

Robinson Crusoe's Adventures in China

TANG Guang-rong

Southwest University, Chongqing, China

During his visit to China, Robinson Crusoe, as a representative of European civilization, reviewed Chinese civilization in contempt. Through those satirical remarks by Robinson about China, Daniel Defoe criticized the blind vogue of China in 18th-century England. Robinson had a very narrow view of civilization and knew China little. The Chinese image constructed by Robinson, not so much to represent China in itself as to represent it for European colonists, is typical of orientalism.

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Introduction

The Life and Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe (1719) by Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) is one of the most influential novels in the world literary history, which has inspired many imitations and been translated into many languages. There are more or less 20 Chinese versions of it up till now. Defoe himself loved it so much that he followed it with *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robin Crusoe: With his Vision of Angelick World* (1720). The latter is more a manual of piety than a work of fiction and lies beyond the scope of our investigation. In *The Farther Adventures*, after revisiting to the Island of Despair, Robinson traveled on around the Cape of Good Hope, past Madagascar, up toward the East Indies and the Pacific, overland through China and Tartar to Europe, and finally back to England. This study will focus on Robinson's adventures in China.

The Chinese Image Constructed by Robinson

Robinson, as an ordinary merchant, stayed almost half one year in China. There he sold his opium with a very good price, and bought a large quantity of Chinese goods which were popular in Europe, such as raw silk, tea, calicoes, and nutmegs, expecting to make another fortune when he was back. Besides doing business, he visited in his spare time Nanquin (Nanjing) and Peking (Beijing), the two most prosperous capitals of China at that age, and also had a glance at some Chinese rural areas on his long journey.

When Robinson visited China, it was near the end of Emperor Kangxi's reign, during which, according to Chinese historians, China was prosperous and strong, and Chinese people lived in peace and contentment. But the Chinese image Robinson tried to convey to his fellow countrymen was a far cry. In his eyes, the backwardness of China was shocking, and Chinese people lived just like beggars and slaves, poor, filthy, ignorant, and superstitious. The reason why some of Europeans applauded Chinese civilization was, in his opinion, just that

Chinese, out of their anticipation, were a little better than those barbarous natives in America and Africa:

But the greatness of their wealth, their trade, the power of their government, and strength of their armies are 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; and this, indeed, is the advantage with which all their greatness and power is represented to us: otherwise, it is in itself nothing at all. (Defoe, 1868, p. 548)

Robinson's travels were always full of thrilling experience except those in China. His half-one-year China stay was very boring, no adventures worthy of the name. Until encountering Tartars outside of the Great Wall, Robinson even had no chance of using his gun, one of his two favorite travel companions (the other is Bible). Robinson was a born adventurer, not a common sightseer. He did not love sightseeing. When in Peking, he even had no desire to visit the famous Forbidden City. He also had not much enthusiasm for business. To him, doing business with Chinese was not so interesting as frightening gruesome cannibals in the Island of Despair and fighting ruthless bandits in the wilds of Siberia.

During his boring travels in China, Robinson apathetically talked a little about almost all aspects of Chinese civilization, trade, architecture, religion, etc.. His favorite topics were undoubtedly Chinese self-inflation and Chinese armies.

To satirize the self-inflation of Chinese was a most amusing thing for Robinson. In order to embody it, he presented a caricature of a country-gentleman he came across on the journey from Nanquin to Peking. This gentleman was a ridiculous mixture of pomp and poverty. The ceremony with which he ate lunch outdoors astounded Robinson:

He sat under a tree, ... which effectually shaded him over the head, ... 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: I think, few gentlemen in Europe would accept of their service in, viz. 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; while the great fat brute thought it below him to employ his own hands in any of those familiar offices, which kings and monarchs would rather do than be troubled with the clumsy fingers of their servants. (Defoe, 1868, pp. 552-53)

What was the gentleman eating with such great pomp? Just a mess of boiled rice with a small lump of mutton and some pickles. In addition, that gentleman pleased himself with others' watching while he was eating. Robinson concluded that vanity had took over the gentleman's common sense. In his narrative, Robinson referred to the gentleman by various epithets—"the honor", "the brute", "the poor wretch", and so on. These epithets highlight Robinson's contempt. In *The Farther Adventures*, there are some other descriptions of the self-glorification of Chinese, but they are not so vivid and picturesque as this one.

On his Chinese journey, Robinson's another favorite is to preach the weakness of the Chinese armies and the backwardness of their weaponry. He worshiped military strength and considered it as a decisive element of civilization. The gun was the most important among those tools which accompanied Robinson's adventures. In *The Adventures*, the role of gun was overplayed time and again. Gun was taken by those natives as an awful supernatural being. It seemed in Robinson's view that the use of gun was the distinction between the barbarous and the civilized. Robinson acknowledged the fact that Chinese had firearms, but he pointed out that "they are awkward, clumsy, and uncertain in going off; they have powder, but it is of no strength" (Defoe, 1868, p. 548).

Consequently, Chinese firearms are little better than those arrows and bows of the barbarous, and they are not gun in its strictest sense, on the whole Chinese is a barbarous nation without gun. The Great Wall is the pride of China, but it was ridiculed by Robinson as the most absurd defense works in the world:

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. (Defoe, 1868, p. 560)

Since it could not hinder the tartars, certainly it would be nothing but the fodder of the European cannons. Robinson had no enthusiasm for representing China, but he eagerly played up the easiness of conquering China by force. He even said: "Nay, I do not boast if I say, that 30,000 German or English foot, and 10,000 French horse, would fairly beat all the forces of China" (Defoe, 1868, p. 548). He overtly incited the European powers to invade China. Robinson's remarks, however, were not true. At that time, not like in 1840 (First Anglo-Chinese War), the military-technology gap between China and Europe was not very big. The main firearms in Europe, musket and cannon, were also used in China. Chinese armies were not so weak as depicted by Robinson and other European writers. Robinson jumped to the conclusion:

The czar of Muscovy might, with such ease, drive them (Chinese) all out of their country, and conquer them in one campaign; and had the czar... fallen this way, instead of attacking the warlike Swedes, ... he might, by this time, have been the emperor of China, instead of being beaten by the king of Sweden at Narva. (Defoe, 1868, pp. 548-49)

In fact, Peter the great, the czar of Muscovy at that time, finally defeated, in 1709, at Poltava, the king of Sweden, one of the most formidable powers in Europe of that age, and occupied some Sweden territories, but in the east his army was twice defeated by Chinese army at Jaxa and was forced to sign the truce in 1689.

Defoe and the Vogue of China in 18th-Century England

Defoe had deep affection for travels, in his life he had ever been to many European countries, but never to China. His knowledge about China were from some books about China then available in England. It was found out that Defoe had heavily drawn upon *Memoirs and Remarks Made in above Ten Years Travels through the Empire of China* (1697) written by Lewis Le Comte, a French Jesuit, who visited China between 1687 and 1692. This book was a latest and complete introduction to the Chinese society under the reign of Emperor Kangxi (Secord, 1924). It was a great hit, and soon was translated into multiple languages, for example Germany, English and Italian, and deeply shaped the image of China in the European intellectual circles of 18th century. In his book, on the one hand Le Comte reported the self-inflation of Chinese characteristic and the weakness of Chinese forces, but on the other, he showed great admiration for the system of government of China and the ethics of Chinese. Defoe accepted Le Comte's bad remarks about China, and did not accept his good ones. The reason that he treated Le Comte in this way was rooted in the social environment of England of that age.

Before 18th century, the English indirectly knew odd bits about China by the English versions of some travel notes of the Portuguese and French missionaries. Notwithstanding the meager information, the English craze for China was getting hotter and hotter in 18th century. Chinese style and elements were eagerly absorbed into English architecture, garden design, and interior decoration, and English people had an crazy interest in Chinese knick-knacks. In *Letters on the English Nation*, John Shebbeare, a satirist, ever mocked the craze of his

contemporary:

Every chair in an apartment, the frames of glasses, and tables, must be Chinese: the walls covered with Chinese paper filled with figures which resemble nothing of God's creation, and which a prudent nation would prohibit for the sake of pregnant women. In one chamber, all the pagods and distorted animals of the east are piled up, and called the beautiful decorations of a chimney-piece; on the sides of the room, lions made of porcelain, grinning and mishapen, are placed on brackets of the Chinese taste...Nay, so excessive is the love of Chinese architecture become, that at present the fox hunters would be sorry to break a leg in pursuing their sport over a gate that was not made in the eastern taste of little bits of wood standing in all directions; the connoisseurs of the table delicacies can distinguish between the taste of an ox which eats his hay from a Chinese crib, a hog that is inclosed in a sty of that kind, or a fowl flattened in a coop the fabric of which is in that design, and find great difference in the flavour...the Chinese taste is so very prevalent in this city at present, that even pantomime has obliged harlequin to seek shelter in an entertainment, where the scenes and characters are all in the taste of that nation. (Shebbeare, 1775, pp. 261-64)

This passage from Shebbeare was the most eloquent testimonial to the vogue of China in 18th-century England.

Since the vogue of China characterized by showing off one's fortune and admiring the pagan civilization was against the ethics of the puritans, the English intellectuals at that time were critical of this vogue. They ridiculed the ignorance and shallowness of English people, and further belittled Chinese civilization. Among them, Defoe, an ardent puritan, was a pioneer who with Robinson's caustic remarks "almost set the tone of the 18th-century English criticism of China". (QIAN, 2005, p. 150)

From Universal Representative to Colonist

Defoe had a genius for realistic details. When he related Robinson's 28-year solitary life on the Island of Despair, he carefully depicted Robinson's everyday activities, building shelter, domesticating wild goats, planting barley, making pottery, etc.. These depictions do not seem trivial and boring, but interesting and meaningful.

By means of telling the truth undeviatingly as it appears to him—by being a great artist and forgoing this and daring that in order to give effect to his prime quality, a sense of reality—he comes in the end to make common actions dignified and common objects beautiful. To dig, to bake, to plant, to build—how serious these simple occupations are; hatchets, scissiors, logs, axes—how beautiful these simple objects become. (Woolf, 1960, p. 57)

But Defoe did not display this genius in these chapters about China. His knowledge of China was so poor that he was not able to portray it realistically. The Chinese scenes in *The Farther Adventures* are rather thin and void of local colors. Robinson's ironic remarks on Chinese life tend to formularize and generalize. Defoe forestalled readers' criticism by the following remark: "I shall make no more descriptions of countries and people: it is none of my business, or any part of my design; but giving an account of my own adventures" (Defoe, 1868, p. 549).

The image of Robinson in China was very different from that of him in the Island of Despair. In his island, although destitute of tools, without help from other people, Robinson toiled day after day for 28 years, depending on the reason and common sense of an ordinary person, finally lived like the civilized, not like the barbarous. He on his own almost recreated the human civilization in the tiny island. His story in the island probes into the relationship between the individual, society, nature, and religion, a common theme often portrayed in literature.

According to Coleridge, Robinson in the island is “the universal representative, the person, for whom every reader could substitute himself” (Coleridge, 2009, p. 197). His image is beyond the boundaries of nation, culture, and religion, and can be appreciated by every person in every age. But when he came to China, Robinson degenerated into an European colonist. He regarded himself as a representative of European civilization. When he compared all aspects of Chinese and European civilizations, Chinese were always addressed as “they” while European always as “we”. On the one hand “we” are prosperous, powerful, scientific, reasoned, civilized, and Christian European, on the other “they” are poor, weak, superstitious, unreasoned, barbarous, and pagan Chinese. This dichotomy, reminiscent of the orientalism defined by Edward Said, justified in advance the colonization by Europe. Since every important aspect of the eastern civilization is backward, it would be justifiable to be reformed, even replaced by the advanced European civilization. For colonists the logic is self-evident. Robinson knew China little, and was completely void of sympathy derived from understanding. For him, “they” were only a silent and absent other, an object to be reviewed, whose attributes were totally defined by “me (Robinson, the legal representative of ‘us’)”.

Said ever argued: “Islam became an image, . . . whose function was not so much to represent Islam in itself as to represent it for the medieval Christian” (Said, 2001, p. 60). Robinson constructed Chinese image in the same way to cater to the psychology of European colonists, and it did not represent the real China.

Conclusion

Defoe knew China a little and had no much zeal in writing a Chinese tale by exploiting his genius. He poured out, by Robinson, malicious remarks about China and eagerly hoped to extinguish the craze for China in England of that age and overtly instigated the European invasion and colonization of China. The Chinese image conveyed by Robinson to his fellow countrymen was constructed for the need of the ideology of colonialism and imperialism having been burgeoning in England since 17th century. The image of Robinson had a complete transformation from a hardworking, persevering, charismatic human representative in the Island of Despair to a sour, sarcastic, cold bystander in China. Therefore, the story of Robinson's travels in China is far less fascinating but more patently embodies the ideology of Defoe as a colonist and an imperialist than Robinson's story in the Island of Despair.

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