

## Bertrand Russell on Chinese education

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**Abstract:** The visit of Bertrand Russell to China during 1920 to 1921 was one of the most significant events in May Fourth Movement, and Russell pointed out that education was the most important thing for Chinese reconstruction. The author argues that we should interpret Russell's educational idea of China from a theoretic and practical point of view. The man in Chinese education is the key to the future of China.

**Key words:** Bertrand Russell; Chinese education; May Fourth Movement

Invited by a scholar association of Peking University, Russell delivered a series of lectures about the problems of China, besides his theory of logic and philosophy. Chinese intellectuals, young students, politicians made comments on his lectures with great enthusiasm. His influence on China was so great that former president SUN Yat-sen called him "the only foreigner who knows Chinese civilization" and in 1998, CAC (Cultural Academy of China) chose his lectures in China as "the most influential literatures on China in the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (Bertrand Russell, 2000, p. 293).

Russell took Chinese education as a key to the Chinese problems. He wrote, "But as for the thought recently, I take Education as the first thing in various methods of Chinese reconstruction" (Bertrand Russell, 2000, p. 297). In this paper, besides a survey of Russell's thoughts of Chinese education, which intersperse among Russell's lectures and essays about Chinese problem. The author will argue that Russell's solution of Chinese problem based on education is still useful for us.

### 1. Analysis of Chinese education

Unlike present situation, Chinese education was not unified partly because its government was too weak and there were many forces in education. There were many forces in Chinese education, so Russell concluded that there were mainly three forms of Chinese education.

#### 1.1 Old-fashioned education

Before disintegration of Qing Dynasty, there was only one kind of education in China, which Russell described as old-fashioned education. Old-fashioned education emphasized the learning of classical works, which mainly were the doctrine of Confucius and his followers. They had no interests in scientific knowledge, which was taken as being unnecessary to man's happiness. The aim of education is to acquire the ability of "self-cultivation, regulating the family, governing the country and establishing peace throughout the world" (Bertrand Russell, 1922, p. 34).

A man's morality and political ability were the standard of his cultivated level, and a perfect example was the

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Saint such as the ancient emperors YAO and SHUN. Therefore, under the encouragement of government, all the best students tried their best to be a good politician. Under the influence of this doctrine, all of education was to learn and study classical works. Russell described in this way, “There is first the old traditional curriculum, the learning by rote of the classics without explanation in early youth, followed by a more intelligent study in later years. This is exactly like the traditional study of the classics in this country, as it existed, for example, in the eighteenth century” (Bertrand Russell, 1922, p. 46).

This schema of education was destined to fail when facing the western science. But its tenacious life power was noticed by Russell, he wrote, “Such schools still form the majority, and give most of the elementary education that is given” (Bertrand Russell, 1922, p. 47).

### **1.2 American education**

As for China, a series of war failure in early 20<sup>th</sup> century has resulted in a large number of war compensation and partly losing its self-government. Since what American lost in anti-China war was much less than what it demanded for compensation. Congress of USA decided to establish a series of American school in China by using a part of war compensation, and the best students could be sent to American for advanced study. To be frankly, American education has fastened the spread of natural science, introduced another kind of education, and trained a large number of students, who were an important force in Chinese education. But Russell was aware that the motivation of American education was not as noble as they described. Russell wrote, “They remain always missionaries—not of Christianity, though they often think that is what they are preaching, but of Americanism. What is Americanism? ‘Clean living, clean thinking, and pep’. I think an American would reply. This means, in practice, the substitution of tidiness for art, cleanliness for beauty, moralizing for philosophy, prostitutes for concubines (as being easier to conceal), and a general air of being fearfully busy for the leisurely calm of the traditional Chinese” (Bertrand Russell, 1922, p. 49).

Indeed, its aim was to replace Chinese traditional culture by American culture. Similarly, American education played a role of invader. Russell holds a critical position about American education. The best Chinese educationists are aware of this, and have established schools and universities which are modern but under Chinese direction.

### **1.3 Modern education**

Russell was not satisfied with the former two kinds of Chinese education, but he highly praised modern education. Although it has many disadvantages, such as there was no adequate book or equipment, the teaching of English was not sufficiently thorough, and the courses were not very rational. As for Russell, these disadvantages would disappear if there would be a powerful government.

Contrast with old-fashioned education, the system of courses of this kind of education was more westernized, and the students receiving modern education would learn more about natural science, industry, economy, which were ignored in old-fashioned education. Meanwhile, the advocators of modern education emphasized scholar freedom, and Russell wrote, “They respect the knowledge of Europeans, but quietly put aside their arrogance” (Bertrand Russell, 1922, p. 50). By this way, modern education was differed from American education. “Modern Chinese schools and universities are singularly different: they are not hotbeds of rabid nationalism as they would be in any other country, but institutions where the student is taught to think freely, and his thoughts are judged by their intelligence, not by their utility to exploiters” (Bertrand Russell, 2000, p. 301).

We can take the modern Chinese education as the Chinese version of American education. What Russell appreciating in modern Chinese education was its emphasis on pursuing a truth. Russell described the three forms of Chinese education as “the old traditional education, stands for Conservatism; America and its commerce and its educational institutions stand for liberalism; while the native modern education, practically though not theoretically, stands for Socialism. Incidentally, it alone stands for intellectual freedom” (Bertrand Russell, 1922, p. 52).

## **2. Why education first?**

This is an ignored problem in Russell’s studies. Some people thought it was an utopia idea, some doubted it because Russell, as an educator in Beacon Hill, was failed according to the statements of Katherine Russell, who is the daughter of Bertrand Russell. But the author argues that if we paid more attention to Russell’s educational theory and Chinese situation in 1910s, we would understand Russell’s opinion better.

### **2.1 From a theoretical point of view**

In Russell’s educational theory, education plays a key role in civilization and social construction. According to Russell’s statements, there is a question that “whether education should train good individuals or good citizens”. Russell denied the latter. The fundamental characteristic of citizen is that he cooperates and is just a part of a society. Personal freedom disappears, and there is only the freedom of a whole. The society constituted by calm and tame citizens would not be democratic and possibly be regained by some ambiguous men. Russell dislikes this kind of society, “The whole educational machine in America, from the public schools to the universities, is concerned to emphasize citizenship. In my mind, it could be one important reason of Russell’s anti-America standpoint in 1910s which has sent him into jail” (Bertrand Russell, 2000, p. 276).

Therefore, Russell thinks education should be a tool to reconstruct the society. As individual education, Russell said individuals mirrored the world. Russell believes that the purpose of education should be to cultivate a free man, to establish a bright future of human. We should be noted that Russell’s theory of education is correspond with his philosophy, Russell advocates a kind of atomism, rejected any kind of holism. In one word, Russell believes that “the issue between citizenship and individuality is important in education, in politics, in ethics, and in metaphysics” (Bertrand Russell, 1938, p. 14).

### **2.2 From a practical point of view**

In all men concern with Chinese education, Russell paid more attention to the young students, who he called “Youth China”. On one hand, these students were very clever and longed for the western knowledge very much, Russell has gave an example, “The discussions which I used to have in my seminar (consisting of students belonging to the Peking Government University) could not have been surpassed anywhere for keenness, candor and fearlessness” (Bertrand Russell, 1922, p. 66). On the other hand, Youth China was a powerful force in China. A good example was the student’s objection on the problem of Shandong in the Versailles Treaty.

Russell also felt surprised about the influence of Chinese intellectuals, the majority of whom were the teachers. There were two cases that could be used as example. The first thing was the movement of co-education about male and female. At that time, there was no enough elementary education in China for the girls, so if the girls could not go to the schools as the boys, they would not be able to get suitable education. Therefore, some provinces in China, such as Hunan, have adopted co-education. In Russell’s opinion, it was a greater improvement

than England, in which co-education had been only in talk.

The second thing was the movement of teaching strike. Because they were not paid for several months, they went on a deputation to the government, but were repulsed by soldiers and policemen, who clubbed them so severely that many had to be taken to hospital. The incident produced such universal fury in China that there was nearly a revolution. The high position of teachers in Chinese society was from their spirit of self-sacrifice in the view of Russell. Chinese teachers dedicated themselves to Chinese education and Chinese reprosperity.

In one word, Russell took the man about education, such as teachers, students, etc., as the hope and propellants of Chinese reconstruction.

### **3. Some remarks on Russell's view**

In the problem of China, Russell said that there were three things key to Chinese reconstruction, "The three chief requisites, I should say, are: (1) the establishment of an orderly government; (2) industrial development under Chinese control; (3) the spread of education" (Bertrand Russell, 1922, p. 73).

In May Fourth Movement, there were two famous sirs: sir democracy and sir science. I take this as a westernize road and just a slogan. Russell's solution is a realistic one and there is some analogy between Russell's solution and Chinese practice, a Marxism way.

In my mind, Russell took education as the condition of realization of first two requisites of Chinese reconstruction. An orderly government should be run by educated people, and Chinese industry should be established by educated people too. We should distinguish between education and the spread of education, education is a more general concept than the spread of education. It means the man related to education, the role of education, and so on. After visiting china, Russell "set up his own experimental school, Beacon Hill. This was partly opportunity to put his ideas into practice" (Nicholas Griffin, 2003, p. 11). Russell's visit to China is successful and his idea about Chinese education will benefit us continually.

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