

The Cultural Dialogue between Poland and China from the 13th Century to the Beginning of the 20th Century¹

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Abstract

The cultural dialogue between Poland and China can be traced back to the 13th century, the time of Mongol invasions of Europe. It can also be linked to the activities of the missionary, Benedict of Poland. Significant place should be attributed to the Jesuit Michał Boym and his fascination with learning about the life, customs, flora, fauna and medicine of China, as well as his sense of research and substantive scholarly preparation. Concurrently, Chinese researchers, historians and politicians spread knowledge about Poland in China through a number of historical and geographical studies about the world; at the same time, essayists and reformers drew practical knowledge from Polish historical fate and made their compatriots aware of the need to modernize China. Those first attempts to learn about both cultures had a significant impact on the contemporary cultural dialogue between Poland and China.

Keywords

cultural contact, historical fate, China, Poland

The tradition of Polish-Chinese friendship reaches far back in the past. It began at a time of intensified contacts between the East and the West.² The knowledge that China and Poland had gained about each other before the 20th century was undoubtedly

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² In this article, “East” refers to Asian countries, whereas “West” designates Europe.

the starting point for contemporary bilateral relations in the fields of literature and culture.

The earliest mentions of Poland come from the 13th century, the time of concurrent reign of several dynasties, such as the Southern Song, Jin or Western Xia, before the unification of China by the Mongol Yuan dynasty. It was in this period that Poland suffered from Mongol invasions from the East. They were called “Tatars” by the Poles. As the “Bulwark of Christendom” and the main battlefield in Europe, Poland fought several long, fierce battles against the forces of the Mongol Empire. In the battle of Legnica (1241), when the Mongols equipped their troops with gunpowder, Poland could feel the power of the East. A description of this battle is presented in Jan Długosz’s *Roczniki czyli kroniki sławnego Królestwa Polskiego* [Annals or Chronicles of the Famous Kingdom of Poland]. In the 17th century, a Polish missionary, Michał Boym (1612–1659), came to China and brought to Europe information about the geography, medicine and other aspects of life in China. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Poles broadened their knowledge of China thanks to the monographs written by missionaries about the history, geography, ethnic origins and culture of the Middle Kingdom.

On the other hand, thinkers and politicians from the “Eastward Spread of Western Learning” movement, towards the end of the Qing dynasty and at the beginning of the Republic of China, spread in China knowledge about the world, including Poland, through such works as 四洲志 [A Gazetteer of the Four Continents, 1839], 海国图志 [The Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms, 1842] or 瀛寰志略 [Brief Records of the World, 1848]. They drew practical knowledge from Poland’s historical fate and made their compatriots aware of the need to modernise China. We could say that this type of historical sources was the main channel of mutual cognition and understanding among the citizens of both countries, with this exchange taking place above all in a small group of intellectuals.

The earliest mutual cognition (13th century)

The commonly known legend in Poland about the St. Mary’s Trumpet Call refers to the history of Mongols, also called Tatars, invading Europe in 1241. The over 40-year period of Mongol invasions left its mark on the Western countries, but, to some extent, it also familiarised the Europeans with the distant civilisation, laying the ground for Eastern-Western cultural and economic contacts. Chinese inventions, such as gunpowder, paper, print and compass, were brought to West Asian and European countries, whereas China adopted Western astronomy, medicine and calendar, which led to contacts and integration of Asian and European nations on a large scale. Polish chronicler Jan Długosz (1415–1480) described a method – unknown to Polish chivalry – of diffusing sulphur or gunpowder, a new kind of weapon used by the Mongols in a manner that in the chronicler’s eyes was close to alchemy:

Among the Tatar standards is a huge one with a giant X painted on it. It is topped with an ugly black head with a chin covered with hair. As the Tatars withdraw some hundred paces, the bearer of this standard begins violently shaking the great head, from which there suddenly bursts a cloud with a foul smell that envelops the Poles and makes them all but faint, so that they are incapable of fighting³.

Ding Chao (丁超), co-author of the work 中外文学交流史:中国—中东欧卷 [China and Central and Eastern Europe: A History of Literary Contacts], pointed to the fact that the Mongol military expedition to the West broke the isolationism of Eastern and Western civilisations, exerting a positive influence on the promotion of intercivilisational communication.⁴ From this perspective, we can conclude that the Mongols' arrival in the West was the moment when the Poles began to discover the Chinese. The Tatars' expedition all the way to Kraków, the capital city of the Seniorate Province, and the invasions of the Duchy of Silesia constituted, objectively speaking, a factor fostering interpenetration of Chinese and Polish civilisations.

Mongol expeditions to the West shook the entire European continent. Later, due to the great khan Ögedei's death, the Mongol army retreated, and Europe breathed a sigh of relief. In spring 1245, Pope Innocent IV (1195–1254) called the First Council of Lyon, which also discussed the “question of the Tatars”. It was decided that the Franciscan provincial Giovanni da Pian del Carpine (ca. 1180–1252) would be sent with a papal letter to the country of Genghis Khan. On 16 April 1245, the legate set off from Lyon with friar Stephen of Bohemia; at a further stage of the journey, in Wrocław, Benedict of Poland (ca. 1200–1251) joined them. He was a Franciscan from Wrocław and the first Polish traveller who reached, together with the delegate sent by the Pope, the capital city of the Mongol Empire, Karakorum, where he attended the coronation of the third great khan, Güyük. Upon his return to Poland, Benedict made an account of his impressions to the friar C. de Bridia, who later wrote down this relation in Latin under the title *Historia Tartarorum* [History of Tatars]. Shortly after, Benedict himself wrote a treatise entitled *De Itinere Fratrum Minorum ad Tartaros* [The Journey of Friars Minor to the Tatars]. It was an account documenting his journey to Asia. This over 3,000-word-long relation was the first scientific work in Europe describing the culture and languages of the Far-East countries. It included many Mongol words translated into Latin and was of groundbreaking scholarly importance. Since the Italian Marco Polo arrived in China in 1275, thirty years later than Benedict, we can affirm that the Pole was undoubtedly the first traveller from Poland and from Europe who reached the Far East. His travel account was at that time the only “field study” of China conducted by a Pole and a European, and it marks the historical beginning of discovering the Eastern culture by Poland, and even by Europe.

³ Jan Długosz, *The Annals of Jan Długosz: An English Abridgement*, trans. Maurice Michael, Chichester: IM Publications 1997, p. 180.

⁴ Ding Chao (丁超), Song Binghui (宋炳辉), 中外文学交流史:中国—中东欧卷 [China and Central and Eastern Europe: A History of Literary Contacts], Jinan: Shandong Education Press 2014, p. 47.

Missionaries as the main exchange-promoting force (16th century)

Towards the end of the 15th century, following the great geographical discoveries and the Spanish and Portuguese overseas expansion, the European missionaries began to travel to various parts of the world to preach the Christian teachings. Among the destinations of those missionary expeditions was also China. In 1583 (in the eleventh year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor of the Ming dynasty), the Jesuits Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and others arrived at Zhaoqing (肇庆) in Southern China as “foreign monks”, thus establishing the first Jesuit community in continental China. More Jesuits were successively sent to proclaim missionary teachings and spread knowledge about the West, including Poland. They wrote letters, diaries and travel journals to reconstruct their wanderings. They described what they had seen or heard, presenting a panorama of the Chinese society and culture. In fact, they popularised the achievements of Chinese civilisation and the Chinese society’s lifestyle in the West, thus promoting cultural exchange between China and the West. At that time, numerous monographs on those topics were translated and published in Poland, giving the Polish people an idea of what China was like and laying the foundations for early “sinological research”. For instance, in 1611, Polish priest Szymon Wysocki translated into Polish the account written by Matteo Ricci and João Rodrigues *Nowiny abo dzieie dwvletnie z Iaponu y z Chiny, krain poganskich, Nowego Świata* [Tidings or A History of Two Years in Japan and China, pagan countries, the New World],⁵ which was published in Kraków by Jan Scharffenberger. The monograph was a collection of letters sent by Matteo Ricci to the Superior General of Jesuits, Claudius Aquaviva, in the years 1606 and 1607. In his correspondence, the friar documented his journey to China. The same kind of literature is represented by António de Andrade’s account *Tybet wielkie panstwo w Azyey* [Tibet, a Great Country in Asia],⁶ which was translated into Polish by Fryderyk Szembek and published in Kraków in 1628. The travel literature of that period was mainly interested in the Far East, and China was only mentioned within the discourse concerning Eastern civilisations. The authors of travel journals were, for the most part, missionaries, emissaries or voyagers, who documented their expeditions to various countries of the Far East, with particular focus on China. This type of works continued to be published in Poland until the 19th century and they played an important role in fostering knowledge and understanding of the Middle Kingdom.⁷

⁵ Matteo Ricci, João Rodrigues, *Nowiny abo dzieie dwvletnie z Iaponu y z Chiny, krain poganskich, Nowego Świata*, trans. Szymon Wysocki, Kraków: Jan Scharffenberger 1611.

⁶ António de Andrade, *Tybet wielkie panstwo w Azyey*, trans. Fryderyk Szembek, Kraków: Drukarnia Franciszka Cezarego 1628.

⁷ Examples of such books include: George Leonard Staunton, *Podroz lorda Makartney posla W. Brytanii do Chin w roku 1792, 1793 i 1794 zawieraięca wiadomosc o kraiu, rzadzie i narodzie chińskim, tudzież o części Tartaryi chinskiej & c.* Cz. 2, trans. Roman Markiewicz, Kraków: Drukarnia

One of the missionaries who contributed the most to the cultural exchange between China and Poland was Michał Boym, also known as “Polish Marco Polo”, an orientalist and emissary of the emperor Yongli (永历) of the Southern Ming dynasty. Desiring to preach the Christian faith in the Far East, he petitioned the Roman Catholic Church numerous times for permission to depart for China, which he eventually obtained. In March 1643, he left Lisbon, travelled around Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and India, passed the Indonesian Strait and arrived at Macau. At the beginning, he taught at the local Jesuit school and was studying the Chinese language, then he went to Hainan (海南) island, where he preached the missionary teachings. Later, he also visited the provinces of Hunan (湖南), Henan (河南), Shaanxi (陕西) and other places, where he conducted detailed research on the inscriptions from the Xi’an Stele, “A Monument Commemorating the Propagation of the Ta-Chin Luminous Religion in the Middle Kingdom”. He ended up at the Yongli Emperor’s court and was sent by him to Europe to solicit help from the Roman Catholic Church in resisting the army of the Qing dynasty. On the return journey to China, having completed the mission in Rome, Michał Boym died in Guangxi (广西). When he had come to Europe as a Chinese emissary, he had brought with him an eighteen-page-long atlas of China (*Mappa Imperii Sinarum*) drawn by himself, with nine chapters introducing basic information about that country. In fact, thanks to those texts, the atlas became a handbook of knowledge about China. *Mappa Imperii Sinarum* specified for the first time the location and size of the Middle Kingdom. It was also the first work explaining that “Cathay” mentioned in Marco Polo’s writings and China, where the Portuguese had arrived, are the same country, and the capital city called “Cathay” or “Cambuluc” or “Khanbaliq” is in fact Beijing.⁸ Also, precise localisations were marked for certain Chinese cities, the Great Wall and the Gobi Desert. Many illustrations were attached to the map, presenting Chinese fauna and flora, architecture and scenes from the life of the Chinese. Those materials greatly enriched the knowledge of the Far East among the Europeans. During his stay in China, Michał Boym conducted in-depth, systematic research concerning Chinese history, politics, language, culture, geography, regional products, customs, medicine, and he wrote a series of works, including the first European monograph on Chinese flora

Jana Maya 1801 (English original: George Leonard Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China; Including Cursory Observations made, and Information obtained, in travelling through that Ancient Empire and a small part of Chinese Tartary*, London: G. Nicol 1797); Laurence Oliphant, *Poselstwo lorda Elgin do Chin i Japonii w latach 1857, 58, 59*, trans. Adela Karolina Malletska, Warsaw: Aleksander Nowolecki 1862 (English original: Laurence Oliphant, *Narrative of the Earl of Elgin’s mission to China and Japan in the years 1857, ‘58, ‘59*, New York: Harper and Brothers 1860); Józef Pawlicki, *Wiadomość o życiu i śmierci Jana Gabryela Perboara, kapłana Zgromadzenia księży Lazarystów, umęczonego w Chinach d. 11 września 1840 r.*, Warsaw: Drukarnia Księży Misjonarzy u Ś. Krzyża 1852.

⁸ Adam Robiński, “Michał Boym – pierwszy polski sinolog, ambasador Chin”, *Rzeczpospolita* 17/02/2012, <https://www.rp.pl/kultura/art6253631-michal-boym-pierwszy-polski-sinolog-ambasador-chin> [accessed 13 June 2025].

(*Flora sinensis*) and Chinese medicine (*Specimen medicinae Sinicae*)⁹. All of this gave Poland, and Europe as a whole, a better understanding of China and the Far East. It also substantially contributed to spreading Chinese science and culture, and had a profound influence on future sinologists.

Around the same time in China, in 1602, an Italian Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci, drew in Beijing a complete map of the earth – 坤輿万国全图 [A Map of the Myriad Countries of the World], thus presenting Poland for the first time to the Chinese. Among the geographic names placed on the map, there is the name “Polonia”, which refers to Poland. It was probably at this point that the Chinese officially gained knowledge of the existence of that country. Soon after, another Italian, Giulio Aleni, completed in 1623 his chronicles – 职方外纪 [Chronicles of Foreign Lands],¹⁰ which were the first Chinese version of world geography written by a missionary with the use of the Western perspective of religious geography. The book is composed of five volumes, the second of which focuses on Europe. It includes a chapter dedicated to Poland, which, back then, constituted the earliest and most lucid description of that country in Chinese historical sources.

In 1646, missionary Michał Boym sent to Beijing Johannes Kepler’s Rudolphine Tables (*Tabulae Rudolphinae*), praising the book as “unique and the best for calculating total and partial eclipses and the movements of the heavens”,¹¹ which can be deemed as the first introduction of Nicolaus Copernicus’ theory in China. Later that same year, Jan Mikołaj Smogulecki (1610–1656), another Jesuit missionary, came to China and, together with the Chinese scholar Xue Fengzuo (薛凤祚), wrote and published the monograph 天步真原 [True Principles of the Pacing of the Heavens] treating the subject of European mathematics, astronomy and astrology, thus spreading Copernicus’ astronomical theory.

The beginnings of sinological studies in Poland (18th–19th centuries)

At the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries, in Poland, a style called *chinoiserie* from the French appeared, visible mainly in architecture and interior design, which increased the Poles’ fervour to seek a better understanding of Chinese culture. In 1787, Ignacy Manugiewicz (ca. 1750–?) translated from the Russian *Historyczno-geograficzne opisanie miasta Pekinu ciekawsze od innych edycyi*

⁹ Michał Boym, *Flora sinensis*, Viennae Austriae: typis Matthaei Rictij 1656; idem, *Specimen medicinae Sinicae*, ed. Andreas Cleyer, Frankfurt: J.P. Zubrodt 1682.

¹⁰ Giulio Aleni, 职方外纪 [Chronicles of Foreign Lands], Fujian: s.n. 1623.

¹¹ Pasquale M. D’Elia, *Galileo in China: Relations Through the Roman College Between Galileo and the Jesuit Scientist-Missionaries (1610–1640)*, trans. Rufus Suter, Matthew Sciascia, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1960, p. 53.

[A Historical-Geographical Description of the City of Beijing, More Interesting Than Other Editions],¹² originally authored by a German geographer Johann Gotthelf von Stritter (1740–1801). This treatise presents a detailed description of such domains as the philosophy, religion, history, politics, society, economy and art of China.

Moreover, studies were conducted on the Chinese language and the Chinese natural environment, thus shaping the style of contemporary sinological studies. In the second half of the 19th century, the Poles extended their research on the history of China, taking a more systematic approach. For instance, Czesław Pieniążek (1844–1917) and Adolf Spamer (1883–1953) wrote together a book entitled *Illustrowana historia starożytna. T. 1, Od czasów najdawniejszych aż do zawiązków historii greckiej* [Illustrated Ancient History. Vol. 1, From the Most Ancient Times to Early Beginnings of the Greek History],¹³ which described the history of China up to the 5th century. In the field of social and political studies, Polish author Józef Kenig (1821–1900) published in 1896 the work *Sprawa chińsko-japońska i dwa odczyty* [The Chinese-Japanese Issue and Two Lectures],¹⁴ describing the beginning and the outcome of the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). Whereas Władysław Michał Dębicki (1853–1911) in his book *Przyszłość Chin: groźne wnioski z przesłanek lekceważonych* [The Future of China: Fearsome Conclusions from Neglected Premises],¹⁵ departing from a comparison of the power of China and other countries, presents an analysis of the international situation of China as well as the chances and challenges that the Middle Kingdom was facing.

In that period, the Poles began to translate classic Taoist texts, thereby opening the door to a better knowledge of the ancient Chinese civilisation. In 1784, Grzegorz Zachariasiewicz (1740–1814) translated from French *Krótki zbiór starożytnych moralistów* [A Short Collection of Ancient Moralists].¹⁶ The second volume of that work – *Myśli moralne Konfucjusza* [Confucius' Moral Thoughts] and the third volume – *Myśli moralne różnych filozofów chińskich* [Moral Thoughts of Various Chinese Philosophers] constitute examples of the first comprehensive studies of the ancient Chinese philosophy conducted by Polish scholars. Descriptions included in the book present mostly the essential features of Chinese philosophical thought, as well as Confucius' life and his idea of morality, and they are accompanied by 329 translations and interpretations of quotes. The work discusses three main religious-philosophical

¹² Johann Gotthelf von Stritter, *Historyczno-geograficzne opisanie miasta Pekinu ciekawsze od innych edycji*, trans. Ignacy Manugiewicz, Warsaw: Drukarnia Nadworna Jego Królewskiej Mości i Komisji Edukacji Narodowej 1787.

¹³ Czesław Pieniążek, Adolf Spamer, *Illustrowana historia starożytna. T. 1, Od czasów najdawniejszych aż do zawiązków historii greckiej*, Vienna: F. Bondy [1894].

¹⁴ Józef Kenig, *Sprawa chińsko-japońska i dwa odczyty*, Warsaw: S. Lewental 1896.

¹⁵ Władysław Michał Dębicki, *Przyszłość Chin: groźne wnioski z przesłanek lekceważonych*, Warsaw: Gebethner i Wolff 1898.

¹⁶ *Krótki zbiór starożytnych moralistów*, trans. Grzegorz Zachariasiewicz, Łowicz: Drukarnia Prymasa 1784.

currents in China, that is: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, therefore, we can assume that it provides a basic insight into ancient Chinese philosophy.

In the 1890s in Poland, Chinese literary works began to be translated from the original. The first titles offered to the readers were Chen Jitong's novels published in 1891 and 1892: *Romans złotego człowieka, osnuty na tle chińskich obyczajów* [A Romance of a Yellow Man, Set Against the Background of Chinese Customs]¹⁷ and *Nowelle z życia Chińczyków* (*The Chinese Painted by Themselves*).¹⁸ Today, there is no possibility of finding information about the Polish translators. On the yellowed title page, we only see the note: *tlómaczenie z francuskiego* ("translation from French"). The publisher's foreword to *Nowelle z życia Chińczyków* presents the initial motivation for translating Chinese literary works into Polish:

About China and the Chinese, we know in general very little; only what the scanty travel accounts explain to us – and even those were merely travels along the shores, because foreigners are forbidden to make inland journeys. Recent wars, especially the victories of the French, have slightly lifted that mysterious veil – yet it was only general Chen Jitong, until recently a Chinese ambassador in Paris, who by an entire series of short stories and literary pictures shed some light on the local customs, private life, traditions and literature of that nation.

We believe, therefore, that by offering to our readers a small collection of stories in Polish translation, we will provide them with pleasant entertainment and, in some part, also with learning, because the above-mentioned work by the Chinese author unveils to some degree the mystery of the internal social system in the Celestial Empire.¹⁹

Chen Jitong, a diplomate, translator and Chinese author writing in French, was sur-named "The First One Who Presented the Western Knowledge in the East". He played a crucial role in the cultural exchange between the East and the West in those times, particularly in terms of spreading the traditional Chinese culture outside of China. *Le roman de l'homme jaune* (French edition of *Romans złotego człowieka*, based on 霍小玉传 [The Legend of Huo Xiaoyu]) was the first Chinese novel written in a Western language.²⁰ Published in Paris in November 1890 by the Charpentier publishing house, it tells the story of a tragic love between Li Yi and Xiaoyu. It became popular among the French and helped Chen Jitong gain a reputation in the French literary milieu. As for *Nowelle z życia Chińczyków*, the French version (*Contes chinois*) is a translation of the Chinese 聊斋志异 [Strange Tales from A Chinese Studio] by Pu Songling (蒲松龄) and constitutes the most important literary translation by Chen Jitong.²¹ The first Polish

¹⁷ Czeng-Ki-Tong [Chen Jitong], *Romans złotego człowieka, osnuty na tle chińskich obyczajów*, trans. s.n., Warsaw: Noskowski 1891.

¹⁸ Idem, *Nowelle z życia Chińczyków*, trans. s.n., Warsaw: T.H. Nasierowski 1892. English edition: Tchong-Ki-Tong [Chen Jitong], *The Chinese Painted by Themselves*, trans. James Millington, London: Field & Tuer, The Leadenhall Press [1885?].

¹⁹ Idem, *Nowelle*, pp. V–VI.

²⁰ Idem, *Le roman de l'homme jaune*, Paris: Charpentier 1890.

²¹ Idem, *Contes chinois*, Paris: Calmann Lévy 1889.

translations of this author's French works reflect certain tendencies among 19th-century Polish translators. They often took interest in books written in foreign languages by Chinese (or Chinese-American) authors, who depicted Chinese history, society, culture and presented scenes from everyday life in China, thus satisfying the Polish readers' imagination, avid for details about the Far East countries.

In this period, the Poles acquired knowledge about China also from literary fiction written by Western authors. In 1869, Joanna Belejowska (1820–1904) translated *Przygody Amerykanina w Chinach* [The Adventures of an American in China], a novel by Émile Souvestre²² telling the story of an American called Walter Effendon, who traveled thousands of miles in China in search of his daughter. The book contains many descriptions of China and Chinese customs, including the geographical location and urban functions of Guangzhou, the residences and courts of Chinese officials as well as traditional Chinese gardens. Various aspects have been considered, such as poetry, opera performances, culinary culture, funeral traditions, imperial examinations, means of transport and many others. The novel reconstructs a vivid image of the streets of Beijing and the scenery of imperial gardens – the Old Summer Palace.

In the Age of Enlightenment, during the reign of King Stanisław II August Poniatowski, the Far Eastern culture also had an enormous influence on Polish writers, such as, for instance, Ignacy Krasicki (1735–1801), who included in his works inspirations drawn from Chinese themes. In his novel *Mikołaja Doświadczynskiego przypadki* (*The Adventures of Mr. Nicholas Wisdom*), elements of Confucian thought are woven into the teachings of a fictitious great master Xaoo of the island of Nipu.²³ In Krasicki's satire *Żona moda* [The Fashionable Wife], one of the signals of Chinese influence is “the Chinese honey ginger”, a necessary treat among the heroine's exotic specialties.²⁴ In the 20th century, in the works by Stefan Żeromski, we can observe social and custom-related mentions of China. In *Ludzie bezdomni* (*The Homeless*), Joanna Podborska, one of the heroines and the narrator of confessions from the chapter “Confidential”, refers to customs in the times of the Qing dynasty when she characterizes her aunt with a surprising comparison: “Poor Tecia sits in Mękarzyce and waits. All her being calls to mind the foot of a Chinese girl, molded in a wooden form from childhood”.²⁵ Binding

²² Émile Souvestre, *Przygody Amerykanina w Chinach*, in: idem, *Im więcej komu dano, tem z większego rachunku słuchanym będzie*, Biblioteka dla Młodocianego Wieku, ser. I, vol. II, trans. Joanna Belejowska, Warsaw: Gebethner i Wolff 1869, pp. 37–103. This short novel was originally published in French as a book chapter: Émile Souvestre, “Le facteur de Canton”, in: idem, *Pendant la moisson*, Paris: Michel Lévy Frères 1859, pp. 117–180.

²³ Ignacy Krasicki, *Mikołaja Doświadczynskiego przypadki*, Warsaw: Michał Gröll 1776; English translation: idem, *The Adventures of Mr. Nicholas Wisdom*, trans. Thomas H. Hoisington, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1992.

²⁴ Ignacy Krasicki, *Żona modna*, <https://wolnelektury.pl/media/book/pdf/satyry-czesc-pierwsza-zona-modna.pdf> [accessed 13 June 2025].

²⁵ Stefan Żeromski, *The Homeless*, trans. Stephanie Kraft, intr. Jennifer Croft, Boris Darlyuk, Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books 2024, p. 174.

the feet of Chinese girls, especially those of aristocratic origin, was a ritualised testimony of beauty and attractiveness, but also an exceptionally cruel act against women, a blind subordination to the rules of patriarchy. Joanna Podborska, well-versed in the issues of equal rights and emancipation of women, knows about the cruel ritual, so these words sound authentic in her mouth, they are full of empathy for the women who cannot rebel against the ossified tradition.

Such mentions of China in various aspects, e.g., social, custom-related, philosophical, political, historical and geographical, can be found in Polish literature in great numbers. Indeed, this fact has already been discussed by Bogdan Mazan, for instance, in his article “Figury myśli i (anty)wzory. Motywy chińskie w *Przeglądzie Tygodniowym* 1871–1876” [Figures of Thought and (Anti)Models. Chinese Motifs in *Przegląd Tygodniowy* 1871–1876],²⁶ and Tadeusz Budrewicz in the article “Stereotypy Chin i Chińczyków w polskiej prasie satyrycznej drugiej połowy XIX wieku” [The Stereotypes of China and the Chinese in Polish Satirical Press of the Second Half of the 19th Century].²⁷ Since the subject matter of the present article is different, I merely refer to these researchers as a valuable bibliographical suggestion without analysing their reflections.

The historical fate of Poland as a reflection of the modern social reforms in China

Towards the end of the Qing dynasty, at the turn of the 20th century, Chinese politicians, diplomats and thinkers wrote books and theories through which they strived to present Poland and other “weak and small nations”²⁸ to the Chinese people. The historical fate of Poland became a reflection of the modern social reforms in China. Works such as 四洲志 [A Gazetteer of the Four Continents]²⁹ by Lin Zexu (林则徐), an eminent politician, thinker and poet of the end of the Qing dynasty, the treatise 海

²⁶ Bogdan Mazan, “Figury myśli i (anty)wzory. Motywy chińskie w *Przeglądzie Tygodniowym* 1871–1876”, in: *Pozytywiści warszawscy: „Przegląd Tygodniowy” 1866–1876. Seria 2: Świat, Europa, Polska*, ed. Anna Janicka, Białystok: Temida2 2020, pp. 105–124, <http://hdl.handle.net/11320/11006> [accessed 13 June 2025].

²⁷ Tadeusz Budrewicz, “Stereotypy Chin i Chińczyków w polskiej prasie satyrycznej drugiej połowy XIX wieku”, in: *Bez antypodów? Konfrontacje i zbliżenia kultur*, eds. Bogdan Mazan, Słowinia Tynecka-Makowska, Łódź: Fundacja Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego 2008, pp. 207–230.

²⁸ Lu Xun (鲁迅) was the first one in the history of Chinese literature who called Eastern European countries, such as Poland or Hungary, small and weak nations. He meant by this that those countries were continually invaded, occupied or partitioned by hostile nations.

²⁹ Lin Zexu, 四洲志 [A Gazetteer of the Four Continents], ed. Zhang Man (张曼), Beijing: Huaxia Press 2002.

国图志 [The Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms]³⁰ by Wei Yuan (魏源), a famous philosopher, politician and Enlightenment writer of the Qing dynasty, and 瀛寰志略 [Brief Records of the World]³¹ by Xu Jiyu (徐继畲) who was proclaimed “the Galileo of the East”, familiarised Chinese readers with the history of other countries.

Providing the Chinese with new information about the world contributed to China’s better understanding of the West and accelerated the process of modernisation of Chinese society. The common feature of those books was the choice to present small and medium-sized countries and ethnic groups that were little known to the Chinese, including Poland.

In 1839, Lin Zexu went to Guangzhou as the emperor’s emissary in order to implement the prohibition of opium smoking and to destroy opium stocks. At that time, he studied the history and contemporary situation of Western countries and popularised *An Encyclopaedia of Geography*, written by a Scottish scholar Hugh Murray (1779–1846), by commending his workers and advisers to translate this work into Chinese. Lin Zexu refined the translation, edited the work and published it under the title 四洲志 [A Gazetteer of the Four Continents]. The translation briefly describes the geography, history and political situation of over thirty countries on four continents of the world. At that time in China, it was the first systematised description of the geography of the world and it played an important role in the pioneering modern history. The book is divided into thirty-five chapters, thirteen of which discuss various European countries. In comparison to other Central and Eastern European countries, Poland was presented in a separate chapter, which begins with the foundation of the Polish state and describes historical and dynastic transformations of Poland, in particular the consecutive partitions and the changes of Polish boundaries. The authorial translations of Polish names of localities and people differ a lot from today’s versions. For instance, the word *Waxiao* (洼肖) meant Warsaw, *Genaou* (格那耦) stood for Kraków and *Chazhe’erlun* (查遮尔伦) referred to the Grand Duke of Lithuania Jagiełło. In the course of the translation work, the author did not verify the dates from the history of Poland, which resulted in some mistakes. In the *Gazetteer of the Four Continents*, it is stated that “in the year 990 after the birth of Jesus Christ (the first year of the reign of Taizong (太宗) Emperor of the Song dynasty), Mieszko I established a kingdom with the capital city in Warsaw”.³² Historians, as is generally known, date the foundation of the State of Polans at 966 and, of course, the capital city was Gniezno. Yet those several mistakes do not diminish the worth of the work as a whole. The general description of the history, geographical conditions, ethnic groups and religions in Poland in the *Gazetteer of the*

³⁰ Wei Yuan (魏源), 海国图志 [The Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms], Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House 2011.

³¹ Xu Jiyu (徐继畲), 瀛寰志略 [Brief Records of the World], Fujian: s.n. 1848.

³² Lin Zexu, 四洲志 [A Gazetteer of the Four Continents], pp. 95–96 (in the entire article, quotations from Chinese sources had been first translated into Polish by Yi Linan).

Four Continents is definitely correct and it constituted a valuable source of knowledge about Poland for the Chinese.

The author of *The Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms*, Wei Yuan, advocated the adoption of advanced Western technologies to be able to oppose the invasion of the most powerful Western states. This initiated in China a new model of acquiring knowledge about the world and learning from the West. Wei Yuan's work was published in 1842 and it was inspired by the *Gazetteer of the Four Continents*. Additionally, the author made use of new information and source materials, but also included his essays, thus creating a compilation that treated historical, political, ethnographical and culture-related issues. At that time, it was the most precise presentation of the science, technology and historical geography of Western countries. Two chapters were dedicated to Poland: "The Polish State" and "The Changes Taking Place in Poland". The 'Discord of Five Dukes' that is mentioned there refers to the fragmentation of the realm of Poland between 1138 and 1320. The history of the three partitions of Poland is also described, with the following words of warning: "people died in uprisings, but even ten fights did not suffice to overthrow the reign of the Russian occupant",³³ which refers to the November Uprising in the years 1830–1831, a national liberation upsurge of Poles against the rule of Tsarist Russia.

In 1848, the General Office of Fujian (福建) Province published for the first time Xu Jiyu's work *瀛寰志略* [Brief Records of the World]. The work is divided into ten volumes in six collections with 44 illustrations. The detailed descriptions of regions of all continents, human races, populations, ongoing transformations, architecture, local products, everyday life, customs, religions, the beginnings and the declines of various nations, as well as comparisons with other countries, became for the Chinese a window to the Western world. The *Brief Records* do not include a separate chapter dedicated to Poland. Information on this subject is contained in the chapter "European Russian State", which tells the history of the Polish-Lithuanian union and describes Poland's unique natural geography and its rich resources. At that time, the Chinese name for the Polish Mazovia was *Masuoweiya* (马索维亚), Kraków was referred to as *Jialageweya* (加拉哥维亚), Kalisz as *Jialisi* (加利斯), Lublin as *Lubolin* (鲁伯林), Płock as *Boluoge* (波罗咯), and Podlachia as *Bodalageiya* (波达拉给亚). Also, in the chapters entitled "European Austrian State" and "European Prussian State", there are descriptions of Poland under the Austrian and Prussian partitions.

A Gazetteer of the Four Continents describes the first partition of Poland executed by Russia, Prussia and Austria. *The Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms*, in turn, pays particular attention to the influence that the Polish feudal separatism, lasting from the 12th to the 14th centuries, exerted on future generations; it also mentions the November Uprising against the Russian occupant. Whereas the *Brief Records of the World* tell the story of the Polish-Lithuanian union. Chinese politicians, diplomats and scholars were from the very beginning particularly interested in this type of events

³³ Wei Yuan (魏源), *海国图志* [The Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms], p. 1347.

from the history of Poland. They served as a warning for the politicians reforming the late Qing dynasty and encouraged them to make efforts to remedy the empire.

Kang Youwei (康有为, 1858–1927) was an important politician, thinker, pedagogue and a representative of bourgeois reformism in the late Qing dynasty in China. His book *波兰分灭记* [Record of the Partition and Destruction of Poland], based to a large extent on the history of Poland and submitted to the emperor in 1898, was

an important work [...] in the late period of Hundred Days' Reform, aimed to repulse the counter-attack of the conservative faction, which moved the emperor Guangxu (光绪) to take the decision to "hold fast to the chosen path" and actively promote the new politics.³⁴

The book is composed of seven volumes following the chronological order. It introduces historical events, like for example the fact that in the 18th century, during the reign of King Stanisław II August Poniatowski, reforms in Poland were blocked by influential aristocrats and conservative nobles, which led to the partitions of the country by neighbouring political powers – Russia, Prussia and Austria, and resulted in the downfall of Poland. The author of the *Record of the Partition and Destruction of Poland*, by referring to those events and applying a rhetoric of fear, tries to convince the emperor Guangxu to implement reforms and new politics that will save and strengthen the country. In the introduction, Kang Youwei clearly highlighted the importance of the sovereignty of a strong country:

When a country makes no attempt to compete with others, it is digging its own grave. For what a country is that?! Based on the partitions and the downfall of Poland, we know that a country cannot exist without sovereignty.³⁵

Kang Youwei recorded the historical fact that the king of Poland depended at first on Russia's support to ascend to the throne, but later found himself under the pressure of the Russian government. At the beginning, the petty and middle nobles were in favour of the reforms, but "their monarch and aristocratic ministers, who questioned the reforms' rightness, opposed them fiercely".³⁶ Later, even though the king and aristocrats changed their attitude and tried to save the country through reforms, it was too late. Kang Youwei compared this fact to contemporary Russia's control over Northeast China, resulting from the railway construction at that time, and with a bitter sigh, he stated: "In my opinion, there is no hope for Poland anymore!". He also underlined that those who hindered the reforms "contributed to the partitions of Poland", therefore he "sheds tears and sighs each time when he analyses Poland's situation for the purpose

³⁴ Kong Xiangji (孔祥吉), 从《波兰分灭记》看康有为戊戌变法时期的政治主张 [Kang Youwei's Political Ideas in the Time of Reform Movement in 1898, as Reflected in the *Record of the Destruction of Poland*], *The Journal of Humanities* (人文杂志), 28 November 1982, p. 84.

³⁵ Kang Youwei, (康有为), 康有为全集 [Kang Youwei's Collected Works], eds. Jiang Yihua (姜义华), Zhang Ronghua (张荣华), Beijing: People's University Press 2007, p. 395.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 396.

of preparing a general overview and a record of his own observations”.³⁷ The history of Poland told by Kang Youwei inspired the emperor Guangxu’s empathy for that distant country that had collapsed. This persuaded him to some degree of the need for reforms and modernisation of the empire. The *Record of the Partition and Destruction of Poland* may be deemed as an essay that directly influenced the course of the contemporary history of China.

Before Kang Youwei presented the *Record of the Partition and Destruction of Poland* to the emperor Guangxu, Liang Qichao (梁启超) mentioned the tragic situation of Poland subjugated by Russia, in an article published on 29 August 1869 in the Shanghai journal 時務報 [Current Affairs]. In the late Qing dynasty, this was the first work in the academic world that studied the history of the downfall of Poland.

Later, Liang Qichao wrote in 1901 *A New Theory of a Country’s Destruction*, published in three parts in the issues number 85, 86 and 89 of the journal 清议报 [Chinese Discourse]. In the article, he included the history of the downfall of Poland, which he perceived as a typical example of “instigation of a civil war for the purpose of destroying a country”.³⁸

Both imperial reformers who analysed the reasons of Poland’s downfall indicated the need to implement quick and effective reforms, and, by use of analogy to Poland, they demonstrated that if China did not undertake remedial actions, it would fall just as Poland did. From then on, the allegory of the suffering, subjugated Poland served as a historical argument in favour of the reform of the empire, especially in the situation of foreign political powers exerting their influence in China and the urgent need for changes.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a Chinese translation of *The History of Poland’s Demise* (Jap. *Pōrando suibō senshi*)³⁹ written by a Japanese scholar Shibue Tamotsu was a turning point in recording the history of that country. According to the latest research, there are at least three Chinese translations of that work: the first one was published in 1901 by Central Compilation and Translation Press (译书汇编社), the second one, authored by Chen Danran (陈澹然), was published in 1902 by Jiangxi Official Press (江西官报社), the third one, authored by Xue Gongxia (薛公侠), was published in 1904 by Jingjin Press in Shanghai (上海镜今书局). The original work was completed in 1895 and consisted of two parts. Shibue Tamotsu listed the following reasons for Poland’s downfall: firstly, “disadvantages of public elections of the monarch”, referring to the Polish system of free elections, which strengthened the Polish nobility and resulted in the fragmentation of the nation. Secondly, “the disaster provoked by the intervention of a foreign state”, above all, Russia’s intervention in the

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 398.

³⁸ Zou Zhenhuan (邹振环), 晚清波兰亡国史书写的演变系谱 [The Evolutions of Describing the History Poland’s Downfall in the Late Qing Period], *Journal of PLA Nanjing Institute of Politics* (南京政治学院学报), 2016, 4(32), p. 84.

³⁹ Shibue Tamotsu, *Pōrando suibō senshi* [The History of Poland’s Demise], Tokyo: Hakubunkan 1895.

matters of the Polish parliament. Thirdly, “prohibition on citizens’ decision-making in political matters”, which refers to the limitations of the Polish “Nobles’ Democracy”. Not only was *The History of Poland’s Demise* translated and published in China three times, but it also became a major topic in many progressive journals and magazines. Ding Chao’s research demonstrates that just in the first few years at the beginning of the 20th century, several articles on this subject appeared in the press. These include, inter alia: 波兰国的故事 [A History of the Polish State] from 1901, published in issues number 1, 2 and 3 of 杭州白话报 [The Review of Hangzhou Colloquial Speech]; the article 波兰灭亡始末记 [The Beginning and the End of Poland’s Demise] printed in issues number 15 and 16 of the journal 经济丛编 [Economic Series]; the article 波兰亡国之由 [The Origin of the Downfall of Poland] published in 1903 in issue number 27 of 外交报 [Foreign Affairs Magazine]; and an article in several parts entitled 讲俄国和普奥两国瓜分波兰的事 [Discussing Poland’s Partition by Russia, Prussia and Austria] published in issues number 44, 49, 50, 52, 54, 56 of 俄事警闻 [Warnings Regarding Russia] in 1904.⁴⁰

At the beginning of the 20th century, the subject of Poland, which played an important role in the studies of a country’s downfall, penetrated into literature. An example of such inspiration was a new Beijing opera 瓜种兰因 [The Causes of Poland’s Partition] from 1904, written by Wang Xiaonong (汪笑侬), an esteemed authority in the matters of opera stage at that time. Most of the scripts he created or adapted were based on historical events with allusions to contemporary times in the form of anecdotes speaking of past times, but reflecting the direction of contemporary politics. The opera script, based above all on Shibue Tamotsu’s *The History of Poland’s Demise* in Xue Gongxia’s translation, tells the history of the partitions of Poland, which is in fact a metaphorical representation of the fate of China and a warning for the Chinese, inscribed in the analysis of the causes of that European country’s downfall. In contrast to previous works discussing the subject of Poland’s demise, Wang Xiaonong’s opera redefined the role of foreign political powers in the loss of the liberty of the Polish nation. This opera, staged in 1904 in Shanghai, presents a fictitious partition of Poland by Turkey. It became the most discussed and appreciated new-style opera in the first decade of the 20th century. Turkey is presented there as the principal agent of the partitions of Poland, whereas other texts perceived the intervention of Russian forces, the limitations of the Nobles’ Democracy and the ruling class’s reluctance to reform as the main causes of the partitions. The difference between *The Causes of Poland’s Partition* and other works on that subject consists in the fact that, in the previous texts, Liang Qichao and other authors underlined that the downfall of the Polish Commonwealth resulted mainly from the Russian intervention and the lack of influence of average people on the politics, with Turkey presented rather as an ally in the resistance against Russia. Wang Xiaonong was perfectly aware that the Russian-Japanese war, fought at that time

⁴⁰ Ding Chao, Song Binghui, 中外文学交流史: 中国—中东欧卷 [China and Central and Eastern Europe: A History of Literary Contacts], p. 182.

in Northeast China, was a forerunner of severe attacks that the Middle Kingdom would suffer from some political superpowers. The role of Japan back then was similar to the role of Turkey in *The Causes of Poland's Partition*. We can thus assume that Wang Xiaonong intentionally tried to warn the Chinese by means of obliterated or fabricated historical facts. Therefore, it is worth highlighting that towards the end of the Qing dynasty, Poland functioned as a topos of a sinking ship, which had a persuasive, but also appellative function in journalistic texts and historical essays – it warned against the possibility of the Chinese Empire's demise.

The cultural dialogue between Poland and China, which is the subject of the present article, dates back to the Mongol invasion of Europe in the 13th century and is linked in its beginnings to the activity of the missionary Benedict of Poland. The contact with Mongols during the invasions, just as later with the Turks, gave the Poles an idea of the hitherto unknown power of the Eastern countries and nations. Those invasions were not only recorded in the chronicles, but also represented in iconography and in many legends that have been transferred in Poland from generation to generation to this day. The death of Silesian Duke Henry II the Pious on the battlefield of Legnica in 1241 turned the ruler into a martyr of faith, thus laying the foundations for the first important national myth – Poland as the bulwark of Christendom. A particularly significant place in this process of intercultural communication should be attributed to the Jesuit Michał Boym, to his fascination with learning about the life, customs, flora, fauna and medicine of China, as well as his sense of research and substantive scholarly preparation.

Chinese researchers, historians, essayists and reformers drew from the history of Poland a rhetorical argument in the form of an allegory warning against the downfall of the country. It was extremely important for the process of reform implementation at the end of the Qing dynasty, when the empire was subject to influence from Western political powers – Great Britain or France. The analogy between the situation of China and the downfall and destruction of Poland, eagerly used by the journalists, had therefore an enormous persuasive potential – it was a living admonition and an evocative illustration warning against what could happen in China. No doubt all those contacts – related to Mongol invasions of Poland, the activity of missionaries, historians, journalists, translators and writers – created solid foundations for today's relationships and for the mutual understanding of historical processes in both countries. Those early attempts to get to know each other's cultures, to become familiarised with one another, e.g., by drawing information (as Chinese historians did) or transferring knowledge (as the missionaries coming to China did), despite the mistakes and certain simplifications, had a significant impact on the contemporary cultural dialogue between Poland and China.

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