

NEGATIVE IMAGE PROJECTION IN COLIN THUBRON'S *BEHIND THE WALL: A JOURNEY THROUGH CHINA*

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As one of the most famous contemporary British travel writers, Colin Thubron has for a long time been one of the most influential Western image-formers who have written – and continue to write – about China. He has produced several travel books about regions which currently belong to the People's Republic of China (such as *To a Mountain in Tibet* and *Shadow of the Silk Road*) but one of his best-known travelogues is about mainland China itself. The title is *Behind the Wall: A Journey through China* and in it the author describes his several-month journey through the Middle Kingdom in 1985. The gaze of this particular British traveler seems to be very dynamic and the images he produces – quite varied, even contradictory at times, to an extent greater than what can be observed in the works of other English and American travelers. Thubron has evidently not attempted to avoid some specific and even banal aspects of the “colonial style of writing”, often encountered in English-language travelogues about China, “which assumes the superiority of the traveler’s cultural and moral values and which leads to this figure taking possession of what he [sic] sees in a voyeuristic gaze. Even when sympathetic towards the people being visited, this colonial rhetoric positions the indigenous people as childlike or lacking in reason.” (Sharp 1999: 203). He has, however, managed to offer quite a few unique perspectives which, with their very novelty, have probably helped increase the image forming powers of the book.

Colin Thubron travels in a very specific way: from the very start of his journey near Beijing he tries to cover as much as possible of the Chinese territory and talk to as many people as he can. This gives him a perspective denied to other travel writers who either stay at one particular place (like Hessler in *River Town*) or follow a strict, sometimes thematically chosen route. At the same time, however, this hectic traveling routine does not allow him the depth of perception achieved by the likes of Hessler and often leaves him vulnerable to preconceived ideas and hastily adopted

notions: when you are on a marathon journey you can hardly afford to give any particular place or person a chance to change – however slightly – your prejudices.

The very first pages of the narrative offer the first instance of the projection the traveler will frequently resort to, inadvertently. In the airplane Thubron meets a Chinese woman and we are given the impression that he can almost read her mind: “She smiled her set smile. Perhaps she was wondering what the foreigner could ever understand of her nation – this Westerner with his boorish rucksack (I’d dropped it on her feet) and his failure to travel in a group. What could he ever learn?” (Thubron 1988: 2) He appears to be able to read (or at least confidently guess) her thoughts and these imagined thoughts ‘betray’ the powerful stereotype of the Westerners that she harbors. Ironically, it is Thubron who is doing the stereotyping here (the haughty, guarded Chinese who is naturally distrustful of anything foreign) but he puts it in the mind of his new acquaintance. The second ironic detail here is the woman’s imagined refusal to admit in her mind that the Westerners “can learn”. Several times in the book Thubron himself expresses a very similar doubt – whether the Chinese are able to learn, especially from their own mistakes. While this can hardly be viewed as a clear example of what Debbie Lisle calls ‘negative projection’ (Lisle 2006: 83) in connection with another famous traveler – Paul Theroux, whose judgments about the people he encounters appear to be much more severe, it can easily be consigned to the same category because it ultimately achieves the same effect – it elevates the Western traveler to a position of imagined intellectual and/or moral authority over a stereotyped Other.

Almost instantly, however, the traveler seems to wake up to his rising prejudice and hastens to acknowledge that he – a Westerner – has been fed his fair share of clichés and stereotypes about China: “The Chinese, after all, were stunted and yellow and looked alike. Their multitudinous numbers lent them anonymity. They weren’t quite human. [...] People’s images of countries are rich in such buried sediment, which goes on haunting long after experience or common sense has diluted it”. (Thubron 1988: 2) This struggle of the author with his own preconceived ideas and “background books”, which emerges on the very first pages, is one of the chief leitmotifs throughout the narrative and does not show any signs of disappearing even towards the end of the journey. Sometimes he

manages to push them to the background but they soon emerge again, often unbeknownst to Thubron himself.

The idea of freedom or, rather, unfreedom, is one of the concepts which demonstrate this inner struggle very clearly. From the beginning of the book it is evident that the writer has adopted the Western definition of 'freedom' as universal and does not hesitate to apply it like a moral yardstick to what he finds in the Chinese society. He even admits he feels guilty for being able to travel so widely "since no Chinese could see so much of [the] country". It does not occur to him that the Chinese idea of freedom might be different from his. His months of travel around the country do very little to change his opinion in this respect. On his train journey to the Three Gorges he starts a conversation with several tin miners and a Sichuan official. When the official declares that the Chinese people are now free, Thubron feels a strong desire to disagree with him.

'We can say what we like. We're not afraid to talk to you. We're free.'

The miners grinned agreement.

[...] Momentarily I wanted to ask them if they would dare publicly to reject the Communist Party. But then freedom meant different things. [...] I believed that they felt they were free. Their freedom was not mine, but it was greater than any they had ever known. (Thubron 1988: 229–230)

At first glance it looks like the traveler is ready to admit that his own idea of freedom might not be universal. The next step would be to acknowledge that the Chinese idea is as valid as the western one and to use this as a basis for any further discussion of the concept. It would not make him impartial or 'objective' but it would at least prevent him from constantly privileging the Western definitions of various moral concepts over the Chinese ones. Thubron, however, never takes this extra step. It immediately turns out that his fellow travelers consider themselves free only because they do not know any better and, in any case, they only **feel** they are free. It is the Westerner who passes judgment on whether Chinese freedom is 'real' or imagined. This attitude of the traveler could be explained, to a degree, by the geopolitical situation at the time when the travelogue was produced. During the 80s the relations between the Western world and China were still rather tense and suffering the consequences

of a period when “the general production of negative images of China was increased as part of the larger anti-communist ideology” (Pennycook 1998: 170). A certain measure of (imagined) nationalism is almost always present in the voices of the Chinese who tell Thubron that theirs is a free country. This does not necessarily point to a fundamental clash of opinions between the traveler and his interlocutors but, rather, to their differing understandings of the concept of freedom. As Loomba has noted, “[N]ationalism all over Asia and Africa was not modeled upon simple imitation but also by defining its difference from Western notions of liberty, freedom and human dignity” (Loomba 2005: 160).

It is quite significant that when a Chinese person seems to give credence to the Western idea of freedom, as opposed to the Chinese one, the writer never argues with his interviewee, be it only on the pages of his book, but keeps a respectful, agreeing silence. He seldom misses chances to quote such people as confirmation of his own opinions.

‘What else can people do when they can’t move around? Things here aren’t like with you. Nothing’s really changed. This government is the same as all the others – Mao Zedong, Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping – none of them makes us free. In our Constitution it gives us freedom of speech, freedom of correspondence, freedom of everything... but just try using it.’ (Thubron 1988: 293)

Of the many images that pervade the text, two are especially strong, intrusive and ultimately related to each other: the varying levels of inscrutability of the local people (wherever the traveler goes) and their subtly expressed but discernible inferiority.

The first of these images is projected quite directly and is often openly discussed. At the beginning of his journey Thubron expresses the desire to know one thing in particular – whether a foreigner can **know** the Chinese in any useful sense of the word. The question of whether or not the Chinese are knowable preoccupies him most of the time and he keeps trying to answer it in a definitive way, sometimes even creating the impression that he fails to acknowledge that the Chinese are not a homogenous population with a fixed set of characteristics. Not surprisingly, this chronic oversimplification of the question only impedes the answer and repeatedly brings frustration to the Western observer. When he arrives

in Beijing, the Chinese ‘inscrutability’ – one of the most powerful Western clichés he has brought with himself – seems to be confirmed by his first contact with the local ‘reality’. “Staring at passing faces, I wondered if I could ever come to know them. They conspired to fulfil Western clichés of themselves: inscrutable and all alike. [...] Nobody approached me.” (Thubron 1988: 293). To make matters worse, his Chinese language training, obtained in England, seems to be useless and does not help him ‘decipher’ the people or make himself understood. This first communicative shock induces him to confirm the already created image of inscrutability.

A suspicion that these people would remain forever inaccessible was filling me with suppressed alarm. Like an insecure child, I began to crave for any kind of contact, even abuse. [...] I lingered by open doors and windows — any perforation in the intestine of these alleys. But I encountered only silence, emptiness or bemusement. Westerners who had lived many years in south-east Asia often said that the Chinese were unknowable. I had not believed them. But perhaps I had been wrong. I felt a prick of panic. (Thubron 1988: 6–7)

This is the highest point of the author’s initial frustration with his apparent inability to communicate. The strong image of societal isolation he creates says more about him than about the inhabitants of the *hutong*. Disappointed by the uselessness of his language abilities he is inclined to reinforce in his mind – and in the minds of his readers – one of the usual Western myths about China. No matter how well intended Thubron might be, it is not difficult for the reader to discern in those lines his growing resentment which unavoidably warps the images created under the influence of such emotions. The inscrutable and almost sinister Chinese we encounter in this paragraph are not the real inhabitants of the neighborhood but a construction of the author’s imagination. As time goes by and his language skills improve, this type of frustration subsides and almost disappears. Soon he is able to communicate with the locals relatively easily and the images he produces change accordingly. Having broken down the first barrier, however, he encounters another: it is difficult to make the Chinese ‘open up to him’ and discuss personal matters. Once he asks a man about his experiences during the Cultural Revolution. It seems that the man begins to answer his questions but suddenly changes his mind:

“Between one sentence and another the urbane veneer had slipped from his face. The flesh had stiffened. He said incongruously: ‘I see you’re interested in our history.’ That turned my question – and his experiences – impersonal.” (Thubron 1988: 25)

An interesting interpretative alternative can be detected here, especially if we examine the aforementioned projection of unknowability in the light of Bartkowski’s concept of ‘forelonging’, which she defines as the opposite of ‘nostalgia’, or nostalgia directed towards the future. According to her, many of the fantasies and projections of difference produced in contemporary travelogues are caused by (or even instances of) forelonging – “the desire to see what we’ve never seen, go where we have never been before” (Bartkowski 1995: 19). It is often accompanied by pronounced anxiety. “To be late, to know the exotic as exhausted, mapped, and packaged, is to reinscribe desire off in space, for time has been sealed” (Thubron 1988: 19). The Chinese perceived inscrutability in Thubron’s *Behind the Wall* can be interpreted as just another instance of this type of masochistic, forlonging-induced projection. In 1985 China was no longer the nearly impenetrable country it had been just ten years before. A growing number of westerners were already traversing the former empire and writing about it. The number of organized tours was also on the rise and in the eyes of many travelers there was a real danger of China losing its exotic appeal. As part of this appeal, the Oriental inscrutability had been one of the chief components of the image of China for many centuries. Thubron’s inability to ‘understand’ the inhabitants of the *hutong* is clearly represented as distressing but there is a certain satisfaction to it – the traveler has not been deceived in his preconceived notions of Chinese impenetrability and his forelonging is at least partially satisfied.

The traveler’s visit to a public bath-house in Beijing becomes yet another occasion where he emphasizes the idea of Chinese strangeness and difference – an idea which has for centuries been fairly firmly fixed in the Western imagination. It seems fairly reasonable to assume that the space of a public bathhouse would offer an alien observer an excellent opportunity to see the local people in a different light and to counter, if he/she is so inclined, some of the stereotypes held by his/her own society. One such example can be found in Mary Wortley Montagu’s letter about

her visit to the Turkish baths in Sofia, which has been discussed by Ludmilla Kostova. Thubron and Wortley Montagu, however, are very different types of observers. While “[t]he most striking characteristic of Wortley Montagu’s *Letters* is the systematic dismantling of most (if not all!) Western stereotypes of the Islamic Orient” (Kostova 1997: 28), Thubron seems to be constantly (though often unconsciously) confirming and reinforcing most of the stereotypes about China. For instance, the eighteenth-century traveler rejects the Western myth of inappropriate sexual behavior of the Turkish women in the *hammam* (Kostova 1997: 34) and writes about those women in a highly positive light:

Yet there was not the least wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst them. They walked and moved with the same majestic grace which Milton describes of our general mother. There were many of them as exactly proportioned as ever any a goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian, and most of their skins shiningly white, only adorned by their beautiful hair divided into many tresses, hanging on their shoulders, braided either with pearl or ribbon, perfectly representing the figures of the Graces (Wortley Montagu 1837: 248).

In contrast, Thubron’s passages about the public bath in Beijing appear to reinforce some of the popular Western notions about Chinese men – their ‘low standard’ of hygiene, their near-opacity for the eyes of the Westerner and the emaciated, boyish look of their bodies.

Naked, they looked more than ever like a nation of boys. Their limbs were slender, unshaped. Many looked malnourished... Some men squatted along the tiled pool-sides, soaping their armpits or crutches... as if flushing out extra small fleas. Among them a few old men stood thin as storks. Their shoulder-blades stuck out like those in famine posters...

The dressing-room was like a morgue. Knots of men gathered sleepily around the tin spittoons, where ash and phlegm mingled in a tobacco-colored pool. Others... assiduously sliced the dead skin from the soles of their feet and dropped it on the floor (Thubron 1988: 15–17).

Even though he says he hopes for anonymity and, in a way, tries to merge with the rest of the bathers, throughout the episode Thubron is

careful to maintain his distance from the Chinese and repeatedly signals his readers that he is above all a Westerner who is taking advantage of the opportunity to observe the Orientals in an unusual environment. The preservation of distance has been discussed by Kostova, in relation to Mary Wortley Montagu. She points out that this distance is “one of the conventions of the genre of travel writing itself. Travel writing is about visiting and/or even ‘discovering’ other cultures, but it is ‘**always already**’ addressed to one’s own culture. To gain their addressees’ trust, narrators must emphasize their own ‘sameness’. Total identification with the Other (‘going native’) might make their writing suspect.” (Thubron 1998: 35)

Thubron deliberately brings more tangibility to the idea of Chinese mysteriousness in *Behind the Wall* by occasionally resorting to the image of the split personality. At various points in his travels around the country he meets individuals who appear to suddenly change during a conversation. Almost invariably, the author conjures an image of a person suddenly coming out of another person. Sometimes this uncanny transformation happens more than once during the course of a single conversation and is generally accompanied by a corresponding change of the conversation topic. “[...] It’s the man who get the long sentences. Five years for a man – one for a woman! Perhaps, I don’t know...” He glanced up suddenly – like someone just waking... ‘You’re interested in Chinese animals?’” (Thubron 1988: 26). About a page later the man shows more signs of being the host of another person living inside him: “As he spoke about it, the tension crawled back into his voice... a tension created simply by recollection, by re-entering a past in which (he now felt) he had been a sleepwalker, another man.” (Thubron 1988: 26). This imagined transformation, however, is once again more indicative of the writer’s own state of mind than it is of the Chinese man’s personality. A very interesting link can be made between this particular image and a recent interview with Thubron where he makes the following observation about his travels: “It is as if two of you are going – there is the one who is traveling and there is the one who is sitting on his shoulder and who is going to write about it” (Thubron 2006). This illuminating comment makes it rather likely that the British traveler is in fact projecting his own frame of mind onto his subjects. Moreover, at times he himself seems to acknowledge that. It is interesting that such a “split personality” is not

confined to this particular author but is observed in other travel writers living in China. Peter Hessler, for instance, repeatedly describes the same phenomenon in his first book about China *River Town*:

Eventually, I came to think of myself as two people, Ho Wei and Peter Hessler. [...] Ho Wei was completely different from my American self: he was friendlier, he was eager to talk with anybody, and he took great pleasure in even the most inane conversations. [...] I had two desks in my apartment... One desk was Ho Wei's and the other belonged to Peter Hessler. Sometimes this relationship unnerved me – it seemed wrong that behind Ho Wei's stupidity there was another person watching everything intensely and taking notes. (Hessler 2001: 238)

Hessler, however, hardly ever projects this feeling to the Chinese people he communicates with. Throughout *Behind the Wall* Thubron demonstrates a strong tendency to project his emotions and thoughts to his interlocutors and the “split personality phenomenon” is no exception. By commenting on what the people he meets feel or think about him, his country or some aspect of Chinese society, he is in fact inadvertently revealing to his readers what goes on in his own mind. This is at least partially confirmed by the fact that the mood of the people Thubron meets very often coincides with the mood that is displayed in the preceding or following paragraphs of the narrative, even when these paragraphs are not in any way related to the Chinese person in question.

Another instance of projection, this time strong undertone of Orientalism, can be found a little further in the book, when the author talks to one of the men whose lives have been scarred by the Cultural Revolution. In spite of his experience, the man declares the things in China should not “relax very much”.

‘... If they have to much freedom – yes, I’m afraid of chaos.’
‘What sort of chaos?’

But he didn’t know. He only felt that somewhere inside his heart Old-Hundred-Names nurtured a terrible capacity for violence; and when he spoke of it his thin hands came up and encased his own ribs too, as if the demon waited for him. (Thubron 1998: 51)

This is a clear projection of the image of the “yellow peril” which originated in the late nineteenth century when a big wave of Chinese

immigrants came to various Western countries. The image of Chinese violence and cruelty is a recurring one throughout the text. Occasionally, the narrator openly admits that this is one of his preconceived notions about the country but again and again he stubbornly refuses to take the extra step and attempt to free himself from his prejudices. He is quite content to just mention them: "I realized that I was still steeped in a conventional anxiety about Chinese cruelty, and that ever since entering the country I had unconsciously waited for some expression of tenderness, of empathy with pain." (Thubron 1988: 95) The problem here is not that Thubron longs for tenderness and empathy but that he just waits for them passively instead of systematically and actively questioning the assumptions and the stereotypes he has brought with himself. As a result, he expects the Orient to manifest what constitutes the **Western** idea of humaneness instead of attempting to discern the difference between his abstract ideas and those of his interlocutors.

That Thubron should be fascinated with the image of Oriental cruelty is not in the least surprising. After all, it is an inseparable part of what Said calls "a complex array of "Oriental" ideas" (Thubron 1988: 4). A more interesting question is what the reason for this fascination is. Needless to say, this question pertains not only to Colin Thubron but to all travel writers who dwell on the subject. Clearly, at this particular moment in history (1985) Thubron is not a representative of a contemporary colonial power whose ambitions need to be backed by denigrating images of the Orient produced by writing travelers, as Said suggests. According to A. L. Macfie, the imperial gaze is not a necessary condition for the interest in violence and cruelty whose explanation "should be sought not in imperial ambition, but in a Romantic urge to portray the sublime" (Thubron 1988: 70). Whatever the cause of Thubron's fascination, he is rather quick to draw conclusions and imagine historical sequences at work: "He was deeply bewildered at his own past. Once authority had sanctioned violence, no monitor inside him had called a halt. Such a pattern, a realised, ran far back in China's history: a recurring cycle of constraint broken by sudden ungovernable savagery" (Thubron 1988: 27).

The above quotation is an excellent example of cultural construction at work. Thubron makes no effort to support this sweeping assertion about the 'cycle' he claims to notice. He provides no evidence of such a historical

pattern. He feels that, as a westerner, he has enough authority to make such a claim, even though he has not bothered to acquaint himself with a reliable book on Chinese history. He only extrapolates his personal observations. As can be seen clearly throughout *Behind the Wall*, the traveler is seldom reluctant to reinforce his pre-conceived ideas (rather than to challenge them). He passes judgment on the people he meets and on Chinese society in general, hardly eves resists the urge to essentialize and, as a whole, serves as a rather good illustration of the attitude of many western travelers in China during the 1980s.

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