

THE RETURN OF HISTORY IN COLIN THUBRON'S TRAVELOGUE BE HIND THE WALL: A JOURNEY THROUGH CHINA

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Abstract: The paper discusses Colin Thubron's book *Behind the Wall: A Journey Through China* – one of the most popular twentieth-century travelogues about this country. It explores the various ways in which the author constructs the image of the Chinese people, especially when these images are related to China's recent history. More specifically, I focus on a discursive phenomenon – an imagined “return of history” – which the reader can witness throughout the book. The author constantly travels around the country, expecting to somehow see the history he has heard so much about at home. He expects something from China and is prepared to see this ‘something’ even in the face of the evidence. At the same time he feels he has every right to pass judgments on what he perceives as history, while denying the Chinese he meets the right to comment on British history.

Keywords: China, travel writing, imagology, history, postcolonial

Among the scores of writing travelers visiting China in the late 20th century, Colin Thubron stands out as one of the most prolific. His enormous popularity with the readers – which endures to this day – has made him an influential producer of images. His hectic style of traveling, characterized by a constant effort to cover as large a territory as possible, allows him to see a much bigger part of the country than has been accessible to other travelers. He usually embarks on his journeys by train and invariably chooses to travel third class – not necessarily to save money, but rather to get acquainted with ‘the common people’. This tactic does allow him to meet a great number of fascinating characters but at the same time it wears him down quickly and gives an additional sarcastic

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tinge to his already wry outlook. Not surprisingly, the images he produces as a result are often very subjective and palpably negative.

Throughout Thubron's book the backwardness of China is frequently hinted at. The narrator makes various analogies with how things are in the West and China invariably appears to be lacking in something and lagging behind. Given the fact that he frequently travels to distant places, located far away from Beijing, Shanghai or any other metropolis, it is not in the least surprising that the situations he encounters are very different from what he has got used to in the West. Even when he travels around the big cities – even the Chinese capital – what impresses him (and what he conveys to his readers) is not how China is modernizing itself, not how the people there struggle to catch up with the prosperous West - although he frequently comments on that. Rather, his attention is always captured by some detail or other which seems to confirm his conviction of Chinese inability to make 'real' progress. This kind of observational selection is not unusual for travel writing. "The gaze of the 'knowing subject' is most frequently cast from his/her vantage point and is always purposefully directed as a beam of light, intended to illuminate a certain location, to examine certain models... in order to arrange the diversity of the Eastern world in accordance with the criteria of its own world (Цончева 2019, 138)"². What is more, there are certain instances where Thubron sees backwardness and 'the return of history' at places where the reader would least expect them. One such moment can be found in Chapter 2 – "The Power Circles" when the narrator is sitting in the restaurant of the Great Wall Hotel in Beijing:

The blank-faced waitress dropped a hefty bill on my table. Over an invisible tannoy came the strains of the New World Symphony. I had an ominous sensation of returning history. This place mirrored those privileged foreign ghettos in Shanghai or Canton during the 1930s, teetering on the edge of their nemesis – enclaves incarcerated in cities of the waiting poor, blinding their expatriates in an illusion of home. Now I could not tell if the hotel were flagship or dinosaur.

China was present here only in permutations and refinements. (1987, 52)

² This and all subsequent translations of passages originally written in Bulgarian are done by the author of this paper.

This new and stylish hotel does not bring to Thubron's mind images of development, progress and striving for prosperity. In a paradoxical way, it becomes a symbol of 'returning history'. Why would the narrator view Chinese evident material progress in such a way? So far, his complaints about Chinese underdevelopment at backwardness have been at least understandable – he avoids highly developed areas, insists on traveling the lowest possible class on the trains (even when he is quite exhausted) and, for the most part, looks for exactly this kind of experience. He enjoys being uncomfortable and occasionally complaining about his discomfort, the Chinese inscrutability and lack of understanding. One would think, however, that in this posh Beijing hotel he would paint a somewhat different picture, that he would openly concede the Chinese striving for modernization and its partial (at least) success. Instead, something quite different happens. After briefly describing the modern hotel he pronounces that this conspicuous symbol of change and prosperity only serves to drag the country deeper back in history. In China, it appears, even progress epitomizes oriental stagnation. The traveler's very notion of 'returning history' is dominated by the western understanding of this concept. In *Behind the Wall* it implies linearity, while, as Mamronova writes, “[i]n the East the connection between things is not linear but contemporaneous and parallel. They simply alter their form and manifestation” (Мамротова 2018, 218–219).

The reason for this attitude may lie in Thubron's own expectations, in his 'background books'. He expects something from China and is prepared to see this 'something' even in the face of the evidence. This may also be one of the explanations of why he always chooses to travel in the lowest possible class and his general avoidance of highly developed areas. He visits Beijing and Shanghai, it is true, but he does so partly because for him they represent parts of the “real” China that he simply cannot avoid. The reader can sense that he feels much more content and in much better shape when he visits, for instance, the villages in southwest China. His visit to the Great Wall Hotel prompts him to say a few more words about China's potential modernization and who exactly will be responsible for it:

At the cost of \$75 million, this hotel was the largest Sino-American joint venture before 1985. It had been prefabricated in other countries –

plate-glass curtain-walls in Belgium, elevators and furniture in Japan, carpets in New Zealand, Crystal and silver in France, computer system in Britain, food in Hong Kong. It was its own country: eclectic, placeless. The palisades of its reflecting walls glimmered synthetically over the eastern city. (52)

The above passage clearly points to the narrator's opinion that it is in fact the West that is going to be responsible for the country's modernization, not China itself. This is not the only point in the book where he insinuates that without Western help and Western dynamism China will be unable to make any progress. What is more, even when it does make progress, this progress is considered by Thubron to be merely a step back in time, in the general direction of the beginning of the twentieth century: a time when the Western countries and the "China hands" representing Western businesses had China under their nearly complete economic and political Domination. In this respect, Thubron's earlier reference to the 1930s is not in the least incidental: it was the time when Carl Crow wrote his *400 Million Customers*, reminiscing about the earlier times of the 'great grab for China'. The reader can almost feel the same sense of nostalgia in the pages of *Behind the Wall*.

The representation of the West as an agent of modernization in China also brings to the narrative a certain sense of neo-imperialist domination. As a result, one is likely to wonder what kind of imperial domination could possibly occur in a post-Maoist, communist China, bearing in mind the fact that it was the very same communist regime that obliterated almost all traces of Western influence at the at the beginning of the 1950s. As has been demonstrated, however, neo-imperial influence can come in many different forms and in various guises. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* Loomba writes:

If imperialism is defined as a political system in which an imperial centre governs colonised countries, then the granting of political independence signals the end of empire, the collapse of imperialism. However, if imperialism is primarily an economic system of penetration and control of markets, then political changes do not basically affect it, and may even redefine the term as in the case of 'American imperialism' which wields enormous military and economic power across the globe but without direct political control. (Loomba 1998, 11)

It is exactly this “economic system of penetration and control of markets” that is illustrated in the above quotation from *Behind the Wall*. China’s gradual opening to the world in the early 1980s made it possible for many Western companies and enterprises to enter the country and conduct business there, establishing strong economic, cultural and – later in the twentieth century and in the beginning of the new millennium – political influence. “A country may be both postcolonial (in the sense of being formally independent) and neo-colonial (in the sense of remaining economically and/or culturally dependent) at the same time” (Loomba 1998, 12).

It is worth noting that in this particular case (and in quite a few other instances in the book) Thubron does not view the economic power of the Western companies in China as reminiscent of neocolonial influence or something to be wary of. This is not an unbreakable tendency, however. There are instances where the narrator does perceive a neo-imperialist paradigm when he discusses English and American economic influence in China. Thubron’s contradictions need not surprise us. In either case he is engaging in acts of translation for his readers and as has been pointed out in critical theory, wherever there is translation, contradictions are never far away. Ludmilla Kostova writes that “[t]hese contradictions further complicate the difficult task of cultural translation that their authors have ambitiously undertaken” (Kostova 2009, 41) and “the task of cultural translation is fraught with contradictions” (2009, 58).

On the other hand, even this false modernization is represented by the narrator as illusory only a few paragraphs later:

Yet inside, it was fearfully isolated. Its Chinese staff seemed hesitant, estranged. If you tried to telephone outside the hotel, the modern world collapsed. Often the lines were overloaded, permanently engaged, or went dead. Taxis left the annex into a city which the drivers did not seem to know. Beijing and the hotel were severed from one another. It lay on the outskirts like a space capsule discharged from another planet. (Thubron 1987, 53)

Suddenly the efforts of the West seem to have been in vain: China is impossible to modernize in the real sense of the word. The westernized hotel exists in its own closed-off space, almost like a holographic projection from some alien planet and it does not matter that this space has been

created by Thubron by purely discursive means: as far as the pages of the narrative and its readers are concerned it seems sufficiently 'real'. The narrator's postcolonial gaze documented on the pages of the book does not seem to allow for even a partial fusion of Chinese 'reality' and Occidental modernity and "dynamism" (Thubron 1987, 53). They must remain forever separated. This image strengthens the stereotype of Chinese deliberate cultural isolation and closed-off state, although, as Tsoncheva points out, "the absolute reticence of a nation and the total rejection of the 'alien' are impossible" (Tsoncheva 2015, 313). When I say that for the travelogues readers the discursive spaces created in the book are sufficiently 'real' I am referring to Said's and Foucault's notion that texts can, in a sense, **create** their own reality. "[T]exts can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" (Said 1978, 94). What follows is even more significant as far as the above passage is concerned. "In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it" (94).

As many critics have pointed out, the discursive location back in time is one of the most powerful and enduring ideas in travel writing about the Orient. A multitude of travel writers are carriers of this particular trope and Colin Thubron is no exception. Lisle writes that "[n]ot only are [the Oriental societies] located elsewhere, they are also located 'back' in time. By journeying elsewhere, the travel writer is able to 'go back in time' and experience more primitive historical eras that were once populated by colonial explorers" (Lisle 2006, 43). In this particular case the narrator does not need to journey very far back in time to achieve his goal. He only needs to go as far as the first decades of the twentieth century. Even the more recent past is sufficiently 'far back' for him.

Apart from exoticizing them, Thubron has a strong tendency to portray the Chinese, especially when they appear in groups, as hapless natives of a distant and uncivilized land who seize every opportunity to stare, spellbound, at the fascinating white Westerner. One of the most expressive passages is found in Chapter Four:

I was left sitting before a mounting audience of fascinated townspeople. They trickled through the doors and filled the seats in front

of me. Then they banked up behind – standing two, three, four ranks deep, jostling for the best view – until they choked the whole building... Now the hoary faces came circling a foot or two from mine, as if examining the detail in a statue. When I affected to read, one man wordlessly lifted the book from my hands to inspect it. To some of them I was probably the first foreigner they had ever seen, and as they gazed I found myself marvelling at the enclosed conformity of this land... (115)

A was already mentioned, Thubron travels extensively and very economically. Given his mode of traveling – mostly in hard-seat carriages – he cannot avoid meeting countless people who have never seen a foreigner in real life before. Quite naturally, people are curious and look at him. The way he frames this experience, however, is rather indicative of his lofty attitude. In a comical but rather disturbing way he unconsciously compares his encounter with the man who takes the book from his hands to an encounter between a ‘civilized’ European conqueror and a native from some distant continent during the Age of discovery. The reader is all but left with the impression that the Chinese man has never seen a book in his life. The narrator is quick to pass the judgment that the part of China in which he has found himself is nothing but a land of “enclosed conformity”. Ironically, it is in fact Thubron who conforms to an old and resilient tradition of representing the oriental Other as infantile, childishly curious and hardly civilized.

This impression becomes even stronger a few lines later when the traveler adds: “Their stare lingered down from my face and over my clothes, my shoes, my rucksack – not with the acquisitive glitter of the Arab butt with a dull, hopeless disconnection, as they might stare at fish” (115). Not only are the Chinese denigrated here but they are also compared unfavorably to another group of ‘orientals’ – the Arabs. Compared to them, the Chinese people at the bus station are made to appear almost inhuman and robotic. They do not try to communicate with the traveler, to ask him questions or to be friendly to him, the way the Arabs would probably do.

Unlike other authors, however (such as Paul Theroux), Thubron is evidently working on the tacit presumption that that he is, on the whole, well disposed towards China and the Chinese people. This presumed attitude frequently enables him to pass judgments without appearing to do

so. Occasionally, these judgments are presented in the form of comments or even criticism directed towards other Westerners who happen to be in the same vicinity. Usually such comments are presented as originating in Chinese minds: “Barbarically hairy..., we sweated under a stupefying hodgepodge of gear and hairstyles. We went in for unseemly shows of affection, and were even seen publicly to kiss our big-breasted girls with their eerie light eyes. Many of us seemed like giants or albinos” (116).

These distorted images of the Westerners are evidently presented as coming – second hand – from the Chinese themselves. The deceptive nature of such comments is not always apparent but it is not difficult to notice that they are not uttered by any Chinese people in spite of being presented as a Chinese viewpoint. Once again, we have a case of image projection: the narrator ascribes to others feelings that he himself possibly harbors towards them. It does not take much effort to establish a notional connection between these hairy, giant, albino creatures with eerie eyes and the strange monsters with enormous feet and heads growing out of their chests described by much earlier travelers to the Orient. The two differences are that the above-quoted images are produced much later and, more importantly, that they are directed towards the Westerners and projected into the minds of the Orientals. In both cases, however, the imagining and the construction take place in the mind of the Westerner.

It may also happen that the foreign devil, if he is resilient, will look up and smile – and hesitantly, in the confusion of surrounding faces, there dawns the realization that the creature is reciprocal. At first, when he speaks, nobody responds, because he must surely have uttered something incomprehensibly foreign. Then a nervous epidemic of smiling breaks out and trickles through the whole crowd. Somebody asks a tentative question... (116)

This passage solidifies even more the image of the ‘clash of civilizations’, discussed above. This time the narrator waxes romantic and envisions a scene of tentative intercultural communication conducted between the Westerner and the childlike Orientals. It is almost as if the Chinese realize for the first time that they are dealing with a member of their own species. Significantly, even when they unthinkingly invade his private space and start touching his possessions, he accepts that somewhat patronizingly and without showing any irritation: the Chinese appear to be

only children who do not know what they are really doing and for this reason cannot be judged. But the judgment is passed: the traveler does not consider the people at the bus station his equals and his apparent lenience confirms this impression. From this perspective to show annoyance at the invasion of his private space, thus engaging in an adult-to-adult exchange, would have been a much more respectful reaction.

As he approaches the end of his journey, the narrator becomes exhausted and increasingly irritable. Everything Chinese seems to annoy him: the trains, the food, the noise, the restaurants, the people. In this state of mind he is even less likely to express tolerance towards China and its inhabitants. The positive-sounding details that occasionally appear in earlier chapters of the book seemed to disappear completely. "In my fourth-class carriage to the north, I spent a day and a night squashed among Sichuanese tin miners. I felt fragile and choleric... The legs of the man beside me get quivering... I thought: my nerves must be at breaking-point" (227). As time passes he begins to feel even more isolated and alone in spite of the fact that his language abilities improve and, unlike in the initial chapters, he is now able to communicate freely with almost anyone he meets. Significantly, he still insists on traveling the lowest possible class although, as a relatively wealthy Westerner, he can afford much greater comfort.

At one point he falls into a conversation with a veterinary doctor and a group of miners. Suddenly he finds himself in a situation where his interlocutor claims to **know** Western culture.

He wanted to exhibit his knowledge of Western European culture, which was muddled. The words 'Shakespeare' and 'Hamlet' dribbled smooth and unread from his lips. The tin miners stared at him. I started to like them.

'Shack-es-peer is famous in our country. He wrote fifty plays....'

'No.'

'Fifty plays, and....'

My eyes strayed to a soft-porn romance sticking out of the vet's pocket: a current favorite. I was surprised to find myself angry.

"The Western languages all come from Latin, don't they?"

"No."

'Certainly they do....'

The narrator's anger at the Chinese man's claims to know Western European culture is unsurprising but it is also ironic because throughout the book the traveler himself rarely misses an opportunity to show off his knowledge about Chinese history and to converse confidently with many of the Chinese people he meets about their culture. Thubron's attitude to history is ironic since, as Hein writes, etymologically it means "study, research or 'knowledge acquired by means of study and research'" (Őàéí 2017, 228). For the traveler, however, Chinese history appears to be something that needs to be imparted to the people he meets. He frequently creates the impression that he is able to not only acquire fluency in the Chinese language in a relatively short time, but also to obtain a reliable grasp on a wide array of aspects of Chinese politics and culture. However, when a Chinese person lays claims to some knowledge of any aspect of Western European life, he is presented as a caricature and rarely allowed to express his views at length on the pages of the narrative. It is almost as if any knowledge displayed by the Chinese seems aggressive and threatening to the traveler. One possible explanation of this peculiar attitude is that Thubron views any Occidental knowledge displayed by Chinese people as a symbol of the threat posed by an aggressive and threatening Orient to his inherent Occidental dominance. This interpretation is supported by a threatening image which appears a little later: "The encircling faces, signaled by their cigarettes, only leered closer, like predatory fireflies, to the dark gap where I sat. The vet's fists continued to locate my knee. 'Western history begins with Jesus....'" (228). It is not incidental that in this passage the otherwise good-humored and inquisitive Chinese workers are represented as ominous and threatening. The body language of the Chinese, described by Thubron, contributes to his resentment and his refusal to acknowledge any the doctor's points. This is hardly surprising, since "[the body language markers] accompanying verbal communication is what can make our interlocutor either 'trust' what we are saying or choose not to accept it" (Цончева 2018, 81). This image is in full accordance with- and is in fact a projection of the narrator's own state of mind.

Thubron's book *Behind the Wall* is an excellent example of cultural construction at work. The author 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; some scholars have partially attributed the lack of cultural understanding on the part of the western travelers to the fact that they “have not acquainted themselves with Chinese culture, which dates back thousands of years, and with the identity of the Chinese people, built on the fundament of this history (Мандова 2019, 72). Thubron 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 and hardly eves resists the urge to essentialize.

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