

# JOHN BELL'S REPRESENTATION OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WEST

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**Abstract:** The article focuses on some of the comparisons between China and the West on the pages of John Bell's travel account. Regardless of how neutral or non-judgmental John Bell strives to be, his travel account contains a number of such comparisons. The majority of these are implicit and deserving of examination as well, but in this article I discuss some of those that are direct because they are the most striking and indicative of the British author's attitude towards the East.

**Keywords:** John Bell; Enlightenment; China; Travel Writing; Imagology; Representation

The Scottish physician John Bell visited China in 1719 as a member of Peter the Great's diplomatic mission to Peking, led by the Russian diplomat Lev Ismailov. Several decades after his return, the Scotsman published an account of his travels which many scholars today regard as one of the most significant pieces of travel writing about China during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most unusual characteristics of Bell's travelogue is the narrator's evident desire to be as objective as possible. Regardless of how neutral or nonjudgmental John Bell strives to be, however, his travel account contains a number of implicit and explicit comparisons of things and events he sees in China with corresponding things and events in the West. This is an inevitable characteristic of every Western travelogue describing parts of the Orient. The majority of these comparisons are implicit and deserving of examination as well, but I will discuss some of those that are direct because they are the ones that are the most striking and indicative of the British author's attitude towards the Other.

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The first differences Bell discusses with regard to the Chinese appear in Chapter 8. The ambassador and a few other people of his group are invited to dinner by the commandant of the city of Kalgan:

[S]upper was brought, and placed on the tables, without either table cloth, napkins, knives, or forks. Instead of forks were laid down to every person a couple of ivory pins, with which the Chinese take up their meat. The dishes were small, and placed upon the table in the most regular manner, the vacancies being filled with saucers, containing pickles and bitter herbs. The entertainment consisted of pork, mutton, fowls, and two roasted pigs. The carver sits upon the floor, and executes his office with great dexterity. He cuts the flesh into such small bits as may easily be taken up by the guests, without further trouble... The whole is served in China-ware, and neither gold nor silver is to be seen. All the servants perform their duty with the utmost regularity, and without the least noise (Bell 1965: 119–120).

The cultural differences described by the physician are superficial, concerning nothing deeper than mealtime customs, but they are symptomatic of what is to come later and cause the first mild 'culture shock' that the narrator experiences. In spite of their mundane nature, they serve an important discursive role because they contribute to the conditioning of Bell's mind to look for and find more significant differences in the course of the narrative. As a whole, he does not display a particularly strong tendency to exoticize the Orient on the pages of the *Travels* but the details provided in this passage definitely have an exoticizing function. He finds it necessary to not only inform the reader that the Chinese use only chopsticks and chinaware but to emphasize that they *do not* use forks, knives, napkins, tablecloths or silverware – things typical of Western culture. In other words, he takes what could have been an implicit comparison and makes it explicit by stressing on what specific Western objects are lacking from the table. The Other is defined not only by the presence of something unfamiliar but also with the absence of something familiar.

The instances of exoticization in Bell's travel account can be partially accounted for by an insightful piece of theorizing in Chela Sandoval's article "Theorizing White Consciousness for a Post-Empire World: Barthes, Fanon and the Rhetoric of Love". Discussing Roland Barthes and his ideas about identification, she writes that exoticization is in fact an emergency strategy which is deployed when there is a danger of the Other appearing too different and threatening: "Identification extends as a dependable emergency figure to become 'exoticism,' so that the exoticized other can be perceived as pure 'object,' 'spectacle,'

or ‘clown’” (Sandoval 1997: 91). The scholar is discussing modern texts and this kind of argument is frequently applied to a postcolonial situation but the inner psychological mechanism of producing otherness and exoticism cannot have been very different in the eighteenth century – after all, at a time when travel was considerably more difficult and the journeys to the Orient – dangerous, the Other might have appeared even more alien, threatening and prone to being exoticized. The fact that Bell was a man of science hardly changes this mechanism because science itself has often been implicated in constructing damaging stereotypes (Loomba 2008: 56).

At the end of the paragraph, however, the comparison does not prove to be in the West’s favor. Bell usually refrains from sharing his personal opinions, leaving the readers to judge for themselves, but this time he writes: “I must confess, I was never better pleased with any entertainment” (120). Another instance of emphasizing the differences between the Chinese and the Western attitude to food can be found in Chapter 9. At the start of a banquet given by the Emperor Bell notices that the servants begin to bring fruits and sweets before everything else: “It seems to be the fashion of this country to bring the desert first, at least that was the case at all the entertainments where I was present. In this, as in many other things, the behaviour of the Chinese is quite contrary to that of the Europeans” (Bell 1965: 136). In this case he presents the information matter-of-factly, sharing no opinion, contenting himself with noting that the whole meal was “very agreeable” (136).

Another difference between China and Europe which Bell discusses is the evaluations of gems and precious stones:

Most of the ministers of state were dressed very plain, having nothing like ornaments about them; a few only had large rubies, sapphires, and emeralds. These precious stones are cut into the shape of pears, through which a hole is drilled, to fix them on the top of their bonnets. These holes diminish the value of the stones, one half at least, at an European market. I once saw, however, one of these rubies, with a hole drilled through it, which was bought at Pekin for a trifle, valued at ten thousand pounds sterling in Europe... As for diamonds, the Chinese, it seems, do not much esteem them; for few diamonds are found in China, and these very rudely cut and shaped, and so indeed are all their coloured stones. (Bell 1965: 135 – 136)

Bell describes the Chinese failure to appreciate the true value of the precious stones relatively dispassionately but this particular point of difference with the West is culturally important because it illustrates the different ways in which the two cultures perceive something which has no intrinsic value – a natural

substance which does not come with a price tag when it is derived from the earth. Its value is determined on cultural, economic, and societal grounds and it is not surprising that it should vary greatly from culture to culture, especially in a world not yet transformed by globalized commerce. This was particularly true for China whose isolationist eighteenth-century policies, derided by Enlightenment thinkers such as Adam Smith and Daniel Defoe, allowed China to retain a little longer its own value system with regard to commodities which were highly priced in the West and other parts of the world influenced by it. Bell does not pass an explicit judgment and refrains from stating outright that the Chinese do not know the true value of the gems but the implication is clear: the Chinese have not yet reached the stage of their economic and cultural development where they can 'know' what their possessions are worth.

As for the ruby, bought "for a trifle" in Beijing and then sold for thousands of pounds in Europe, this anecdote brings to mind a passage from *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, where the narrator, describing his trips to the coast to Guinea, boasts "how easy it was to purchase upon the coast for trifles – such as beads, toys, knives, scissors, hatchets, bits of glass, and the like – not only gold-dust, Guinea grains, elephants' teeth, &c., but negroes, for the service of the Brazils, in great numbers" (Defoe 1815: 38 – 39). If the Chinese, who also sell their gems "for a trifle", are not quite the savages Robinson is describing, this common characteristic was bound to link the two groups in the minds of the eighteenth-century readers. Indeed, Bell's passage seems to echo Defoe's so distinctly that one wonders whether the former was not unconsciously influenced by the latter. It is not possible to establish this with any degree of certainty but such a connection is not impossible: *Robinson Crusoe* was published in April 1719 and Bell set off for China in July 1719. At any rate, in both cases it is the European man who is capable of establishing the 'true' value of the gems and is willing to take advantage of this fact, giving the locals trifles in exchange.

Bell's inclination to compare what he sees to corresponding things in Britain finds another expression in his description of the food which the Emperor sends to the ambassador's retinue.

Next day, the Emperor sent to our lodgings several large dishes of massive gold, containing a kind of delicate fish, called mu, already dressed, but in such a manner that *I did not know to what to compare it*. Also some bowls filled with excellent vermicelli, and a sort of pastry-puffs, baked over the steam of boiling water, exceeding in whiteness *any thing of that kind I ever saw*. All these things were sent from His Majesty's own table; an honour which he grants but seldom. (Bell 1965: 137, my italics)

In this short paragraph Bell indicates – twice – his inability to find a Western analog of what he is seeing. Once again, he attempts to see the Other not on its own terms but as a part of an East-West binary. The proclivity of travel writers to compare – explicitly or not – what they experience in the Orient with their own country is so deeply rooted in the genre, so ubiquitous and so unavoidable that Zhang sounds a little too optimistic when he appeals to the Westerners to abandon it and declares that it is time the Other was recognized as “truly Other, that is, the Other in its own Otherness, which is not only non-Western but may perhaps have things in common with what the West thinks of itself-the Other that does not just serve the purpose of being a foil or contrast to the Western self” (Zhang 1988: 127). Since the time of Hippocrates – who is among the first to mention ‘the Seres’ – those who have written about the East – or the West, if they come from the Orient, have always compared the Other with their own culture. This tendency is inescapable: every person is a part of his/her culture and shaped by it when it comes to perceiving and ‘producing’ the world. It is commendable to strive to minimize essentializing, stereotyping and orientalizing, which often result from the above-mentioned comparisons, but to hope to eliminate them is unrealistic. John Bell has achieved this minimizing to an impressive degree (especially for a British person writing in the period of British colonial expansion), often preferring to provide raw information and leave his readers to judge for themselves, but he can hardly be expected to refrain from drawing comparisons.

Another strongly implied difference between China and the West we can observe in Chapter 11. The Emperor invites Ismailov and his men to go hunting in a forest near the capital. The company spends the day pursuing and killing small game. In the evening the Chinese ruler offers his guests to join him for another ‘hunting’ entertainment involving three tigers held in cages.

A guard also was placed before the ambassador’s, and the rest of the tents, to secure the whole encampment from the fury of these fierce animals. The first was let out by a person mounted on a fleet horse, who opened the door of the coop by means of a rope tied to it. The tiger immediately left his cage, and seemed much pleased to find himself at liberty. The horseman rode off at full speed, while the tiger was rolling himself upon the grass. At last he rose, and growled, and walked about. The Emperor fired twice at him with bullets; but the distance being considerable, missed him, though the pieces were well pointed. Upon which His Majesty sent to the ambassador, to try his piece upon him; which being charged with a single ball, he walked towards the animal, accompanied by ten men, armed with

spears, in case of accidents; till, being at a convenient distance, he took his aim, and killed him on the spot.

The second was let out in the same manner...

The third, as soon as he was set at liberty, run directly towards the Emperor's tent, and was in like manner killed with the spears. A man must be well mounted and armed who hunts this kind of animals in the woods; where they must be much stronger and swifter than these we saw, which had been confined for many months, and whose limbs, by want of exercise, were become stiff and unwieldy. (Bell 1965: 171)

Although he does not openly condemn this practice, his attitude while describing it suggests that he does not find it particularly honorable. By stressing particular details, he manages to convey to his readers that such 'hunting' is not an activity a British man would indulge in. He mentions the cages several times as well as the guards who make sure that there is not the slightest danger to the people, especially to the Emperor and the ambassador. By describing the numerous guards Bell implies that the animals do not stand even the slight chance they would in the wild, in their natural environment. Moreover, he chooses to draw our attention to the fact that the tigers are far from being in a good shape, their limbs being "stiff and unwieldy". In other words, the tigers are clearly not 'fair game'. The lack of direct criticism of this 'entertainment' is a little surprising, but it is easily explained by the fact that throughout his narrative Bell strives to adopt a 'cosmopolitan vision' – an attitude characterized by a strive for objectivity and apparent lack of prejudice. Such an attitude, however, according to Debbie Lisle, does not mean that the orient will be represented any more objectively or fairly than in the accounts of those who choose an openly critical and even condemning approach (Lisle 2006: 10). The Russian man, who is an Easterner himself, does not show any disapproval of what the Chinese are doing. On the contrary, he offers the Emperor his weapon, thus personally taking part in the killing of the disoriented animals.

The textual practice of covertly condemning Chinese practices which the Westerners find unfair to the animals is not confined to eighteenth-century narratives. We find the same tendency in much later travelogues. For instance, almost three hundred years after John Bell, Peter Hessler describes a similar scene in his article in *The New Yorker* "View from the Bridge: North Korea through a Chinese Looking Glass" (2000). In it he describes a young Chinese couple who amuse themselves by shooting at quails that have been tethered to the ground. Hessler, too, refrains from explicitly condemning the practice but he provides an example from American literature which indirectly does the condemning on his behalf. The American observes the drunk couple for a few minutes, "trying to

remember which Hemingway story it recalled. In the best at stories there were always guns, animals, women, and drunk people bickering. The only difference was that in Hemingway stories the animals were never tied to the ground” (Hessler 2000: 34).

Much like Bell, Hessler is always on the lookout for something in his own culture which can be related to what he is experiencing in China. In a way, both authors are trying to ‘translate’ Chinese culture and way of thinking for their British/American readers, although there are almost three centuries standing between the two travelers. Such unconscious attempts are to be expected in any piece of travel writing because when travel writers describe foreign cultures and practices, they invariably engage in an act of translation. This is yet another example of the extraordinary durability of travel writers’ proclivity to draw comparisons and magnify differences.

This episode would have been even more interesting if Bell had mentioned the special significance of hunting in Chinese culture. Menzies points out that hunting served as a means of legitimizing Manchu power by reminding the Manchu people of their heroic martial past and reminded the surrounding peoples that the Emperor was a ruler of ‘all under heaven’. He also writes: “The Kangxi Emperor (1662–1723) was particularly concerned that the Manchus should remain a strong and vigorous people. His writings frequently extolled the hunt as an exercise which instilled discipline and as an opportunity for training in the arts of war” (Menzies 1994: 58). It would have been fascinating to read Bell’s explanation of how the shooting of the three confined tigers corresponded to these lofty goals but as he spent only six months in China it is possible that he simply did not know about them.

The music played at the banquets organized by the Emperor is another point of difference which the Scotsman brings up, though cursorily.

During the dance, each Tartar had a small basket in one hand, and an arrow in the other wherewith he scraped on the basket, keeping time to the music. This scraping sounded a little harsh to an Italian ear; for I could observe Signor Mezzobarba and his retinue smiling at the performance... The instruments of music were very various, and all tuned to the Chinese taste. (Bell 1965: 162–163).

At first sight it appears that Bell indulges in another bit of not-so-subtle criticism of the Chinese – this time their taste in music. If this quote were taken out of context and presented to an imagological critic without appraising them of its source, they might be inclined to define it as critical of Chinese music. However, the spirit of Bell’s narrative makes such a conclusion unlikely. There

are quite a few passages in the narrative where the differences appear to be in favor of the Chinese, even when what he is discussing seems unusual to the foreigners. The spirit of the narrative gives us grounds to interpret the above passage as a mere statement of fact: the papal envoy finds Chinese music unpleasant. The condescending smile he produces is by no means an indication that Bell shares Mezzobarba's opinion. Rather, the Italian is made to look judgmental in a country where he has just arrived in order to iron out cultural and religious conflicts. Mezzobarba's attitude is skillfully contrasted with the Emperor's who is presented by Bell as much more open-minded and accepting of cultural differences as he tells Ismailov that "he knew well their music would not please an European ear, but that every nation liked their own best" (Bell 1965: 163).

Bell mentions Chinese music on many occasions and he never says that he likes it. Evidently, just like the papal envoy, he did not find it particularly appealing. However, he appears to gradually develop a higher appreciation of cultural peculiarities and realize that difference does not necessarily mean lower quality: "There was also some vocal music; an old Tartar, in particular, sung a warlike song, to which he beat time, by striking, with two ivory rods, upon a chime of little bells that hung before him" (Bell 1965: 136), "In the mean time a band of music was called in, which consisted of ten or twelve performers, on various but chiefly wind instruments, so different from those of that class in Europe, that I shall not pretend to describe them" (Bell 1965: 120). True to his usual character, Bell declares his inability to describe the Chinese instruments and does not provide the slightest indication that he considers them inferior to the Western ones. Neither does he become indignant when a Chinese man shares his opinion on the two types of music when the Emperor invites the ambassador to bring his musicians to his palace: "I asked an elderly gentleman who stood by me, how he liked the music? He said it was very good, but their own was better" (Bell 1965: 147).

When Bell detects differences, those differences are not always between China and the West. Sometimes they are between China and another part of the Orient. The narrator writes:

While walking through the street, I observed an old beggar picking vermin from his tattered cloaths, and putting them into his mouth; a practice which, it seems, is very common among this class of people. When a Chinese and Tartar are angry at one another, the Tartar, in reproach, calls the Chinese louse-eater; and the latter, in return, calls the other fish-skin coat; because the Mantzur Tartars, who live near the river Amoor, subsist by fishing, and, in summer, wear coats made of the skins of fishes. But this habit is used only in summer, for in winter they wear furs. (156)



This type of comparison, of course, is not restricted to the Scotsman's writings or to the eighteenth century. It appears frequently, in various travel accounts, and can even be described as one of the characteristics of the genre. The usual binary model Orient (China) – Occident (Bell) is disrupted by the introduction of a third party (the Tartars). This discursive relation is also related to Milica Bakic-Hayden's 'gradation of Orients' model discussed above. The 'nesting orientalism' are evident in Bell's case. The Tartars are peculiar in their habit of wearing fish-skin coats but they are not as shocking to a Westerner as the Chinese who consume their own vermin. From another textual angle, the Chinese find the Europeans apparel odd (as illustrated in the passage about the theatrical performance discussed below) but not as ridiculous as the Tartars' fish-skin coats. The reader is not provided with the point of view of the Tartars but some such gradation probably existed in their perception of the Chinese and the Europeans as well. This kind of triangular perspective, then, is not limited to the Western (potentially colonial) point of view but is characteristic of any person who encounters more than one unfamiliar culture: we seem to compare the Others not only with ourselves but also with one another. The ability to be 'culturally shocked' in different degrees appears to be as natural as (and indeed one of the results of) "the desire to see what we've never seen, go where we have never been before" (Bartkowski 1995: 19).

It is curious that several decades later George Staunton – the chronicler of the Macartney embassy (1793) – also mentioned this Chinese habit: "Persons not so opulent as to be delicate, are sometimes found to ransack every department of nature to satisfy their appetites. And even the vermin that prey upon uncleanly persons, have been known to serve as a prey in their turn to them" (399 – 400). Like Bell, Staunton does not pass judgment on the practice but does point out that it is of no importance to the Chinese what kind of living creature they eat: "[T]hey reckon the preference given to one species of animal before another, as little more than a matter of taste or fancy" (Staunton 1797: 399).

Some time after the ambassador's first audience with the Chinese monarch he is invited, along with his group, to a banquet given by the Emperor's ninth son. It is at this banquet that one of the most fascinating incidents occur. The entertainment consists of several stage performances – dancing numbers, "comical farces" etc.

The last character that appeared on the stage was an European gentleman, completely dressed, having all his clothes bedaubed with gold and silver lace. He pulled off his hat, and made a profound reverence to all that passed him. I shall leave it to any one to imagine, what an awkward figure a Chinese must make in this ridiculous habit. This scene was interrupted,

and the performers dismissed, by the master of the feast, from a suspicion that his guests might take offence. (Bell 1965: 143 – 144)

All of a sudden, the narrator and his readers realize that they are not the only ones gazing on an alien Other and recreating it (either on the pages of a book or in their minds). It turns out that the alien Other is doing the same thing and, what is more, showing the end result to the observed party. This strange cultural hybrid – a Chinese man dressed in an improvised European suit – appears to give something of a shock even to the levelheaded doctor and he does not hesitate to describing in as ‘ridiculous.’ It is a pity that Bell did not elaborate on this particular episode. His interpretation would have provided us with an insight into the image-constructing mechanisms in the mind of an eighteenth-century British intellectual. It would also have given us an Enlightenment interpretational perspective which would be invaluable in any imagological study of the eighteenth-century Far East. Such as it is, the passage allows us to make a few guesses whose reliability cannot be established. It appears, for instance, that Bell was not the only one startled by the fake European. The reaction of the other foreigners must have been relatively unrestrained and clearly visible to the hosts since they suddenly decided to interrupt the farce. It is hardly believable that the master of the ceremonies had a mere “suspicion that his guests *might take offence*” (Bell 1965: 144, my emphasis). If this had been the case, he would have canceled the impersonation in advance. Instead, he apparently waited to see how the guests would react before deciding to step in.

The speedy cancellation of the act suggests that the ambassador and his retinue may have seen the Chinese man's impersonation of a Westerner as a form of not-so-subtle ridicule directed at the foreign guests, or even as an impertinence bordering on perversity. It hardly occurs to Bell that the way he – or any other Western traveler – portrays the Chinese in his travel account may seem equally ridiculous to a Chinese person. The scandalous nature of the impersonation can also be explained in terms of something we already discussed – the propensity of Western writers to reaffirm their own identity by contrasting it with a society which they see as fundamentally different. In this episode the British man is rudely confronted with a picture which not only clashes with his own image of himself as a Westerner but has been constructed – perhaps maliciously – by the very Other he has been hitherto describing. Perhaps Bell does not comment on this incident because the gaze of the oriental other is too uncomfortable for him to dwell on.

The confusion of identities in the passage might be another reason for the Scottish man's discomfort. In his travelogue he shows almost no inclination to identify with the people he describes and is always careful that there be a con-

siderable distance between himself and the Chinese. In this respect he differs from other travelers who display a tendency to keep this distance shorter. Even they, however, are careful to maintain it. Kostova points out that this distance is “one of the conventions of the genre of travel writing itself. Travel writing is about visiting and/or even ‘discovering’ other cultures, but it is ‘always already’ addressed to one’s own culture. To gain their addressees’ trust, narrators must emphasize their own ‘sameness’ (Kostova 1997: 35). The danger, in her opinion, is that “[t]otal identification with the Other (‘going native’) might make their writing suspect” (35). John Bell is never in such a danger because he always presents himself as a detached onlooker. Perhaps this is why the theatrical splicing of the Chinese and the European identities appears symbolic and threatening to him.

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