviewers, both expert and novice, were enthusiastic. Many reviews restated some portion of his central argument and let it seem correct because it was printed without

⁸³ "First Impressions of China" (*Papers*: 15: 248).

⁸⁴ SAID, *Orientalism*, p. 180, and DEWEY, "What Holds China Back?"

⁸⁵ LIN YUTANG, *My Country and My People* (2009; 1st edn., 1935). Lin devotes the majority of the work to Chinese culture, life, literature, and arts.

⁸⁶ LIN YUTANG views Russell's China writings favourably (*My Country and My People*, pp. 31, 52, 111, 192).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–11.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11. He writes that Russell is "able to see the meaning in a type of life so different from [his] own."

comment.⁸⁹ The remaining reviews were positive.⁹⁰ The *New York Times* claimed that Russell had “shattered the impenetrable soul of the Oriental”, showing that the work’s success came through its cultural generalities.⁹¹ Another reviewer, even more powerfully, hailed it as “strictly just and completely free from any kind of bias whatsoever”.⁹² Praise also came from John Dewey, who had the knowledge of China to question Russell’s statements and the authority to undercut them had he desired to. He glowed about *The Problem of China*.⁹³ Even the rare critical reviewer did not critique Russell’s treatments of Chinese education and culture—the two sections most readily criticized given his letters and articles.⁹⁴ In brief, reviewers concluded that *The Problem of China* would have “more than passing value”.⁹⁵ At least for a Western audience, they were largely wrong.

WISDOM OF THE EAST

Russell remembered his time in China fondly, drawing lessons and future engagement from his trip. Throughout the 1920s, Russell continued using China to critique British policy and publish his political views.⁹⁶ In 1930, for *The Conquest of Happiness*, Russell returned to

⁸⁹ See “Literary Gossip: Recent Doings among Writers”, *Los Angeles Times*, 19 Nov. 1922. OTTO, “News of New Books and Those Who Write Them”, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 15 Nov. 1922. “The Problem of China”, *The Atlanta Constitution*, 5 Nov. 1922.

⁹⁰ See “Our Book Table: China’s Problem”, *The Chinese Recorder*, Shanghai, 1 Dec. 1922; “East and West on Chinese Problems”, *New York Times*, 24 Dec. 1922; “Bertrand Russell on China”, *The China Weekly Review*, Shanghai, 22 Sept. 1923; JORDAN, “Sir John Jordan’s Review of Bertrand Russell’s Book”, *The North-China Herald*, Shanghai, The Book Page sec.; and CHEW NG POON, “Bertrand Russell’s Book Is Applauded by Chinese Editor”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 Dec. 1922.

⁹¹ “East and West on Chinese Problems”, *The New York Times*, 24 Dec. 1922.

⁹² “Bertrand Russell on China”, *The China Weekly Review*, Shanghai, 22 Sept. 1923.

⁹³ DEWEY, “China and the West” (1923).

⁹⁴ 13 of 14 reviews surveyed were not critical. The one critical review, moreover, can be explained by *The North-China Herald*’s tie to the British government, which was very critical of Russell at this time. Thus the disagreement stems from Russell’s critique of Western involvement in China. See D. J., “The Brigands: Bertrand Russell’s Tribute to the Foreigner in China”, *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, Shanghai, 2 Dec. 1922.

⁹⁵ CHEW NG POON, “Bertrand Russell’s Book Is Applauded by Chinese Editor”, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁹⁶ See RUSSELL, “What Really Is Happening in China”, *Daily Herald*, 19 Nov. 1924;

“the wisdom of the East” (p. 234). Specifically, he referenced the Chinese doctrine of the Golden Mean as “uninteresting”, but “true” (*ibid.*, p. 230). Although it is unclear whether this learning came from his time in China or his English reading about China, Russell found some part of the “new hope” he had sought. In 1931, when writing his *Autobiography*, he took the chance to paint his picture of the trip. Here his students, no longer lazy and stupid, are called “charming” and “intelligent” (*Auto.* 2: 127). The country as a whole, although he had denied that China is unchanging, is said to have the “beauty of ancient civilization”, an essential “respect for intelligence”, and to be “filled with philosophic calm” and “incredible contrasts” (*Auto.* 2: 126, 129). This chapter closes the book on the incongruities of Russell’s trip.

Russell, like many of the advisors in Spence’s history of them, went to China for reasons as much personal as altruistic. He made sincere attempts to be intellectually honest and humble, but a combination of factors led him to publish on China nonetheless. This is not, of course, to say that Russell’s China writings were *wrong*. Rather, their evolution reveals how larger historical forces shaped Russell’s views and their publication. Orientalism, for example, approximates the Western set of standards for his writings, explaining much of their topography. Orientalism, however, obscures Russell’s fight against many powerful Western political and intellectual institutions. He used China as a springboard for a critique of the West. Russell’s trip to China, then, was for much less than “to change China” and for much more than to Orientalize it. Neither captures his contradictions or his intellectual honesty.

From this story, then, we can draw a few lessons about Russell specifically and Western advisors during this era generally. First, Russell was both more intellectually honest and less rigorous than he has gotten credit for. He was able to recognize many of the faults of Orientalism, but not able to avoid making them himself. Second, he was not a simple agent of imperialism, as both *To Change China* and *Orientalism* might suggest. This raises the general conclusion that Western intellectuals had idiosyncratic relationships with Western

“Deliver China From Her Bondage”, *The New Leader*, 10 July 1925; “What Is Happening in China?” *The Socialist Review*, March 1926, “The White Peril in China”, *The New Leader*, 17 Sept. 1926; “Where Is China Going?”, *Jewish Daily Forward*, 13 Feb. 1927.

power structures, and that these relationships complicate a simple reading of their motivations. Additionally, Russell's writings raise the possibility that thinkers East and West can use each other as comparisons and foils for powerful internal critiques, but that this process risks simplifying the other. Finally, our story reveals the impressive degree to which Russell leveraged his authority before 1920 into credibility on a topic he knew relatively little about, and that his audience did not perceive the intellectual or personal limits of his work. This story, then, is a warning to both writers and readers of Western knowledge about the East.

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