

Mickiewicz, a Poet of Vengeance or a Preacher of Forgiveness? In Search of a “Third Way” of Intercultural Translation on the Example of Adam Mickiewicz’s *Zdania i uwagi*¹

Tingting Zhang

University of Warsaw, Poland

e-mail: cebulkapekin@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-4080-7082

Abstract

The literature of Polish Romanticism, which Marta Piwińska called “a Renaissance of Christianity”, from the beginning of its presence in China has had a contrastingly different reception from that of Polish readers. This article offers a reading of Adam Mickiewicz’s *Zdania i uwagi. Z dzieł Jakuba Bema, Anioła Ślqzaka (Angelus Silesius) i Sę-Martena* [Sentences and Remarks. From the Works of Jakob Böhme, Angelus Silesius and Saint-Martin], conducted to open up a space for reflection on a set of questions that are crucial to cross-cultural studies: Will cultural differences always impede intercultural translations and, in a similar manner, the reception of works originating from one tradition by readers from another? Is it possible to find a platform that would allow for a dialogue between an author rooted – often in a dialogical way – in the Christian Romantic tradition on the one hand and a reader brought up in the Confucian culture on the other? This article aims to propose an answer to these questions.

Keywords

Adam Mickiewicz, Saint Augustine, *Zdania i uwagi* [Sentences and Remarks], Christianity, Confucianism, intercultural translation

¹ This article was originally published in Polish: “Mickiewicz poetą mściwym czy nauczającym przebaczenia? W poszukiwaniu ‘trzeciej drogi’ przekładu interkulturowego na przykładzie *Zdań i uwag* Adama Mickiewicza”, *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 2024, no. 2, pp. 55–67, <https://doi.org/10.31338/2657-599X.ph.2024-2.3>.

Over a hundred years ago, Lu Xun,² the father of contemporary Chinese language and the first promoter of Adam Mickiewicz's works in China, in his treatise entitled *On the Power of Mara Poetry*³ wrote the following passage:

In Mickiewicz [...] we already have explicit poetry of revenge. The key message of such poetry consists in saying that those who [...] suffered human injustice are allowed to resort to all kinds of measures if only the purpose is to resurrect or to defend their homeland. This is a sacred principle. [...] that for the aim of destroying enemies, all methods are allowed.⁴

The above quoted interpretation of the poet's work may surprise a Polish reader, since, as observed by Bernadetta Kuczera-Chachulska, a Polish scholar of Romanticism, forgiveness holds a priority place in the thought of the Polish poet, and "the question of conscience in Mickiewicz's works shall reveal itself as one of the most important – if not the most important? – issue of his writing".⁵

Although Lu Xun's interpretation of Mickiewicz developed on a specific historical-political ground and, therefore, bears a clear ideological mark, it provoked undesired consequences that hold fast to this day. Even though the Chinese have two translations of *Pan Tadeusz*⁶ and a translation of *Dziady (Forefathers' Eve)*,⁷ the reception of these works seems to be rather schematic, and sometimes even fossilised and restrictive.⁸

² Lu Xun (pseud.), in fact Zhou Shuren (周树人, 1881–1936) – a prominent writer, ideologist, considered the father of contemporary Chinese language and literature.

³ *On the Power of Mara Poetry* (摩罗诗力说, mó luó shī lì shuō) is a treatise written by Lu Xun in 1907, dedicated to European literatures. It is composed of nine chapters, the eighth of which describes the writings of "the Three Bards" of Polish Romanticism. As source material for my text, I only chose the chapter that is closely related to the topic discussed. The treatise is included in the collection entitled *The Tomb* (坟), containing twenty-three essays written by Lu Xun in the years 1907–1925.

⁴ Lu Xun (鲁迅), 摩罗诗力说 [On the Power of Mara Poetry], in: idem, 坟 [The Tomb], in: idem, 鲁迅全集 [Lu Xun. Complete Works], vol. I, eds. Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培), Ma Yuzao (马裕藻), Shen Jianshi (沈兼士), Zhou Zuoren (沈兼士), Shanghai 1938, pp. 65–120 (quotations from Chinese sources had been first translated into Polish by Tingting Zhang, and then from Polish into English – trans. note).

An abridged English translation of the treatise can be found in: Lu Xun, "On the Power of Mara Poetry", trans. Shu-ying Tsau (应应哇), Donald Holoch, in: *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945*, ed. Kirk A. Denton, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1996, pp. 96–110, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503615830-011>.

⁵ See: Bernadetta Kuczera-Chachulska, "Między teologią a poezją. Przebaczenie u Mickiewicza", *Paedagogia Christiana* 2016, vol. 37, no. 1, p. 223.

⁶ There are two translations of *Pan Tadeusz* into Chinese. The first one, a prose translation from English executed by the eminent translator Sun Yonga (孙用, 1902–1983), was published in 1950. The second one, translated in verse directly from the original, was published as late as 1998, on the 200th anniversary of Adam Mickiewicz's birthday. The translation work was done by Professor Yi Lijun (伊丽君, 1934–2022), a graduate from the Faculty of Polish Studies at the University of Warsaw in 1950s.

⁷ *Dziady (Forefathers' Eve)* in the Chinese language, translated by Yi Lijun and Lin Hongliang, were published in 2015 by Sichuan Literature and Publishing House.

⁸ Such narrow interpretation e.g. of *Konrad Wallenrod*, in a way contradicting the authorial intention, was practiced already among the poet's contemporary. See: Maria Janion, *Życie pośmiertne*

Concurrently, for several decades, a growing fascination with Polish literature has been observed in China. There is an interest, inter alia, in the works of Adam Mickiewicz, who, owing to Lu Xun, is still perceived one-dimensionally as a prominent revolutionary poet. At the same time, some important features of his writing still remain unknown in China, while they could be particularly attractive to a contemporary Chinese reader, who is increasingly prone to seek answers to existential questions in literature.

In search of a “third way” of intercultural translation

Theoreticians of translation described various solutions applied in the translation practice. In the 20th century, there were basically two dominant schools of the theory of translation. The first one, aptly described by Lawrence Venuti, proposed the concept of “domestic inscription”. The advocates of this school contend that

the translator negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the source text by reducing them and supplying another set of differences drawn from the receiving situation to enable the translation to circulate there.⁹

As for the second school, whose eminent theoretician was Antoine Berman, it understands translation as pure experience of the foreign and proposes to retain maximum faithfulness to the original, even at the cost of making the text incomprehensible for the projected target reader.¹⁰

However, it seems that neither of the proposed solutions will meet the challenge faced by a translator who tries to present the works of Polish Romantics to Chinese readers. For we are dealing here with a different kind of translation problem. The principal poets of Polish Romanticism, called by Marta Piwińska “a renaissance of Christianity”,¹¹ often tried to convey in their works a message deeply rooted in the religious tradition (not always orthodoxly conceived, to be sure), which may be alien to a reader deprived of that vital cultural context. Christian tradition was the natural ground from which their works sprang. As for Lawrence Venuti’s method, which consists in replacing

Konrada Wallenroda, Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1990; see also: Stefan Chwin, *Literatura a zdrada. Od „Konrada Wallenroda” do „Małej Apokalipsy”*, Kraków: Oficyna Literacka 1993; Ewa Hoffmann-Piotrowska, “Konrad Wallenrod. Zanegowana wolność”, *Tematy i Konteksty* 2023, vol. 18, no. 13, pp. 41–53.

⁹ Lawrence Venuti, “Translation, Community, Utopia”, in: idem, *Translation Changes Everything. Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge 2013, p. 11.

¹⁰ See: Antoine Berman, “Translation and the Trials of the Foreign”, trans. Lawrence Venuti, in: *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti, London: Routledge 2000, p. 286.

¹¹ Marta Piwińska, “Bóg utracony i Bóg odnaleziony. Buntownicy i wyznawcy”, in: *Problemy polskiego romantyzmu*, vol. I, eds. Maria Żmigrodzka, Zofia Lewinówna, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich 1971, p. 253.

with domestic equivalents the notions and terms that appear in the original and that may be incomprehensible to target readers, it could paradoxically provoke greater misunderstandings in the reconstruction of the translated text's meaning. For instance, the seemingly corresponding terms, metaphors or symbols may harbour additional content, some unwanted domestic associations, which are being evoked, but they are not necessarily helpful – in extreme cases, they may even impede comprehension or alter the meaning of works translated from a different cultural tradition.

My aim in the present article is to share my reflection concerning the attempts I have been making to find an interpretative key that would make it possible to translate not only the content of the discussed work by Adam Mickiewicz, but also its values and message, for the readers educated and living in a non-Christian culture, namely the Chinese one. Moreover, I shall try to answer the question whether a third way is possible between the two translation methods proposed above, that is, between, on the one hand, simple replacing foreign notions with domestic equivalents in order to facilitate the target reader's comprehension, which carries the risk of losing the meaning of original notions in the foreign work, and, on the other hand, the attempt to remain as faithful as possible to the foreignness of the translated work at the cost of it being incomprehensible for the target readers.

I shall try to find an answer to the posed question on the example of a work presenting important Christian themes and messages, which may be difficult to translate into a different culture. Adam Mickiewicz's *Zdania i uwagi. Z dzieł Jakuba Bema, Aniola Ślązaka (Angelus Silesius) i Sę-Martena* [Sentences and Remarks. From the Works of Jakob Böhme, Angelus Silesius and Saint-Martin] is no doubt such a work. Indeed, this poetic cycle bears the mark of the influence of prominent Christian thinkers, it is the result of profound spiritual reflections, a work that finishes the path of religious pursuit undertaken by a poet who eagerly read the Fathers of the Church¹² and great Christian thinkers, such as Saint Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Saints Thomas Aquinas¹³ or Thomas à Kempis. The poet constantly refers in his work to the transcending reality, to the Absolute, by which he conveys metaphysical reflections (and, as a result, a vision of the world and human being), the translation of which into a different culture requires a ground that would provide a similar set of philosophical and religious notions, allowing the target readers to assimilate the message of *Zdania i uwagi*.

Such ground, I believe, could be provided by Confucianism. The Confucian teaching, apart from strong insistence on the human and political matters, contains a clearly metaphysical dimension:

Confucianism [...] does not end with the material satisfaction of human needs, nor does it reject pursuing the spiritual Absolute. Although it holds a different conception of what can be counted as 'spiritual', Confucianism does not have a common sense of the ultimacy of a personal experience of

¹² See: Władysław Mickiewicz, *Żywot Adama Mickiewicza podług zebranych przez siebie materiałów oraz z własnych wspomnień*, vol. II, Poznań: Drukarnia Dziennika Poznańskiego 1892.

¹³ See: Piotr Chmielowski, "Filozoficzne poglądy Mickiewicza", *Przegląd Filozoficzny* 1897, fasc. 4.

the sacred and a personal commitment to the Ultimate. It is thus [...] a humanistic tradition manifesting spiritual longing [...] and leading to a religious destination that answers human ultimate concerns. [...] Confucianism is a kind of humanism that seeks sacredness in an ordinary yet disciplined life.¹⁴

The second very characteristic feature of Confucian doctrine (apart from the metaphysical one) points to the ethical dimension of human life. Confucianism, as many scholars contend, due to the exceptionally exposed place attributed to morality, can be deemed as an ethical tradition or even an ethical system. Prominent Western scholars also underlined the unique importance that Confucius and his disciple Mencius attached to upbringing that should lead to the realisation of virtues. This strong insistence on morality may prove particularly helpful (by law of analogy) in translating the Mickiewiczian cycle, which – as I shall try to demonstrate below – also has a strong moral accent.

Zdania i uwagi may prove attractive to Chinese readers also in terms of form. Mickiewicz's poetic cycle is, for the most part, composed of aphoristic couplets (or, less often, quatrains). This form feels familiar in the Chinese culture. The origins of aphoristic poems in China date back to the 11th century BC. In the *Book of Odes* (诗经),¹⁵ particularly important for the literature of the Middle Kingdom, compiled between the 11th and the 7th centuries BC, they already appear in their mature form. Aphoristic enunciation can also be encountered in the writings of ancient Chinese philosophers, who “were accustomed to express themselves in the form of aphorisms, apothegms”.¹⁶ I assume, therefore, that the work of the Polish Romantic poet can be translated into Chinese with no detriment to the original's literary qualities. The conjunction of meditation and didacticism will not feel alien to Chinese readers, because, as noted by Feng Youlan, eminent historian of Chinese philosophy, “ethics [...] provided the spiritual basis in Chinese civilization”,¹⁷ including literary works. Another helpful element in familiarising the readers with Mickiewicz's thought may be the analogy to the Confucian tradition, with its fundamental writing, the *Confucian Analects*, in which “each paragraph consists of only a few words, and there is hardly any connection between one paragraph and the next”.¹⁸

At this point, we should add another methodological remark. Reflections that Mickiewicz included in his poetic cycle are the fruit of many years' maturation. They did not result from a sudden spiritual revolution or illumination, which we so gladly

¹⁴ Yao Xinzhong, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, p. 45.

¹⁵ The *Book of Odes* (诗经) is a compilation of Chinese poetry from the period between the 11th and the 7th centuries BC. It is composed of 305 poems. The original version of the book comprised 311 poems, but six of them have not been preserved and we only know their titles.

¹⁶ Feng Youlan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, New York: Macmillan 1958, p. 12.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 4. See also: Derk Bodde, “Dominant Ideas in the Formation of Chinese Culture”, *Journal of American Oriental Society* 1942, vol. 62, no. 4, p. 293.

¹⁸ Feng Youlan, *A Short History*, p. 11.

attribute to Romantic heroes. Nor are they a consequence of the poet's intellectual deliberations and spiritual readings, but rather the effect of their profound and personal experience and assimilation. This is why they show unusual consistency and find confirmation in other spheres of the poet's creative biography. They encompass all dimensions of his activities, both in the cycle and in the letters which he wrote at that time. This consistency can also be seen later in the Paris lectures, which Mickiewicz held at Collège de France in the years 1840–1844. Therefore, I shall interpret Mickiewicz's gnomes both in the context of the poet's personal correspondence with friends from the years 1833–1836 (that is, from the time when he was working on the cycle) and in the light of his utterances from Paris lectures, which I treat as an auto-commentary or a testimony of reflections conveyed in an aphoristic form in *Zdania i uwagi*.

The morality of happiness

Researchers have noticed a strong moral-didactic accent of *Zdania i uwagi*. Such instruction was given by the poet himself, who seems to indicate the purpose of his work in a letter to his Parisian publisher, Januszkiewicz:

Szanowny Panie Eustachy.

Posyłam maksymy dla zbudowania ciebie i tomiku. Ostrzegam, że werset pod tytułem *Pax Domini* ma być drugim z porządku i iść po wersecie *Rzecz zaniedbana*, a zaś werset pod tytułem *Reszta prawd* ma być ostatni.¹⁹

Dear Mr. Eustachy.

I am sending you maxims to edify you and the collection. Please note that the verse entitled *Pax Domini* should be second in order and follow the verse *Rzecz zaniedbana* [A Neglected Thing], whereas the verse entitled *Reszta prawd* [The Rest of Truths] should be the last one.²⁰

The key phrase in this letter seems to be “dla zbudowania” (“to edify”). According to *Słownik języka Adama Mickiewicza* [Dictionary of Adam Mickiewicz's Language], in the poet's works, ‘zbudowanie’ (‘edification’) means, inter alia, “raising to a higher moral level, perfecting”.²¹ Thus, *Zdania i uwagi* were meant to be, in line with the author's intention, an edifying work, serving to raise the moral level of the reader.

¹⁹ Adam Mickiewicz, “Do Eustachego Januszkiewicza”, [Domont, beginning of Sept. 1836], in: idem, *Dzieła. Wydanie Rocznicowe 1798–1998*, eds. Zbigniew Jerzy Nowak, Maria Prussak, Zofia Stefanowska, Czesław Zgorzelski, vol. XV: *Listy. Część druga 1830–1841*, eds. Maria Dernałowicz, Elżbieta Jaworska, Marta Zielińska, Warsaw: Czytelnik 2003, p. 337.

²⁰ Quotations from Adam Mickiewicz's letters and *Zdania i uwagi* were translated into English by Blanka Domachowska for the purposes of this article (trans. note).

²¹ *Słownik języka Adama Mickiewicza*, vol. X, ed. Konrad Górski, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich 1980, p. 606.

Researchers followed this authorial guideline: “Mickiewicz – says Barbara Łazińska – concentrates not on theological questions, but on the ethical ones, which are close to everyone, giving instructions that can be put into practice”.²² However, if the first part of the researcher’s remark perfectly renders the poet’s spirit, the second part raises a doubt. “Instructions” – to use the author’s language – that Mickiewicz gives in his poetic cycle often seem impossible to realise in purely human practice. Moral perfecting of man, and the poet’s anthropology in general, are strongly Christocentric, in the sense that in the poet’s thought “edification” of man comprehends in its essence an infinite possibility, transcending man’s earthly life only by a constant reference to Christ, as Alina Witkowska fittingly put it: “a man following Christ would become a proposal of permanent change, with indeed infinite perspective of self-perfecting”.²³ If this is the case, then we can also conclude that moral perfecting in life is not the ultimate goal in itself, but finds its justification in the transcendent, metaphysical reality, as the poet seems to be claiming himself already at the beginning of the cycle:

PAX DOMINI

Pokój jest przyszłym dobrem, przyszłym szczęściem mojem;
Nie chciałbym Boga, gdyby Bóg nie był pokojem.²⁴

PAX DOMINI

Peace is my future good, my future bliss;
I would not want God if God were not peace.

Interestingly, a moral-didactic work, by principle directed to the reader and written with a specified intention, begins with a couplet, in which the speaking persona makes an internal, almost intimate confession about who God is for him. It seems that precisely in this poem, the poet’s deep understanding of the spirit of the Gospel is revealed. Indeed, the moral message of the Gospel begins with the *Sermon on the Mount* – the *magna charta* of Christian morality²⁵ based on eight beatitudes, which contain the essence of the conception of happiness. Therefore, we should read this personal confession in *Pax Domini* as a romantic self-expression. It seems that the poet is trying to provoke by these means the metanoia of the reader by showing him a different perception of the high evangelical demands that are impossible to realise

²² Barbara Łazińska, “Mistycyzm i dydaktyzm *Zdań i uwag*”, in: *Mickiewicz mistyczny*, eds. Andrzej Fabianowski, Ewa Hoffmann-Piotrowska, Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 2005, p. 298.

²³ Alina Witkowska, *Mickiewicz. Słowo i czyn*, Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1986, p. 103.

²⁴ Adam Mickiewicz, *Zdania i uwagi*, in: idem, *Dzieła. Wydanie Rocznikowe 1798–1998*, eds. Zbigniew Jerzy Nowak, Maria Prussak, Zofia Stefanowska, Czesław Zgorzelski, vol. I: *Wiersze*, ed. Czesław Zgorzelski, Warsaw: Czytelnik 1993, p. 379.

²⁵ Cf. for instance: John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html [accessed 1 July 2025].

on the purely human level – namely, they can be perceived as a guidepost leading to happiness. At the same time, by his subjective tone (“my”), far from any ambition of preaching *ex cathedra*, the poet seems to suggest that he will share his “instructions” not as someone who “assumes entirely the role of the teacher; teaches and preaches”,²⁶ nor as someone who “knows for certain and tries to impose on us that certain faith of his”,²⁷ but as someone who gives advice: “this is what I believe; if you want, my reader, we can set off together on a spiritual journey, and I will accompany you and guide you through this work of mine”.

The question of happiness is, in turn, no great concern for Confucius or his followers, nonetheless, the notions elaborated by Confucians may help assimilate concepts originating from other philosophical and religious traditions. We need to begin with some terminological remarks. Explaining the Confucian notions to Polish readers belongs to my method of practicing intercultural translation, so it may prove useful for the reflections developed in this article.

The fundamental concept for the Confucian worldview is *Dao* (道, dào), a word of such vast meaning that it would be difficult to render it with a single term in other languages. It could be translated as: doctrine, teaching, order or way. Yet each of these words has considerable limitations. In my work, I have decided to use the term “way”, mainly because it is easily accessible to readers brought up in Christian tradition, for whom this word has strong spiritual connotations. Such passages from the Bible are indeed very well-known: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (Is 55,8) or “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths” (Ps 25,4).²⁸

Taken in general, the Confucian way has three constitutive elements, in other words, three ways which are concrete manifestations of the one Way. They are namely: the Way of Heaven, the Way of the Earth and the Way of Humans. The Way of Heaven plays the principal role.²⁹ A lot of space is dedicated to this issue in the *Confucian*

²⁶ Barbara Łazińska, “Mistyccyzm i dydaktyzm”, p. 299.

²⁷ Adam Poprawa, Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, *Mickiewicz, czyli wszystko. Z Jarosławem Markiem Rymkiewiczem rozmawia Adam Poprawa*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe i Literackie OPEN 1999, p. 194.

²⁸ The Bible is quoted according to New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE), <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Updated-Edition-NRSVUE-Bible/> [accessed 2 July 2025].

²⁹ In my article, I will not try to resolve the question whether Heaven is a personal being in the Christian sense, because, in my opinion, this question is wrongly formulated, so it cannot be answered in a scientifically proper way. Neither Confucius, nor great Confucian thinkers reflected upon the definition of Heaven. We can informally make such comparison, but scientifically speaking, we should not impose on Confucian concepts a dimension drawn from a different (in this case – biblical) tradition. Such approach leads to the sin of confusing different orders, and whatever answer is given to an erroneous question, it has no scientific value. The fact that to this day there is no agreement among researchers regarding the essence of Heaven, was discussed by the above-quoted Yao Xinzong, see: Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, pp. 143–144.

Analects. According to the Confucian doctrine, Heaven endows man with virtues³⁰ and establishes moral principles.³¹ It is the supreme, ultimate sanction of human actions, which reveals itself both in the individual and political-social dimensions. In the individual dimension, according to Confucian doctrine, the agency of Heaven manifests itself by sending a noble, virtuous man, similar to Old Testament prophets, in order to remedy the universal moral corruption.³² Whereas in the political-social dimension, Heaven bestows its Mandate on the ruler,³³ which is comparable, though not entirely, to the anointing of kings in the Old Testament tradition. This Mandate can be revoked when the ruler begins to break moral principles established by Heaven. The Way of Heaven, therefore, means the Way of morality. And the Way of Humans “is essentially the way of moral life”,³⁴ “follow[ing] the Way of Heaven”.³⁵ When humans, both the ordinary people and the rulers, follow the Way of Heaven, that is, when they abide by the rules established by Heaven, then the reign of the ruler will endure, and the society and individuals will live in harmony and prosperity.

The aim of the above explanations, by necessity only cursory, was to outline certain common features of both traditions, the Christian and the Confucian: virtuous life is good for man, and moral principles are guideposts on the way leading to happiness. These traditions differ in their understanding of happiness. While in the reflections of Confucianists, men (the people and the rulers alike) experience already in this life the consequences of their moral or immoral conduct, the Christian tradition – and so also

³⁰ In deciding to render one of the fundamental Confucian notions, namely the concept of 德 (dé), with the word ‘virtue’, I applied the theory of “domestic inscription” presented at the beginning of the article, because the words figuring in dictionaries as corresponding in terms of meaning, comprise essentially different content. Confucius elaborated and organised a system of virtues that is different from the Christian one. There are eight of them (八德, bādé). Sinological tradition proposed various translations. The translations presented here are in part a contamination of traditional options and my own propositions: ren (仁, rén), usually translated as *humaneness*, *goodness* or *benevolence* in relation to people; yi (义, yì), *righteousness*, the accent being laid on behaviour; xiao (孝, xiào), which, contrary to traditional translations, I translate as *piety* or *filial virtue*; ci (慈, cí), *parent’s love for children*; xin (信, xìn) – again, in spite of traditional translation of this virtue as *honesty*, I would render it as *trustworthiness*, *being true to one’s word*; zhong (忠, zhōng) – *faithfulness*, *loyalty*; ti (梯, tī), *care*, which the elder siblings should show for the younger ones; and shu (恕, shù), a virtue semantically analogous to Christian forgiveness.

³¹ The Master said: “Heaven engendered the moral virtue [...]” (子曰: “天生德於予 [...]”), *Lunyu*, Book VII, Chapter 23). English translation is based on the Polish version: *Konfucjusz. Analekta*, trans. and ed. Katarzyna Pejda, Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 2018, p. 80.

³² Compare this passage from the *Analects*: “This world has long ago lost the way, so Heaven uses the Master as a wooden bell-clapper” („天下之無道也久矣, 天將以夫子為木鐸”, *Lunyu*, Book III, Chapter 24). English translation is based on Tingting Zhang’s translation into Polish.

³³ Mandate of Heaven (天命) could also be translated as “the calling of Heaven”. It may be understood, as Dawid Rogacz explains, as “Heaven’s vote of confidence offered to the ruler. This Mandate is bestowed each time to the emperor of the dynasty that begins its reign”. See: Dawid Rogacz, “Pojęcie Nieba (Tian) w filozofii konfucjańskiej”, *Przegląd Religioznawczy* 2015, no. 3(257), p. 172.

³⁴ Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, p. 154.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 148.

the author of *Zdania i uwagi* – directs human thought towards the reality transcending earthly life. And though it may seem that this difference constitutes an obstacle in assimilating Mickiewicz’s collection by Chinese readers, perhaps precisely this is its strength. For a man of thought, who no longer struggles with material deficiency, who lives in a world that still deserves the Weberian qualification of “disenchanted”³⁶ and who seeks answers to existential questions in literature, Mickiewicz’s cycle, by virtue of the metaphysical reflections it conveys and a different perception of happiness, could prove to be a very attractive proposal.

3. *Unde malum?*

Having considered the positive aspect of morality, Mickiewicz, following Saint Augustine, asks the essential question: *unde malum?*

SKĄD ZŁO?

Bóg jest dobrem: więc wszystko, na co duch narzeka,
Zło, śmierć i potępienie, pochodzą z człowieka.³⁷

WHENCE EVIL?

God is goodness: so all things that make the soul complain,
Evil, death and damnation, they all come from man.

“God is goodness” – with this strong statement, Mickiewicz, again in line with the saint Bishop of Hippo, who argued with the Manicheans, excluded the possibility of God creating any kind of evil. The statement is reinforced by the absolutising word “all”. Did the Romantic poet mean to entirely encumber the human will and acts with evil? Could it be that Mickiewicz’s Christocentric anthropology proposes such a pessimistic vision of man?³⁸ It seems that this couplet may be elucidated by another gnome from Mickiewicz’s cycle:

CNOTA

Gdy pełniąc cnotę cierpisz trudy i kłopoty,
Jeszcześ nie jest cnotliwym, tylko szukasz cnoty.³⁹

³⁶ See, e.g.: Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons 1930.

³⁷ Adam Mickiewicz, *Zdania i uwagi*, p. 385.

³⁸ In this poem, Mickiewicz’s reflection on the causes of evil reveals strong influence of Saint Augustine. However, this issue would require detailed explanations. The great Bishop of Hippo treated this matter especially in *De moribus Ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum* 2,2,2 (PL 32;1345). Polish discussion thereof can be found in: Hanna Cholwińska, “Zagadnienie genezy zła w myśli świętego Augustyna”, *Studia Theologica Varsaviensia* 1999, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 87–113.

³⁹ Adam Mickiewicz, *Zdania i uwagi*, p. 381.

VIRTUE

If your acts of virtue make you suffer dearly,
You are still not virtuous, but seeking it merely.

In the first line, the poet sketched the image of a man who clearly knows what virtue is, he even has a certain spiritual adherence to it, otherwise he would not act by it. The paradox is brought about by the word “seeking” from the second line. This word suggests that one can and should seek something to which one already internally adheres, and only the search for it will enable full realisation of that which one already knows and even, to some degree, possesses.

This internal adherence to virtues is called by Mickiewicz, in his Parisian *Wykład IX kursu IV* [IX Lecture of the IV Course], “God’s germ within us”.⁴⁰ This statement seems to show that, in the poet’s perception, virtues have their transcendental source in God himself (“God’s germ”), who bestowed them upon man in germinal form, as the bard put it. Man has to seek within himself this God’s germ, find it and cultivate it. It depends upon man, upon his “seeking”, as we read in the analysed poem “Cnota”, whether a beautiful tree of virtuousness will grow from this seed, or whether, as in the case of the gnome “*Skąd zło?*”, the seed will wither, and the man will indeed become the source of “all things that make the soul complain”.

Surprisingly similar anthropological thoughts can be found in the reflections of great Confucian thinkers. In their doctrines, good and evil are “terms for the moral character of an individual”,⁴¹ and the concept of evil is “a moral concept, designating a kind of moral situation in which the moral and physical activities of a human being are conducted in a wrong way”.⁴²

The teachings of Mencius, a disciple of Confucius, seem particularly helpful in conveying Mickiewicz’s thought. The eminent continuator of Master Kong’s philosophy was convinced that man is born naturally good, and evil appears as a deviation from this essential, primordial goodness. Mencius explained his teachings by means of concepts that may be particularly useful for intercultural translation of *Zdania i uwagi*. When trying to answer the question of why evil exists in man, Mencius refers to the concept of human nature (性, xìng), which he believes to be good. At the same time, he persuades that this primordial, innate goodness exists in man only in the form of germs, which is shockingly evocative of Mickiewicz’s “God’s germ within us”. Such germinal goodness is extremely fragile and vulnerable to all destructive influences from the outside, so it demands to be cultivated by man in order to grow into true virtues. It requires a man to undertake a labour, which Mencius, exactly like Mickiewicz, called

⁴⁰ Idem, “Wykład IX kursu IV”, in: idem, *Dzieła. Wydanie Rocznikowe 1798–1998*, eds. Zbigniew Jerzy Nowak, Maria Prussak, Zofia Stefanowska, Czesław Zgorzelski, vol. XI: *Literatura słowiańska. Kurs czwarty*, ed. Julian Maślanka, Warsaw: Czytelnik 1998, p. 104.

⁴¹ Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, p. 160.

⁴² Ibidem.

“seeking”: “Seek – encourages Mencius – and you will find them [innate germinal virtues – TZ]. Neglect and you will lose them”.⁴³

4. Personal reflections in lieu of conclusion

Mickiewicz’s cycle may unceasingly inspire admiration with its inexhaustible spiritual depth, which the poet conveyed by means of concise, masterly constructed gnomes. As a person who was brought up in the Confucian culture and at the same time has the opportunity to learn about the Christian tradition and the literature it originated, I am well aware of the challenge that Mickiewicz’s work presents for a translator.

At the beginning of this article, I presented two schools in the field of translation studies and the theories they propose. In my opinion, neither of them could meet the challenges faced by a translator trying to present to Chinese readers Mickiewicz’s *Zdania i uwagi*. The poetic cycle of the Polish Romantic comprises all the riches of metaphysical reflection. Even though the Confucian tradition can offer a set of philosophical-religious terms as a key allowing to translate the work of Mickiewicz into Chinese, yet for a Chinese reader, each of these terms evokes associations, which, if they are applied literally and thoughtlessly, may obscure and even deform the original message of Mickiewicz’s poems. The resulting risk is that the work may lose its identity and become a “blend” of Confucian notions. As for the second theory, which understands translation as a platform for experiencing the foreign in its pure form, it may leave the target reader disoriented, and the process of reading the work will be at best an adventure with a taste of novelty, never an existential or metaphysical experience.

In view of the above, I think that in order to make Mickiewicz’s poetic collection and the reflections contained therein understandable for a Chinese reader, a third way is needed, namely a critical translation, which would contain a thematically organised introduction, obligatorily prepared by a person with adequate competences, not necessarily by the translator himself. Such an introduction should begin with an explanation of gnomes speaking of those moral issues that are particularly close to Chinese readers.

Man, says Christian theology, is a creation *capax Dei*. It lies in his nature to seek the supernatural meaning and for the answers to ultimate, metaphysical questions. I am convinced that such a desire, even unconscious or unspoken, may be satisfied in a Chinese reader by Mickiewicz’s *Zdania i uwagi*, upon the condition, however, that they be translated with proper respect for the original work and for the values it contains.

⁴³ Yang Bojun (杨伯峻), 孟子译注 [Menzi Yizhu], Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1960, 6A: 8. English translation: *The Chinese Classics*, trans. and ed. James Legge, vol. II: *The Life and Teachings of Mencius*, London: Trübner 1875, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/legge-the-chinese-classics-vol-2-the-life-and-teachings-of-mencius> [accessed 3 July 2025].

I take Confucius' thought ultimately as a context that may help understand the thoughts expressed in Mickiewicz's collection. As a meditative work encouraging reflection (an attitude very deeply rooted in the Chinese culture), it should be approached by a Chinese reader in an individual, subjective way, which would make it possible to draw personally important thoughts and adapt the reading process to one's own needs and culture.

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