



“The Miserable People of These Countries”: Eighteenth-Century Perceptions of China and Daniel Defoe’s *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*

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The article discusses changing Western attitudes towards China during the eighteenth century and some of the images produced as a result. While during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many representatives of the British intellectual elite held the Chinese Empire in high regard, considering it to be something of a moral and social paragon for the West, the eighteenth century brought a different attitude. There began to be heard persistent notes of contempt, hostility and derision which eclipsed the previous positive ones almost entirely towards the end of the century. The main text I focus on in order to demonstrate this attitude shift is Daniel Defoe’s *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, which not only foreshadowed the attitude changes that were already taking place but led to the construction of even more unfavourable images by travellers in the late eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries.

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With the dawn of the eighteenth century the relatively calm surface of amazement, reverence and general approval expressed towards China during the previous two centuries began to be gradually disturbed by ripples of dissent and criticism. The positive sentiment was still prevalent, as is evident both from the still unabated popular enthusiasm for *Chinoiserie* – china products, silk and about anything else that found its way from the great Eastern empire to Europe. However, the times were changing, the European balance of power was shifting and the images of China began to undergo a significant change whose development was politically determined and would come to its final and most extreme stages during the nineteenth century. The military power of the Catholic European states was in a state of decline and their intentions to colonize and rule distant territories suffered a drawback. At the same time, Protestant countries such as Great Britain and Holland, were on the rise and it was now their turn to send waves of missionaries and explorers to China (Dawson 132–134). It was with these people that the change in the attitudes towards the Middle Kingdom began to take place. Ros Ballaster observes that China’s apparent stagnation – both political and moral – was the primary target of the growing criticism of the “realists” (207).

The looming change of the “religious guard” played a significant role in the sharp change in the images of China that were produced in various travel accounts – both real and fictional. Occasionally dismissed by commenters as religious zealots, the Catholic missionaries were generally open-minded and even receptive to Chinese religious ideas. Some of them held the opinion that Chinese religious beliefs were not completely incompatible with Christianity and it did not escape their notice that many pieces of Chinese wisdom were reminiscent of the teachings of Christ. It did not take long for some of them to suggest that the Chinese people were in fact no “heathens” at all and that Western civilization had a lot to learn from them. In fact, the first detailed descriptions of the Middle Kingdom were produced by Jesuit missionaries towards the end of the sixteenth century. What was different from the accounts of earlier times – such as that of John Mandeville and Mendes Pinto – was that this time the travellers had the opportunity to observe the country carefully, live in it and gain acquired a great amount of direct experience. Many Jesuits, who spent years in China, learned the language and attempted to “understand” the local culture. These positive images sometimes echo the

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writings of Marco Polo and Mandeville. Matteo Ricci, for instance, who went to China as a missionary, and whose journals were published after his death in 1610, speaks highly of the Chinese Empire and expresses admiration towards the way the Chinese have organized their society:

While the nations of the West seem to be entirely consumed with the idea of supreme domination, they cannot even preserve what their ancestors have bequeathed them, as the Chinese have done through a period of some thousands of years. . .

[T]he entire kingdom is administered by the Order of the Learned, commonly known as The Philosophers. The responsibility for orderly management of the entire realm is wholly and completely committed to their charge and care. The army, both officers and soldiers, hold them in high respect and show them the promptest obedience and deference, and not infrequently the military are disciplined by them as a schoolboy might be punished by his master. Policies of war are formulated and military questions are decided by the Philosophers only, and their advice and counsel has more weight with the King than that of the military leaders. (Weisner-Hanks 257)

Another Jesuit, Joachim Bouvet, went so far as to compare the Chinese Emperor to Louis XIV:

The Jesuits whom your Majesty sent [to China] several years ago were astonished to find at the ends of the earth, that which had not been seen up to this time outside of France, that is to say a prince, like you Sir, in which is joined to a mind as sublime as it is solid, a heart that is even more worthy of empire; who is master of himself as of his subjects and [who is] equally adored by his peoples and respected by his neighbours. . . A prince in one word who unites in his person the majority of those qualities which make heroes, and would be the most accomplished monarch to reign on this earth in a long time were it not that his reign coincided with that of Your Majesty. (Spence 2)

A striking positive image was created by a participant in one of the earliest English commercial ventures in China, Captain John Weddel's expedition of 1637. His name was Peter Mundy and he produced a narrative of the expedition. In the seventeenth century the English could only visit Canton but this did not stop Mundy from producing a rather detailed description of the country. In a passage titled "Chinas Excellences" he writes: "This Countrie May bee said to excell in these particulers: Antiquity, largenesse, Ritchenesse, healthynesse, Plentiffulness. For Arts and manner off governmentt I thinck noe Kingdome in the world Comparable to it, Considered alltogether" (303).

The Catholic missions (Jesuit at first, Franciscan and Dominican later) remained in China for the better part of in the eighteenth century but their influence was waning. European Protestantism was becoming powerful and this was the beginning of a strong Protestant religious influence on the images of China that were produced throughout the nineteenth century. The Protestant missions acted on the assumption that the heathen Chinese population had to be made to embrace the Christian religion and reject its own belief system. "What looked like security and ancient lineage to the Jesuits began to look like xenophobia, paranoia, and stultification to Protestant trading powers" (Ballaster 208). Although Protestant missions did not start formally until 1807, representatives of the Protestant denomination, such as Daniel Defoe, whom I discuss below, were active image creators as early as the eighteenth century.

A powerful factor that tarnished the already fading image of China in the eighteenth century was the fact that by the time the Europeans became truly aware of their military superiority over the Middle Kingdom England had entered the Enlightenment which could be defined as a period of rapid attitude change. Old ideas of stability, continuity and tradition were being superseded by new notions of mobility (both spatial and social), change and opportunity. The idea of free trade was one of the chief results of this attitude change. Free trade was considered to be an indispensable element of any viable modern society and the rejection of its principles was equal, in the eyes of many Europeans, to stagnation, backwardness and, in more extreme cases, barbarism and savagery. It is not surprising, then, that eighteenth-century China made such a negative impression on most Europeans - soldiers, merchants, missionaries (both Protestant and Catholic) and adventurers - who began to arrive at the southern and eastern Chinese shores in growing numbers. Apparently, China was refusing to accept the principles of free commerce as universal. The local officials obstructed free trade and erected obstacles in the paths of the newly arrived merchants. The resulting resentment had a profound influence on the image of China in eighteenth-century accounts as it caused most Westerners to transfer in their minds the idea of obstructionism and backwardness onto Chinese society as a whole.

In his article “A Peculiar but Uninteresting Nation: China and the Discourse of Commerce in Eighteenth-Century England” David Porter points out that “[t]he degree of restriction and constraint that seemed to define the most basic human interactions in China offended the sensibilities of English visitors and contributed to a widespread view of the empire’s moral and political culture as backward, corrupt, and tyrannical” (184). The freshly-demonized China created an excellent vantage point from which Europeans could look back on their own continent and reinforce their positive idea about it: the classic process of self-defining with the help of a denigrated Other. This positive self-image, fortified by the comparison, would, in turn, precipitate the formation of an even more negative image of China. “The resulting degradation of the idealized China of earlier Jesuit accounts, together with its trivialization in the aesthetic frivolities of *Chinoiserie*, fostered the patronizing and imperious attitude toward China” (Porter 184).

Defoe was one of the most enthusiastic champions of the idea of free trade. There was an apparent strong link in his mind between commerce and the religious idea of predestination. In his view, Providence has “prepared the world for commerce” (Nicolson 258). It is therefore not surprising that China’s attitude towards free trade should have outraged Defoe and made him produce one of the worst images of China in eighteenth-century literature. Following this logic, it would appear that by obstructing free trade and refusing to succumb to the demands of Western European merchants, China was in fact going against God’s will. From the point of view of a dedicated Christian like Defoe this alone would be a sufficient justification for representing the Chinese Empire in the worst possible light. This is exactly what Defoe – who never went to China – does in *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. The narrator’s religious zealotry is especially spectacularly displayed a short time after the travellers leave the territory of China itself, when they deliberately destroy the idol of a pagan village they happen to pass through (Chapter 15), and it provides a valuable insight into what motivated the author to produce such a negative image of China in the previous chapters.

Even if the religious argument had not been so powerful, however, new attitudes, inspired by the Enlightenment, provided other justifications for creating denigrating images of China. One of these attitudes was the result of a perceived *natural order* according to which free trade was an inevitable step a modern society had to take in order not to stray from the teleological path of civilizational development. As Adam Smith wrote in his fundamental work *The Wealth of Nations*, “it is only into one or two ports of their kingdom that they even admit the ships of foreign nations. Foreign trade, therefore, is, in China, every way confined within a much narrower circle than that to which it would *naturally extend itself*, if more freedom was allowed to it [my emphasis]” (439-440). It was, however, the combination of all these factors that sculpted the image of China in the minds of many Europeans. As Millar observes, “The interaction between European national interests, missionary activity, commercial concerns, and Chinese policy from the sixteenth century onwards was of great importance to the formation of primary sources, and ultimately European views of China as a political, economic and cultural entity” (208). While earlier watchers of China were inclined to envy China’s perceived changelessness, continuity and social stability, comparing them to European tumultuousness, Defoe and other eighteenth-century authors (such as Admiral George Anson and later John Barrow) levelled sharp criticism on the vast Asian Empire which, searing as it may sound, was only the first noticeable gust of the raging storm of disapproval that was to be raised in the next century. In the period of the English Enlightenment there still were influential literary voices, usually Tory sympathizers, such as Oliver Goldsmith, who, when writing about China, criticized their own country and seemed appreciative of Chinese “tradition, strong forms of monarchy and rural economy” (Ballaster 207). As the eighteenth century wore on, those voices became weaker.

Using the framework proposed by Said in his *Orientalism*, it is not difficult to discern how this new attitude would have triggered the creation of an imagological vicious circle. The freshly-demonized China created an excellent vantage point from which Europeans could look back on their own continent and reinforce their positive idea about it: the classic process of self-defining with the help of a denigrated Other. Eugenia Jenkins terms such early manifestations of the European attitude described by Said “prehistory of orientalism.” She writes: “Recognizing the Chinese ecliptic as part of a prehistory of orientalism provides insight not only into the role of China in the early modern English imagination, but also into how English culture positioned its subjects in relation to the world at large in the century before Great Britain consolidated its global empire” (22). Srinivas Aravamudan uses the term “Enlightenment Orientalism”:

Enlightenment Orientalism was not “a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient” but a fictional mode for dreaming with the Orient—dreaming with it by constructing and translating fictions about it, pluralizing views of it, inventing it, by reimagining it, unsettling its meaning, brooding over it. In short, Enlightenment Orientalism was a Western style for translating, anatomizing, and desiring the Orient. (8)

It is striking that the narrator in *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* when describing Robinson’s adventures in China, brings up the exact same topics and expresses the same sentiments that were to be manifested several decades later in the writings of “real-life” travellers. This resemblance seems quite explicable in the light of the modern economic doctrine that was avowed both by those travellers and Daniel Defoe. If Defoe was, as J. M. Coetzee claims, not a realist but “something simpler: an impersonator, a ventriloquist, even a forger” (quoted in Innes 63), he certainly forged, or ventriloquized, an image-forming pattern that was to be adopted almost verbatim by “real” travellers and merchants many years later.

Defoe was one of the first authors and intellectuals to lead the still tentative reaction against Sinophilia. He was predisposed to view the of China perceived stagnation with a very critical eye. The apparently frivolous public enthusiasm for Chinese goods filled the writer with annoyance which he vented in *A Tour thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-26):

The Queen [Mary] brought in the custom or humour as I may call it of furnishing houses with China ware which increased to a strange degree afterwards, piling their China upon the tops of cabinets, scrutoires and every chimney piece to the top of the ceilings and even setting up shelves for their China ware, where they wanted such places, till it became a grievance in the expense of it, and even injurious to their families and estates. (Goodwin 119)

With my commentary on *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* I aim to contribute to the existing research on Defoe and China by combining the analytical tools of imagology with those of a postcolonial theoretical approach. It would be, I think, useful to see how contemporary postcolonial critique can be applied to a China-related pre-(semi)colonial context, having in mind that China was never a fully colonized country. In this second book of Robinson’s adventures Defoe’s resentment of the older, positive images of China, created in the previous centuries by the Jesuits and other travellers, is even more apparent. The protagonist is again involved in a series of unfortunate events which leaves him – and a few of his co-travellers – in possession of a ship which used to belong to pirates and which they obtained without knowing anything about the history of the vessel. They decide to go to China to try and sell the ship before being discovered, taken for pirates and attacked by other European ships in the area. Even before they reach the country, the author gives his readers an idea of how he is likely to treat people who are not Christian or who reject the European value system. Speaking of the people on the Philippine Islands, he expresses the opinion that they are “courteous in their manners” and “dealt very fairly and punctually with us in all their agreements and bargains” (Defoe 392) simply because they are still being influenced by the remnants of Christianity that was once preached there. “[T]he Christian religion always civilizes the people, and reforms their manners, where it is received, whether it works saving effects upon them or no” (392). At this point there can be little doubt in the reader’s mind that in the following chapters China, which had consistently proven almost impossible to convert on a large scale, is in for some serious criticism.

Robinson reports that he is living in constant fear because of the pirate ship but, significantly, that does not prevent him from gazing upon China with an extremely commercialist eye. When he and his fellow travellers finally arrive at the Chinese shore and he sends the ship off to Japan to be sold there, he is left without any means of going back – either by sea or overland. Robinson immediately sees a business opportunity in this unpleasant situation. “[I]n about four months’ time there was to be another fair at that place where we were, and then we might be able to purchase all sorts of the manufactures of the country, and... find some Chinese junks, or vessels, from Nanquin... that would carry us and our goods whither we pleased” (419). This practical attitude never leaves the narrator, even in moments of grave danger. It appears to be one of the catalysts for his frequent derisive outbursts and one of the central reasons for his contempt for the Chinese he meets.

One of the first images of China that Defoe creates is the image of paganism and heathenry. As a devout Protestant, the author had no qualms about roundly criticizing the Catholic missionaries who, in spite of

working on the salvation of the Chinese for many years, had achieved, in many people's opinion, only a superficial conversion. Criticism of the Catholic missions in China had started long before the first Protestant missionaries came (Dawson 144) but with the arrival of the Protestants it increased considerably. Defoe's traveller illustrates this tendency:

[W]e thought they made but poor work of it, and made them but sorry Christians when they had done... [T]he conversion, as they call it, of the Chinese people to Christianity, seems to amount to little more than letting them know the name of Christ, say some prayers to the Virgin Mary and her Son, in a tongue which they understand not, and to cross themselves, and the like; yet it must be confessed that these religious, whom we call missionaries, have a firm belief that these people shall be saved, and that they are the instrument of it. (409)

Crusoe and his friends decide to take an overland trip to Nanquin (Nanjing) to pass the time until the next commercial fair and – not surprisingly – to obtain an idea of the Nanquin market. It is from this point on that the negative images of China suddenly become very abundant. As they set off, Robinson appears to be under the impression that in this big Chinese city he will find a well-developed Western-style market society. What he finds instead is quite different and falls very short of his preconceived standards. For the first time the narrator's European idea of *how things should be* clashes with what Chinese "reality" has to offer: the Asian empire has Evidently remained oblivious of (or has disregarded) the laws governing modern English trade. The clash between Robinson's Enlightenment-inspired ideals and China's perceived obstinacy produces an extremely denigrating, almost grotesque, image.

But when I came to compare the miserable people of these countries with our's; their fabrics, their manner of living, their government, their religion, their wealth, and their glory (as some call it), I must confess I do not so much as think it worth naming, or worth my while to write of... [W]e wonder at the grandeur, the riches, the pomp, the ceremonies, the government, the manufactures, the commerce, and the conduct of these people; not that it is to be wondered at..., but because, having a first notion of the barbarity of those countries, the rudeness and the ignorance that prevail there, we do not expect to find any such thing so far off. Otherwise, what are their buildings to the palaces and royal buildings of Europe? What their trade, to the universal commerce of England, Holland, France, and Spain? What their cities to ours, for wealth, strength, gaiety of apparel, rich furniture, and an infinite variety? (420)

Not surprisingly, Defoe identifies the absence of Western-style free commercial environment as the reason for the pitiable condition, as he sees it, of the Chinese. In a sense, China becomes an instructive image, deliberately created by the author, to illustrate one of the most important points he made earlier in his *Review*: that if free trade stops, this will spell the downfall of the whole of English society: "The Poor would eat up the Rich; the Land would not feed the Multitude; your Rich Trading and Encroaching Neighbors would hire and Entertain all your Youth, who would fly to them for Bread, and being Arm'd by them, would come back and Conquer you" (Copley 60). In *The Farther Adventures* the "misery" and stagnation the narrator mentions seem to have stemmed directly from the absence of free commerce. Once again, this is an excellent, ironic example of how an author who undertakes to create an image of an Oriental country, inadvertently tells us more about the condition of his own society than he does about what is in fact happening in the Oriental one.

Another conspicuous image that emerges from the above paragraph is the one of "barbarity" and "ignorance." The narrator opines that even the greatest Chinese achievements are hardly worth wondering at and states almost directly that what appreciation some travelling Europeans might have for anything Chinese results from their lack of expectation to find anything civilized in this barbarous land: "the greatness of their wealth, their trade, the power of their government, and the strength of their armies, is surprising to us; because, as I have said, considering them as a barbarous nation of pagans, little better than savages, we did not expect such things among them" (420). After this devastating judgment, the traveller goes on to draw a military comparison between Europe and China, which blackens even more the already tarnished image of China:

[A]ll the forces of their empire, though they were to bring two millions of men into the field together, would be able to do nothing but ruin the country and starve themselves;... a million of their foot could not stand before one embattled body of our infantry, posted so as not to be surrounded, though they were not to be one to twenty in number; nay, I do not boast if I say that thirty thousand German or English foot, and ten thousand french horse, would fairly beat all the forces of China;... there is not a

fortified town in China that could hold out one month against the batteries and attacks of an European army... They have firearms, it is true; but they are awkward, clumsy, and uncertain in their going off; they have powder but it is of no strength. They have neither discipline in the field, exercise to their arms, skill to attack; nor temper to retreat. (420)

The narrator lays a strong emphasis on what he sees as a discrepancy between the factual situation and Western perception: the Europeans have come, for no good reason, to view China as a powerful empire: “[T]herefore, I must confess, it seemed strange to me, when I came home, and heard our people say such fine things of the power, riches, glory, magnificence, and trade of the Chinese” (Defoe 420). As this diatribe progresses, Crusoe’s contempt reaches a climactic point as he declares: “I saw and knew that they were a contemptible herd or crowd of ignorant, sordid slaves, subjected to a government qualified only to rule such a people” (420). Especially seen through the frame of Orientalist critique, these passages are unspeakably offensive. This is one of the points in the book where one can detect a strong colonial militarism in the narrator’s voice. The traveller becomes completely carried away, forgetting that his potential readers would perhaps like to hear about exotic things, and telling them instead what rich and powerful countries they belong to. In spite of the vitriol of these passages, however, mainly because of the historical moment and the intellectual heritage of the previous century, Defoe’s criticism of China does not go to the extremes of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The period of well-pronounced Sinophilia was still casting a shadow on early eighteenth-century England. As George Steimetz notes, “[i]n earlier centuries it would have seemed implausible to categorize the Chinese as barbarians, much less savages, and even Defoe had forced himself to qualify his judgment by calling them ‘little better than savages’” (398).

The narrator, however, does not content himself with criticizing Chinese (lack of) trade and military power. He also produces extremely negative images of Chinese agriculture, science and (absence of) common sense.

As their strength and their grandeur, so their navigation, commerce, and husbandry is imperfect and impotent, compared to the same things in Europe; also, in their knowledge, their learning, their skill in the sciences, they are either very awkward or defective, though they have globes and spheres, and a smatch of the knowledge of the mathematics; but when you come to enquire into their knowledge, how short-sighted are the wisest of their students! They know nothing of the motions of the heavenly bodies; and are so grossly absurdly ignorant, that when the sun is eclipsed, they think it is a great dragon has assaulted and run away with it, and they fall a clattering with all the drums and kettles in the country, to fright the monster away, just as we do to hive a swarm of bees! (421)

Significantly, the production of a denigrating image of Chinese achievements is only of half of what the passage achieves. Very often, immediately after insulting the Chinese, the narrator starts talking extremely praisingly about Britain. To my mind, this represents an instance of the so-called reversal of the Western gaze, elaborated upon by Mary Louise Pratt, when the traveller uses the foreign land as a vantage point from which to observe his/her country. “It is possible to reverse the direction of the Linnaean gaze, or that of Defoe’s armchair traveller, to look out at Europe from the imperial frontier” (Pratt 36). In this instance Pratt is discussing Defoe’s other book - the first part of *Robinson Crusoe* - but her observation holds true for the second part as well. To be sure, it would be a big stretch to call China Europe’s “imperial frontier” at this particular historical moment but the imagery the author employs in the above passages clearly points to his strong colonialist attitude, especially when he discusses military matters and how easy it would be for a few thousand English to defeat the whole Chinese army. Moreover, European imperialist attitudes were moving the situation towards a point when, a little over a hundred years later, after the first Opium War, China would indeed become a semi-colonial country.

As was pointed out above, the reversal of the Western gaze can easily lead to a vicious circle, where the Western traveller uses an idealized version of his/her homeland as a basis for comparison and, consequently, produces even worse images of the Oriental country. We can clearly see this mechanism at work in the aforementioned passages. The narrator is critical of China to begin with, but when he resorts to a comparison with an “overpraised” version of England, his criticism becomes aggressive. “If the geography of England is increasingly defined in this period by writers like Defoe in terms of the vital flow of commerce among vibrant and prosperous centers of trade, the Chinese cultural landscape, in contrast, emerges in these accounts as an unrelenting panorama of stagnation, boredom, and death” (Porter 2000, 182).

At the beginning of his Chinese adventures Robinson's strong commercialist attitude leads him to the naive expectation that China would have adopted the same commercial practices he has become used to in Europe. Apart from being unsurprising, his sharp denunciation of what he finds instead reveals a feature of the traveller's character which was clearly exposed in Defoe's first book about Robinson: his desire to make the foreign land (the island) resemble his own country. Here, in a futile effort, he is almost trying to will China *into becoming like Europe*. This is what Boehmer calls "[a] practice of interpretation as replication" (Boehmer 17). The replication here is impossible but the desire for it is present nonetheless. His constant frustration, and the resulting negative images, spring, to a large extent, from the sheer impossibility to fulfil this desire.

As the narrator progresses on his journey along the Silk Road, he produces another vivid image - the image of China's unmerited pride. It is this additional element that adds fuel to the fire of Robinson's contempt and anger. If China had been just a backward and miserable country, the traveller might have just described it as unimportant and unsuitable for commerce. It is Chinese perceived haughtiness and contempt for the outside world that infuriates him the most and provides him with a reason "to launch an assault on the Jesuit accounts and reveal an empire mired in idolatry, the majority of its population poor and barbarous" (Ballaster 219). Robinson is offended not by the poverty he sees but by the pride of the people:

The pride of these people is infinitely great, and exceeded by nothing but their poverty, which adds to that which I call their misery. I must needs think the naked savages of America live much more happy, because, as they have nothing, so they desire nothing; whereas these are proud and insolent and, in the main, are mere beggars and drudges. Their ostentation is inexpressible, and is chiefly shown in their clothes and buildings, and in the keeping multitudes of servants or slaves, and, which is to the last degree ridiculous, their contempt of all the world but themselves. (424)

The vicious circle initiated by the reversal of the Western gaze is now completed: while several pages earlier Crusoe described Chinese as "*little better* than savages [my emphasis]", now it turns out that they are in fact worse than savages; stuck in their own wretchedness, they "know no better."

Another possible reason for Robinson's annoyance with Chinese pride lies not so much in his Englishman's contempt towards a "heathen" culture, as in his Protestant convictions. As one of the deadly sins, pride inevitably strikes the narrator as a terrible addition to the character of a non-Christian. What bothers the narrator even more is the fact that the Chinese do not seem to acknowledge how far ahead the Western world is and how backward China is in comparison. It does not occur to him that Chinese ideas of progress and backwardness might be different from his own and that he is applying his own European standards where they might not be valid. The observation about the Chinese contempt of "all the world but themselves" is ironic because it is nothing short of a projection of Defoe's own sentiments. These sentiments are fully displayed in his depiction of the self-centered "country gentleman" he meets on the way to Peking: "[T]he state he rode in was a perfect Don Quixotism, being a mixture of pomp and poverty. The habit of this greasy Don was very proper for a scaramouch merry-andrew, being a dirty calico, with... hanging sleeves, tassels, and cuts and slashes almost on every side; it covered a taffeta vest, as greasy as a butcher, and which testified that his honour must needs be a most exquisite sloven" (424). It is quite obvious that this grotesque image is a deliberate caricature intended to create an unflattering image in Defoe's readers. The caricature is extended and strengthened a little later when Robinson describes how the Chinese man eats:

[W]e saw him in a little place before his door, eating his repast... and we were given to understand that the more we looked on him the better he would be pleased. He sat under a tree, something like the palmetto tree, which effectually shaded him over the head, and on the south side; but under the tree also was placed a large umbrella, which made that part look well enough. He sat lolling back in a great elbow-chair, being a heavy, corpulent man, and his meat being brought him by two women slaves, he had two more,... one fed the squire with a spoon, and the other held the dish with one hand, and scraped off what he let fall upon his worship's beard and taffety vest, with the other. (425)

Defoe had at his disposal a number of earlier travelogues which he could have used for his descriptions, and he may have created some images from whole cloth, but it is very easy to find a close similarity between this passage and John Mandeville's fourteenth-century description of a rich Chinese man's eating habits (1998, 70). "[H]e hath, every day, fifty fair damosels, all maidens [who] cut his meat, and put it in his mouth; for he toucheth nothing, ne handleth nought, but holdeth evermore his hands before him upon the table. For he

hath so long nails, that he may take nothing, ne handle nothing” (Mandeville, ch. 34). This particular image may not have a great significance in the account of Crusoe’s Chinese travels, but it is probably the one that makes the perceived difference between Chinese and English society of the eighteenth century seem like an uncrossable gulf. The Oriental strangeness, despotism, sloth, excess and (possibly) lust all merge into the corpulent figure of this “country gentleman” and leave the reader with the strong impression that the Chinese are essentially different from Europeans.¹

As the Chinese adventure of Robinson and his co-travellers draws to an end, the narrator gives an account of two architectural monuments both of which have a deeply symbolic meaning in the context of the narrative. On their way to northern Chinese border, one of Robinson’s co-travellers, a Portuguese pilot, tells him about a house made entirely of porcelain. In an uncharacteristic, though subtly facetious remark, covertly directed towards the readers, Defoe suddenly half-acknowledges the fact that the images of China he has been producing, are perhaps a little too denigrating. The pilot expresses the opinion that “after *all the ill-humoured things* [Robinson] had said [my emphasis]” about China, he will without a doubt admit that this is something which deserves admiration. What is even more significant than this tacit admission is the narrator’s first reaction to his friend’s words: he immediately asks whether it would be possible to buy this house, put it on a camel and bring it back to England (432). Since chinaware was one of the things the Chinese were supposed to excel at, and, in the minds of many Europeans, epitomized the essence of Chinese culture, this can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture of appropriation and/or subjugation. It is made without the slightest hesitation and is indicative of the colonial notional substratum underlying Defoe’s text. Robinson’s eagerness to take home the porcelain house seems to represent what Lydia Liu calls a “double act of deictic enunciation” (17) where the protagonist “creates” simultaneously a sovereign and a subject. In this particular case this act is not as pronounced as in the first part of *Robinson Crusoe*, but it does contain the two necessary elements, as described by Liu: “occupying the position of the *I*” and “fantasizing, naming, and subjugating the other” (189).

At first glance the pilot’s prediction seems to come true: Crusoe indeed admires the house and spends much time examining it. There is, however, a certain measure of irony in his admiration. The description Defoe provides us with makes it quite apparent that, to him, the porcelain house, though quite spectacular, is a perfect example of cultural superficiality and emptiness. There is also the implication that a house made of china is largely impractical and useless:

As to the inside, all the walls, instead of wainscot, were lined up with hardened and painted tiles, like the little square tiles we call galley-tiles in England, all made of the finest china, and the figures exceedingly fine indeed, with extraordinary variety of colours, mixed with gold, many tiles making but one figure, but joined so artificially with mortar, being made of the same earth, that it was very hard to see where the tiles met. (432)

This apparent artistic achievement is represented by the practical traveller as pointless, though he does not explicitly say so, and symbolizes, in a way, China’s fragility and lack of substance. An additional denigrating feature is the narrator’s observation that the house is in fact made of wood, plastered with porcelain. This allows him to express the opinion that a great number of the stories about Oriental splendour and artistry are simply made up. Thus China moves even closer to the image of “an empire of dullness” (Ballaster 226). Even when Crusoe reluctantly admits that the Chinese excel in this particular art he does it only to imply that chinaware “captures perfectly the spirit of the nation in its relentless transmutation of grounded substance into fragile, ephemeral form” (Porter 196). “As this is one of the singularities of China, so they may be allowed to excel in it; but I am very sure they excel in their accounts of it; for they told me such incredible things of their performance in crockery-ware, for such it is, that I care not to relate, as knowing it could not be true” (Defoe 434).

Crusoe concludes his account of his Chinese travels in much the same way as he starts it: with a powerful blast of contempt directed towards China. This time his target is the very symbol of the Empire’s grandeur – the Great Wall – and there is not even the pretense for admiration. As they encounter the Wall, the narrator pours his scorn first in the form of not-too-subtle sarcasm, when he comments on the greatness of the

¹ In this respect Defoe differs fundamentally from another eighteenth century writer, Oliver Goldsmith, who in his preface to *The Citizen of the World* (which started coming out as a series of letters in 1760) makes the following remark: “The truth is, the Chinese and we are pretty much alike. Different degrees of refinement, and not a distance, mark the distinctions among mankind” (23).

structure: “and a very great work it is, going over hills and mountains in an endless track, where the rocks are impassable, and the precipices such as no enemy could possibly enter, or indeed climb up, or where, if they did, no wall could hinder them” (436).

Not only does the Great Wall appear useless in Crusoe’s eyes, but it also gives him an opportunity to launch into a tirade about Western superiority over China:

[“D]o you think it would stand out an army of our country people, with a good train of artillery; or our engineers, with two companies of miners? Would they not batter it down in ten days, that an army might enter in battalia; or blow it up into the air, foundation and all, that there should be no sign of it left?”... The Chinese wanted mightily to know what I said [to the pilot], and I gave him leave to tell him a few days after, for we were then almost out of their country...; but when he knew what I had said, he was dumb all the rest of the way, and we heard no more of his fine story of the Chinese power and greatness while he staid. (436–437)

At this particular moment – at the very end of the Chinese narrative – Crusoe’s vitriol reaches a climactic point as he fires off his most disdainful remark yet, calling the huge structure “this mighty *nothing*, called a wall [my emphasis]” (437). With it he essentially writes off not only the Great Wall as an architectural wonder but China itself because the Wall was perceived as a symbol the Chinese civilization and China’s determination to survive as an Empire. More significantly, however, his work foreshadowed the attitude changes that were already taking place in England and the rest of Europe and led to the construction of even more unfavourable images by travellers in the late eighteenth and especially in the nineteenth centuries. China was no longer the enlightened empire that the Occident looked up to. Instead, it became the West’s perceived antagonist – both commercial and (later) ideological.

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