



## **Behind the Wall: A Journey Through China**

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## **Behind the Wall: A Journey Through China** Colin Thubron

Having learned Mandarin, and travelling alone by foot, bicycle and train, Colin Thubron sets off on a 10,000 mile journey from Beijing to Tibet, starting from a tropical paradise near the Burmese border to the windswept wastes of the Gobi desert and the far end of the Great Wall. What Thubron reveals is an astonishing diversity, a land whose still unmeasured resources strain to meet an awesome demand, and an ancient people still reeling from the devastation of the Cultural Revolution.

## **Behind the Wall: A Journey Through China Details**

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Author : Colin Thubron

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## From Reader Review Behind the Wall: A Journey Through China for online ebook

### Richard McGeough says

I've visited China on numerous occasions since the late 90s. I've watched the downtown areas of its cities morph into malls full of Chanel and Cartier, and its inter-city travel become a network of comfortable high-speed rail links. Colin Thubron travelled the length and breadth of China in the mid-80s. He writes about another planet: a desperately poor country still putting itself back together after the disaster of the Cultural Revolution, train carriages flecked in spittle and cigarette ash, but slowly, painfully slowly, beginning to open up to the world.

As others have observed here, Thubron lets his subjects do most of the talking. He asks ordinary people simple questions about their lives and - with a bit of poetic flourish - tells their stories. He's erudite, but eager to engage with people, and not beyond self-deprecation as the towering, lumbering foreigner who is - inexplicably to the locals - traveling alone.

One of the best books I've read this year. It left a deep impression on me of what China was like in the mid-80s, and how much it's changed - except for the smog.

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### SP says

Not cheerful book. But then, China in the '80s was not a cheerful book. If you must, Mr Thubron's travelogue is as good as any - sensitive, intelligent and well-written.

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### John says

One thing I've noticed in the four Colin Thubron books I've read so far, all involving travel somewhere in Asia, is that he seems to have a knack for discovering the most unpleasant people in whatever country -- China, in this case -- he's touring.

He is in Nanjing, I think, on Page 101, when he makes an ill-fated call on the family of an acquaintance from Beijing. Here's a glimpse of what happens:

*I had always conceived of the Chinese family as a stereotype of unity and closeness. But soon I realised that the war between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law was being waged in iron silences. Compared to the old couple -- conservative parents -- Hua was the daughter of a once-discredited bourgeoisie: voluble, raw overbearing.*

*The Suzhou girl was unorthodox too. She could scarcely bear the sight of her own three-year-old son -- an electric urchin with a sprout of chimney-brush hair.*

*... The cliches of family unity were dropping dead about me -- a mother who hated her son, a niece who despised her aunt, a domineering daughter-in-law.*

It gets worse. After a dreadful meal, he agrees to go to the home of Hua, the daughter-in-law. He spends the night there in the company of three females: Hua; her 88-year-old-mother; and a 13-year-old named Yulong who isn't directly related to either of the others. All three appear to be hitting on him, in one way or another. The mother is the most likable of the three, but that's not saying much:

*"I don't like living here," the old woman said. "Yulong is always weeping and complaining. I hate her." The people she hated were many. Her eldest daughter had divorced, and this had rankled for years. It was proof that the world was rotting. "Such things weren't done by my generation. That man still comes to visit me at the New Year Festival. I don't know why." She stared bitterly at the window. "I hate him."*

Another recurrent theme in Thubron books is that sooner or later someone asks him why he isn't married. This is refreshing for me, because in the polite culture in which I live no one asks that question, but they are thinking it. Hence, it's good to know that even a great writer like Thubron has a tough time with the question. This is from Page 242:

*She began feeling sorry for me. She was boiling noodles on a little stove. "Why aren't you married? I had not the English, let alone the Mandarin, to answer this.*

The worst thing I can say about "Behind the Wall" is that it was written in 1987. Given the enormous rate of change in China, the book is unavoidably dated if you're reading it now. At least I hope it is; China doesn't come across as an inviting place.

On the other hand, the Cultural Revolution was still a somewhat fresh memory when Thubron was traveling for this book. I never realized before reading this how horrible the Cultural Revolution really was. It was unimaginably horrible.

Thubron's travel books are unimaginably good. Reading them is a delight from cover to cover.

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## **Filip says**

Interesting but dated view of China as seen through the eyes of a British traveller in the 1980's. Not only has the country changed enormously since then, but also the way the West looks at China. The condescension and borderline racist statements by the author would be strange and unacceptable in a contemporary book about China.

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## **Deborah says**

I like his style of writing.

He makes the place come alive with his descriptive narratives about the scenery, the background history and the people he meets and sees.

At times, you feel like you are "part of his journey", whilst fully aware that his experiences are more than just those of an ordinary tourist because he can speak the local language adequately and thus is able to more easily be a solo traveller and interact with various people on his travels.

His writing style and narrative make the "trip" /journey informing and interesting.

He ends up giving you a "desire" to experience what he has or at least to travel to some of the far flung places he has seen. If you can't, he has "shared" his experiences in such a way, that at times, you can imagine what it must have been like.

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## **Billpilgrim says**

I've been reading this book on and off, now and then, over a long period. I finally decided to just finish it. It's not that I didn't like the book. It is excellent, really. Thubron is a very observant outsider, and he is very knowledgeable about China and its recent and ancient history. He reports on observed details that I know I would have missed if I had been in his place. And his writing is superb. It's just that without a continuing story, it was easy to put this one down when something more plot driven came along and caught my interest. But, everytime I'd pick this one up again, I would be amazed at how good it is.

I kept looking for something placing Thubron's China trip in a particular year, but I could not find it. It is sometime in the middle part of the 1980's (the copyright is 1987, so probably shortly before then). Thubron travels all over China, starting in the Northeast, then he travels South down the coast to Hong Kong, and winds his way through the interior of the country to the far Northwest, where the Great Wall ends. (There is a map showing his route at the front of the book, which I went back to frequently.) He travels by train mostly, sometimes a bus. He meets locals and other travelers along the way (he speaks Chinese and some locals speak English). He is primarily interested in the people, the religious sites, the natural beauty, and the effects of the Cultural Revolution and other major historical and political events.

I read another of his books a few years ago, *To A Mountain in Tibet*, which I enjoyed and led me to pick this book up at a library sale. I have another of his, which I also got at a library sale, but I think I'll try to read it straight through. I expect that I will get more out of it that way.

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## **Always Pink says**

When I first opened this book, I was afraid a 30-year-old tome would perhaps not be worth the effort and time. What could Colin Thubron possibly write about China and the Chinese that was still relevant today? But I was soon reassured and highly impressed - here's a man who really earns the accolade "travel writer": erudite, fearless and sensitive, Thubron patiently and poetically describes the numerous landscapes and cities he sees during his months of travel, the countless people he Encounters, and most interestingly his own nuanced reactions and feelings towards them. Being conversant in Mandarin, circling China in fourth class railway carriages or by bus and staying in run-down hostels and monasteries or sleeping rough, Thubron is slowly easing into the Chinese mind set. To the extent of beginning to accept even the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution as a given - a fascinating and somewhat chilling experience as he duly notes.

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## **Maja - says**

I was completely and utterly taken in by this book. From the first little anecdote that had me laughing aloud on the trainway to school to the end that turned me into a one-time-philosopher. Colin Thubron goes to China after the death of Chairman Mao, after the Cultural Revolution and after Deng Xiopeng has introduced new reform through out the country. Thubron tells us that he, for the purpose of this trip, has learned Mandarin Chinese and throughout the book it becomes very apparent why he did so. He wants to talk to people, wants to understand them and wants to understand the country's history, especially the Cultural Revolution. This is something he has heard a lot about at home in England, and he has his own opppinion of this, which is certainly not good, but he is constantly met my indifferent Chinese people. Well, perhaps not completely indifferent, but they have certainly accepted that this is the way life is for them. Though there is one Chinese woman who makes a big impression on Thubron. She tells him, that everybody in town thinks her mad, but that's only because she isn't like them. She doesn't conform, she doesn't follow the stream.

Thubron himself is only sporadically visible in the book. Most of the book is made of small anecdotes about things he's seen, and retellings of conversations he's had. It's not often that he himself, his feelings, thoughts or opinions become visible to the reader. Instead he has a very unique and likable approach, I felt, anyway. In his conversations with the Chinese he often asks about the Cultural Revolution, and though his questions are careful and slightly guarded, his constant need for answers about this subject shows just how much he wishes to know about it. He doesn't volunteer any information about himself. We know only that he is English because he is asked where he comes from. We know only that he's 46 because he's asked about his age. We know only that he's single because he 'invents' a wife at one point. Another interesting thing about Thubron is the way he travels. Alone. Many Chinese people he meets wonder about this, seeing him as almost strange. Some even offer to go with him, but he turns them down. We also never learn why he has embarked on this journey, but a good guess would be curiosity. This is just after the opening of China, so this country is virtually only a fantasy to a lot of people. At one point Thubron has a chance to sleep in Chairman Mao's bed, one of them anyway, and when he is in this enigmatic man's room he refers to him as goldlike, calling him He, and pondering over His life. To Thubron Mao is an exalted being. Towards the end we start to see more of Thubron. He starts one chapter with melancholy drabbings, he is tired of traveling, his tired of China, but most of all his tired of the Chinese and the 'sameness'. Before this point he has willingly spoken to those who approach him. After this he becomes rude and even ignore certain people until they go away. A little after this, towards the end of his journey, he oversees a public trial, and it is here that we learn of his psychological journey, of his his travels have changed him. Because though he is still outraged about this public display of power and humiliation, he has finally come to accept that that is the Chinese way. In punishment and even in death the individual serves the masses. It is also very easy to tell that Thubron has an interest in China. In between tellings of his own journey he has little paragraphs of history about the places he visits or the things he sees.

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### **Katarzyna says**

I gave up after three chapters. There is a lot of interesting information about China's history and society but the author's writing prevents me from continuing reading the book. Not only does he use incredibly pretentious and complicated language to describe simple things, he also projects feelings and thoughts on people he talks to. I wish I would be able to finish this book since I love reading about China.

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### **Cecily says**

A travelogue around China, in mid 80s, I think (annoyingly, it doesn't specify). There are some wonderfully poetic passages, and plenty of more prosaic and disjointed encounters. He does at least speak Mandarin, so was able to talk to "real" people relatively easily and seemed good at picking out interesting ones. He covered much of the tourist trail, albeit independently, and even slept in Mao's old bed.

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### **Paul Bryant says**

Brilliantly lovely engaging travel book about China before it became the roaring supercharged capitalist success story it is today. (Or has their capitalist dream gone bust too, like ours? It's hard to keep up these days!)

Two anecdotes from me and a quote from Mr Thubron and we're done.

Now I don't often mention HF in these reviews, on the grounds that she might object, which is fair enough. But she goes to China on university business regularly (they have a campus in Ning-Bo). And once she told me that she had to go to a "banquet" (a regular occurrence) which is where you get given food, you don't get a menu, they just bring it to you. And one of the dishes looked really weird and she didn't fancy it at all. So she asked someone what it was and they said without batting an eye "shredded deer's afterbirth"

There was a BBC news guy in China I heard on the radio a couple of years ago. He said he was standing in the middle of the city of (can't remember, some place I never heard of), where

*one third of the world's socks are manufactured.*

that stuck with me!

My favourite passage of this splendid book:

*In Cantonese cooking, nothing edible is sacred. It reflects an old Chinese mercilessness towards their surroundings. Every part of every animal- pig stomach, lynx breast, whole bamboo rats and salamanders - is consumed. No Hindu cows or Muslim pigs escape into immunity by taboo. It is the cuisine of the very poor, driven to tortuous invention. Most Chinese still eat only fourteen pounds of meat a year, and many survive at little above subsistence level. In the rowdy, proletarian Wild Game Restaurant, I interrogated the waitress for anything I could bear to eat. But she incanted remorselessly from the menu: Steamed Cat, Braised Guinea Pig (whole) with Mashed Shrimps, Grainy Dog Meat with Chilli and Scallion in Soya Sauce, Shredded Cat Thick Soup, Fried Grainy Mud-puppy ('It's a fish,' she said) with Olive Kernels, Braised Python with Mushrooms .... If I wanted the Steamed Mountain Turtle, she said, I'd have to wait an hour. And Bear's Paws, she regretted, were off. I had turned suddenly vegetarian. I played for time by ordering python broth, then glanced furtively round at the main courses on nearby tables, hoping for escape; but their occupants were bent over opaque stews where dappled fragments floated anonymously. Around us the windows were glazed with pretty pictures of the animals concerned : deer and cats wearing necklaces. The waitress tried to be helpful. 'What about Dog Meat Ready to be Cooked Earthen Pot over Charcoal Stove on Table?' I guessed in desperation: 'It's too expensive.' 'Then I recommend Braised Wildcat.' 'Well...' I glanced at a domestic tabby squatting on the veranda beside me. The waitress followed my gaze. 'It's not that.' She tried to explain it. It had nothing to do with real cats, she said. She wrote down the Chinese character for it, which I couldn't read. In the end, hoping that it was a fancy name for something innocuous, I heard myself say: 'One braised wildcat, please.'*

*But the soup was a meal in itself. It came in a python-sized bowl, and beneath its brown liquid lurked sediment of what appeared to be 'white chicken meat. It tasted fishy. The darker flecks might been skin. I excused myself by reflecting that pythons (although I had never known one) were less endearing than lambs, which I had eaten often. The tabby had squirmed under my table. It looked scrawny but dangerously edible. In fact I had the impression that almost everything bere was in peril. When somebody brought a warm flannel for my I was half prepared to munch it. What else was nutritional, I wondered? The mosquitoes? The curtains? It occurred to me that should I fall from the fourth-floor stair-well. The cat was still under my table when its braised compatriot arrived. I lifted the lid to reveal a mahogany-coloured flotsam of mushrooms and indistinguishable flesh. A pair of fragile ribs floated accusingly on the surface. I ate the mushrooms first, with relief, but even they were suffused by the dark, gamey tang of whatever-it-was. The meat was full of delicate, friable bones. I did not know if my faint nausea arose from the thing's richness or from my mind.*

*Several times my chopsticks hit rounded, meat- encircled fragments, like miniature rolling-pins, which resembled legs. I smuggled them to the cat under the table, as a melancholy atonement. "You don't like your wildcat?" The waitress was peering into the bowl, disappointed. 'I'm rather full.' I smiled feebly, picking the python out of my teeth. But she seemed to understand my diffidence, and stooped down to sketch me an exonerating picture of the whatever-it-was. She drew what looked like the illustration of an Edward Lear Limerick : a lugubrious, four-legged ellipse, with a face either cross or upset. But it was too late : I had already eaten it. And when later I showed an English-speaking Cantonese the word she had written, he translated it "elephant-cat" or "cat-fox", and shook his head, nonplussed..*

Is that not great?

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### **Aliaksandr says**

To every body who like good reading and an amazing twist in travelling story telling. That's one of my loved. I shall read it on more time next year.

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### **Rachel Lofthouse says**

Though thirty years had passed since this book was first published it still has a lot of offer to the reader. To start, Colin Thubron has a style of writing that makes all his books easy to read. His descriptions and characterisation are in the right dosage to get a sense of a person and a place. In these pages, the author observes China as a hard and brutal country to all but the elite. That said and as with most travel books, the kindness of strangers shines through. Demonstrated by the hard-up citizens who show their generosity by hosting this privileged Englishman.

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### **Justin Gaynor says**

This is my favorite book about China, and I've read quite a few.

Thubron is an endlessly sympathetic narrator as he travels through 'classical' China, befriending people along the way and extracting their stories. His masterly writing style is evident even in his chapter headings: Where a lesser writer might have written "To the Southwest" or "Guangxi and Yunnan," Thubron writes "In the Land of Peacocks," which is infinitely more vivid.

I read this book years ago, and yet many of the stories he tells are still lodged in my brain. A frightened young woman on a train, fearing for her brother's life at home with their violent father; sleeping in The Great Helmsman's bed; saving a small owl from the dinner table. One of the best stories appears very late in the book, about an indomitable, statuesque Chinese girl and her American husband. Just as he's concluded that "her husband didn't stand much of a chance," he extends the story a bit and hits you with a surprise ending.

This is a book about people, in all our sadness, joy and glory. That it happens to be set in China in the mid



1980's is almost beside the point.

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### **Ettore1207 says**

Publicato in lingua originale nel 1987 e in lingua italiana nel 2001 (con colpevole ritardo) è oggi un libro datato, poiché in trent'anni in Cina di cose ne sono successe, e tante.

Ho l'impressione che l'autore tenda a guardare le cose dall'alto della sua "civiltà" anglosassone, non sia riuscito a calarsi in una realtà storico-sociale così diversa e, quindi, sia un reporter discutibile. Due stelle e 1/2.

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