

Western Images of China: Recent Travel Accounts

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Introduction

We form our images of foreign countries from a variety of sources. Perhaps we read a book or a magazine or newspaper article that leaves a particular impression about another country. Or perhaps we see a TV program or a movie that molds our view of a country we previously knew little or nothing about. Or perhaps we visit a foreign country and come away with new ideas about the culture and the people. Or perhaps we talk with foreigners and in that way learn something of their country and customs. Depending on the reliability of the source, each of these methods can lead to our formulating images that are positive or negative, correct or mistaken, tolerant or prejudiced. In most cases, of course, our images end up consisting of both the good and the bad.

Of all these sources, the one I focus on in this paper is the travel account, which can be broadly defined as the personal views and reminiscences of people who have spent anywhere from several weeks to several years traveling and living in the country they are writing about. I intend to look at how a number of Westerner writers, mainly American and British, have described China in recent travel accounts. I think these accounts are important for several reasons: first, the books I discuss are interesting and easy to read and thus make China more accessible to the general public; second, the authors, most of whom are not China specialists, are often well-known writers whose opinions carry weight; and third, as a practical matter, almost all of the books, even those written twenty or so years ago, are currently in print in paperback editions and readily available in major American and British bookshops. As a result, it is my contention that these travel accounts have and still do play a fairly significant role in helping to create Western images of China.

When I use the word "recent" in the title, I am referring, with one exception, to books published during the twenty-five year period from 1976 to 2001.¹⁾ The year 1976 was an important year for China: Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong both died, and the

1) John Kenneth Galbraith's *A China Passage* describes his 1972 visit to China. The reasons for including this book will be discussed below.

so-called “Gang of Four” were arrested, an event which more or less signaled the end of the Cultural Revolution. After that it was possible for individual travelers from foreign countries to plan and make trips to China. There were difficulties, of course; at first, the Chinese government imposed many restrictions on how they traveled and where they went. However, from 1978 on, when Deng Xiaoping gained control of the reins of power and decided to open up the country to the outside world by instituting the Four Modernizations, it became easier and easier for foreigners to travel throughout China. It was during the 1980s that many Westerners were finally able to see China with their own eyes; and, coincidentally, that was when most of the travel accounts I talk about in this paper were written. In the 1990s almost anyone who wanted to could go to China and tour the country. Now, at the dawn of the 21st century, individual travelers can visit virtually every part of this vast land, something that was unthinkable and impossible a mere two decades ago.

The accounts I deal with in this essay can conveniently be divided into five categories: books by professional travel writers; books by well-known men of letters (an economist, a poet, and a dramatist); books by amateur travel writers; books by a journalist and a scholar; and books by teacher-travelers. Of course, this division is not absolute; in a few cases, there is some overlap, and not all the books fit perfectly into the categories. But for purposes of analysis and comparison, I think this general structure provides a handy and meaningful way to organize the material.

Professional Travel Writers

Two of the most popular and prolific travel writers now active in the West are the Englishman Colin Thubron and the American Paul Theroux. Between them, they have visited most parts of the world and written best-selling accounts of their travels.²⁾ Both men are also well-published novelists, although the case can perhaps be made that they are better known for their travel writings. What is interesting is that they visited China about the same time and both stayed for extended periods.³⁾ And their books were published within a year of each other. In addition, before departing for China, both men took the trouble to learn enough spoken Chinese to get around on their own in China. This meant, of course, that they had more freedom of movement since they did not have to rely on government-supplied interpreters. They could presumably go places, do things, and talk with people that other, less well-prepared visitors could not. Because of this, readers assume that they will learn more about the “real” China.

Colin Thubron’s *Behind the Wall* first came out in 1987. The book received

2) Thubron has written travel books about the Middle East, Russia, Central Asia, and China, and Theroux has published accounts of his travels through Asia, the South Pacific, South America, the Mediterranean, the British Isles, and China.

3) It seems that Thubron was in China about half a year, while Theroux stayed more than one year.

several literary prizes and many very favorable reviews.⁴⁾ It is the story of the long trip Thubron took in China a few years earlier. During the trip he travels along the length and breadth of the land, covering thousands of miles by train, boat, airplane, and bus. Not only does he visit the usual tourist spots, but he also introduces us to several places that regular tourists seldom see: a public bath in Beijing, for example. He talks with as many ordinary people as possible in order to try to figure out what the Chinese are thinking. Since the Cultural Revolution is still fresh in people's minds, it is one topic that he often asks them about. And, as in most good travel writing, the author supplies from time to time short descriptions of famous historical sites, events, and people.

Early on in the book, Thubron tells us about some of his childhood images of China: it was a distant, exotic, inhuman, mysterious, aesthetic country with a very large and anonymous population.⁵⁾ He felt it was a land of enormous contradictions. Many people in the West, especially those who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, probably share similar feelings concerning China. And often such images are extremely hard to dislodge. Here is how Thubron describes it: "People's images of countries are rich in such buried sediment, which goes on haunting long after experience or common sense has diluted it."⁶⁾ As one would expect, a long visit to China cannot help but change one's images, sometimes for the better and occasionally for the worse. And this seems to have been the case with Thubron.⁷⁾

One of the first questions the author tries to answer is: Are the Chinese knowable? He hears this answered in the negative by experienced Asia hands, but he does not want to believe it. However, during the first days of his stay in Beijing, he starts having doubts when he finds himself unable to meet people, carry on conversations, or penetrate into society. Everyone seems inaccessible. His year of Chinese language training does not help much, for often he cannot understand much of what is being said. He concludes that the people are "more opaque, more inhibited, more disciplined" than they are in Europe.⁸⁾ One wonders if he is really being fair, for he has only been in China a few days and still lacks a good command of the local language. This proves that anyone, no matter how well-intentioned and open-minded they are, can experience disappointment and even resentment when attempting to immerse themselves into another culture, especially one as radically different as China is.

4) For example, in her review, Jan Morris, who is also highly praised for her travel accounts, ranked Thubron as one of the two or three best living writers of the genre. Her comment appears on the back cover of the Penguin Books edition of *Behind the Wall*. In a recent newspaper interview about travel, Morris now says that Thubron is "the best living travel writer." (*USA Today*, Feb. 16, 2001, p. 5D)

5) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 2.

6) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 2.

7) As we will see, the same thing can be said of all the writers discussed in this paper.

8) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 7.

The author soon discovers that it is not easy being a foreigner in China. First, there is the continuous staring. Wherever he goes, a crowd forms around him and stares for what seems like an eternity. The reason is simple: the people are curious. Most of them are seeing a foreigner up close for the first time in their lives. And while Thubron can understand why they would want to stare at him, the staring begins to wear on him before long. “Their stare lingered down from my face and over my clothes, my shoes, my rucksack—not with the acquisitive glitter of the Arab but with a dull, hopeless disconnection, as they might stare at fish.”⁹⁾

Since he is in China to meet Chinese, he becomes annoyed when hotel clerks or ticket sellers or restaurant managers try to separate him (usually into more comfortable and expensive quarters) and thus prevent him from associating with Chinese travelers. For him it amounts to a kind of apartheid. “It is,” the author believes, “as if the hated distinctions laid down by colonizing Westerners in the last century were being reimposed—through some masochistic reflex—by the Chinese on themselves.”¹⁰⁾ He sees this springing from “an old superiority complex mixed with its opposite, a deep-laid Chinese instinct for guarding their cultural uniqueness, mingled with pride of hospitality and timeless fear of ridicule, a knowledge that the West—by some fleeting chance—has materially surpassed them.”¹¹⁾ In other words, the Chinese are acting xenophobic, a point he makes several other places in the book.

By the time Thubron gets to China, it is obvious that the country is undergoing momentous changes—and not always for the better. There is, he quickly notices, little or no interest in revolution or reforming things, particularly among young people. They are mainly concerned with getting rich or getting to America, and they at times even openly criticize the government and its leaders. The author is astonished when he meets a young girl on the train who proclaims in a loud voice, “I don’t believe in communism.”¹²⁾ In Suzhou he talks with a young man who gives his frank opinion about Mao Zedong and recent Chinese history: “...I hate him [Mao]. Many people hate him. In private people criticize him all the time—we call him The Old Man—and everybody admits that the Cultural Revolution was his fault.”¹³⁾ There is no way to know for sure if the limited number of people Thubron encounters during his travels actually represents the majority opinion of the Chinese population. At times, however, we do get that impression from the text. We should remember that most, if not all, of the author’s Chinese acquaintances are people with complaints, people who are not afraid to speak their mind to a foreigner.

That China has entered a “New Age” following the death of Mao and others of his

9) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 115.

10) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 9.

11) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 9.

12) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 86.

13) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 132.

generation is clear to every visitor, even in the mid-1980s. Without a doubt, people have more freedom than before to think for themselves. But now, according to Thubron, the weak and poor are more neglected; there are more vagrants; the rural birthrate has increased; there is a large labor surplus; and for some nothing has changed or gotten better.¹⁴⁾ His puritan concept of communism is sullied by the blatant materialism of the people, which is clearly visible wherever he goes. What this means is that, for him, the country and the people seem to have lost their romantic aura.

In crisscrossing the country, it is inevitable that he will on occasion have to deal with government and party officials, none of whom impress him with their intelligence or friendliness. The members of the bureaucracy are nothing more than modern-day mandarins who are vain and stubborn and routinely ignore the common people.¹⁵⁾ One man he meets in a Beijing bathhouse tells him: "...our officials are rude. They're arrogant and lazy. Shop supervisors, ticket-sellers, office cadres, all of them..."¹⁶⁾

Thubron hears frequent complaints about the Communist Party and its members: the Party has degenerated; cadres abuse their rights, keep mistresses, and engage in smuggling; and party officials take advantage of their position to make themselves rich. But it is in Xining in the western province of Qinghai that one of his friends, a man named Tong, makes the bitterest denunciation of the system: "...there's a network of corrupt officials right to the top. The posh Party children get all the privileges. The Party blabs that the West is corrupt and Capitalist, then they send their children to study there.... It's hopeless. There's nothing we can do. I think the whole system is useless."¹⁷⁾ A bleak assessment, indeed.

Like many travelers to China, Thubron makes the mandatory trip to a school to see firsthand how education is conducted. In fact, he visits two schools—one a kindergarten in Beijing and the other a high school in Nanjing. Both places he finds disappointing. The young children in the kindergarten are completely lacking in spontaneity; everything seems orchestrated. After viewing several of their class activities, he leaves with the feeling that this kind of behavior is "impressive, vivid, and somehow terrible."¹⁸⁾ What he notices at the high school is the "mind-crushing discipline, the Confucian respect for rote-learning and inherited wisdom." Again there is lots of formality and conformity.¹⁹⁾ But this should not surprise him, since people must conform in China. It is not a country where it is possible to challenge authority or where it is common to ask the question why.

14) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, pp. 164–165.

15) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 112.

16) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 19.

17) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, pp. 293–294.

18) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, pp. 21–23.

19) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 94.

Chinese violence and cruelty is one topic the author touches on a number of times, usually in relation to things that happened during Mao's reign. It is now well known that millions suffered and died in the Cultural Revolution. In trying to figure out why no one was able to stop the terrible deeds perpetrated during those ten years of collective madness, Thubron claims to see a historical pattern at work—"a recurring cycle of constraint broken by sudden ungovernable savagery."²⁰⁾ That might be true, but it is hard to be sure without more evidence than he offers. He also blames the hierarchical structure of the family for much of the cruelty in China. In Chinese families wife-beating is prevalent and equality unknown.²¹⁾ Later, while riding a bus in the mountains, he looks out the window and sees a dead baby, which had apparently been run over at the crossroads. No one on the bus seems concerned, and the bus continues down the road. Angry at this cruel and heartless attitude, Thubron asks how they can just leave the baby there. He does not get any kind of answer, and soon all the other passengers are gazing toward the front of the bus.²²⁾ His final brush with Chinese cruelty takes place in Canton. When he takes a walk through the food market there, he feels squeamish, for parts of the area look more like a row of pet stores than butcher shops. What particularly upsets him is the pitiful condition of the animals—dogs, cats, monkeys, owls, and every other living thing imaginable.²³⁾

A discussion of the Chinese market naturally leads to a discussion of Chinese food. It seems that every foreign visitor has to comment on the exotic things that Chinese eat, especially in the south. Although the information is far from new, we learn that there are restaurants in Canton that cook and serve cats, dogs, snakes, turtles, and numerous other delicacies. In one of the book's funniest sections, the author bravely enters one such restaurant, and then tries his best to avoid eating anything disgusting or pet-like, which is not at all easy once he clearly understands what the house specialties are. They include such dishes as "Grainy Dog Meat with Chilli and Scallion in Soya Sauce," "Shredded Cat Thick Soup," and "Braised Python with Mushrooms."²⁴⁾ However, he does attempt to be fair to the Chinese by explaining their eating habits in this way: "In Cantonese cooking, nothing edible is sacred. It reflects an old Chinese mercilessness towards their surroundings. Every part of every animal...is consumed.... It is the cuisine of the very poor, driven to tortuous invention."²⁵⁾ What cannot escape his notice is the Chinese passion for food. It is a national obsession that permeates many cultural and political metaphors.

20) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 27.

21) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 99.

22) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, pp. 260–261.

23) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, pp. 190–191.

24) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, pp. 184–185.

25) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 184.

Even though *Behind the Wall* is not a traditional guidebook, the author does his share of sightseeing, taking in many of the most famous sights around the country. But he is quite sparing in his praise; there are only a few places that he classifies as beautiful. One is the area along the Li River in Guangxi Province, where he wanders alone for several days. The scenery reminds him of a Ming Period landscape painting. He is also impressed (as was Marco Polo) by the beauty and meaning of the man-made gardens in Suzhou. When he walks through the intricate doorways and courtyards, it is easy for him to picture the classical grandeur of the garden and its surroundings as they must have appeared several hundred years ago. This, he admits, is the China of his dreams. And the fact that it finally materializes pleases him a great deal.²⁶⁾

But for every favorable impression, there are at least four or five that are extremely unfavorable. While exploring the traditional Suzhou gardens, he is brought back to reality by the endless waves of sightseers, which quickly ruin the magic of the moment for him. All the best vantage-points are occupied by photographers and shops and restaurants. And he has little good to say about most Chinese cities. For example, we are told that a walk through the streets of Chengdu is like “roaming the uncensored corner of Tudor England, with its filth still in place.”²⁷⁾ Chongqing comes in for even harsher criticism. It seems to have no redeeming features; there is nothing but ugliness and pollution. The author takes a bus trip through parts of the city, where he see many miles of “belching suburbs: steel-mills, collieries, chemical and machine factories” and a rundown Manhattan on every cliff-top.²⁸⁾

Anyone who travels as long and as far and as economically as Thubron does in China is bound to reach a point of exasperation, when every little inconvenience becomes a major annoyance. By the middle of his journey, he confesses to being irritated by the food, the crowds, the spitting, the staring, the hotels, the toilets, and the drabness, along with a host of other things.²⁹⁾ A constant target of his complaints is the service industry (or lack of) in China. He seems to go from one bad hotel to another, where the lobbies are shabby, the rooms filthy, and the water disgusting. And, to make matters worse, it is not always easy even to get a room. Most of the time, the hotel clerks are lazy and unfriendly. Their private conversations and personal business always take precedence over the needs of the guest or customer. He can only explain this by saying that jobs in the service industry are looked down upon in China.³⁰⁾ Here is how the author describes the problem:

26) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, pp. 131–132.

27) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 235.

28) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 240.

29) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, p. 226.

30) The author also makes the point that the average Chinese person is treated even worse than

Sometimes in offices and shops the foreigner is treated with exaggerated politeness and aplomb. But more often he is confronted by a Great Wall of lethargy, helplessness, and dissimulation. In the larger hotels the desk-clerks yawn in a coma of earphones and cigarette smoke; and above the charming photographs on the identity badges of waitresses, the real faces are a rockery of sulks and scowls. Their lidless eyes have been invented for avoiding yours. Requests for service become guilty intrusions into the intimacies of shop assistants as they chatter together or slumber over novels. Private life has eaten into business life, reversing the unhappy Western trend. Amidst these inactivities the customer is an irrelevance, who must attract attention not by discreet coughs or murmurs, but by yelling....Ever since Confucius's day, the service industries had been stigmatized as menial, uncreative.³¹⁾

The condition of the trains and buses upsets him on countless occasions. They are dirty and uncomfortable; the air is filled with cigarette smoke and the floor is covered with spit. The trains serve inedible food and the bus drivers endanger all the passengers with their daredevil driving. Then there is the inevitable free-for-all getting on and off the trains and the buses. Once on, the overcrowding is usually almost unbearable, particularly on the long trips. And the author is never able to get used to these brutal routines. Part of his problem is that he always insists on traveling in the lowest class, which is the cheapest of course but also the most exhausting.

Throughout his stay in China, Thubron tries to meet people and learn about the China that is not so easy to learn about from books, in other words, the China that is "behind the wall." This he does to the best of his ability, in spite of enormous language difficulties and physical inconveniences. He tries to be as fair as possible, always searching for the Chinese explanation for those things he cannot understand. But at the same time he finds it difficult to reconcile his value system and standards with those of the Chinese. His criticisms and complaints are in general the common ones voiced by most Westerners traveling in China. The images of China contained in his book are a mixed bag: some sympathetic and others much less so, some superficial and others fairly profound, some flattering and others almost entirely negative. In this regard, Thubron can easily be distinguished from our next author, Paul Theroux, who is much more relentless in his criticism and sarcasm.

Paul Theroux is arguably the most popular living travel writer in the English-speaking world. His books are brimming with trenchant remarks. No matter where

foreigners.

31) Thubron, *Behind the Wall*, pp. 111–112. I insert this lengthy quote here because, as we shall see, most foreigners who travel to China voice the same complaints.

he goes, he never pulls any punches in his descriptions. Nothing is sacred or above reproach. If anything, he is honest to a fault. Although at times Theroux' comments might seem overly critical and ill-tempered, readers seldom get bored, for his writing is always interesting and skillful and often very humorous. And this is especially true in *Riding the Iron Rooster*, the account of his trip through China.³²⁾ Over the course of about a year in the mid-1980s, he travels from one end of the country to the other almost entirely by train. He goes more or less wherever he pleases, chatting with people in his rudimentary Chinese and trying to figure out what makes China and the Chinese tick.

Theroux is not your ordinary traveler. He wants to do what other travelers have not done. If he is told he cannot visit a certain area, he will ignore the rules and do everything in his power to visit there. He avoids most of the famous sightseeing places, and instead spends time in unusual and less popular regions of China. For him, sightseeing is unrewarding and tedious; it involves too much ritual and bestows too few spiritual benefits.³³⁾ Since he loves trains, he takes advantage of China's vast rail network and rides as many different ones as possible—often in conditions that are far from comfortable. One has to give him credit for spending so much time and energy in getting to know the country.

Theroux decides to immerse himself in China in order to see how much the new post-Mao China has changed and to discover how accurate the American images of China are. He realizes that China exists distinctly in each person's mind and that it is difficult to shake loose the fantasy and see the real thing.³⁴⁾ Tourists in previous years came back from China with a set of basic images: acupuncture was glorified for its amazing effects; there were no flies; there was no tipping; lost items, even razor blades, were returned; the Chinese worked like dogs; the Chinese ate cats; and Mao was praised for all the momentous things he had done for China.³⁵⁾ While this list might seem like a bad caricature of things Chinese, so many of our images are just that: caricatures.

Let's begin with the people. How does Theroux characterize the Chinese? He says he does not accept "Chinese inscrutability"; on the contrary, he thinks they are "knowable," like many other people in the world.³⁶⁾ In fact, he goes as far as to say that they are easy to understand. One only has to listen carefully since the Chinese are very honest and talk about anything. He finds them friendly, hospitable, candid, unsuspecting, eager to chat, proud of their family, curious about foreigners' reactions

32) The book was first published in 1988, and has been in print ever since.

33) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 65.

34) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 160.

35) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 2.

36) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 482.

to China, and fairly open.³⁷⁾ Rarely do they badmouth foreigners or foreign countries, especially in the presence of a person who is a foreigner, for that is considered bad manners.³⁸⁾ And, as is well known, manners are extremely important in Chinese society. In general, the Chinese strike him as phlegmatic and stoic. After meeting many different kinds of people during his trip, he comes to the conclusion that stoicism is the major characteristic of the people.³⁹⁾

At first he has trouble reading the Chinese face, for it is not always what it seems. In Xian Station, when he looks at the face of the man assigned to accompany him around China, he is puzzled; he does not know what the expression means. This is how Theroux describes the encounter: “He looked up and smiled at me, which depressed me even more, because I suspected that he was sad. Then I decided that he was not sad at all. He was like so many Chinese—reserved and fatalistic and steeling themselves against disappointment.”⁴⁰⁾ Then there is the Chinese smile, which is often judged by Westerners to be enigmatic.⁴¹⁾ A lot of foreigners make the mistake of confusing it for affection. The smile is different from the smile Westerners are used to. It is often merely a kind of grimace, concealing frustration or curiosity or embarrassment. And the Chinese laugh is just as perplexing, but before long Theroux is able to distinguish the various Chinese laughs. By his reckoning, there are about twenty laughs, none of which has anything to do with humor.⁴²⁾ One more thing that baffles foreigners is the age of a Chinese person. Most would agree that it is hard to tell how old anyone is. Theroux explains it nicely: “The Chinese look young until their mid twenties and then they begin to look very haggard and beaten. A certain serenity returns to their features when they are in their sixties, and they go on growing more graceful and dignified and become not old but ageless.”⁴³⁾ Here we have the image of the ageless Chinese.

Theroux has lots to say about the people, some of it unfavorable: the Chinese lead frugal lives; they make a virtue of not complaining; they are content just to muddle through; and they live the dullest lives and perform the most boring jobs one can imagine. He is constantly complaining about their personal habits. For example, they talk too loud and play their radios and TVs at unbearable volumes. He wonders if this is the result of a national deafness or just a bad habit. The author does not give them high marks for their cleanliness either, particularly on public transport—trains, boats, and buses. He writes: “They were very tidy in the way they dressed and

37) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, pp. 115 and 300.

38) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, pp. 300–301.

39) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 346.

40) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 226.

41) The problem of the “enigmatic smile” is not limited to the Chinese. Westerners feel that Asians in general have a smile that is almost impossible to decipher.

42) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 169.

43) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 63.

packed their bags, but they were energetic litterers and they were hellish in toilets. It was strange seeing a neatly dressed mob leaving a railway car they had befouled."⁴⁴⁾

He also criticizes them for not thinking logically. He comes to this grand conclusion after discussing the issue of the death penalty in China with a communist functionary.⁴⁵⁾ However, his generalization, which is one that has been made by countless other foreigners, is not backed up with much supporting evidence. The Chinese, he asserts, are fascinated with the freakish and the pathetic.⁴⁶⁾ Things that are big, weird, or unusual attract their attention. That is why the people around Lanzhou Station get so excited when they see a dwarf walking by. They go into a frenzy, laughing, shouting, and pointing at the conspicuous dwarf.

And their fascination for the unusual extends to foreigners. Since the author looks different with his big nose and large feet, the Chinese seem to be interested in everything he does, from opening his wallet to sorting his dirty clothes. For people who have never seen a person from another country before, such persistent but innocent curiosity is all but unavoidable. While foreigners are merely stared at by the average Chinese, they are used and then discarded by Chinese officials. According to Theroux: "A foreign expert is a barbarian with a skill to impart, but should never make the mistake of believing that he is being invited to stay for an indefinite length of time. They are in China to be used, and when they are no longer useful, to be sent home."⁴⁷⁾

At times he resents the way he is treated. There is an obvious double standard in pricing, which irritates him a great deal. Foreigners are forced to pay higher prices than the Chinese—often three to four times as much. It seems to him that the Chinese are confident they can always fool foreigners, whom they consider mere yokels from barbarian lands outside the Middle Kingdom.

In spite of the fact that some Chinese ideas are still stuck in the past, Theroux admits that the country has undergone tremendous change since the death of Mao Zedong. The "New China" is more cheerful and hopeful. Some of the changes in clothes and styles are superficial; others, however, are more substantial. It is easier now for ordinary citizens to travel. Also, people can talk a little more openly about politics, money, and the future. But the openness does not necessarily apply to discussions of recent history, where silence and shadows still prevail. In the author's opinion, the Chinese approach to serious problems is to draw a veil over them.⁴⁸⁾

There is one political issue, however, that Theroux is able to get many of his

44) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 218.

45) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, pp. 122–123. Theroux, who opposes the death penalty, would probably find anyone, Westerners included, guilty of illogical thinking if they supported it.

46) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, pp. 212–213.

47) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 322.

48) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 138.

Chinese acquaintances to talk about, and that is the Cultural Revolution. He is told of the horrors of the ten-year national hysteria: intellectuals were forced to shovel chicken droppings, Muslims were ordered to keep pigs, historians were paraded around in dunce hats, people were beaten to death because they were teachers, and so on.⁴⁹⁾ The Cultural Revolution produced the phenomenon of the “Lost Generation,”—that is to say, the entire generation of young people who grew to adulthood during that period. They invariably have bad manners, are without hope, and are consumed with greed.⁵⁰⁾ The effects of the Cultural Revolution can be seen everywhere. The Chinese, particularly young Chinese, seem more liberated and willing to talk about democracy and free speech, but they will never trust the politicians again.⁵¹⁾ In spite of its idealistic goals, the Cultural Revolution resulted in a society that is stupider, slower, more brutish, more backward, and more insecure than it was before.⁵²⁾

In *Riding the Iron Rooster* Theroux generally avoids the major tourist sites. He dislikes huge crowds. But China is overrun with people, which means any historical site or cultural artifact is usually crowded beyond belief. It seems the Chinese idea of tourism is to go to the same place as millions of other people. The problem is not only that the sites are full of tourists, but also that the transportation facilities are grossly overcrowded as a result. Although travel is safe and cheap, it is painfully difficult, thanks to the relentless press of humanity. The author hates sightseeing for another reason: “I felt the Chinese hid behind their rebuilt ruins, so that no one could look closely at their lives.”⁵³⁾ In other words, famous sights provide a kind of shield that hides the “real” China from the outside world. There is some truth to this idea, but it happens in most countries to a certain extent, simply because the goal of tourism is to show others the good side of a country and to hide the bad side. Towards the end of the book, Theroux’ fatigue begins to show: “Travel in China, I suspect, would give me a lasting desire for solitude.”⁵⁴⁾

Theroux makes his most pungent and biting remarks when talking about the trains. Traveling almost entirely by rail, he has ample opportunity during his visit to experience the shortcomings of Chinese trains. And the more he rides the trains, the more he complains about them. Here is one of his milder descriptions, for he does at least list a few good points, too:

Chinese trains could be bad. In twelve months of traveling—almost forty trains—I never saw one with a toilet that wasn’t piggy. The loudspeakers plonked and nagged for eighteen

49) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, pp. 144–145. There is, of course, a vast literature now on the Cultural Revolution, but that was not yet the case in the mid-1980s.

50) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 174.

51) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, pp. 92–93.

52) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 136.

53) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 219.

54) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 365.

hours a day—a hangover from the days of Maoist mottoes. The conductors could be tyrants, and the feeding frenzy in the dining-car was often not worth the trouble. But there were compensations—the kindly conductors, the occasional good meal, the comfortable berth, the luck of the draw; and, when all else failed, there was always a chubby thermos of hot water for making tea.⁵⁵⁾

What bothers Theroux the most about the trains is their general filthiness. On numerous occasions, he grumbles about the amount of garbage that is thrown on the floors and which soon begins to smell. Part of the problem is that passengers are always eating, which results in more garbage. He wonders if this accumulation of garbage is for some a perverse symbol of prosperity. Even on short trips Theroux is amazed by the sheer quantity of the stuff left by travelers:

On these one-day railway trips, the Chinese could practically overwhelm a train with their garbage. Nearly everyone on board was befouling the available space. While I sat and read I noticed that the people opposite, after only a few hours, had amassed on their table ...: duck bones, fish bones, peanut shells, cookie wrappers, sunflower seed husks, three teacups, two tumblers, a thermos, a wine bottle, two food tins, spittings, leavings, orange rinds, prawn shells, and two used nappies.⁵⁶⁾

From the frequency of the author's complaints, one can assume that this scene was a common one during his journey.

Without a doubt, spitting and throat-clearing are the two personal habits of the Chinese that infuriate Theroux the most. Time after time he notes the particulars of the spitting he is forced to put up both inside and outside trains. It is constant and it is pervasive, and it disgusts him. Before long it becomes an obsession with him. He cannot help recording the how and what in rather gruesome detail.⁵⁷⁾ But he believes that "Chinese spitting is not half as bad as Chinese throat-clearing: the hoick that can be heard for fifty yards and that sounds like the suction on a monsoon drain. After that, the spitting itself is rather an anticlimax."⁵⁸⁾ He also finds fault with several other Chinese habits—smoking and blowing ones nose with ones fingers. Some readers might consider it unnecessary and even unpleasant to bring up these topics so often. Theroux is not very culturally sensitive, but for better or worse he is brutally honest.

55) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 211.

56) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 376.

57) There is another way to look at this problem. That is, to see it as simply a cultural phenomenon. In one recent guidebook, we are told: "It is also quite common for people to spit, despite official campaigns to try and restrain this habit. It is important for foreign visitors to know that these things are customary and not at all bad manners." *Insight Guide to China*, p. 363.

58) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 111.

Another of the author's pet peeves is the ugliness of the cities. He is scathing in his descriptions. "The words 'a Chinese city' had acquired a particular horror for me, like 'Russian toilet,' or 'Turkish prison,' or 'journalist's ethics.'"⁵⁹⁾ He cannot stand the way the cities have been defaced with row after row of unbelievably ugly houses and buildings. The cities have lost any redeeming characteristics they might once have had. This holds true for most of the cities he visits, including the more famous ones such as Beijing and Shanghai. In a burst of exaggeration, he says upon entering one city, "It was a Chinese city, and therefore a nightmare."⁶⁰⁾ But there are a few cities about which Theroux has something favorable to say. One is Xiamen, because of its prosperity and attractive buildings and gardens. Another is Gulanyu, because it has real city planning, something unheard of in other parts of China. The third is Turfan, simply because it is not a Chinese city and because it takes pride in its native culture. But the one he likes best in all of China is Qingdao, because it has appealing architecture and refreshing weather and is not very Chinese.⁶¹⁾

Like Thubron and many other Western travelers, Theroux points out how awful the service industry is in China. Workers are lazy and inept; station officials are bad-tempered and inflexible; bureaucrats are sadistic and arrogant. Hotels come in for their share of abuse. Usually they are not only bad but also expensive. Phone service is sporadic at the best of times. Public toilets are gross, to put it mildly. This is how the author explains this most vexing of problems for foreign tourists:

We passed a public toilet—the Chinese tend to erect them in the middle of all beauty spots—and though we were forty feet away the thing gave off an overpowering stink. Every public toilet I saw in China was so vile it was unusable. Every foreigner mentioned them; the Chinese never did—not because they were fastidious but because they were ashamed and phlegmatic, and preferred to suffer in silence.⁶²⁾

Regardless how accurate his explanation is, he does have the courage to bring the issue up. And he does it in very stark language.

Chinese cruelty to animals is touched upon in the book. Theroux' opinions are no different than those of most Westerners. He condemns the Chinese for their treatment of animals, claiming they torture animals like cats and dogs on the grounds that such animals feel no pain. It is thought that the animals were put on earth to be used or killed and eaten.⁶³⁾ The Chinese are bird crazy, and large numbers of people

59) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 297.

60) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 348.

61) Except for a few exceptions, Theroux thinks little of the architecture in China. "I found it hard to distinguish the hotels from the colleges and the hospitals from the prisons. Chinese architecture, which is all—purpose and excruciating, makes it impossible to tell these places apart." *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 278.

62) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 202.

63) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 133.

own them, for a bird is the only animal that can easily be kept as a pet. Of course, Theroux sees this as another form of cruelty, since the birds are kept in small cages. If one accepts this argument, one must then also criticize those people all over the world who keep caged birds as pets.

It is well known that the Chinese love to eat and that they will eat almost anything—dogs, cats, raccoons, anteaters, baby owls, and hawks, in addition to countless other animals, rare and not so rare.⁶⁴⁾ The author is served exotic (and expensive) dishes several times in China, both in the north and in the south. But such meals do not set well with him: “There was something dreadful and depressing about this food, partly because it tasted good and partly because China had so few wild animals. These creatures were all facing extinction in this country. And I had always hated the Chinese appetite for rare animals—for bear’s paws and fish lips and caribou’s nose.... This sort of eating was the recreation of people who were rich and spoiled.”⁶⁵⁾

As one might guess, the average Chinese meal does not satisfy him much, either. Although the dishes might have glorious names, most of the food is of the same color and texture and is often impossible to tell apart.⁶⁶⁾ The worst food is the food on trains. Here is how he evaluates one train snack: “It [the fish] was tough and tasted (and looked) like an inner sole of a shoe—a Chinese inner sole, and a minority one at that. On the wrapper it was described as ‘Dried Fish With Minority Flavor.’”⁶⁷⁾

Although Theroux does praise the Chinese for doing some things right, he is generally critical, sometimes even hypercritical, in his comments on the people and the society.⁶⁸⁾ It appears at times that he does not even like the Chinese. He would counter that it is not a question of liking or disliking the Chinese but of simply telling the truth.⁶⁹⁾ Readers come away with almost entirely negative images of China.⁷⁰⁾ One has the right to ask if the author is being fair, for China is still an extremely poor country with problems common to all developing nations. Perhaps his ideas of China are images left over from an earlier, more aesthetic period. Maybe he is looking for a China that no longer exists. In fact, at one point, he says that the country isn’t what it used to be.⁷¹⁾ He admits that the hardships of the trip tend to color his views: “I sometimes suspected that my weariness blurred my perceptions—or else made me

64) Needless to say, Theroux considers this further proof of Chinese cruelty.

65) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 273.

66) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 187.

67) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 354.

68) In his review of Theroux’ book for *The New York Times*, Mark Salzman concludes: “More often than not, he [Theroux] is passing judgment on China rather than describing it, all from a very limited perspective. The result is an opinionated, petty and incomplete portrait of that country.” Salzman, “I Hate Sightseeing.” Salzman is one of the authors discussed below in the section on Teacher-Travelers.

69) Theroux, “Travel Writing: The Point of It,” p. 52.

70) In his latest collection of essays, *Fresh Air Fiend*, Theroux includes several pieces on China. Although written in recent years, the essays contain basically the same message in the same tone as *Riding the Iron Rooster*.

71) Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 156

giddy and fanciful.”⁷²⁾ But in the end we learn more about the author than we do about the country. This is the attraction as well as the weakness of this genre, even when the books are written by professionals like Theroux and Thubron.

Men of Letters as Travelers

It is quite common for men of letters of one country to visit another, either officially or unofficially, and record their impressions in book form. Throughout the twentieth century a veritable stream of creative writers and intellectuals made the trip to China and wrote their books, some more memorable than others. As a rule, such visitors do not speak Chinese, are not very knowledgeable about the country itself, travel first-class, and stay a month or less. They generally see what the government wants them to see and talk to the people the government wants them to talk to. Since they are already famous, their books on China often have an influence out of proportion to the depth of the contents. The three men I wish to discuss here are John Kenneth Galbraith, Arthur Miller, and Stephen Spender, all three of whom are well-known and respected in the West for their intellectual accomplishments.

John Kenneth Galbraith, one of America’s leading economists and intellectuals, visited China for three weeks in the fall of 1972. *A China Passage* is the account of his tour of China, from Canton to Beijing with several stops in between. He went at a time when Mao Zedong was still alive, the Cultural Revolution was in full swing, and the only visitors were officially sponsored ones. Every tour was minutely planned and closely supervised. The China of then was a completely different China from the China of today. Why then include such an obviously out-of-date book in this survey of travel accounts? I have two reasons for doing so. First, even though the book is almost thirty years old, it is still being sold in new bookstores, having been reprinted in 1989. That means that people are buying it and reading it. Second, as far as I know, it is the sole remaining book available today that describes Mao’s China when foreigners held all kind of idealistic and laudatory images of the country. For the most part, the images presented are no longer valid, but they did influence an entire generation of Western intellectuals.

In the Introduction to the 1989 reprint, Galbraith tells us that travel books “are, with exceptions, our lowest form of literature,” for they are uninformative when it comes to social commentary and hedonistic and derogatory when it comes to food and hotels.⁷³⁾ What he hopes to write is not the average travel book but a pleasant essay about China for non-specialists. Since he is an influential intellectual, he is given the VIP treatment. The impression one gets from reading this short (138 page) book is that the trip is hard but enjoyable. He only goes where he is taken and only talks

⁷²⁾ Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, p. 389.

⁷³⁾ Galbraith, *A China Passage*, p. vii.

with the people he is supposed to talk with. Considering the period, we can only conclude that he has no choice; that is the way China trips were done in those days.

His first stop is Canton, where the streets are “cleanly elegant” and the people on bicycles all seem to be in “excellent humor.”⁷⁴⁾ Staying in a first-class hotel there, he has every reason to compliment the staff for being “good natured and obliging.”⁷⁵⁾ Since he is a special state guest, how could it be otherwise? When he is taken sightseeing in the various cities he visits, he responds enthusiastically. In Beijing, he finds the Forbidden City “vast, elegant, mysterious, mystifying, and exhausting.”⁷⁶⁾ Upon seeing the Great Wall for the first time, he recalls approvingly what former President Nixon’s said about it earlier in the same year: “This is a Great Wall and only a great people with a great past could have a great wall and such a great people with such a great wall will surely have a great future.”⁷⁷⁾ At every gathering he receives a warm reception, special treatment, and superb cuisine. While walking in the area adjoining the Sun Yat-sen mausoleum in Nanking, he is greeted there, as everywhere, by people waving and clapping and hoisting their babies in the air.

In addition to the tourist sights, his itinerary includes stops at a number of places obviously meant to educate and impress. When he inspects a factory and a worker’s apartment, he notes that the buildings and rooms look clean, food is plentiful, and the workers smile contentedly. He is taken to a high school in Shanghai, where the education is highly disciplined and very political, but extremely efficient considering the limited resources available.⁷⁸⁾ The fruit and vegetable market in Beijing that he visits is clean, functional, and well-stocked. The workers are friendly and the prices are moderate, but there are no lines, even for scarce goods.⁷⁹⁾ His comments about the Beijing Department Store are fairly objective and straightforward: low markup in prices, few expensive items, limited variety of styles, no credit, no advertisements, no shoplifting, and no elevators or escalators; moreover, the place is clean and the staff is helpful.⁸⁰⁾

The people Galbraith encounters in China are uniformly intelligent and obliging. On two occasions he praises the honesty of the Chinese: first, a bag he left on the train is found and returned immediately; and then a small Chinese coin he accidentally dropped on his hotel room floor is also returned. In general he is very trusting of what he is told in China. But when he is driven to a commune outside Shanghai, he has his doubts whether it is a wholly typical commune. He says: “There is a

74) Galbraith, *A China Passage*, p. 18.

75) Galbraith, *A China Passage*, p. 20.

76) Galbraith, *A China Passage*, p. 32.

77) Galbraith, *A China Passage*, p. 34.

78) Galbraith, *A China Passage*, p. 101.

79) Galbraith, *A China Passage*, p. 41.

80) Galbraith, *A China Passage*, pp. 44–45.

tendency in such matters to mislead.”⁸¹⁾ This is about as negative as his remarks get. One other rather gentle complaint is that the Chinese smoke too much.

The economy gets its share of favorable comment. The author judges the economic system of China to be without a doubt highly effective, much more so than in Poland or Russia. One reason is that the Chinese do work hard. He sees diligent effort wherever he goes. Maybe, he suggests, the Chinese, like the Japanese, really enjoy working.⁸²⁾ In China, clothing is adequate, housing is average, health services are good, and medicines are excellent. He boldly states: “I am prepared to believe that Shanghai...has a better medical service than New York.”⁸³⁾ It is clear to Galbraith that while China is authoritarian it is also efficient and successful in meeting the needs of its vast population, especially in the areas of education, health, and welfare. He does not believe that the system would be right for Americans or Europeans, but he has no doubt that it works for China and that it is the Chinese future.⁸⁴⁾ When viewed from a later perspective, one can only say that his is a very rosy prediction indeed.

In 1978 Arthur Miller, America’s most distinguished living playwright, went to China with his wife, the photographer Inge Morath. During their one-month tour of the country, they visited many places, including most of the major tourist sights and talked with numerous intellectuals (novelists, poets, painters, actors, and dramatists). The result was a fascinating and attractive travel book entitled *Chinese Encounters*, published the following year with text by Miller and photographs by Morath. It is a well-informed attempt to understand and explain the situation in China in the late 1970s.

Miller has doubts about his ability to know China. Early in the book, he says, “...no one can think he knows a country until he can easily separate its merely idiosyncratic absurdities from its real contradictions. We do not ‘know’ China when we still notice and are even startled by things that no Chinese pays the slightest attention to.”⁸⁵⁾ What he seems to be claiming is that we have to see China as the Chinese do if we expect to discover its true essence. This is something that most travel writers would surely dispute. They would insist that they have a distinct advantage simply because they do see and interpret things differently from the Chinese. In any case, Miller’s approach is to see things the Chinese way, as much as possible. That means in effect that he is partly obliged to look at China through the eyes of Su Guang, the guide-interpreter who accompanies Miller and his wife throughout the entire trip. Thanks to Su Guang, China becomes less dramatic and

81) Galbraith, *A China Passage*, p. 105.

82) Galbraith, *A China Passage*, p. 122.

83) Galbraith, *A China Passage*, p. 127.

84) Galbraith, *A China Passage*, p. 137.

85) Morath and Miller, *Chinese Encounters*, p. 7.

incongruous, but more repetitious and real than Miller previously imagined.⁸⁶⁾

Here are a few of the author's observations. China is poor. That is clear when he walks along the back streets of Beijing and sees first hand the poverty of housing. Yes, the buildings are decrepit, but the atmosphere is serene. There is no odor of decay or sewage in the air, nor is there the smell of poverty that is normally found in Mexican towns. In addition, he notices no sense of demoralization among the people living in the area; on the contrary, they seem quite vigorous.⁸⁷⁾ Obviously, the poverty is there, but it is not as all-encompassing or deadening as in other countries.

China is a country of pervasive beauty, which seems to come as a surprise. Here Miller is referring not to the physical beauty of the country, but to the sense of beauty embodied in the people. There is a desire or instinct for aesthetic beauty among ordinary Chinese that manifests itself in countless ways. It exists in the young as well as the old. "The Chinese child is a triumph of humanity, and in the aged there is a sort of dignity that can only come from social respect and a decent tradition."⁸⁸⁾ And the feeling for beauty extends to arts and crafts and even food. "There is a certain proportion, a native taste in objects held in the hand. And a poetic tradition inconceivable in the West—where else in the world is a leader's calligraphy of importance, and where could it evoke pride that is elegant?"⁸⁹⁾

After several conversations, Miller concludes that the Chinese are uninformed, if not totally ignorant, of Western culture, and this includes the educated classes. However, he does acknowledge that the gap is mutual; he and other Westerners do not know that much about the real culture of China.⁹⁰⁾ This does not mean that the Chinese are provincial, for they can probably name more writers than Americans can. What it means is that isolation and political movements have taken their toll on the intellectual climate of the country.

Miller touches on other shortcomings of the system. First, Chinese justice is criticized for being neither fair nor complete. In fact, he gives as the major weakness of the Chinese style of government the fact that there is no independent and objective judiciary; the whole idea is alien in present-day China. But he admits that America cannot get too self-righteous on this point, for prisons in the U.S. hold a extremely high proportion of men who are poor and black, thus implying that American justice is not always fair.⁹¹⁾ Second, there is a clear tyranny of the majority, an exceedingly powerful form of peer pressure that tries to eradicate nonconformist opinion. In the U.S., on the other hand, individualism is encouraged, which often results in a rootless

86) Morath and Miller, *Chinese Encounters*, p. 30.

87) Morath and Miller, *Chinese Encounters*, p. 33.

88) Morath and Miller, *Chinese Encounters*, p. 111.

89) Morath and Miller, *Chinese Encounters*, p. 111.

90) Morath and Miller, *Chinese Encounters*, pp. 14–15.

91) Morath and Miller, *Chinese Encounters*, pp. 45–46.

condition with less human contact.⁹²⁾ Not only do Chinese face strong peer pressure, they must also submit to strong social discipline. This is something most people in the West instinctively rebel against. And yet it is the cause of much of the corruption, crime, and anarchistic selfishness prevalent there.⁹³⁾ In order to be fair, for every criticism of China or the Chinese that he makes, he brings up a similar weakness in Western practices.

The Cultural Revolution is one of the author's major concerns. This is to be expected since he was in China only a few years after it ended. One of the first things Miller notes is that since there are no useful analogies in Western experience it is impossible for Westerners to understand what the Chinese suffered during those ten years of convulsion. After talking with various victims and survivors, he feels depressed and frustrated, for he tries but is unable to come to any personal conclusions about so immense a phenomenon. His summary of the event is concise but basically accurate: "The Cultural Revolution was launched to invigorate the 'below,' the underclass, the will of worker and peasant... this thrust for democracy had created instead a fascism, with torture, mass denunciations, and industrial chaos."⁹⁴⁾ In spite of the horrible consequences, he is still able to sympathize with one of Mao's motives in launching the Cultural Revolution: that was, to counter the evil effects of Western technological civilization such as anomie, cynicism, neuroticism, self-absorption, and diseases of the soul.⁹⁵⁾ And yet that is not a good enough excuse for the social and political upheavals forced upon the people. In order to prevent such a thing from ever happening again, he believes China needs some kind of independent press or judiciary with sufficient power to stop any mass movements from getting out of hand.

It was in 1981, three years after Miller's visit, that the English poet Stephen Spender made a three-week tour of China with his fellow countryman, the famous painter David Hockney. The trip was sponsored by a London publishing company and approved by the Chinese government. Spender, who was seventy-two years old at the time, had no special knowledge of the language or people of China, nor did his much younger traveling companion. So they had to rely on guided tours with interpreters for most of their visit. Several times they did go out on their own, and on occasion they did meet people who spoke English. For the most part, however, they were totally dependent on their guides. Of course, this way of traveling limited how much of the "real" China they were able to see and how many "average" Chinese they were able to meet. Their itinerary was the standard tourist itinerary with stops in Canton, Beijing, Xian, Shanghai, Nanjing, Hangzhou, and Guilin. The following year

92) Morath and Miller, *Chinese Encounters*, pp. 45–46.

93) Morath and Miller, *Chinese Encounters*, p. 40.

94) Morath and Miller, *Chinese Encounters*, p. 51.

95) Morath and Miller, *Chinese Encounters*, p. 53.

their *China Diary* was published and well received by reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Considering who the authors are, most readers of *China Diary* will probably expect a great deal in the way of sensitive observation and expression. No one can deny that the writing is delightful, the sketches pretty, and the photographs evocative. It is obvious that Spender and Hockney enjoy being in China. For them, the trip is wonderful and China is wonderful. While there are inconveniences here and there, the authors seem to be in a perpetual good mood; moreover, as we shall see, their interpretations and comments about the country and the people are almost entirely positive and generous.

Although it is a commonplace remark, we are told by Spender that China preserves very little continuity with its past. Society has changed so much since Mao Zedong and the Communist Party came to power in 1949 that the past now seems dead. The people's lives are better in the New China. In contrast to earlier in the century, the Chinese of today feel respect for their country, and everyone has at least the minimum standard of living. What China has accomplished should not be underestimated. And much of the credit goes to Mao Zedong. At first his ideas about society were indisputable in practice, especially in regard to the concept of the people's democratic dictatorship and the brutal things that must be done to gain power. Spender goes so far as to say that Mao's original concepts are irrefutable "because the Chinese revolution could certainly never have been achieved without employing ruthless dictatorial methods and removing all opposition."⁹⁶⁾ But Spender is bothered by what comes after the revolution: a dictatorial state and tyranny, both of which will be abolished, it is promised, sometime in the distant future. In any case, the present government, he feels, is moving in a more hopeful direction, with increased emphasis on pragmatism and reason—not ideological Marxism.

That China experienced a terrible Cultural Revolution does not escape his notice, but his reactions are not as vociferous or emotional as those of the other authors included herein. In different parts of the country Spender hears tales of what people had to go through as a result of the Gang of Four.⁹⁷⁾ What he learns from the poets and painters he meets is that they have much more freedom now than they did under the Gang of Four. "Within certain limits," he says, "they discuss everything freely, openly, seriously, sincerely, but the limits to their clarity are as clear as the clarity itself."⁹⁸⁾ Metaphorically speaking, Spender compares it to a clear stream with an opaque floor of stone a few inches below the surface. Although he realizes that

96) Spender and Hockney, *China Diary*, p. 11.

97) At this time (1982) it was usually the Gang of Four and not Mao Zedong that received the lion's share of the blame for what had happened. Spender humorously dubs the Gang of Four "Those who are Guilty for Everything that is Wrong."

98) Spender and Hockney, *China Diary*, p. 48.

conversations can go only so far, he praises the Chinese, even the officials and the guides, because “they seem rather to want to have real discussions about things and are half-hearted about telling lies. They do not tell more than they are allowed to, but they are not cynical and they are often apologetic.”⁹⁹⁾ This he compares favorably to what he has seen in other socialist countries.

When Spender and Hockney look at the everyday life of the Chinese, they tend to make two comparisons: one with present-day India and one with Europe of half a century ago. Put in a comparative perspective, the situation in China does not look as bleak as other commentators sometimes suggest. No matter how poor the conditions appear to be in China, Spender notes that they are much worse in India. Coming upon a manure carrier in Xian, Hockney does not complain about the sight or the smell; instead he recalls seeing the same sort of thing in England when he was a boy.¹⁰⁰⁾ The shops along Xian’s streets may be small and meagerly stocked with unfashionable items, but they resemble those found in provincial French towns in the 1930s. One British couple they meet in Nanjing tells them about a Chinese apartment they saw: it was “squalid” because there were only three small rooms and almost no furniture. Hockney counters by pointing out that many people in England live in similar conditions.¹⁰¹⁾ As for the cleanliness of China, Spender simply says that China is dirtier than Japan but cleaner than America. Both Hockney and Spender seem to be stressing that such matters are relative and should never be judged by a set of absolute standards. This is probably the reason they rarely complain about anything—hotels, food, or travel arrangements.

In several cities they come into contact with Chinese children, who leave a very favorable impression indeed. Spender feels that seeing children at play is one of the real delights in China, for the children there live in a world of “perfect manners, gaiety, charm, color, and happiness.”¹⁰²⁾ In Canton they stop at the Children’s Park. For Hockney, it moves him more than any other place or monument in China; it is the most human part of China because the children are the real people.¹⁰³⁾ They do not at any point along the way view Chinese children as mere robots lacking in the endearing qualities possessed by children in other countries.

While the children seem real, there are times when the adults do not. The authors become frustrated when they are unable to have genuine conversations with average Chinese. In fact, they can remember only having done so once during their entire tour. How does one explain this? Not knowing how to speak Chinese is the

99) Spender and Hockney, *China Diary*, p. 92.

100) Spender and Hockney, *China Diary*, p. 89.

101) Spender and Hockney, *China Diary*, p. 92.

102) Spender and Hockney, *China Diary*, p. 103.

103) Spender and Hockney, *China Diary*, p. 198.

principal reason.¹⁰⁴⁾ If a visitor has to rely on an interpreter, especially a government appointed one, it is difficult, if not impossible, to chat freely with anybody. Another reason is that the nature of their tour allows them little free time to roam about as they wish. Spender describes the problem this way: "On nearly all occasions the tourist visiting China has the feeling that he is looking at people (the masses!) through a pane of glass and that they are looking through it back at him."¹⁰⁵⁾ His explanation seems reasonable enough. And if we accept his metaphor of the glass barrier, we should also recognize the fact that the glass can be broken through study of the language and culture of China. Although at certain times in the past the Chinese people might have been apprehensive about talking with foreigners, in recent years the atmosphere has much improved, and now there are few or no restrictions on such contact.

After reading (and looking at) *China Diary*, we get the impression that the country is certainly worth visiting. In that China is a poor, communist country, travelers do still face some problems; however, these are overshadowed by the greatness and beauty of the country. Spender sums up his feelings about China by saying: "So much of China makes me think of poetry, not just because it is poetic but because it corresponds to descriptions of things in English poetry."¹⁰⁶⁾ There is more to the country than strange places and unfamiliar customs; there is a shared sense of poetry and poetic beauty that for Spender transcends everything else.

Amateur Travelers

I classify the next group of three authors as amateurs because they are neither established writers nor well-known travelers. However, they did publish accounts of their travels in China, all of which are quite easy to find in paperback. Their books offer the reader little depth and insufficient analysis, and after finishing them, one is struck by how little they tell us about China. It seems to me that what is missing is a sense of empathy, that is, an understanding of what the Chinese have experienced and endured during the past half century or so. As we shall see, the authors complain a lot about a world they are not used to. And, in most cases, the impressions received are far from favorable.

John Lowe, an Englishman living in Japan, wrote *Into China* in 1986. It is a record of the three short trips he made to China during the period 1983–1985. Compared to the other books we have looked at so far, his is more of a guidebook, for he simply describes what he sees without offering much commentary on China or the Chinese. Although Lowe does not know the language and has no previous

104) Since the great majority of travelers to China know no Chinese language at all, it should not surprise anyone that they return home without having talked with any "real" Chinese.

105) Spender and Hockney, *China Diary*, p. 104.

106) Spender and Hockney, *China Diary*, p. 137.

experience in China, he bravely travels through a large part of the country, partly alone and partly with a Japanese companion. His travels take him to many of the country's most famous tourist sights as well as to Taiwan. That he decided to include a short chapter on Taiwan is unique; in fact, of all the writers I surveyed he is the only one to do so.¹⁰⁷⁾

Between the time of his first visit in 1983 and his last in 1985, China adopted more pragmatic policies in regard to foreign tourists. This allows him more freedom in planning the itinerary for his later trips. Thereafter he is able, for the most part, to go and stay where he pleases—a freedom that he especially appreciates after the earlier visit when he is forced to follow stricter rules and is almost always segregated from the Chinese on trains and in hotels. He praises the Chinese government for its new and more open policy. But in spite of this bright spot, he still encounters much that he dislikes. For example, in some places he visits, he experiences the unfortunate effects of foreign tourism such as “nagging touts and moneychangers, inflated prices and petty dishonesty.”¹⁰⁸⁾ When he exits the train station in Canton, the first stop on his China tour, he realizes what it means to be in a Chinese crowd. There is the heaving and the shoving, the spitting and the shouting. It is not long before the constant screaming, yelling, and playing of loud music get to him, and he exclaims: “The Chinese are the noisiest people in the world. It seems to stimulate them like alcohol.”¹⁰⁹⁾ In another fit of anger, he even states that noise is one of the necessities of life in China. Of course, these are obvious exaggerations, but damaging nonetheless.

After riding on the overcrowded transportation system, Lowe makes another generalization about the Chinese: they have their contradictions. Here is the example he offers. When he attempts to board a rush-hour bus, it is like a scene from hell, with people fighting over the last few inches of space. Once on the packed bus, however, he is treated to the kinder side of Chinese manners. An older lady offers him her seat and refuses to take no for an answer.¹¹⁰⁾ He receives this special treatment simply because he is a foreigner and most Chinese probably feel it is their duty to be nice to visitors from other countries. This is really not as surprising as Lowe implies. Similar contradictions can surely be found in many other parts of the world.

Like the great majority of foreign travelers to China, the author bemoans the indifference and inefficiency built into the tourism and service industries. Perhaps it

107) He basically makes two points about Taiwan: one is that it is a police state with no democratic freedom and the other is that the National Palace Museum is the best museum in the world for Chinese art.

108) Lowe, *Into China*, p. 39.

109) Lowe, *Into China*, p. 44.

110) Lowe, *Into China*, p. 108.

is because his expectations run too high that he ends up finding fault with the system all during his trip. When he tries to buy a plane ticket for a domestic flight, he is told there are no more seats. After much persistence, however, lo and behold there are tickets available. But this experience and others like it leave a bad taste in his mouth. He cannot but conclude that this is a new form of Chinese torture devised for use by petty officials.¹¹¹⁾ Hotels do not fare any better. Regardless where he stays, he always faces the same problems: bad service, neglected facilities, lack of information, untrained staff, and most importantly lack of concern. He finally just gives up. "In such situations across China I have tried every reaction. Politeness, shouting, wheedling, humor, pleading and, in extremis, mad laughter. All were met with the same great wall of Chinese indifference, impenetrable."¹¹²⁾ The reason everything is so abysmal is because the workers, who are poorly paid, have no incentive to provide good service. The one bright side to an otherwise gloomy picture is the train system, which Lowe praises for its punctuality and basic efficiency.

While the workers in the service industry are lethargic to say the least, the common people are much more energetic. Lowe finds it admirable that the people are full of life in spite of their poverty and dreary surroundings.¹¹³⁾ In many places, city and country alike, he discovers how much energy the poor people have. This holds true especially for the school children that he observes; they display individuality as well as noisy vitality.

The author is disappointed by the cultural sights in China. The places he would like to visit a second time comprise a surprisingly short list: the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, the Great Wall, Tibet, and a few others. For him, Beijing has lost its exotic nature and has turned into a characterless capital city. With no coherent plan, it has become just another sprawling, ugly city—a common occurrence in China. And yet it does possess a little more individuality than most. While he is overwhelmed by the magnificence of the Forbidden City, he still finds it "forlorn," for the grounds are filled with weeds, the furnishings are either frayed or nonexistent, and the place generally has the feel of an empty stage.¹¹⁴⁾ He saves his highest praise for the Temple of Heaven, which he judges to be the most beautiful group of buildings in China. "Here at last," he says, "is a building that fulfills one's dream of China, simple yet exotic."¹¹⁵⁾

Many foreigners catch an idealized view of rural China from the windows of trains and buses. But Lowe points out that such a view is unrealistic and wrong, for there is little that is romantic in rural life. Farmers and peasants lead a hard and brutish life.

111) Lowe, *Into China*, pp. 47–48.

112) Lowe, *Into China*, p. 72.

113) Lowe, *Into China*, p. 67.

114) Lowe, *Into China*, p. 127.

115) Lowe, *Into China*, p. 136.

The best proof of this is the fact that people living in the villages want to move to the cities.¹¹⁶⁾ Having made this claim, he then contradicts himself a few chapters later in the book. As he passes a tea plantation near Hangzhou, he describes what he sees as follows: "It provides the perfect oriental scene with which to leave Hangzhou. The low bushes stretch away across the rising ground to the forest beyond. Here and there, bending over the squat, neatly shaped bushes, are girls in wide straw hats, with deep woven baskets slung from their hips. Rapidly but meticulously they pick the young budding leaves of spring which produce the best green tea."¹¹⁷⁾ He also makes it clear that the real face of China is not the one shown in brochures. There are beggars and bums and homeless people, many of whom sleep in or near big city train stations.¹¹⁸⁾

Politics do not play a very large role in the book. Lowe does, however, leave the reader with the impression that China has suffered under communism. Since Mao and the communists took power in 1949, millions of people have been either imprisoned or exterminated. There has been much brutality and persecution, so we are warned not to glamorize China. On the other hand, China seems less depressing and gloomy than the Soviet Union. The author even believes "...there is a certain heroic element in Chinese communism which is evident at the highest levels of the government and in the extraordinary spirit and vitality still to be found among the ordinary Chinese..."¹¹⁹⁾ In addition, we are told that Mao is one of the giants of human history, regardless of his many fatal mistakes. His record is a mixed record of success and failure. Deng Xiaoping is the man most responsible for the current pragmatic policies of China. It is thanks to him that the country has returned to normalcy and the people are now able to improve their lives.

The China that Lowe sees is a rapidly changing China. Without a doubt, things are getting better. The country is still mostly poor and largely dilapidated; there are large numbers of uneducated people and a cancerous bureaucracy. But it is a unique culture with a rich past and a hopeful future.¹²⁰⁾

David Kellogg's *In Search of China* is an altogether different kind of travel book. Published in 1989, it takes the form of a series of letters to friends, in which he details his experiences during the five years he spent living, teaching, and traveling in China.¹²¹⁾ Having studied Chinese at the university, Kellogg is proficient enough in the language to move around quite easily on his own. What makes his account

116) Lowe, *Into China*, p. 56.

117) Lowe, *Into China*, p. 111.

118) It is hard to imagine any country in the world inserting pictures of such people in their tourist brochures.

119) Lowe, *Into China*, p. 15.

120) Lowe, *Into China*, p. 207.

121) Although Kellogg does teach in China for part of his stay, I did not include *In Search of China* in the Teacher-Traveler section because the book deals mainly with his extensive travels around the country.

unusual is that he goes to China as a young man of twenty-four and stays there long enough to feel he is part of the country.

The author is not your normal foreigner visitor to China. Because his financial situation is always precarious, he must travel the most economical way possible. He rides the cheapest trains and buses and even hitchhikes through some areas. Whenever he can, he stays at the hotels intended for the poorest Chinese. On several occasions, he has to sleep in bus or train stations. He likes to go where other foreigners cannot or do not go. The more out-of-the-way a place is, the more it attracts him. The China he describes is not the China of guidebooks, but the "other" China, the one most foreigners do not have the stamina or interest to visit. And yet the general impressions we get from his book are very similar to those found in other works mentioned in this paper. A unique itinerary does not necessarily guarantee a unique commentary.

One of the first things he takes the Chinese to task for is their treatment of foreigners. What bothers him the most is the racial segregation common in China; it seems to be an obsession with the Chinese. In restaurants, hospitals, and especially hotels, the government strives hard to keep foreigners away from Chinese. According to Kellogg, the problem is not merely a political or bureaucratic one; the problem is that the Chinese fear and hate foreigners.¹²²⁾ In this regard, it is much worse to be black or Arab than white, for whites are usually treated a little better. There is some variety in how Chinese treat white foreigners: sometimes they are humane, sometimes obsequious, and sometimes mendacious. For the most part, they resent these people who come from afar with lots of money to spend, and view them merely as a source of income.

Kellogg frequently touches on the widespread poverty in China. It is an extreme kind of poverty that Americans have never seen and cannot image.¹²³⁾ This holds true not only for the countryside but also for the cities. Only fifty meters from Tiananmen Square in Beijing, he walks through an area with unbelievably poor housing and terrible sanitation. He sees homeless people sleeping on the street in freezing weather and beggars with horrible looking diseases. Such sights shock him. And he finds it hard to believe that things could have been worse in the past.¹²⁴⁾ In trying to live like the average Chinese, he sees a style of life unfamiliar to almost all foreigners. Much of this life he describes in frank detail. We are given an insider's view of public toilets and other facilities. When he ventures into the countryside or into the remote regions of western China, the conditions are even more appalling. What is miraculous is that he is able to endure and keep going, in spite of these

122) Kellogg, *In Search of China*, p. 41.

123) During Nixon's visit to China, Americans were never shown any pictures of the underside of society.

124) Kellogg, *In Search of China*, pp. 17-18.

obstacles.

Through teaching at a medical institute in Beijing, he comes to know a little about the Chinese medical health system. The system can proudly list among its achievements the virtual elimination of such diseases as VD, leprosy, and smallpox. But the one aspect of the system that he objects to is the doctor-patient relationship. From what he observes, there seems to be little or no rapport between doctors and patients, and the latter are often belittled and mistreated, particularly if they are illiterate peasants. Moreover, patients are rarely told their fate, for there is a fear that such information might prove devastating. Dying patients are treated like children by their family and their doctors.

The author presents a conflicting, almost contradictory, image of Chinese women. They are, he believes, “ferociously intelligent, serious, articulate, utterly devoid of world-weariness and cynicism, and burning with curiosity.”¹²⁵⁾ And he is impressed with their innocent enthusiasm for work. In addition, he considers oriental women the most beautiful in the world, perhaps one reason being that they seem to age very slowly. What disappoints him, however, is the immaturity of women his own age, that is in their mid-twenties. They tend to be emotionally retarded due to societal repression: for example, many still play with dolls and are afraid of the dark. And even though they might possess beauty and grace, they are far from enjoyable to be with.¹²⁶⁾ As an aside, he notes that women comprise as much as seventy percent of illiterates but only twenty-five percent of university students.

Being a communist in his political beliefs, Kellogg has high expectations for the Chinese experiment in socialism.¹²⁷⁾ When he gets there, however, he discovers a different China, one growing increasingly materialistic under the economic reforms instituted by Deng Xiaoping. In the rural areas, it has resulted in “a get-rich policy that can only mean merciless stratification of the peasantry, and searing polarization of the whole countryside.”¹²⁸⁾ One of the problems with the new economic liberalization, especially in the cities, is that prices go up but salaries remain the same. As a result, many teachers have to moonlight in order to make ends meet. In Shanghai the situation is so bad that teachers are forced to sell ice-cream to students during class. Equally serious is the growing malnutrition among students, who are said to be the most undernourished group in China.¹²⁹⁾ And in the author’s opinion, the so-called “free enterprise” system has wreaked havoc on education. Now that schools are required to become more and more self-supporting and fend for

125) Kellogg, *In Search of China*, p. 98.

126) Kellogg, *In Search of China*, p. 187.

127) His teaching salary is five times that of the Chinese teachers. Being a communist and believing in total equality, he petitions the school to lower his salary to the same level as the Chinese staff. But he is told that such a thing is not permitted.

128) Kellogg, *In Search of China*, p. 90.

129) Kellogg, *In Search of China*, pp. 357–358.

themselves, classes have gotten bigger, fees have been hiked, and students have been forced to work part time—a state of affairs that apparently turned into a national scandal.¹³⁰⁾

Toward the end of the book, Kellogg boldly presents his conclusions about China, a country in which he lived so long and traveled so far.

China is the future: it is more crowded, more cultured, less private, less individualized—and, despite everything, it does work. It is, despite the terrible poverty, a higher stage of civilization than Thatcher's Britain, just as France in the late 18th century was a higher stage than Britain, although far, far poorer, and in some ways more violent and cruel. I believe the same thing holds for most of the struggles China faces today, and that is one reason why, no matter how horrid and inflationary things get, I'm staying. China represents the future.¹³¹⁾

His final thoughts about China might seem somewhat optimistic when one considers the actual conditions that he experiences and reports on during his stay. There is no doubt that he has great affection for the country; in a sense, he almost feels that he has become Chinese. For him, the details are not as significant as the overall picture.

Journey to the Middle Kingdom is the weakest of all the books I survey in this paper. Written by a young Englishman named Christopher West, it was first published in 1991 and is still easily obtainable in paperback. This book, the shortest of all the works discussed herein, is an account of a relatively brief trip he made to China in 1985 (it is never made exactly clear how long he stayed). In spite of having no apparent knowledge of the language or the culture, he traveled solo in backpack style around the country and then returned home and put his observations down on paper. West wrote a book that is an excellent example of an amateurish effort by an amateur traveler. Even when we give due weight to the circumstances and timing of his trip, we cannot but conclude that his comments are extremely banal and his impressions of the country overly simplistic.

The major obstacle faced by a traveler like West is the simple fact that he cannot communicate with Chinese. Since he does not speak Chinese, he has to rely on English-speaking Chinese and foreigners, in order to learn about the country. What we end up with is a foreigner going to China and talking with other foreigners, most of whom are students or fellow travelers. There are at least ten such encounters in the book. With one or two exceptions, the people West meets along the way are either fairly negative or extremely negative in their views on China. In Guangzhou he has dinner with a Londoner who claims that China is dead, morally, culturally, and

130) Kellogg, *In Search of China*, pp. 279–280.

131) Kellogg, *In Search of China*, p. 376.

economically and that China is a brutal, conformist, authoritarian, and xenophobic country.¹³²⁾ Without hesitation two foreign students in Nanjing tell him how much they detest the country, the people, and especially the city of Nanjing. An African studying in China admits that he hates the Chinese because of their racist feelings toward blacks. In Beijing a student named Paul tells the author that he is extremely disappointed with China because the country has not lived up to his ideals. It turns out that the Chinese crave money and influence and put their own interests above those of the community.¹³³⁾ And the other foreigners have similar or even worse things to say about China. The reader is not given a thoughtful critique of the country's numerous problems. Instead, we get emotional outbursts of discontent. Even West senses the danger in listening to too many of these angry comments. He needs to escape from such people and "to be alone with the real China—the China that had vanished the moment I became surrounded by Westerners."¹³⁴⁾ Yet he tends to use such disgruntled people's opinions to create very bleak images of China. Unfortunately, he is unable to have any meaningful discussions with the Chinese.

West travels to China expecting a country of traditional beauty and culture, but what he discovers is something quite different. It is the age-old clash between image and reality. Like most first-time visitors, he is struck by the poverty, noise, crowds, and dirt that assault his senses frequently during the trip. For example, he cannot believe how cruel and dirty the main market in Canton is. At Beijing Station, he confronts the "real China," as he puts it: "globules of spittle on the hard, slippery concrete; ruthless pushing and shoving round the exit; loudspeakers quacking and screaming."¹³⁵⁾ However, the reader might legitimately wonder if this is the only "real China." Being a foreigner, West becomes the target of unscrupulous taxi drivers. When he is cheated on a fare, he feels humiliated and begins to distrust everyone.¹³⁶⁾ He also gets frustrated at the bad service in hotels and restaurants, where the system is inefficient and the staff is surly.¹³⁷⁾

To be sure, all is not bad. While he criticizes many places for their primitive conditions, he does find a few sights that leave a deep impression. One is in Shandong when he looks out over some fields. The scene moves him: "It was as if my mind had suddenly floated free of my body and was hovering weightless over the landscape. In this state, I discovered, it could dart down on any activity and become a part of it...I could almost feel the spirit of the land itself—timeless, nutritive, holy. I

132) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 27.

133) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 130.

134) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 130.

135) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 127.

136) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 27. His reaction seems excessive. Anyone who travels much knows that taxis are almost always a problem in foreign countries.

137) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 98.

was a part of this place.”¹³⁸⁾ No matter what cultural site he visits, his first reaction is usually the same: China does not take care of its heritage. He has a theory about Chinese culture: what one sees at first is not so striking; later it gets better; and then finally it appears beautiful. The lesson here is that we cannot always trust our initial impressions. But those moments when West is able to experience beauty and happiness turn out to be brief and soon disappear.¹³⁹⁾

The text is marred in numerous places by silly and fatuous observations that do not make much sense even when taken in context. Here are a few representative examples. “I cursed this country and its cruel, deceitful inhabitants; I hated them, almost as much as I hated myself.”¹⁴⁰⁾ “The harshness of Guangzhou was just a memory: traveling, I realized, meant motion, and motion meant change, a perpetual chance to start again.”¹⁴¹⁾ “So much idealism, so much waste—this country’s life might have been my own.”¹⁴²⁾ “What mankind needed was truth, truth about what we are and how we should live. It suddenly seemed such an unattainable goal.”¹⁴³⁾ Of course, other books contain howlers, too, but those in *Journey to the Middle Kingdom* make the writing, which is weak to begin with, even weaker.

In spite of receiving a confusingly mixed set of impressions, West reflects on his trip and has nothing but praise for China. He tells us that he has fallen in love with the country, but only after overcoming his expectations and prejudices. What turns him around is a patient and generous China, which presents him with a wonderful gift—“a glimpse into the universal Middle Kingdom of the human spirit.”¹⁴⁴⁾ This China, the one he never knew existed, is full of life and is always changing. It is a country of paradoxes: “tough and sentimental, ancient and novelty-struck.”¹⁴⁵⁾ Like many other younger travelers, he is thankful to China for one more thing: visiting such a unique country changes his character by forcing him to look at himself, his culture, and his beliefs, in a totally new and challenging way.

A Journalist and A Scholar

Perhaps the most aggressive travel account is *Behind the Forbidden Door* by the Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani, who reported on China for several European newspapers from 1980 to 1984. He published his book the following year after being expelled from China for the articles he had written on the country. His book, which

138) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, pp. 103–104.b

139) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 68.

140) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 34.

141) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 39.

142) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 41.

143) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 118.

144) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 150. I am not exactly sure what he means by “the universal Middle Kingdom of the human spirit,” but the phrase does have a nice ring.

145) West, *Journey to the Middle Kingdom*, p. 156.

is a combination of travelogue and political analysis, is subtitled “Travels in Unknown China.” And it is the unknown that he wishes to find out about. With an excellent knowledge of the language and the culture, Terzani is well equipped to probe below the surface and discover as much as possible about China in all its aspects. In his quest, he goes all over the country, often in the “hard seat” class of trains and sometimes even by bicycle. His frank account is harsh, to put it mildly, for he stresses the severity and failures of communist rule.

In order to report on China, he must talk with “real” Chinese, but this is not at all an easy thing to do. Foreigners are basically isolated from Chinese. They are forced to live in special western-style apartments, eat in special restaurants, stay in special hotels, and travel in special train compartments. What is worse is that they are controlled by the “Barbarian Handlers,” officials whose job is to keep tabs on where they go and whom they talk with. There is a complicated system of rules and regulations which make candid reporting that much more difficult.¹⁴⁶⁾

In Terzani’s opinion, the cost of communist victory has been high in China. Since it is always easier to destroy than to build, the communist government has been quick to tear things down, thus causing lots of confusion and misery. But it has not been as successful at rebuilding.¹⁴⁷⁾ Without a doubt, the old China is dead; there are few remains of that remarkable civilization—the Middle Kingdom. It is true that Mao Zedong attempted, unsuccessfully, to create a completely new society; however, Mao’s China was never born. Deng Xiaoping has a different idea: he wants to make China into a copy of the rest of the world. China and the Chinese deserve better, for they are still a very vibrant and talented people.¹⁴⁸⁾ Terzani sees a contradiction in the way the government uses the past. “The contradiction is this: in the context of her relationship with the outside world, China boasts of her glories of the past to compensate for the failures of the present; in the context of her social development, that past is refuted and destroyed. The people are being asked to be proud of something they know nothing about.”¹⁴⁹⁾

Most communist policies are judged to have been fiascos. For thirty-five years the government has emphasized the collective life, socialistic education, and struggles against Chinese tradition and human nature. And yet people in China are for the most part the same as before: parochial, selfish, and family-oriented.¹⁵⁰⁾ Even Confucius is becoming popular again; in fact, he is being resurrected as the “great educator.” The communists are using the ancient sage to impart values and ideals to apathetic and confused Chinese youth. Driven by the spirit of an earlier age, people

146) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 255.

147) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 56.

148) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 20.

149) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 162.

150) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 117.

who are now in their forties and fifties never asked questions; they just worked hard and sacrificed for the Motherland. But their children are different. They behave in ways that are shocking to the older generation. Not knowing how to handle the problem, the government simply blames everything on the “Spiritual Pollution” which has seeped in from the West. People are considered “polluted” if they are too modern, Western, or bourgeois, or if they are indecent, anti-socialist, or critical of the communist party.¹⁵¹⁾ What this means is that the party and the government are in danger of losing a great deal—the high prestige that they once enjoyed, the respect of the people, and the dream of communism.

Terzani has strong opinions on the successes and failures of Deng’s China. First of all, thanks to Deng, China has begun to open its doors to the outside world. Out of economic necessity, it has had to adopt and adapt Western standards in many areas, for example, the economy, culture, and fashion. This process has not always produced welcome results. It is causing China to renounce its uniqueness. And that, in turn, could lead to an inferiority complex and possibly a backlash, either against the government or the West.¹⁵²⁾ However, for the moment, Deng’s China looks like any other country: people dress colorfully; people talk to each other; lovers walk hand in hand; children dream of being something; city skylines are changing; and rural areas are being divided into small plots for individual families.¹⁵³⁾ But it is also a time of deep ideological and cultural confusion, for the new China is a place without faith or ideals. As a result, there has been an increase in crime and executions. The government has instituted a controversial one-child policy which is cruel and hard on mothers; in addition, it is producing a generation of spoiled people. For better and worse, it is completely different China.

The author is dismayed by much of what he sees during his travels in China.¹⁵⁴⁾ Take the capital, for example. Since 1949, Beijing, once a splendid and magnificent city, has been turned into a shapeless slum. What specific changes have the communists made to the city? First, they torn down fifty-five arches or gates and razed the walls that once ringed the city; of 8000 monuments, they destroyed all but seventy eight; they rapidly put up lots of substandard buildings; they altered the city’s traditional orientation from north/south to east/west; and they demolished half of the surface of old Beijing.¹⁵⁵⁾ Terzani says that the city has become an unhealthy place because of the large number of coal-burning factories built within the city limits since the Great Leap Forward in 1958. Temples were converted into factories, which

151) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 243.

152) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 13.

153) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 15.

154) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, pp. 195–197.

155) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, pp. 25–27.

means that the people have no real temples to use for religious purposes.¹⁵⁶⁾ The author also regrets the destruction of the *hutong* (lanes) and courtyard houses, for they were the last bastion of privacy and individualism.¹⁵⁷⁾ In sum, after thirty-five years of rule by the communists, Beijing is a capital which is neither Chinese nor socialist. He wonders in fact if it is a real city at all.

Other places receive equally harsh criticisms. Manchuria is “the symbol of the confusion, the disarray, the mismanagement, the crisis of confidence that grips the whole country.”¹⁵⁸⁾ The city of Harbin is “dirty, dilapidated and malodorous, a good example of what the Chinese revolution in Manchuria inherited from the past and managed to squander.”¹⁵⁹⁾ Taiyuan in Shanxi Province was a fabulous city, but now it is “an evil-smelling cluster of dilapidated houses with open, common toilets exposed to the street.”¹⁶⁰⁾ Pingyao, a smaller city in the same province, is “a collection of all that the local authorities do not want the visitor to see. All the streets are unpaved and covered with a mixture of mud and excrement; rich old mansions built of stone are crammed with derelict people...All the temples and historic monuments described by a guidebook of the fifties are in ruins.”¹⁶¹⁾ Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, has two distinct sections: one for Chinese, which is clean and modern, and one for Tibetans, which is dirty and feudal. The city is primitive. When walking along the street, the author sees within a few hours “a woman giving birth, a man dying in the crowd, and an old woman drinking the urine of a little boy beside her.”¹⁶²⁾ This, in general, is the tone he maintains throughout his travels. No matter what part of China he visits, he finds little to praise but much to criticize. Almost everything he observes is a failure, and communist policy bears responsibility for the failures. For him, the past was good and the present is bad. There is not much joy in his book.

In recent years few women have written travel accounts of China. One exception is Professor Hill Gates, an American scholar who specializes in Chinese anthropology. Over a period of eight years, from 1988 to 1996, she made several trips to Sichuan Province, living there for a number of months, mainly in the capital city of Chengdu. Her travels took her throughout the province and into other areas of southwest China. In 1999, she published a book entitled *Looking for Chengdu*, which is the story of her adventures in China. She went to China with a solid grounding in Chinese language and culture, having previously lived several years in Taiwan.

Gates wants her “journal of a journey” to be different from those that came before.

156) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, pp. 32–33.

157) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, pp. 36–37.

158) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 75.

159) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 86.

160) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 171.

161) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 173.

162) Terzani, *Behind the Forbidden Door*, p. 149.

In the past, most travel accounts treated Chinese like an alien race with an unfathomable culture. It is rare, she says, to find books of this genre in which the Chinese appear as perfectly ordinary people, living ordinary lives and making the most of their opportunities.¹⁶³⁾ The places she visits and describes are fairly typical of China in the late 1980s. So, in theory, her observations should not differ all that radically from others written in the same period. However, as we shall see, they do, because she interprets almost every aspect of Chinese life in a positive light.

Most travel accounts tend to emphasize how poor and dirty China is. While admitting that the main streets are ugly and traffic-infested, Gates praises the back allies as places where people can live in comfort and neighborliness.¹⁶⁴⁾ When she visits the houses and apartments of friends, she is struck by the contrast between their unattractive exteriors and their comfortable interiors. All appear very clean and free of vermin—they are residences which the inhabitants can be proud of.¹⁶⁵⁾ One house fronts a narrow alleyway, but is spacious, bright, and nice. Another is “small and dark and crowded” but homey.¹⁶⁶⁾ She describes the buildings in a housing unit for workers as “perhaps the ugliest arrangements for living on this earth,” for they have no greenery, are crudely put together, and are surrounded by pollution. Nevertheless, she claims that the people living there “often view their housing as fully adequate, homey, and unpretentious.”¹⁶⁷⁾ Overall, the people she meets look neat and healthy. Their clothes are scrubbed clean. Although she notices lots of superficial dirt, she explains that it is difficult for poor people to keep everything clean all the time. Whereas the great majority of foreigners make a loud ruckus over the sad state of toilet hygiene in China, Gates merely states that a certain toilet is primitive; she never takes it as an enduring characteristic of Chinese culture. When it comes to eating, she voices few, if any, complaints about the Chinese food that is available. She likes it because it is healthy and there is lots of variety. At a roadside stall in Yunnan Province, she eats a delicious lunch in an incredible ambience, but later that day she has such a terrible case of bad gut that she has to rest for several days. And yet she blames no one but herself, and says nothing unkind about the sanitary conditions. Another point that sets her apart from other Western travelers is that she almost never complains about the inadequate service in restaurants and hotels. It is obvious that she is extremely understanding of other cultures and their indigenous standards.

Since the author has an interest in women’s lives and problems, she strives to

163) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, p. viii.

164) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, p. 22.

165) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, p. 29.

166) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, p. 91.

167) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, p. 102.

meet and talk with as many different women as possible.¹⁶⁸⁾ Her book has very little to say about Chinese men, mainly because she spends most of her time with women. Though it is difficult for foreigners to do so, she makes good friends among the women she comes into contact with, and in the process she is able to learn a lot about the current lives of Chinese women in Chengdu. She has nothing but praise for their hard work, intelligence, competence, and fortitude. She is also impressed by the civility of children, who do not shout or call her names. It seems to her that they are better disciplined than the children she saw in Taiwan in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁶⁹⁾ In fact, throughout her stays in China, she is never cheated or treated badly (or if such things actually did happen, she never mentions them). The impression we come away with is that the Chinese are a proud and decent people, who in many respects are not all that different from Westerners.

Chinese society does have its problems, however, and Gates touches on a few that are of concern to her. By talking with women in the nearby villages, she learns of the prevalence of filicide, or the killing of unwanted daughters. Regardless of their economic status, most parents dislike having daughters, because they have to provide a substantial dowry in order to marry them off. As a result, many girls are killed at birth in a number of gruesome ways.¹⁷⁰⁾ This has led to an increasingly serious imbalance in the male/female population ratio. Men, especially poor men, are having a harder time finding wives. But at the same time, the population continues to grow and grow. Wherever she travels in China, she feels the pressure of overpopulation. There is no place for so many extra people to migrate to. About half the population of China would have to be sent elsewhere in order to lessen the pressure of so many people on so limited an area. But no country or continent in the world would be willing to accept such a large number of immigrants. So the government adopted the one-child policy in an attempt to slow down population growth. The policy has turned out to be very unpopular (and ineffective) in the rural areas. It is so unpopular, in fact, that the government has given up trying to strictly enforce the rule outside the cities.¹⁷¹⁾

The more Gates sees of the “new” China, the more it reminds her of pre-1949 society. There is a powerful class of officials that has the ability to obtain essential supplies, job security, and political protection. Private production is permitted on a limited scale, mainly because it helps reduce social tensions. The introduction of petty capitalism has resulted in more corruption and even at times exploitation.¹⁷²⁾ Some people are less than enthusiastic about economic reforms. They are disturbed

168) Her ideological beliefs are quite clear. She calls herself a socialist/feminist.

169) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, p. 18.

170) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, p. 151.

171) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, pp. 224–224.

172) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, p. 202.

by the fact that the reforms appear uncontrolled and the results disorderly. There is more worldliness now and less lack of direction; no one seems to have a clear idea of what lies ahead.¹⁷³⁾ What is most troubling is, without a doubt, the corruption that plagues society from top to bottom. It has become the essence of the new system of post-Mao economic reforms, which in large part amount “to the appropriations of public goods by private persons with good connections.”¹⁷⁴⁾ It should be emphasized that “connections” (*guanxi*) are a natural feature of Chinese life; they are necessary for carrying out almost any transaction. However, the problem of connections often leads directly to the problem of corruption. This is a structural weakness of society that foreign businessmen in China always tend to stress.

Even though she is extremely sympathetic to China, Gates does experience some cross-cultural conflicts. When she is with Chinese, she discovers that she is unable to do anything on her own, no matter how trivial. It is simply not considered acceptable, and she has to do as everyone else does. At several points in her travels, she just wants to be alone, but her friends do not allow it.¹⁷⁵⁾ The reason is clear: the Chinese do not recognize the U.S. concept of personal autonomy. Regardless of the situation, there is strong pressure to subordinate ones feelings and wishes to those of the group. Because of the excessive solicitude and inflexible rules, she becomes so frustrated at times that she gets angry and shouts. Gates, who is the most culturally sensitive of our travelers, admits that there are occasions when she dislikes being bound by another society’s customs.

She concludes by saying that friends of China (and she certainly considers herself one) have the responsibility to tell certain truths about the country: “truths about common humanity, about the individualism of Chinese..., about the difficulties and successes of leaping a cultural gap.”¹⁷⁶⁾ Hers is a very understanding and positive view of China. What she sees and admires is a China trying to find its place in the modern world.

Teacher-Travelers

As China began to open its doors to the outside world following the death of Mao, it became necessary to invite foreigners to teach certain subjects that the Chinese themselves were unable to teach, foreign languages, for example, especially English. Before long there were several programs in place to recruit young people to come to China and spend two years as English teachers at colleges and universities throughout the country. Most are from the U.S. and the U.K., and most are young, although there has also been a number of middle-aged and older teachers. A two-

173) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, p. 24.

174) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, p. 86.

175) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, pp. 121–122.

176) Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, p. 242.

year stay gives the teachers a good chance to see China at the grass roots level and to travel around the country. After returning home, some of the participants write books about their experiences, some of which are unique, humorous, and enlightening. The books are actually a little hard to classify, for they are not merely a record of travel or a description of society. They are a combination of both and, for lack of a better term, are usually included in the adventure/travel genre.

Of all the books in this genre, Mark Salzman's *Iron and Steel* has undoubtedly sold the most copies and exerted the greatest influence. It was first published in 1986, and is still on the travel section shelves of bookshops, both large and small. In 1989 it was even made into a movie with the author playing the lead role.¹⁷⁷⁾ *Iron and Silk* is the story of a young American man, fresh out of college, who goes to China in 1982 to teach English for two years at Hunan Medical College and to learn Chinese martial arts in his spare time. Having majored in Chinese at Yale, Salzman has the advantage of being fluent in the language, which makes his stay in China more enjoyable and productive. However, always knowing what is being said can at times lead to frustration because there is no intermediary to interpret or filter out the unpleasant nuances.

On the first page of the book the author displays his dislike—hatred might be a better word—for the Chinese bureaucracy. At the end of his stay, while trying to leave the country with a large bag of martial arts equipment, he is forced to endure what he considers a totally unnecessary bureaucratic runaround.¹⁷⁸⁾ He calls it a game and even gives it a name: “Let’s Make a Regulation.”¹⁷⁹⁾ It is, he believes, the favorite pastime of officials all over China. It is the one feature of present-day China that perturbs him throughout his stay. The Chinese government seems to have a regulation for almost everything, especially when the person involved is a foreigner.

His first day in China is miserable. Once he arrives in Canton he is pushed around by bossy officials at China Travel Service, which “specializes in imposing services on foreigners and then failing to carry them out properly, thus creating a need for more services.”¹⁸⁰⁾ No matter how well he speaks the language, the Chinese force him to do things the foreign way, that is to say the expensive way. The more he tries to argue his point, the more intransigent and vengeful the other side becomes. What he does not know at this point is that it will basically be the same for most of his stay in the country.

A few months later Salzman has a discouraging experience with the officials of

177) The movie *Iron and Silk*, which came out in 1991, is loosely based on the book. It is a story about martial arts, love, and cultural differences.

178) Admittedly, Salzman is carrying a strange assortment of things out of the country: five swords, four sabers, a staff, a halberd, two hooked swords, some knives and a nine-section steel whip. It is understandable, I think, that the Chinese officials are somewhat suspicious.

179) Salzman, *Iron and Silk*, p. 3.

180) Salzman, *Iron and Silk*, p. 6.

the Post Office and the Foreign Affairs Bureau in Changsha, the city in Hunan where he teaches. When he develops a bad case of athlete's food, he searches for some local medicine, but is told there is none because the disease has been completely eliminated in China. He sends to Hong Kong for the medicine, and it soon arrives. However, he cannot get it from the Post Office without paying a special tax, which turns out to be more than the original value of the medicine. To make matters worse, the worker at the Post Office is rude and hostile. Since he was led to believe that foreign teachers were exempt from the tax, he decides to take his complaint to the Foreign Affairs Bureau—the college office in charge of all matters related to foreigners. The officials there cannot help him, however. They politely explain that the tax is levied because it is insulting to China if people import expensive foreign goods instead of using readily available Chinese substitutes. He tries to explain that there is no substitute, but it is to no avail. By accident, however, another foreigner sees Salzman's package on a shelf at the Post Office, picks it up, and brings it to him, without of course paying the tax. The author feels elated, thinking that he has finally beaten the system. Then the mail for foreigners at the college suddenly stops being delivered. Realizing that the Post Office is now getting its revenge, he knows he has no choice but to pay the original tax. Once he does that, all the teachers start getting their mail again. What he learns from this incident is that there is no way to defeat the Chinese bureaucracy.¹⁸¹⁾

Officials are not the only people who irritate him. He has a run-in with a girl working in the coffee shop at a Hangzhou hotel. Since the sign says "Coffee Shop," he figures it will be easy to get a cup of coffee, but he is wrong. She will not let him in unless he pays the five-dollar cover charge for the disco that adjoins the coffee shop. He asks why he should have to pay the charge, for it is only a little after seven and the dancing does not begin until nine. When he suggests ordering a coffee to go, she tells him that is impossible because the cups cannot leave the shop. So he goes back to his room, gets his own mug, returns to the shop, and asks her to fill it with coffee. She does as he requests and charges him five dollars for the coffee, which is five times the regular cost of a dollar a cup. Her explanation is that his mug is oversized. When he protests that he only asked for one cup, she takes it and pours most of the coffee out of the window.¹⁸²⁾ In China, people with any kind of authority, no matter how minor or insignificant, tend to wield it like a battering ram. And if the confrontation is "us against them," it becomes all that more intense. Salzman feels that "humiliating unwitting foreigners is something of a popular sport in China."¹⁸³⁾

Living in one place for two years gives him the opportunity to meet and make

181) Salzman, *Iron and Silk*, pp. 40–43.

182) Salzman, *Iron and Silk*, pp. 188–190.

183) Salzman, *Iron and Silk*, p. 67.

friends with ordinary Chinese. With his excellent Chinese ability, he is able to talk with people about many different topics. What he finds, however, is a cultural gap that makes mutual understanding much more difficult. Here is an example of the gap. When he gets to know a young calligraphy master named Hai Bin pretty well, he asks him what are the two things he thinks about most. Hai's answer is eating and sleeping. Of all the possible answers, these two seem a little frivolous to Salzman. In reply to the same question, Salzman says that he wants people to like him and that he wants to be very good at something. This answer Hai finds rather curious. He explains it this way: "...these goals [being liked and being good at something] can be achieved so easily! All you have to do is be kind and work hard. But to eat and sleep well, that is a difficult wish, because you cannot control these things yourself."¹⁸⁴⁾ These two young men, both of whom are well-educated and sincere, look at the world in completely different ways.

Through his Chinese studies and his martial arts training, Salzman learns about the depth of the teacher-student relationship in Chinese society. An important part of the teacher's job is to look after the student. His classical Chinese teacher, a woman named Wei, tries to be his teacher in the traditional Chinese way. She wants to do everything for him. At first the young American finds her behavior intrusive and overprotective. Before long, however, he begins to appreciate her kindness. Her advice helps him survive the difficulties of everyday life in China. She is a very warm person. One evening when he returns late in the evening from a trip to Wuhan, he is surprised to be greeted at the college gate by Teacher Wei. He asks her if she is on her way somewhere. She says that she has been waiting on him. "This is your first trip in China," she reminds him. "How shameful it would be if no one greeted you when you came home."¹⁸⁵⁾

Certain aspects of Chinese life shock the author. Riding the local trains is an experience he never wishes to repeat, mainly because of the unbearably crowded and dirty conditions. Then there is the spitting. On his arrival at the college, he is introduced to the administrators, and it is during this ceremony that the person next to him, Comrade Lin, nonchalantly spits on a wall a few feet away. Salzman's first reaction is to laugh, but then he realizes that no one else is bothered in the least. Hygiene becomes an issue during an outing with some local fishermen. When the small boat they are in arrives at the riverbank, the fishermen's wives bring them snacks and drinks. After eating, the fishermen all use the river as a toilet and then wash up in the same water. The author is invited to do so, too. His refusal confuses the fishermen and their wives. "...everyone agreed that it was an odd thing that Americans, who supposedly live in a fantastical future-world, understand so little about

184) Salzman, *Iron and Silk*, p. 100.

185) Salzman, *Iron and Silk*, p. 39.

personal hygiene.”¹⁸⁶⁾

Salzman does praise the Chinese for their ability to endure things that most Westerners could never endure. One is the endless and endlessly boring meetings.. When all of the foreigners in Hunan gather for a banquet on October 1, China’s National Day, they are treated to a big meal plus a three-hour speech describing in mind-numbing detail the progress that the province has made under the leadership of the communist party. At first Salzman cannot understand how the Chinese are able to put up with such tedious affairs. But he soon discovers the secret: listening is optional. It is all right to talk, sleep, stretch, or do other things during meetings. One Chinese gentleman tells him that meetings are only boring if you are actually listening.¹⁸⁷⁾ In other words, there are usually very practical Chinese solutions for the problems one has to face in everyday life.

In 1987–1988, Bill Holm, who was in his mid-forties at the time, went to China and spent one year teaching American culture to Chinese students at a university in Xian. What he saw in China became the basis for his book *Coming Home Crazy*, which first came out in 1990. In addition to being a literature professor at a small Minnesota college, he is also an essayist and a poet. His China book is filled with a lot of good-natured and humorous comments. He tells us what he likes and what he dislikes about the country and the people. When he complains, his complaints are never mean-spirited or gratuitous. The problems he encounters there often have their counterparts in America—a point he is quick to emphasize. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that by going to China he learns as much about himself and America as he does about China.

One of the first things Holm makes clear is how hard it is to know China. “No Westerner,” he says, “ever really knows anything about China. It is too big, too old, too complicated, too unlike anything in our half-world made by Plato, St. Paul, and the British Navy. Even the Chinese have a hard go of it to master their own civilization and, except for Party hacks, generalize timidly about China.”¹⁸⁸⁾ And since he cannot speak or read Chinese, his task is made even more difficult. From the beginning, he tries to discount the importance of stereotypes: “China is all the clichés a foreigner has ever heard—dirty, overcrowded, chaotic, oppressive, poor beyond imagining. These are not remarkable facts about China, though they are true.”¹⁸⁹⁾ In order to survive in China, a foreigner has to lose his cultural moorings and let himself go kind of crazy. And this is exactly what happens to the author. Once, three months into his stay, he wakes up one morning and discovers that he has released himself from his set way of thinking; in other words, he has “gone kind of crazy” (hence, the title of the book).

186) Salzman, *Iron and Silk*, p. 128.

187) Salzman, *Iron and Silk*, p. 162.

188) Holm, *Coming Home Crazy*, pp. 20–21.

189) Holm, *Coming Home Crazy*, p. 11.

After that, nothing is ever the same again: he begins to feel happy and love China.

There is much about Chinese culture that Holm finds charming. He sees a people with a shortage of material goods but an abundance of inner tranquility and tradition. And this is what is missing in American life. "The Chinese, with so little, have not lost the power of celebration in their daily lives. In America, owning so much, we love and praise so little, and our comfortable lives shrivel as a consequence."¹⁹⁰⁾ Instead of aiming for more and newer things, Americans need to acquire more depth of feeling and a greater sense of history. For Holm China possesses something vital that America has lost in its search for the "good life."

That the Chinese are a very civilized people is readily apparent to Holm. Even among the poor, there is evidence of this in the people's love of poetry and calligraphy, their concern for human relations, and their sense of history. Holm also sees proof of it in the grandeur of their hospitality, which is so different from that in America. During one long vacation, he travels to Sichuan Province to see the Yangtze River and meet one of his students, a man named Old Fish who teaches English in the town of Wanxian. After spending several days seeing the local sights with Old Fish, Holm is deeply moved by how well he has been treated. He thinks to himself:

"I visit people with an income of less than thirty dollars a month, living in a one-room apartment with a dirt floor, no car, no heat, no flush toilet, no running water, no kitchen, not much electricity, two or three changes of clothing, and a wall full of books. I eat them out of house and home for four or five days, am entertained grandly, not allowed to spend a *fen*, and for the pleasure of bankrupting them, they give me elegant gifts for having been their houseguest. Where is civilization, Minnesota or Wanxian?"¹⁹¹⁾

In his teaching, Holm is impressed by the thirst and desire for knowledge shown by his students. Often there are not enough textbooks; the facilities are Spartan and rundown. But that does not seem to phase the students, whose main goal is to learn as much as possible and then use that knowledge to get ahead in their lives. A year later when he returns to his university in Minnesota, Holm cannot help contrasting the situation in China with that in America, where most students have the best of everything and yet have no interest in the non-materialistic side of life. He gets depressed and angry: "What insufferable arrogance...to throw the chance for a real mental life away on people who don't want it."¹⁹²⁾ The Chinese students also receive praise for their dedication to learning to communicate in English. Not being an introverted people, the Chinese are fearless and creative in attempting to get their

190) Holm, *Coming Home Crazy*, p. 202.

191) Holm, *Coming Home Crazy*, p. 172.

192) Holm, *Coming Home Crazy*, p. 114.

ideas across in English.

China is not just another culture—it is another planet. What Holm experiences is not what he is used to. He has never seen so many people, so much crowding, so much frenzy. According to him, “China is a ruined place, spoiled by being used too long by too many, but it is ruined in the way that only human beings can ruin a place—with dignity, squalor, corruption, blood, foolishness, passion, and love.”¹⁹³⁾ It is a very human place, with lots of bad as well as good. He admits that China is extremely poor and that living conditions there are brutal—bad housing and dangerous pollution. Yet he is always impressed by how well the Chinese are able to adapt and make do with what little they have; the ones who whine are usually the foreigners. On unbearably packed and dirty trains, the Chinese travelers have a genius for enjoying the trip, no matter what the conditions are. Whereas most Westerners equate efficiency and flexibility with civilization, this is not the case in China, where they are of much less importance, especially in offices. When he goes into a bank to change some money, he cannot believe how bad the service is. He is forced to wait and wait, not because the bank is busy but because no one seems to be working. By his count there are 54 employees: 23–24 are reading books or newspapers, 10–12 are getting fresh tea, 9 are gossiping, 2 are quarreling, 4 are playing with abacuses, 5–6 are fingering piles of forms, and 3 are staring off into space.¹⁹⁴⁾ But then, as a partial explanation, he adds that they make an average of only US 70 cents a day.

Holm has other minor complaints as well. First of all, there is the famous Chinese xenophobia towards foreigners.¹⁹⁵⁾ The author devotes a whole chapter to documenting this point. Foreigners are called *waiquooren* (外国人), which is usually translated as “foreigner.” But for Holm, it has a much stronger nuance, that of “barbarian,” in other words, someone from outside of civilization. And the Chinese view the barbarians as the cause of many of their problems: AIDS, demonstrations for democracy, failure of economic plans, and so on. After a year in China, he concludes that foreigners, or barbarians as he likes to call them, are treated like circus animals; they are handled, fed, exercised, and amused, but they are also isolated and watched.¹⁹⁶⁾

In talking with Americans upon his return, Holm notices that the two strangest things that many people know about China are the Great Wall and foot binding. Holm states frankly that the Great Wall is not worth seeing, for it is just a lot of piled rocks overrun with tourists and souvenir stands. Though it was built by a crazed emperor thousands of years ago, it never really worked as protection against invasion.

193) Holm, *Coming Home Crazy*, p. 25.

194) Holm, *Coming Home Crazy*, p. 41.

195) The author seems to be contradicting himself here. Earlier he claims how friendly and hospitable the Chinese are; now they are xenophobic.

196) Holm, *Coming Home Crazy*, p. 195.

It is merely a symbol for all the invisible walls that exist between China and the outside world.¹⁹⁷⁾ The author is on shaky ground here. Regardless of whether the Great Wall was a success or a failure, most, if not all, visitors to China would certainly consider it a lasting monument to the greatness of Chinese civilization; its symbolic meaning does not lessen the majesty of the wall itself.

His comments on foot binding are equally questionable. Today Westerners and Chinese alike condemn this cruel and painful custom, but Holm has a contrary opinion. He says that it was a very human thing to do, for it was a fashion and human beings never base their fashions on reason. In traditional China men thought small feet were erotic while women themselves viewed large feet as ugly and awkward. Without bound feet it was difficult for women to find marriage partners. For better or worse, that was the fashion. Holm then asks whether Westerners really have the right to criticize foot binding. Did the Chinese invent the hourglass corset or girdles or four-inch heels or tanning studios? None of them is comfortable or safe, but people put up with them because they are in style. One can easily rebut this by saying that foot binding causes permanent damage while the others generally do not. Finally, in a rather forced comparison, the author claims that the Great Wall and foot binding have something in common: both misshape and strangle what they are trying to protect—the feet of women in the one case and the purity of the culture in the other.¹⁹⁸⁾

By the time Peter Hessler's *River Town* is published in 2001, writers have started to focus on less stereotypical aspects of Chinese society in their travel accounts. No longer do they dwell mainly on such things as the dirt, noise, crowds, insularity, corruption, bad manners, and unfriendly service.¹⁹⁹⁾ Hessler spent two years teaching English at a teacher's college in Fuling, a small city on the Yangtze River in Sichuan Province. In *River Town*, Hessler provides us with a good description of normal, everyday life in China, as seen through the eyes of a foreigner. His is the moving story of a young American whose experiences in China expose him to a totally different culture and in the process change his thinking as well as his life. The author emphasizes the joys and pleasures and not merely the inconveniences of his two years (1996–1998) deep in the interior of China. Yes, the Chinese are different from Westerners in numerous ways, but China is not as complicated or puzzling as many outsiders claim it to be.

When Hessler arrives in Fuling, he is almost completely ignorant of the culture

197) Holm, *Coming Home Crazy*, p. 53.

198) Holm, *Coming Home Crazy*, pp. 54–56.

199) Although not discussed in this paper, Justin Hill's *A Bend in the Yellow River* is another example of the earlier kind of commentary. First published in 1997, the book chronicles Hill's 1993–1995 stay in Shanxi Province, where he taught English in a small college. Ignorant of the language and the culture, the young Englishman can only describe the loneliness and strangeness of being a foreigner in China. It contains few fresh or insightful comments.

and the language. It is soon clear to him that without a good knowledge of both his stay in China will end in failure. So he proceeds to learn to speak Chinese as well as possible and to delve into the culture as deeply as possible. What Hessler realizes before long is that the key to success is to learn the Chinese way of doing things, which is something that is not always easy to do. Although such a basic rule might seem too obvious to need repeating, many foreigners forget this when they come face to face with the different modes of behavior found in China (or any other country, for that matter).

A simple basketball game at the university provides the author with one of his first lessons in intercultural understanding. Since he is continually fouled for double-dribbling during the game, he assumes that the referee is picking on him because he is a foreigner, and thus he gets angrier and angrier. Later, after the game, he complains to his Chinese language teacher about the unfair referee. He assumes wrongly that she will sympathize with him. Instead, she scolds him, saying that the problem was his dribbling, not the fouls called by the referee. She informs him that there is a Chinese way of playing basketball. But he is stubborn and at first refuses to accept her view.

“Basketball is an American sport,” I said. “We made the rules and I understand them. That referee just doesn’t like *waiguoren*.” After I spoke, I realized how stupid my words sounded, and I might as well have continued: And we Americans can study a language for only four months and already convey our arrogance.²⁰⁰⁾

He knows what he must do if he wants his stay in China to be a success: he must overcome his own arrogance. And compared with most of the other foreigners who visit China and record their impressions, Hessler succeeds to an admirable degree.

Like many cities in China, Fuling is noisy, dirty, and polluted. It does not take him long to realize that he has two choices: he can complain about the problems or he can ignore the problems. His first reaction is to complain, but that only makes him more annoyed. He then comes to the conclusion that it is simpler to ignore those things that bother him, for there is no way for him to change them. After that, he becomes very open-minded, so much so in fact that he comes to like Fuling and the surrounding area. He even says, “It wasn’t such a bad place to be a *waiguoren* once you were accustomed to things.”²⁰¹⁾ Although it takes almost a year, he is finally able to develop enough trust and patience to get along with everyone and find pleasure in his daily life.

Many Chinese believe that foreigners come to China to search for the negative

200) Hessler, *River Town*, p. 74.

201) Hessler, *River Town*, p. 153.

aspects of the country. Whenever foreigners see something they do not like or approve of, they have a tendency to tell the Chinese how to improve the situation. This is a bad habit of almost all visitors from other countries. What must be remembered is that the Chinese feel great pride in their own culture and as a result possess a strong sense of cultural identity, for they assume that Chinese civilization is unique. That is probably the major reason they are so sensitive to criticisms, especially from foreigners who come from countries with short histories or minor cultural achievements. Hessler goes as far as to say that the teachers and students in his college become xenophobic when they feel China has been unfairly slighted or criticized.²⁰²⁾ This, however, is by no means an unusual reaction; people in many countries feel the same way toward what they consider disparaging remarks by outsiders.

After living some months in Fuling, Hessler notices a paradox in the Chinese attitude toward foreigners: "...the Chinese could be hard on foreigners, but at the same time they could be incredibly patient, generous, and curious about where you had come from."²⁰³⁾ No matter where he hikes in the neighboring mountains, the poor country folks are always happy to offer him simple food and lodging. It goes without saying that this young American becomes the center of attention in the Fuling area. It is not unreasonable for the people to be curious about this stranger: most of them have never seen a foreigner in person before. In spite of that, most of them kill him with kindness. And once he has the language down pretty well, he is treated like a normal human being—not a circus animal. He is even invited to dinner during Chinese New Year by a friend who runs a small restaurant near the college. It is a very nice gesture. The family does not consider him as merely an exotic guest. To them, all that matters is that he is their friend and that he is alone on this special holiday. Hessler concludes that there are two things required in order to foster warm, personal relationships in another country: patience and language ability.²⁰⁴⁾

Although China has destroyed much of its traditional culture, the people still place a great deal of importance on education. Learning is highly respected, especially among the poor. Hessler is impressed by how hard his students study, and it is very satisfying for him to see the effects of his teaching. Their diligence inspires him to do his best.²⁰⁵⁾ However, there are certain things about the system that he dislikes. First of all, the students (and teachers, as well) are told not to associate with the foreigner teachers outside of class. Presumably this is to insure that none of the Chinese are overly exposed to dangerous political or social ideas from abroad. Also, thanks to the Chinese educational system, students always tend to

202) Hessler, *River Town*, p. 175.

203) Hessler, *River Town*, p. 237.

204) Hessler, *River Town*, pp. 297–303.

205) Hessler, *River Town*, p. 352.

think in terms of right or wrong—there is never any in-between. Plagiarism is a big problem when he assigns the students written work. All students copy, and moreover they do not feel any sense of guilt. This Hessler attributes to the way they are taught throughout their school years: they are told to imitate and copy models, and that is what they do.²⁰⁶⁾ Several students die during the two years he teaches in Fuling. What is surprising to him is that the students do not seem to be as shocked as he expected them to be by the death of classmates. Their grief is a silent but resolute grief; they mourn and then they move on.²⁰⁷⁾

There are certain aspects of life in Fuling that the author finds bewildering at first. One is the Chinese banquet, which provides a good example of Chinese social behavior in action. Hessler realizes early on that it is impossible to go to an official banquet and not get hopelessly drunk along with most of the Chinese. That is the one time when people are permitted to lose control and do and say things that are normally forbidden or at least considered rude. People who are normally cold and distant turn out to be quite open and gregarious when under the influence of a powerful Chinese alcohol like *baijiu*. In China, and particularly in Sichuan Province, being a strong drinker is a badge of honor, and the members of his department at the university are ranked according to their ability to consume alcohol. But this ranking applies only to the men, for the women teachers are never invited to the banquets.²⁰⁸⁾ If a man cannot drink alcohol, he is badgered and made fun of until he agrees to drink. Although the Chinese place great value on the concept of face, it is acceptable on such occasions to openly bully or embarrass a friend or colleague.²⁰⁹⁾

Hessler is also surprised by the Chinese concern for and interest in money. It turns out to be the main topic of conversation whenever he meets someone. People always want to know how much money he earns, how much American workers make, and how much things cost in America. It is common for young men and women to try to show their wealth by dressing a certain way or carrying such status symbols as cell phones, beepers, and leather purses. The socialist ideals of the past have turned into the capitalist ambitions of China in the post-Mao era. What the country stands for in theory and what the country has become in reality are two different things. That China has for all intents and purposes transformed itself into a capitalist country is a contradiction that never seems to trouble Hessler's students.

When the author reflects on what China has gone through in the recent past, he finds himself sympathizing with the people he meets in Fuling, for many of them have experienced a life of dizzying changes and difficulties: war, liberation, the Cultural

206) Hessler, *River Town*, p. 100.

207) Hessler, *River Town*, p. 332.

208) In theory women and men are equal in China, but in practice there is a clear double standard in deciding what behavior is allowed and what behavior is not allowed.

209) Hessler, *River Town*, pp. 79–86.

Revolution, poverty, increasing wealth, reform and opening, new values, the Taiwan issue, and so on. It is remarkable, he concludes, that they are able to remain sane under such circumstances.²¹⁰⁾ In most cases, the common people do not complain or ask questions. They endure because that is what they are used to doing. For them, the ideas of democracy and freedom are relative.²¹¹⁾ Most people tolerate the current communist government for the simple reason that life is freer than before, and in most respects life is less difficult than before. Chinese society is now rapidly changing—admittedly not always for the better. But no matter how bad things might seem at the present time, they were much worse in the past.²¹²⁾

Conclusion

Since the late 1970s China has become more accessible to visitors from other countries. However, at first, the government tried to exert complete control over foreigners while they were in China. As in the past, it tried to restrict where they went, what they did, and whom they talked to. But gradually a more open atmosphere prevailed, which meant that it was possible for foreigners to visit China more or less on their own and to see most parts of the country without excessive interference by the government. This led to a dramatic increase in the number of Western visitors from America and Europe, many of whom returned home and wrote accounts of their experiences in China. Most accounts were written and published during the decade following the opening of China. It is interesting to note that many, if not all, of them are still in print. Surely this is proof that the general public buys and reads travel books, even those written ten to twenty years ago. Thus I think it is fair to say that those accounts have had some degree of influence on an entire generation of people interested in China. How much of an influence is hard to determine exactly. But these books do matter, because they help to form one's impressions of China, for better or for worse. Reading them, most people assume that the information and images provided are basically true and representative.

Probably there are as many views of China as there are visitors to China. No two people come away with the exact same impressions of the country. As we have seen, some rave while others rant. There are those that compliment the Chinese on their generous nature and magnificent culture. However, most of the travel accounts of China tend to stress many of the same points, which in general are not very flattering to China: spitting, toilets, noise, bad service, officious bureaucrats, crowded trains and buses, xenophobia, greed, pollution, and so on. What we get is a constant

210) Hessler, *River Town*, p. 316.

211) Needless to say, their ideas of freedom and democracy are much different from those held by Westerners.

212) Hessler, *River Town*, pp. 142–143.

stream of complaints about the differences between Western and Chinese standards. Even those people who feel great affection for the country point out the same problems, although in a much milder tone. But we have the right to ask the question: Are the authors being unfair or are they just being frank?

All the authors mentioned above go to China knowing it is going to be different. In fact, that is one of the reasons they want to go—to see a unique civilization up close. When they get there, they finally realize how different it is. China turns out to be a poor and crowded country, albeit one with a great historical tradition. No matter how open-minded they think they are, the writers reach a point when the crowds or the dirt or the food or the service begin to affect them. And it is then that physical and mental fatigue set in, adversely affecting their observations of the country and the people. What happens is that they judge China by Western standards, which is understandable but not very productive.

This problem is one that was recognized long ago. In the late 18th century, Lord Macartney visited China on behalf of the king of England. His goal was to open China to the West. One of the entries in his diary is relevant to our discussion. He wrote: “Nothing could be more fallacious than to judge China by any European standards.”²¹³⁾ Another English traveler, a woman named Mary Wollstonecraft, wrote a year later in 1795: “Travellers who require that every nation should resemble their native country, had better stay at home. It is, for example, absurd to blame a people for not having that degree of personal cleanliness and elegance of manners which only refinement of state produces, and will produce everywhere in proportion as society attains a general polish.”²¹⁴⁾ Many visitors to foreign countries forget these obvious truths. It is arrogant to insist that there is only one right way to do things—the visitor’s.

In one of his essays, Paul Theroux says: “The job of the travel writer is to go far and wide, make voluminous notes, and tell the truth.”²¹⁵⁾ That sounds like a reasonable goal, but it is not always easy to carry out. A person’s version of the truth is often influenced by such factors as prejudice, ethnocentrism, misunderstanding, and ignorance. Even now, which is considered a relatively enlightened period in history, it is surprising how many travelers hold “a corrupting sense of racial superiority.”²¹⁶⁾ This can clearly be seen when difficulties arise during a trip. In such situations, whom do they blame, themselves, the country, or other people? Rarely do travelers hold themselves responsible, even though the problem might be

213) The diary entry is for January 15, 1794. The quotation appears in Colin Mackerras’ *Western Images of China*, p. 40. This is an informative historical introduction to the subject.

214) The quotation appears in Gates, *Looking for Chengdu*, p. 51.

215) Theroux, “Travel Writing: The Point of It,” p. 52.

216) This phrase comes from Barbara Grizzuti Harrison’s *Italian Days*, p. 14. Her book is an excellent guide to Italy and the Italians.

the result of language inadequacy or cultural gaps. More often than not, we assume the other side is at fault. It is reassuring to think that our ideas or opinions are valid, regardless of the country we are in.

In their accounts, many Westerners, consciously or unconsciously, set up a dichotomy between “them” and “us,” between “East” and “West.” The implications are obvious: they the Chinese are not doing things right, but we the Westerners are; they are not logical, but we are; they are mysterious, exotic, and backward, but we are not.²¹⁷ In spite of good intentions, even the best travel writers, for example Thubron and Theroux, fall into this trap at times and turn the Chinese into “the Other”—a distinction with unpleasant connotations. For sure, pointing out clear-cut differences between cultures often makes for interesting reading. Moreover, if we accept these differences, it becomes easier to rearrange things in our own minds: in other words, we are this way, which usually equals good or superior, and they are that way, which usually equals bad or inferior.

As we saw, most of the writers discussed in this paper readily make such distinctions, often with little concern for extenuating circumstances or cultural explanations. While some of the distinctions seem fair, many are biased or downright ridiculous. The images presented strike the reader as a mixed bag: in the worst examples, one senses ridicule and condescension; and in the better examples, one perceives admiration and sympathy. The great majority of books, however, include a combination of the two and fall somewhere between the two extremes.

What can we conclude from this survey of travel accounts? First, China is more complicated than people imagine. When seen from a distance, the country strikes us as wondrous and unique; however, up close that society, like all others, has its foibles and oddities. Second, judgments about China should not be made lightly. It is not prudent to say this or that aspect of Chinese life is bad, without figuring in the historical and physical circumstances of the people. Things are not the same in a poor country with a huge population as they are in a rich country with a manageable population. Third, there are many truths about China, and no single one covers everything in such a vast and varied country. One must be careful in making generalizations, for there are so many exceptions, particularly in a country changing as rapidly as China. Fourth, the China of today is not the China of twenty years ago. It seems that from around 1990 the Chinese began to improve conditions for tourism and travel and to deal with some of the common complaints voiced by foreigners. As a result, the travel accounts written in the 1970s and 1980s are already extremely out-of-date on many points. Finally, I wish to state the obvious and that is that images are

217) For a critical discussion of these issues, see Alastair Pennycook's *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*, especially pp. 160-189.

important. They affect how people react to other countries, and they offer hints on how to handle different types of cultures. In addition, they often have a wider impact by affecting not only personal but also state-to-state relations. Distorted images can lead to distorted policies with dangerous implications. That, in itself, is reason enough for writers and commentators to strive for fairness and accuracy in constructing their images of another country.

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