THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF THE IMAGES OF CHINA IN WESTERN TRAVEL WRITING

Pavel Petkov

Abstract: Scholars who study the mages of China produced in Western travel writing throughout history, have noticed that their 'nature' is cyclical. Individual variability aside, there are powerful cultural and economic factors that influence Western writers and stimulate them to produce images which – sometimes unbeknownst to the writers themselves – follow an imagological pattern, characteristic of the particular historical period. It is not coincidental that the Western imagological tradition – as it relates to China – is sometimes divided into separate periods, according to the general Western disposition towards the Middle Kingdom – the period of reverence, the period of contempt, the period of benevolence etc. The present paper explores and provides examples of this cyclicity.

Key words: Images, China, Travel writing, Cyclical, Imagology

When we study the images of China produced in Western travel writing throughout history, we will notice that their 'nature' is not constant but cyclical. Individual variability aside, there are powerful cultural and economic factors that influence Western writers and stimulate them to produce images which – sometimes unbeknownst to the writers themselves – follow an imagological pattern, characteristic of the particular historical period. It is not coincidental that the Western imagological tradition – as it relates to China – is sometimes divided into separate periods, according to the general Western disposition towards the Middle Kingdom – the period of reverence, the period of contempt, the period of benevolence etc. The present paper explores and provides examples of this cyclicity.

When we discuss images of China, produced in any given period – it is essential to keep in mind that the nature of these images in invariably repetitious, imagined, and always determined by social factors. The use of the word *nature* here would at first glance appear to be a contradiction, as the constructedness of the images does not have much in common with nature in the narrow sense of the word. Indeed, the imagological toolbox and the discursive instruments I use in my analysis are glaringly at odds with the adoption of a concept which,

as defined by the natural sciences, emphasises the objectiveness and perceptual independence of reality. I use the concept, however, in a wider, more inclusive sense, to mean the most common characteristics of an image, more or less inherent to it, observable by most readers for whom a particular travel account is intended, and by most members of a specific culture. It is obvious that the use of this concept entails a certain amount of generalizing but, as I have mentioned elsewhere, this is not always a negative thing and is in many cases unavoidable: The conveyance of any idea, the expression of almost any opinion inevitably excludes some exceptions. Discourse time and space are limited: It would be futile and counterproductive to attempt to list and describe all exceptions to an idea. Generalization is the price we pay for communication.

The first cursory contacts between Europe and the land of the *Seres* – as the people inhabiting the regions of today's China were called – took place in antiquity. These contacts laid the foundation of a cultural exchange of limitless curiosity and of a cultural tradition which has spanned two millennia. The images produced as a result of such an exchange are so numerous and so varied that they defy any strict sorting or cataloguing. The imagological discourse started by those first images thrives to this day. Throughout the different historical periods the images of China are very contradictory. The Chinese society has been represented as both wise and foolish, both noble and vile, both stable and chaotic. Naturally, the attitudes of the recitients of these images – the readers of the travel accounts – also differed wildly – from deep fondness to powerful hatred, from complete acceptance to utter rejection. No one attitude was completely dominant during a historical period in the West but the trends are there and it can be claimed that each particular period was dominated by images of a specific kind. The most powerful trend that underscores the 20-centuries-long image-creation process is the recurrance of somewhat similar images in different historical periods, depending on the social and economic situation in the country for whose inhabitants the travelogues were written. This trend is what allows us to talk about a 'cyclical nature' of the images.

This cyclical nature of the images of China, produced by writing travelers and authors of fiction, becomes evident if we take a brief look at some of the historical periods when the images were created.

Several hundred years BC Herodotus and Hippocrates wrote vaguely about the people of the East but did not mention China specifically. Still, from their writing emerged a trend which would develop and become extremely powerful over the next centuries – the condescension towards Oriental people (which in late 20th century would be termed 'orientalism' by Edward Said).

One of the first authors to write specifically about the *Seres* was the natural philosopher Pliny the Elder who, in his work *Natural History*. There is a chapter in it, titled "The Seres", in which Pliny gives some wildly inaccurate factual information about Chinese silk, implying that that it grew on trees and was harvested in the forest. The false information aside, he also made a contribution to the aforementioned trend to look down on Asian people. He writes: "The Seres are of inoffensive manners, but, bearing a strong resemblance therein to all savage nations, they shun all intercourse with the rest of mankind, and await the approach of those who wish to traffic with them" (Pliny 1855, 2:37). Not only does the author call the Seres savages, but he also informs the reader that all 'savage nations' are similar.

The first image-production cycle, then, appears characterized by two tendencies: pure curiosity towards a distant and unknown land and a general attitude of benign condescension. Another early image producer is the Byzantine historiographer of Late Antiquity Theophylact Simocatta. He writes about China in more detail than his predecessors and – since he lived in the 7th century AD, the Christian point of view is readily detectable in his text. In later centuries the religious point of view would become a prominent characteristic of almost every China-related image-creation cycle and would often contribute to the formation of a very negative, even hostile, attitude on the part of the writer and his readers. For the time being, however, the Christian perspective remains relatively benign: Theophylact writes that although the Chinese are heathen, their laws are just and people's lives are governed by wisdom (Yule 1866, 1: l).

Not long after Theophylact wrote his History, the Far East was made unreachable again – this time by the rising power of Islam which became something like an effective barrier between Europe and China.

In the second half of the 13th century, after a lengthy period of interruption, the contacts between Europe and the Chinese Empire were resumed. The Mongol threat, which had precluded such contacts, gradually came to an end and a number of travelers – mostly religious and commercial – set out for China. Some of them produced impactful travelogues, creating images which deeply influenced the way Europeans viewed the Oriental empire. Among those where Marco Polo, Odoric of Pordenone and John Mandeville, although the latter is now widely believed to have been a fictitious traveller.

The images these travel accounts produced are both similar and very different. Polo's mission in China was religious but the travellers were soon forced to relinquish their missionary hopes when the people responsible for the spiritual enlightenment of the Chinese deserted the expedition in its early stages. Instead, Polo, who was only seventeen when he set out for the great Empire

in 1271, was given the rare opportunity to serve as Kublai Khan's confidant and was allowed to travel extensively, preparing reports for the Khan. Unlike Polo, Odoric of Pordenone's religious mission was an inseparable part of him: he was a Franciscan friar who took his Christianity very seriously. His account was later used by other authors who drew on it heavily, often without bothering to acknowledge this fact.

What kind of images did Marco Polo and Odoric of Pordenone produce? Both travellers were greatly impressed by riches, Chinese economy and military power. Polo in particular did not bother to touch on aspects of Chinese life such as literature, the visual arts and music. Nor did he mention the Great Wall, foot binding and the unique Chinese characters. He offers almost no criticism of any sort and the images he produces are overwhelmingly positive. This is not surprising, considering the merchant's privileged position in Kublai Khan's court. Polo writes:

> [Y]ou find the city of PIJU, a great, rich, and noble city, with large trade and manufactures, and a great production of silk. This city stands at the entrance to the great province of Manzi, and there reside at it a great number of merchants who despatch carts from this place loaded with great quantities of goods to the different towns of Manzi. The city brings in a great revenue to the Great Kaan (Polo 2009, 2, ch. 63).

One would expect – given the nature of Polo's service in China and his cool tradesman's eye – that his account would be rather dry and even boring, but it is very much the reverse: the narrative is gripping and the style – colourful. This seeming discrepancy leads us to another important side of the image formation process: the (in)significance of the individual person producing the text and the unstable role of what we would be forced to call "the author". The essential point in this particular case is the extent of authorship that can be attributed to Marco Polo. It is known that he did not write his travel account himself: he dictated it to a professional romance writer – Rustichello of Pisa, while serving time in prison. It is, therefore, impossible to determine which images were produced by the traveler and which were created by the vivid imagination of the professional man of letters, who we can safely assume is responsible for the engrossing style of the text.

The tone of Odoric of Pordenone's account is not very different from that of Marco Polo's. He too is deeply impressed by riches, military power and material wealth. Like Polo, he pays little attention to Chinese culture or history. He does, however, mention foot binding, describing it impassively, as if it concerns some other species and not a human being. Odoric spent less time in China – about three years – but his enthusiasm for the empire is even greater

than Polo's. At first glance this appears somewhat odd, since, as I mentioned, he notices some social practices which would seem disturbing, to say the least, to a modern reader: foot binding, for instance, was compulsory and Odoric seems to have realized the amount of suffering is caused. We need, however, to keep in mind two factors when we come across such apparent paradoxes: the idiosyncratic personality of the traveler and historical perspective. I am mentioning these factors because they play an important role in the writings produced by travellers of later historical periods as well. Indeed, the second factor exerts an especially powerful influence on the writing travellers between the 18th and 19th centuries.

The author's own character will inevitably influence what comes from under his pen – especially when it comes to moral pronouncements and (lack of) ethical judgement. The second factor, however – historical period – puts its stamp on a travel account with a greater force than the idiosyncratic personality of the author does – mostly because it is non-discriminatory and universally affects all writers of a particular historical period. It is perhaps the most important volume in Umberto Eco's set of 'background books': it's well-filled pages obstruct the traveller's view and disallow him an impartial and objective perspective. He sees mostly what he has been conditioned to see. Marco Polo And Odoric of Pordenone may have had differing personalities and moral compasses but they were a moral and epistemological product of the same age and the same (in a wider sense) geographical region – 13th-century Europe. Odoric's apparent indifference to compulsory and torturing practices such as foot binding may strike us as heartless but we, as readers, should bear in mind that 13th-century Europe was hardly the same place as it is today. Some of the social practices there were no less compulsory or torturous but they were widely accepted and even regarded as beneficial for society. In other words, the expectations and moral pronouncements of a mediaeval European author were inevitably very different from those of a contemporary writing traveller. The great discrepancy occurs when we try to evaluate a travelogue, produced in previous centuries from our modern point of view. If one attempts an imagological analysis without compensating for the specific features of his/her contemporary perspective, the result may turn out to be spectacularly biased, in some cases even bigoted. When Odoric of Pordenone showers praises on the Middle Kingdom, exhibiting his unrestrained enthusiasm about anything Chinese and failing to condemn agony-inflicting practices such as foot binding, he does not necessarily reveal himself to be a particularly callous man. He merely demonstrates that he is a product of his time and a diligent carrier of his background books.

It is worth noting that in later times, especially from the 16th century onward, when Jesuit missionaries began to arrive in China, the perspective of the majority of the authors writing about China changed and they began to concentrate more often on Chinese culture and history. This tendency to give more attention to spiritual and cultural matters, however, did not cause the Jesuits – or any other travellers – to abandon their background books. In their efforts to give the Chinese the gift of Christianity and salvation many of them began idealizing the country to the point of becoming blind to a great number of social problems. The 'benign' attitude of the writer, as many contemporary postcolonial critics have pointed out, does not bring a greater measure of objectivity to a travel account. On the contrary, it can lead to further biases and distortions, creating an image which is not a reflection of reality as much a mirror image of the author's own mode of thinking. If in *The Travels of Marco Polo* China emerges as a land of riches, military achievements and commercial success, it is because the author came from a merchant family and his perspective was shaped by his vocational background. If the Jesuits declared the Chinese to be spiritual and highly moral people, it was because they were preoccupied with their religious mission and did not concern themselves with trade or military achievements.

The first travel account about China whose author claimed to be an Englishman appeared in 1356 and was titled *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. It became extremely popular almost instantly (Rubies 2000, 83) and created a number of enduring stereotypes, many of which survive to this day. Perhaps the most enduring stereotype is the image of the great and powerful Khan, sitting in his golden palace, surrounded by wise and learned men of science. What is notable about this travel account is the fact that John Mandeville's travels probably never took place. The author, whose name is not known, used previously written travelogues to compile his own text. This seems to have passed under the radar of its readers during the next one or two centuries and the account remained popular well into the 16th century. In later times, however, the plagiarism was noticed and the text began to be regarded as a literary curiosity, rather than as a source of information. Mandeville borrows heavily and unscrupulously from Odoric of Pordenone (Yule 1866, 1:29) and other authors, which makes it odd that he never plagiarizes from Marco Polo, even though Polo's account was widely read during the 14th century and cannot have been unfamiliar to the inventor of the fictitious traveller. This paradox could perhaps be explained with the fact that Mandeville is a very religious man: he takes Christianity seriously and the salvation of his soul is never far from his mind. Polo, on the other hand, is unconcerned with religion and indeed indifferent to it. Chinese economic and military achievements impress him but the condition of the Chinese

immortal soul does not. It seems logical, therefore, that the writings of Odoric, who is also very religious, would be much more suitable for Mandeville's text.

In spite of his religiosity, Mandeville produces a text which, as Dawson observes, represents the first attempt to introduce secular subjects into English prose (Dawson 1967, 25). The fictitious traveller may be a zealous Christian but he is greatly impressed by material wealth, especially gold and precious stones. His description of the great Khan's palace is vivid and exaggerated, and serves as a basis for production of similar images of China in later centuries.

> [W]ithin the palace, in the hall, there be twenty-four pillars of fine gold… And in the midst of this palace is the mountour for the great Chan, that is all wrought of gold and of precious stones and great pearls. And at four corners of the mountour be four serpents of gold. And all about there is y-made large nets of silk and gold and great pearls hanging all about the mountour… And [the emperor's throne] is of fine precious stones, bordered all about with pured gold and precious stones, and great pearls. And the grees that he goeth up to the table be of precious stones mingled with gold. And the emperor hath his table alone by himself, that is of gold and of precious stones, or of crystal bordered with gold, and full of precious stones or of amethysts, or of lignum aloes that cometh out of paradise, or of ivory bound. (Mandeville 2009, ch. 23)

It is important to bear in mind that the fictional nature of Mandeville's travelogue and the constructedness of the images he produced do not deprive them of any societal or political relevance. When we asses the imagological contributions of a given text, it is of little use to attempt to base this assessment on whether the images produced by the writing traveller are 'real' or not. As Ludmilla Kostova has pointed out, when conducting such analyses, concepts such as 'truth' and 'objectivity' should be steered well clear of (Kostova 1997, 19). If we start calculating percentages – how many of the images in a given travelogue are 'real' and how many are not, the numbers we reach will not be in the least reliable, and, more importantly, they will not aid us in our efforts to determine the impactfulness of the analysed images and will leave us in the dark with regard to the influence they had on the minds of the readers and on public discourse as a whole. The very idea of 'real' and unreal 'images' which reflect 'real' and 'unreal' national characteristics, would only obfuscate the analysis instead of clarifying it. As Leerssen points out, "the actual emergence of imagology as a critical study of national characterization could only take place after people had abandoned a belief in the 'realness' of national characters as explanatory models" (Leerssen 2007, 21). He also writes:

> [T]he primary reference is not to empirical reality… [N]ational char-acters are a matter of commonplace and hearsay rather than empirical observation or statements of objective fact… Imagology is concerned with the *representamen*, representations as textual strategies and as discourse. That discourse implicitly raises a claim of referentiality vis-à-vis empirical reality, telling us that nation X has a set of character-istics Y, yet the actual validity of that referentiality claim is not the imagologist's to verify or falsify. The imagologist's frame of reference is a textual and intertextual one. (27-27)

These observations are valid not only when we discuss images produced by mediaeval visitors to China, but also when we analyse much later travelogues and works of fiction. The image-creating mechanisms, it appears, are deeply rooted in human mentality and do not change significantly throughout the ages. If we compare texts by Pliny the Elder and, say, Peter Hessler – a 21st-century travel writer, we will notice the same image creating mechanisms at work despite the thousands of years standing between these two authors.

The medieval European travels to China did not last long. A combina-tion of factors brought them to an end towards the middle of the fourteenth century. Spence writes that the energetic contacts between China and Europe had flourished because of the willingness of the Europeans to travel, to develop trade and to disseminate the Christian religion. These contacts were also facil-itated by the rule of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, dominating China and Central Asia (Spence 1998, 19). The Yuan dynasty, however, collapsed in 1368, which made the land journey from Europe to China extremely difficult. In addition, the bubonic plague which appeared in Europe in the late 1340s killed a great portion of the population within only three years and put an end to much of the European trading zeal. A third factor was the stronger grip obtained by the Ottoman Muslims on much of the Middle East. For the second time since the seventh century the contact between China and the West was interrupted.

The images of China produced in later periods followed discernable, cy-clical patterns as well. In seventeenth-century Britain, for instance, the general attitude towards China was positive. The eastern empire was often seen as a land of wise philosophers and sagacious government. The vogue of *chinoiserie*, which got into full swing during the seventeenth century, contributed to this attitude. The images which the writing travelers produced reflected this too. The cycle continued with the advent of the eighteenth century when British attitude towards China began to change and by the beginning of the nineteenth century it was primarily negative, even hostile. The next part of the cycle start-ed at the beginning of the twentieth century and lasted until the foundation of

the People's Republic, when Western views of China again took a turn for the worse.

From the examples provided above it would appear that the images of China – produced between the initial European contacts with the great empire and the fourteenth century – follow a certain pattern: they are all determined and shaped both by the authors' own ideas, interests and idiosyncrasies, and the cultural and political situation in the countries of their origin. No traveler seems to be an exception to this general trend. Umberto Eco's 'background books' weigh heavily on them all and to a significant extent determine the nature of the created images. Not surprisingly, the cyclical nature of the events and processes in the writers' socio-political environment reflect on the nature of the images of China they produce, making them cyclical too. This cyclicity became even more pronounced in later historical periods – especially during the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, when the recurrent patterns in the imagological textual processes became glaringly obvious.

Библиография

Dawson 1967: Dawson, Raymond. *The Chinese Chameleon: an Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Kostova 1997: Kostova, Ludmilla. *Tales of the Periphery*: *the Balkans in Nineteenth-Century British Writing*. V. Turnovo: St. Cyril and St. Methodius University Press, 1997.

Leerssen 2007: Leerssen, Joep. "Imagology: History and Method". – In: *Imagology: The Cultural Construction And Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey*, eds Manfred Beller, and Joep Leerssen. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2007. 17-32.

Mandeville 2009: Mandeville, John. *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. – In: Project Gutenberg Archive, Etext 782. 01 Jun. 2009, < http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/782/pg782.txt >.

Pliny 1855-57: Pliny, the Elder. *The Natural History of Pliny*. Trans. John Bostock and H. T. Riley. 6 vols. London: H. G. Bohn, 1855-57.

Polo 2009: Polo, Marco. *The Travels of Marco Polo*. 2 vols. – In: Project Gutenberg Archive. Etext 12410. 13 Feb. 2009, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12410/pg12410.txt>.

Rubies 2000: Rubies, Joan-Pau. *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250-1625*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Spence 1998: Spence, Jonathan. *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998.

Yule 1866: Yule, Henry. *Cathay and the Way Thither; Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China*. 2 vols. London: The Hakluyt Society, 1866.