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IN MEMORY OF ROMAN SŁAWINSKI

It was a great sadness to learn of Roman Sławinski's untimely death from a phone call of our common friend former Ambassador to China Ksawery Burski. Then came a kind message from Roman's colleague Nicolas Levi, in early August 2015. Roman had been a friend for many years, and I thought he would be always moving around among sinological circles in China and Europe, switching with everlasting elegance and bewildering ease from one language to another on a large range of topics in tune with changing times and audiences.

I met Roman for the first time in January 1968 in Paris. He was spending there two or three months for research under some agreement with the Polish Science Academy. Jean Chesneaux, the French specialist of the Chinese worker movement, who was then directeur d'études at the 6th Section of the École pratique des hautes études (that section is today the École des hautes études en sciences sociales), was preparing a collective volume on popular movements and secret societies in 19th and 20th century China, and had requested Roman to provide a contribution on his current research about the Red Spears Society (*Hong qiang hui* 红枪会) in the 1920's.¹

¹ The book was published as *Mouvements populaires et sociétés secrètes en Chine aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, Paris, Maspero, 1970. Roman Sławinski's contribution appears pp. 393–406, « Les Piques Rouges et la révolution chinoise de 1925–1927 ». An English translation, *Popular Movements and Secret Societies in China, 1840–1950*, was published by Stanford University Press in 1972.



Professor Roman Sławiński, Xi'an, Shaanxi province, 2014

Photo: Jerzy Zdanowski.

I do not know exactly how Chesneaux made contact with Roman. As a very talented intellectual and one of the rare historians of contemporary China affiliated with the French Communist party, Chesneaux was well acquainted with many noted China scholars in Eastern Europe, in the Soviet Union, as well as in Western Europe and the United States. He was also actively involved in the Junior Sinologists activities. That organization had started in 1948, on the initiative of a few Dutch and British scholars, with a conference convened in Cambridge in order to bring together European China scholars who had been isolated by the tragedies of war, so that they could exchange information and rebuild an academic community. A conference was then scheduled every year in a different sinological centre. West Germans participated in 1949. From 1953 on, scholars from East Germany, other East European countries and the Soviet Union joined also. In 1955, in Leiden, Jian Bozan and Zhou Yiliang were sent from China to participate. The next year, in Paris, a Chinese delegation made of Jian Bozan, Zhou Yiliang, Xia Nai and Zhang Zhilian attended. It is probably on the occasion of one of those conferences that Chesneaux first met Roman Sławinski. In fact, his collective volume on popular movements and secret societies was based on the papers presented at the conference of Junior Sinologists held in Leeds in 1965.

While in Paris, Roman Sławinski attended dutifully Chesneaux's seminar, rue de Varennes, in a lovely 18th century building overlooking private gardens, rented from the Paris archbishop. I attended it too, as the only place at the time to get some advanced training in Chinese contemporary history. Jean Chesneaux was not yet entitled to supervise postgraduate work, but had agreed to help his friend

Professor Jean-Baptiste Duroselle who was the supervisor of my Ph. D. at the Sorbonne. The audience of Chesneaux's seminar was an odd gathering of some twenty people, eventually over thirty for hot topics, around a large oval table covered with dark green felt fabric. There were a few ordinary students in their twenties, some former or active militants of various leftist obedience in their thirties and forties, and older or retired activists in their fifties and beyond. All of them, beside their private political commitment of one sort or the other, had an intellectual pursuit related to Chesneaux's own interests, which extended from India to Japan, with strong emphasis on revolution in Vietnam and China.

Among the audience wearing mostly black polo jumpers, Roman Sławinski with his finely combed curled blond hair, his blue suit and tie was perhaps the only one attuned to the aristocratic setting of the place, all the more queer since he was the only one to come directly from a socialist country. He gave a presentation of his research in very elegant and fluent French, on 25th January 1968. I found back in my files the notes I took on that occasion. His account of the Red Spears Society was very factual and detailed. It scrutinized closely and critically all available sources. He did not put forward any especially Marxist interpretation, but seemed more interested in identifying the religious elements that could link the movement to one or the other well-known religious sects active in North China since the 17th century, and in tracing accurately its differences with other movements and groups. He defined the Red Spears Society as one local leader of a widely spread self-defence movement of peasants. However, he skilfully eschewed any general theoretical or philosophical conclusions, and even the idea of a "model" as Lucien Bianco's questions tried to press upon him. After the lecture, I talked with him and discovered he knew Jan Rowinski and Ksawery Burski, the two most brilliant young sinologists at the Polish Embassy in Peking, whom I had the chance to meet during my stay in China in 1964-1966. I told him of unforgettable picnics in the midst of Peking summer heat at the unique swimming-pool of the Polish Embassy where a joyful team of British, Indian, Russian and French diplomats and students would be kindly invited by their Polish friends, and would engage in endless discussions about China. I found that I even kept in my file Roman's address in Warsaw, which he wrote down for me on a sheet of paper.

During that stay in Paris, Roman Sławinski also attended at Chesneaux's seminar a session on the policies of the Indonesian Communist Party under Aïdit in 1963, another one with a paper by Okamoto Sae from Tokyo University on literati and foreign science in 17th and 18th century South China, and one on the beginnings of the Communist Party and its leadership in Vietnam from 1930 to 1936, with a paper by Georges Boudarel, then a peaceful academic, who was later put on trial as one of the most cruel political commissar against French prisoners in Vietminh's camps during the Indochina War. Roman had left back to Poland several weeks before the May 1968 tempest stormed the French academic world, and well beyond.

In January and February, Chesneaux had strongly advised the audience at his seminar to attend the next Junior Sinologists Conference to be held in Prague in early September, and featuring the Chinese 1919 May Fourth Movement as its main theme. However, the Soviet tanks entered Prague on 20th August. Many of our Czech colleagues were put in jail or sent down to clean the streets. The conference was cancelled. Four other Junior Sinologists Conferences were held later, the last one in 1972. I did not attend, and I don't know whether Roman Sławinski attended any. Those meetings were held in a strained atmosphere with a steadily declining number of people, so that they were dropped altogether.

When Kristopher Schipper and Professor Yves Hervouet joined hands to rebuild a proper scholarly organization among European sinologists under the name European Association for Chinese Studies, Poland was represented by Janusz Chmielewski in the provisional Board that convened in Paris in February 1975. However, Roman Sławinski attended the first conference of the new EACS held in Paris on 5-11 September 1976, and presented a paper on the Red Spears Society on 10 September. The EACS Conferences would take place every two years. I met him again at the next conference in Italy, in Ortisei, in September 1978, where he was elected on the EACS Board. We met also at the Zürich conference in September 1980. There, to my great astonishment, I discovered that he had completely abandoned the Red Spears peasants. He presented a purely aesthetic paper on the Tang poet Wang Wei and his poem on the principles of chromatic landscape. He told me he had switched his interest to Chinese classical literature and art, which he found more palatable than peasant revolution. I think that I saw him again at the EACS conference in Cambridge two years later. However, he then dropped his membership, and did not attend the EACS conferences any more. I would eventually get some news about him from other Polish colleagues.

Therefore, it was a happy surprise when I received a phone call from him in May 1994. He had come to Paris on honeymoon with his new wife, a charming young lady with blond hair and blue eyes, whom he told me came from a Tatar family established in Poland on the Baltic shore since the 14th century. They both came for dinner at my home, and kindly brought wonderful smoked eels from the Baltic. It was a real feast! Roman seemed rejuvenated, with many new projects, but not so much related to China. He was more involved in Polish intellectual, artistic and academic life. At the time, I had a very brilliant Polish Ph. D. student with whom I had long discussions about sinology and intellectual developments in Poland. I could very well understand Roman's enthusiasm for broader perspectives and unknown fields. I enjoyed very much the evening with him and his wife. Then we lost contact for several years.

In September 2000, China gave us the opportunity to meet once again. We were both invited to a conference on "Modern China and the World" organized by the Institute of Modern History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. It was held in a most fancy place, a kind of recreation park in Peking suburbs where vari-

ous pavilions had been built, each with a different foreign architectural style: there was the Italian villa, the French castle, the English Oxford college, the Alhambra, the American ranch, a swimming-pool, and the like. We received lavish treatment. Chinese institutions in social sciences were just beginning to receive fairly generous funding for entertaining guests, and our Chinese colleagues were clearly enjoying the new luxury immensely. Roman and I, who could well remember former conditions of Chinese academic life, would smile at their pleasure and exchange some jokes about the spell of feudal and colonial lifestyles. Roman presented a very nice paper on Chinese relations with Poland in the 19th century.

After the conference he stayed a few days at the Embassy with his friend Jan Rowinski. Ksawery Burski, who was then the Polish Ambassador to China, managed to invite us for an unforgettable private dinner at his home. Each of us would remember his own memories of China and Chinese through the years. We would make and remake Chinese past and future, compare China again and again with various other countries. We drank toasts in Chinese Shaoxing yellow wine and in Polish vodka. We all agreed that studying China was an endless task that brought a lot of meaning and delight in our lives, and had also enlightened our common European feeling. I keep pictures of this dinner.

The next day, Roman took me to the Panjiayuan antique market newly opened in the eastern suburb of Peking city. There he gave me a fine demonstration of his stupendous ability in Chinese. He was interested in porcelain, which he had been collecting randomly for many years, he told me. His infallible eye soon spotted a teapot in a very average junk shop. While looking at other odd pieces, he engaged conversation with the shopkeeper in a very soft and courteous tone. The shopkeeper, who did not draw much attention from the crowd of Chinese and foreign passers-by, was obviously delighted to be able to communicate so easily with such a distinguished foreign customer. They talked heartily about life, business and changes in Peking. Roman asked eventually about the price of the teapot, which was fairly high. I was startled and asked him in French whether he really wanted to buy it. He replied that it was a rare “eggshell” sample, a very thin type of chinaware, which he did not have in his collection. Then he went on talking with the shopkeeper on the world, art, and porcelain, the three of us sitting down and commenting the various pieces in the shop. At the end, the shopkeeper sold the coveted teapot for a price ten times less than the original price. The teapot was carefully wrapped, and Roman brought it back to Warsaw the following day. I expressed my admiration at the utter chineseness of his Chinese, so fluent, idiomatic and with the right intonation, which very few foreigners are able to grasp adequately. He then told me laughingly that he was never able to learn tones properly, but that it was not essential for being understood, since many Chinese themselves, being used to their own dialect, did not know the tones in the common language. What was really important was tonic accent, as a Chinese teacher taught him, it was a music in the sentence, and he enjoyed it, especially when talking with ordinary folks in Peking.

Our last encounter was in Paris on 5 February 2013. Roman was in Paris for a short stay. He came for dinner at my home with a friend of his, Leszek Kanczugaowski. They had some project of organizing a conference at UNESCO on Chinese cultural and artistic influence in Poland, Korea and Japan from the 18th to the 20th century. I introduced them to some of my colleagues in Chinese art history and history of Chinese thought. A few months later, they had to drop the idea because Roman had retired from Lublin University, which was supposed to provide some funds. We spent, nevertheless, a very lively evening. Roman would discuss literature, painting, and gardens in a subtle way, as telling secrets which he had long kept for himself. It was his way all along. He would hold a very special relationship to China, as well as nourish fondness for life in Paris. He could fit in with so many different surroundings, and remain a scholar in his own way, always under a haze of mystery.