

**Pavel Petkov. *Enlightenment Geographies: Representations of China in John Bell's Travels (1763)*. St. Cyril and St. Methodius University Press. 2020. 163. ISBN 978-619-208-229-1.**

*Enlightenment Geographies: Representations of China in John Bell's Travels (1763)* is a cultural study analysing an important stage in the history of western relations with China. The monograph focuses on *Travels (1763)* by the Scottish physician John Bell (1691 – 1780). Petkov approaches this text from a historicist perspective, strongly influenced by postcolonial theory. In addition, he positions Bell's account within a broad imagological context of changing perceptions of China, starting with the semi-fictional account of Marco Polo and the totally fictional one of John Mandeville and moving on through later representations. Commenting on perceptions of China during the Enlightenment, Petkov stresses the co-existence of positive and negative images at the time and attempts to link the country's representations to a "shift in the general British attitude towards the Orient" (8).

One of the important questions that Petkov discusses in his Introduction concerns "orientalist" attitudes to China before the rise of British imperialism. Taking his cue from Srinivas Aravamudan's book *Enlightenment Orientalism* (2012), he correctly emphasizes the difference between early eighteenth-century attitudes to the east and later hegemonic ones (18). Further on, Petkov specifies that even in later times the major European imperial powers failed in turning China into a "proper" colony (18). The term that he uses to define China's "anomalous" position vis-à-vis western hegemony is "semi-colony" (20). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this meant the adoption of attitudes to China in which condescension and exoticism were usually inextricably mixed.

Overall, the Introduction testifies to Petkov's serious engagement with theoretical literature about European orientalism and western attitudes to China, as well as with generically diverse writing about the country. John Bell's travelogue, which is his chief concern, is thus placed within a broad context, and justice is done to its difference from other narratives about China.

Chapter 1 introduces John Bell to the monograph's readers. Such an introduction is necessary insofar as scholars exploring western images of China have not done sufficient justice to the life and work of the modest Scottish physician, who travelled to China as a member of the entourage of the Russian ambassador Count Lev Ismailov. Ismailov was the privileged emissary of the Russian Tsar Peter the First (aka "the Great"). Bell's perspective on China was thus shaped by a conjunction of different factors: he was educated in Glasgow, which would soon develop into one of the most important centres of the Scottish Enlightenment, but also owed allegiance to the rising Russian Empire whose metamorphosis into a major world power was being eagerly observed by some of the choice spirits of the European Enlightenment.

In keeping with an approach to travel writing that was becoming typical of travellers in the "Age of Reason," Bell published his book in 1763, some forty years after his return from China. Interestingly, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's famous epistolary travelogue, *Turkish Embassy Letters*, was published posthumously in the same year. Montagu substantially reworked her text, which purported to be an account of her experiences in the Ottoman Empire during her husband's term as ambassador to the Sublime Porte in 1716 – 1718. This Enlightenment tendency highlights the specific character of the travel genre as a species of non-fictional writing that is nevertheless the outcome of substantial revisions, (possibly) involving a fair amount of fictionalization.

Chapter 2 is entitled "I should like them very well for neighbours': Encounters on the Way to China" and deals with Bell's gradual distancing from the relative familiarity of European terrains as he and his companions approached China. To represent this movement away from the familiar, Petkov makes use of a modified version of Milica Bakic-Hayden's model of the "gradation of Orientals," which was originally devised to make sense of western and central European attitudes to the Balkans.

Chapter 3 is an extensive commentary on Bell's entry into "China proper." What is duly noted, in Petkov's text, is that for Bell it was the territory that he and his party had covered before reaching China that appeared to be "uncivilized" and "savage" whereas China was marked by a certain degree of "civilization," albeit different from its European counterpart. This is a valuable observation, which testifies to Petkov's desire to approach Bell's representation of China from a nuanced perspective.

Chapter 4 is of particular interest because it deals with Bell's representation of the Chinese language. Again, an attempt is made to contextualize Bell's perception of that language. There are references to scholars, who made pronouncements on the subject in earlier times. Attention is also drawn to Samuel Johnson's denigrating attitude to the Chinese language, and this leads to yet another excursus into the past, this time we are taken to Ancient Greece. Hippocrates and Aristotle are quoted and faulted on their attitudes to Asia and the east. References are also made to nineteenth-century pronouncements on the Chinese language; however, no attempt is made to link those to the "philological revolution" of the latter century. However, this is an ambitious chapter, and any weaknesses that can be found in it are mostly due to the vastness of the area of research that it purports to engage with; attitudes to the Chinese language could very well be the subject of another monograph about western perceptions of China.

Chapters 5 and 6 address attitudes to religion. Such a focus is in keeping with Bell's Enlightenment conditioning. Religion was an issue that eighteenth-century travellers invariably dealt with. These chapters might have benefited from a reference to western debates over the nature of religion, such as the Deist controversy.

Chapters 7 and 8 present a commentary on Bell's perceptions of everyday life in China from food and eating habits to hunting, sexual mores, and personal hygiene.

In his Conclusion, Petkov represents Bell as a western traveller, who eschewed the extremes of demonization and idealization and managed to remain calm in the face of difference. Overall, *Enlightenment Geographies: Representations of China in John Bell's Travels (1763)* fills a gap in imagological and sinological research, no less than in Anglophone studies, by recovering a neglected text and subjecting it to a thought-provoking analysis.

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