

## **Dialogues with Chineseness in the Polish Literature of the Second Half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries – Forms of Presence, Ways of Absorbing. Approximations<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this introductory survey article is to present the various ways in which Chineseness is dialogued with and exposed in the Polish literature of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Another objective of this exploratory paper is to indicate the forms of presence and the ways and functions of absorbing Chinese themes, as well as to reflect on their functionality in different genres and discourses of that period. Following the findings and diagnoses of Bogdan Mazan (and other scholars focused on the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), the author tries to indicate and bring closer slightly different areas of meaning than those investigated in research to date. He points to possibilities of interpreting traces of Chineseness in the literature of that period and in other texts determining important, albeit often marginal and not central, messages of the analysed works authored by Polish positivist and modernist writers.

### **Keywords**

China, Chineseness, literature of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, dialogue, allusion

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*To Professor Bogdan Mazan*

Chinese and Polish researchers' reflection concerning the ways of diagnosing the diverse forms of Chinese-Polish and Polish-Chinese relationships in literary texts is undoubtedly an important element of intercultural dialogue. Such reflection brings together different research traditions and various schools of reading literary texts as well as other forms of writing and, in consequence, displays a vast array of attitudes to literature, understood as a reservoir of questions related to the construction of identity. The present issue of *Przegląd Humanistyczny* is not meant as an exploration of an entirely unknown research area. Indeed, it often turns to lesser-known texts, which lack due recognition and which (to a large extent) share a common perception of China and Chineseness as well as of figures of their presence used by writers of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Those texts also use similar ways of absorbing, making present and domesticating elements of culture and tradition or, less frequently, of various works, in a conscious or accidental manner, with a fainter or stronger use of cultural stereotypes. Moreover, this issue portrays interesting social and cultural initiatives, reconstructs Chinese-Polish relationships (throughout the ages) and highlights literary events on the Chinese ground in the contemporary literary milieu.

A dialogue thus understood does not have to presume equal participation of both "parties": the Polishness and the Chineseness in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Namely, it shows that the vector of investigation is, more often than not, turned towards one of the participating subjects, broadly speaking – from Poland towards China. It can, therefore, be directed to various objects of description and it can interact with them. A dialogue does not have to be an exchange that leads to an understanding between the two subjects. Nor does it have to resemble a communicative transaction or a barter agreement with the aim of enhancing cross-investment within the exploration areas in order to specify their characteristics. Dialogue is understood here as a process of diagnosing the Chinese culture, civilisation and customs, in an attempt to determine their understanding based on the literature (mainly literary texts, but also press materials or selected passages from personal writings) created on the Polish territory in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This exchange is of a particular kind, for it makes use – in the form of reference, allusion and costume – of culturemes of Chineseness in diverse types of genres and discourses. Therefore, the intercourse between the addressee and the addresser follows the rule of close observation and absorption of various forms of cultural intertexts in order to determine their specific character and function in the text, which leads to clearer diagnoses, which are not necessarily always and directly related to China and Chineseness.

Diagnosing the contact points and the forms of Chinese-Polish and Polish-Chinese cultural presence is not an easy task. It requires to develop tools and to find a language allowing one to speak about the blurred issues stigmatised by stereotypes, ignorance or incomplete knowledge of the writers of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, who nonetheless made insightful observations about the role of prejudices

and stereotypes in the social and cultural life in their times and determined “circles of foreignness” of diverse phenomena on the map of local and global geopolitics.

The difficulties with diagnosing those relationships from today’s perspective and with clear evaluation of the presence of various forms of Chinese motifs in the Polish literature of that time can be attributed to yet another problem. Namely, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, humanities developed styles of research and possibilities of reading texts (not only those from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) which allow us to ask different questions about the conscious or accidental artistic strategies, about the adopted conventions, the ways of approaching philosophical, moral, ethical, cultural, ethnical, material, historical and political issues (not exempt from stereotyping) that informed the knowledge of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers about the world and about the relationship with the Middle Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Images of Chineseness produced by writers in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, their reflection on the necessity of incorporating diverse textual signals that create (sometimes quite handy) matrices for the development of a given notion or phenomenon, had various sources of fascination. They resulted undoubtedly from other experiences of wonderment and in various ways (sometimes consistently, sometimes not) they would describe the attempts at defining the Polish-Chinese relationships, as well as the presence of China in the journalistic, ethnographic, cultural, social and literary discourses of the time. It is not easy to prove which direct sources were used in the reconstruction of those perceptions. Not always is it easy to answer the question about the motivations of the writers from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who used China as a country with determined codes of conduct, a geographical and political territory with a specific approach to statehood, and who treated Chineseness as a set of conventions, beliefs, fashions and signs, and the Chinese people – as representatives of a nation defined by a set of specific characteristics (usually stereotyped, if not grotesquely exaggerating certain national dominants of character, physiognomy and worldview).

It would be invaluable if we could clearly indicate (for instance based on the forms of journalistic enunciations, which, as we know, also use distinctive strategies of constructing ideological and cultural notions in order to depict the literary world of meanings) when and in what respect “China” – evoked or used as an important point of reference (in texts that are not dedicated to China, but merely signal its presence in a side thread) – became a vector-sign that reveals more than the word implies. Therefore, we need findings demonstrating that “China” became an imaginary notion and a construct; this would allow to ask questions about the possibilities of reconstructing the principles applicable in the Middle Kingdom of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries

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<sup>2</sup> Important diagnoses for conducting research on the stereotype in the press of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were presented by Tadeusz Budrewicz, “Stereotypy Chin i Chińczyków w polskiej prasie satyrycznej drugiej połowy XIX wieku”, in: *Bez antypodów? Konfrontacje i zbliżenia kultur*, eds. Bogdan Mazan, Słownia Tynecka-Makowska, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Biblioteka Mateusz Poradecki 2008, pp. 207–230.

thanks to hidden allusions, which speak in fact about the events taking place in Poland at that time. Do the changing ruling dynasties and the intellectual initiatives or national movements have their corresponding counterparts in the country partitioned between three occupants? To what extent could the administrative, juridical and state systems as well as the cultural activity of China in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century serve as a substitute for speaking about the weighty and burning issues concerning Warsaw, Lublin, Łódź, Kraków, Lviv, Poznań, Grodno and smaller towns and provinces in the three partitions? These are fundamental questions that should be answered by way of a comprehensive reflection on the matter of Chinese-Polish relationships in the literature (mainly in press discourse) of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The researchers of Polish-Chinese relationships still have to investigate, for instance, the following questions: how to assemble the diverse forms of substitute speech, the “prison language”, the Aesopian language – so important for the users of language and culture in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (with the diminishing of various forms of censure after the October ukase in 1905) – and how to evaluate this register and the limits of its applicability as well as the degrees of its actual application? Finally, how to describe the metonymies of China used by writers, how are they introduced in the literary, journalistic and personal writing (especially in epistolography)? Does the sole fact that a writer read a given philosopher’s texts, together with the presence of ideological motifs, legal aspects, a cultural and social *entourage*, constitute sufficient proof that their use is conscious (and significant for the reconfiguration of textual notions)? Does indicating the ethnical interpretations of behaviour and the presence of phenomena, conduct and features, which highlight specific dimensions of meaning within a refer-compare scheme, help understand their contribution to the wider plan of plots, actions, enunciations? Those questions also demand a separate reflection and particular attention.

Moreover, special thought should be given to translation studies, both with respect to translating Polish authors into Chinese – whether directly from the original or via English or German – and Chinese authors into Polish. Undeniable contribution was made in this field by works dedicated to comparative studies and translations of Polish and Chinese works:<sup>3</sup> the synthesising monograph by Li Yanan *Literatura polska w Chinach* [Polish Literature in China] (2017),<sup>4</sup> which meticulously registers all

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<sup>3</sup> Zhang Zhenhui, “*Lalka* Bolesława Prusa, *Ziemia obiecana* Władysława Reymonta i *Północ* Mao Duna – interesujące analogie na tle różnych warunków historycznych”, trans. Barbara Li, in: *Pozytywizm i negatywizm. My i wy po stu latach*, eds. Bogdan Mazan, Słownia Tynecka-Makowska, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Biblioteka Mateusz Poradecki 2005, pp. 269–280; Lin Hongliang, “Henryk Sienkiewicz i Lu Xun – analiza porównawcza na podstawie małych form prozatorskich”, trans. Barbara Li, in: *Pozytywizm i negatywizm*, pp. 283–300; Zhao Gang, Yi Lijun, Mao Yinhui, “Od Sienkiewicza do Sienkiewicza, czyli o literaturze pozytywistycznej w Chinach”, trans. Barbara Li, in: *Pozytywizm i negatywizm*, pp. 303–315.

<sup>4</sup> Li Yanan, *Literatura polska w Chinach*, preface by Yi Lijun, afterword by Zhao Gang, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego 2017.

possible translated works, and other works by this researcher from Beijing University of Foreign Languages, and recently – Thomas Starky’s doctoral dissertation (2024)<sup>5</sup>.

The present thematic issue of *Przegląd Humanistyczny* is guided by research questions of different rank and it seeks to evaluate and gain an insight into the Polish-Chinese dialogue – which appears as an unobvious cultural and literary intertwining – on the ground of mutually distant literatures. The two cultures dialogue in a fluctuating manner, scatteringly, meanderingly, accidentally, based on a moderate or scant knowledge about the world or about each other. This set of adverbs seems to be an adequate description of this complex and ambiguous phenomenon. “Single signals”, “isolated spots” – such phrases most accurately indicate the degree of presence of Chinese references in the texts from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Further questions concern the degree of possible absorption of cultural components, the understanding of a foreign tradition in one’s own (national) cultural code, the ways of processing knowledge about the Chinese reality. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, that cultural and geographical area was perceived as a tremendously attractive, exotic enclave, a place of opportunities (if only by comparing the familiar to the unknown). This allows us to discover important components of philosophical, aesthetical, perhaps less literary nature, present in the thinking of the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers.

The evaluation of questions asked by journalists and writers in those times is all the more difficult that their knowledge of China and Chineseness was limited and usually acquired from second-hand sources. Therefore, when we are dealing with knowledge that had been mediated, overheard, gained by means of various transfers, and thus mutated and altered, it is hard to point without any ambivalence to the original model, the source reference purified and freed from foreign mediations and, in consequence, to find the author’s own (even less so – one that is based on experience) way of absorbing it. First of all, when it comes to the writers from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is worth noting that their dialoguing with the Chinese tradition was not so much a dialogue with the Chinese literature and the tastes it shaped, with its deeply interiorised nature and potential, nor with its hallmark genres, but rather with imaginary notions created through someone else’s perceptions (and by the languages of the cultural transfer through reading). In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century diverse comparative syntheses were published, which included Chinese examples, but they were not implemented, applied or overtly discussed in the common consciousness and practice of writers living by the rivers Vistula, Oder, Bug, Nemen, Poltva (I intentionally

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Starky, *Kartografia międzyperyferyjna. Transfery literackie i rola centrum w zapośredniczonych tłumaczeniach małych form prozatorskich Henryka Sienkiewicza autorstwa Zhou Zuorena i Lu Xuna* [Inter-peripheral cartography: Literary transfers and the role of the center in the mediated translations of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s short prose forms by Zhou Zuoren and Lu Xun], doctoral dissertation supervised by Żaneta Nalewajk-Turecka, Małgorzata Religa, Warsaw 2024, electronic manuscript.