

Tomasz Ewertowski

School of Russian and Eurasian Studies
Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai
Faculty of Polish and Classic Philology
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poznań
tewert@amu.edu.pl

Northeast China as a Contact Zone in Polish and Serbian Travelogues, 1900-1939

Abstract

Historically, Northeast China (Manchuria) was a border zone between China and the nomadic peoples, as well as between the Russian and Qing empires since the 17th century. In the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th century, a number of factors (penetration by foreign powers, collapse of the Qing Empire, revolution in Russia, Japanese expansion and demographic changes) transformed this area into “a contact zone” in the sense given by Mary Louise Pratt. The main focus of the article is the way in which this contact zone was described by Polish and Serbian travellers. Their accounts can provide a special outlook, because Poland and Serbia did not participate extensively in the colonial penetration into China, however, Serbs and Poles travelled there, often representing Russian institutions. Therefore they were observing China as agents of an imperial power, but they did not identify themselves fully with it. Our analysis of the image of Northeast China as a contact zone will be divided into three broad sections: 1) political and military expansion 2) economic and demographic relations 3) transcultural phenomena of everyday life.

Keywords: transculturalism, travel writing, imagology, Northeast China, image of China, Polish literature, Serbian literature.

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Introduction

The contemporary term “Northeast China” (东北, Dongbei) refers to the three provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning. This area was also referred to as Manchuria. Historically, this region was a border zone between Chinese civilization and nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples, as well as between the Russian and Qing empires since the 17th century (see Dmochowski, 2001; Mancall, 1971). In the second half of the 19th century and especially in the first half of the 20th century, a number of factors (military and economic penetration by various foreign powers, collapse of the Qing Empire, revolution in Russia, Japanese expansion and demographic changes) transformed Northeast China into “a contact zone” in the sense given by Mary Louise Pratt: “[a] social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in the context of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 2011, p. 26).

Northeast China could be seen as a boundary between Chinese, European, and Japanese influence; Manchu and other local peoples also played a significant role. Rivalry for hegemony was not only a political one, but also a competition between different ways of life (nomads vs. farmers, tradition vs. modernization), different ideologies (nationalism, communism, capitalism), and different religions (traditional Chinese religions, Christianity, local shamanic traditions). According to the editors of the inspiring volume *Entangled Histories: The Transcultural Past of Northeast China*, the interactions of people from different cultures and entanglement of different ways of life, cultural values, and customs resulted in a transcultural experience (Ben-Canaan, Grüner, & Prodöhl, 2014, p. 3), i.e. cultures are not described as pure holistic essences, while emphasis is given to phenomena which overlap cultural borders (Dagnino, 2012, p. 13).

According to Mark C. Elliott, in Western Europe before the 18th century, what is nowadays called Northeast China used to be part of a vaguely defined space known as Tartary (Elliott, 2000). Khitan and Jurchen people emerged there, and from the 11th to the 13th century they controlled a vast area of China proper, creating their own dynasties – respectively Liao and Jin. In the late 15th and early 16th century, descendants of the Jurchen people created a powerful tribe confederation, which adopted the name Manchu in 1635 (Li, 2002, p. 27). Finally, they took control over the whole of China, establishing the Qing dynasty. The name Manchuria became universally used in the second half of the 19th century. The current and widely used

name 'Northeast China' echoes a geopolitical change – in the 20th century the region was thoroughly sinicized, and the old name “Manchuria” is seen as associated with Japanese and Russian imperialism. Elliott himself still prefers to use this term, arguing that it reflects a distinct identity of the region formed during the Qing dynasty. In this article, we use both names interchangeably.

The main focus of the article is the way in which Polish and Serbian travellers from the first half of the 20th century described this contact zone. As such, the following authors are investigated in this research: Jerzy Bandrowski, Aleksandar Đurić, Roman Fajans, Józef Gieysztor, Mieczysław Jankowski, Aleksander Janta-Pończyński, Jovan Milanković, Milorad Rajčević, Władysław Sieroszewski, Vlada Stanojević, Stevan Stanišić, Ozren Subotić, Konstanty Symonolewicz, and Milutin Velimirović¹. Travellers can be roughly divided into three groups. Some of them arrived in Northeast China while working in Russia before the First World War. In this period many Poles were subjects of the Russian Empire, so a significant number worked for Russian institutions in China. Also, quite a number of Serbs were interested in pursuing their studies or professional careers in Russia, partly because of traditional affinity to a fellow Slavic and Orthodox country. The second group consisted of people who escaped to China after the revolution of 1917. E.g. many Serbian soldiers was forced to travel from the European part of Russia via Siberia to Northeast China and then by ship to Europe. Independent travellers or journalists were a third group.

An analysis of travelogues provides a unique perspective into research regarding the borders of civilization. According to Vladimir Gvozden, travel writing is a textual trace of the real journey, documenting the encounter with space, time, social hierarchy and values (Gvozden, 2011). Descriptions of foreign countries are based on linking “unknown entities to known reference points, and to familiar frameworks of meaning and understanding” (Thompson, 2011, p. 67). Consequently, travelogues show the material, social and cultural reality of the described places; however, this image is constructed according to the writers' and their projected readers' knowledge and values. From this point of view, works of Polish and Serbian authors can provide a special outlook on Northeast China as a contact zone because of these travellers' particular points of view. Poland and Serbia did not participate extensively in the colonial penetration into China. What is more, they were also victims of imperial actions. However, quite a few Serbs and a significant number of Poles travelled to and worked

¹ More information on Serbian travellers in China can be found in Pušić (1998, 2006). About Polish community in Northeast China see Cabanowski (1993); Furier (2008); Kałuski (2001); Winiarz (2001); Yong-Deog (2010).

in Northeast China, often representing Russian imperial or commercial institutions. Therefore on the one hand, they were observing China as Europeans and as agents of an imperial power. On the other hand, they did not identify themselves fully with the great powers, sometimes being very critical towards imperialism. Furthermore, one might trace some parallels between these two Slavic literatures in light of the aforementioned historical experience; however, some fundamental differences (e.g. attitude to Russia) should also be taken into account.

Contacts between civilizations happened in various spheres of human activity, thus our analysis of the image of Northeast China as a contact zone will be divided into three broad sections. We will pay attention to the way in which travellers presented: 1) political and military expansion 2) economic and demographic relations 3) transcultural phenomena of everyday life.

Political and military expansion

Before embarking on the main part of our analysis, it is necessary to give a basic outline of the history of Northeast China before the Second World War. In the first half of the 20th century, the history of Northeast China was dominated by the rivalry among great powers and social unrest. During the Boxer Rebellion, Russian forces occupied Manchuria, killing thousands of Chinese citizens. However, a Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905 opened the way for Japanese influence in this region. The second decade of the 20th century witnessed a string of events which brought great changes and instability to Northeast China. The fall of the Qing dynasty and establishment of the republic resulted in anarchy. Various warlords struggled for hegemony, while the central government had no control over large areas of the country, including Manchuria. The First World War marked a further rise in Japanese power in East Asia, and the revolution in Russia had an even more significant impact. A flow of refugees dramatically changed the cultural landscape of the area. Fighting between white Russians, foreign armies and the Bolsheviks over control of Siberia and the so-called "Russian Far East" caused even further destabilization. Furthermore, relations between the Soviet Union, Republic of China, and the Empire of Japan were becoming more and more complicated. As Joshua Fogel claims, the Japanese thought that after the fall of the Qing Empire, the new China lost its right to Manchuria (Fogel, 1996, p. 143). In 1931 Japanese forces occupied Northeast China and proclaimed the state of Manchukuo, with the last Qing emperor Puyi Asino-Goro as

a puppet ruler. Manchukuo became a base for Japanese military actions against China when a full-scale Sino-Japanese war broke out in 1937. In the late 1930's, Northeast China also became a theatre of conflict between the Soviet Union and Japan.

The short historical outline presented above shows how in the border zone political and military expansion intertwined with intense intercultural contacts. Therefore, we will first analyse how the different authors described the expansive actions of foreign powers in Northeast China.

Wacław Sieroszewski, a Polish writer, political activist and exile, who spent a significant part of his life in Siberia and conducted ethnographic research there, visited East Asia in 1903-1904 as a representative of the Russian Geographical Society (on Chinese, postcolonial and colonial topics in Sieroszewski's works, see Bachórz, 2008; Kijak, 2010). While writing on Russian politics towards Manchuria before the war with Japan, he presented a dilemma then faced by the Tsarist empire. Military officials would like to annex the land, claiming that efforts to date were too costly to lose control over the land now. Civilians wanted to keep Northeast China in their sphere of influence, thinking that it would be cheaper and easier if the Chinese administer it themselves. Russians should develop industry and trade in Russian cities, which will attract the local population and lead to lasting, natural, and mental annexation (Sieroszewski, 1904, p. 96). A dilemma of direct and indirect rule was faced by all colonial powers, so Sieroszewski's remarks showed the different ways of expansion in Northeast China as a contact zone, as well as putting this area in a universal perspective. As we will see later, for some writers Chinese colonisation of Manchuria was a perfect example of a lasting, cultural annexation.

The theme of spiritual expansion is also present in Milorad Rajčević's account, although contrary to Sieroszewski, the Serbian writer was writing after the Russo-Japanese war. Rajčević was a Serbian globetrotter who travelled around the world for a few years. He visited Asia in the period between the Russo-Japanese war and the First World War. He made a number of positive remarks on Russian expansion, but being very critical towards Japanese actions. Praising the Russian role in the development of Harbin, the Serbian traveller complained that nowadays Russian spirit is being subjected to the "Mongolian nations" – China and Japan (Rajčević, 1930, pp. 41–42). He was very critical especially towards Japanese expansion, claiming that even if the Nippon islands are overpopulated, their expansion to the continent is politically motivated (meaning not natural). It was meaningful that harbouring suspicions towards Japanese motives, the author did not apply the same logic to Russian expansion in East Asia. Taking into account Rajčević's Russophile tendency, often expressed in

his writings, this is not surprising. An additional factor is racial ideology. Writing on Russo-Japanese war, the traveller mentioned with disdain Europeans who did not support Russians during the war and preferred the victory of the yellow race instead of its own (Rajčević, 1930). A Slavophile interpretation of Russian expansion in East Asia and conflicts between Japan and the European power was also present among other Serbian authors, e.g. Milutin Velimirović. This writer stayed in China in 1918 as a member of a Russian-Mongolian trade mission (Gvozden, 2011, pp. 88, 93; Pušić, 2006, pp. 129–130). He claimed that all Slavic peoples were waiting for a Russian victory (Velimirović, 1930, p. 9). These Slavophile statements of course did not recognize the Polish experience and support for the Japanese among Polish artists and intellectuals (Crowley, 2008).

While Rajčević praised the Russian spirit in East Asia and Velimirović identified Slavic interest with Russian expansion, a totally different point of view is represented by the Polish writer Jerzy Bandrowski, who visited Primorsky Krai, Manchuria, and Japan on the way from revolutionary Russia to Europe in 1918. Bandrowski wrote that Russians could not “spiritually annex” East Asia, and that this world was represented only by one Polish writer, Waclaw Sieroszewski, who could be compared with Jack London, Joseph Conrad, and Rudyard Kipling. Bandrowski stated that Russians were keen to conquer, but did not appreciate conquered lands, did not love them, and so could not expand their souls, and instead of being real conquerors became destroyers (Bandrowski, 1923, p. 19). In the case of all four authors mentioned here, it is very clear how much their national and political background affects their interpretation of human geography and history. Furthermore, Bandrowski’s choice of authors compared with Sieroszewski also reflected a colonial and imperial attitude towards Manchuria.

The war can be treated as an ultimate violent expression of the struggle for hegemony in the border zone; therefore we need to pay more attention to a few issues related to the description of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905. Both Velimirović and another Serbian writer, Ozren Subotić, were to some extent excited by the magnitude of the conflict. They praised Russian soldiers and Japanese victors, but criticized foreign commanders in the Tsarist army (which reflected a popular stereotype that bad government in Russia is due to influence from outside). The conflict between two empires in Northeast Asia may be treated as a harbinger of horrors for the massive, mechanical warfare of the First World War (Steinberg, 2008), so the reaction of both writers – shock mixed with awe – was partially parallel to later reactions to the great clash between powers in the second decade of the 20th century. Both Serbian authors felt affinity towards Russians;

however, humanistic values made them sensitive to other participants in the conflict. Subotić wrote with sympathy about a dying Japanese soldier and his mother (Subotić, 1921, p. 99). Velimirović devoted a long paragraph to the description of violent acts committed by both Russian and Japanese forces on Chinese civilians:

How many Chinese were swallowed by the Russo-Japanese war?! Both Russians and Japanese were beating them, seeing spies in calm citizens and dangerous sorcerers in old people. They were destroying Chinese temples, burning villages and forcing a whole crowd of Chinese, tying their queues into one knot and such groups of cut off heads hang on a tree. Russians compensated every defeat on the front by a victory over calm village and miserable villagers² (Velimirović, 1930, pp. 15–16).

Velimirović is described by Serbian scholars as a writer who could fence himself off from racial stereotypes and appreciate other cultures from the point of view of cultural relativism (Gvozden, 2011, pp. 229–230), which is also seen in the quotation above. Furthermore, the Serbian writer made an unambiguous claim that victims of the struggle for hegemony on the border of civilizations are the common people. Therefore, if one wants to draw far-reaching conclusions from Velimirović's writing, the result will be antithetical. On the one hand, the martial heroism of two armies fighting on foreign soil is praised, making way for an apology for imperialism. On the other hand, civilian victims are mourned, leading to an anti-imperialist, anti-militarist conclusion. This can be seen in the typical ambiguity of the first half of the 20th century, when ideas like nationalism, eurocentrism, imperialism, pacifism and respect for the self-determination of peoples were competing sometimes within the mind of one person.

The aforementioned authors wrote about the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905, however it was not the only military confrontation in Northeast China in the first half of the 20th century. A contact zone is often a place of violent military struggle, therefore in Polish and Serbian travel writings we can find remarks about various conflicts. Konstanty Symonowicz, who worked in China, mostly in the Northeast as a diplomat for more than 18 years, i.e. during 1912-1930 and again for a short period after the Second World War (Kajdański, 2005, pp. 323–340; Winiarz, 2012), left

² “Ali koliko je kineza progutaao rusko-japanski rat?! Tukli su ih i rusi i japanci, koji su u mirnim stanovnicima videli špijune, a u starcima opasne vračare. Rušili su kineske hramove, palili sela, terali čitave gomile kineza vezujući svima perčine u jedan zajednički čvor i takve grupe otsečenih glava vešali o staro drveće. Svaki svoj neuspeh na frontu, rusi su nadoknađivali pobedom nad mirnim selom i nesrećnim stanovnicima.” All translations into English are our own, unless otherwise indicated. For the convenience of readers, all Serbian Cyrillic texts have been transcribed into the Serbian Latin script.

behind two books and a number of articles about his Chinese experience. Symonolewicz devoted some attention to the Sino-Soviet conflict of 1929 (Symonolewicz, 1932, pp. 213–217, 1938, pp. 187–190). As we will see later, the Polish author was in general very critical towards Westernization of China, claiming that it was only superficial, and for this conflict he blamed young, westernized elites. Judging the performance of the Chinese army, he criticized an inefficient bureaucracy and the depravation of its commanders.

In the 1930s, conflicts in Northeast China between China and Japan were also a subject of interest for two Polish travellers: Aleksander Janta-Pończyński and Roman Fajans. Both were professional reporters, and were thus looking for exciting information while trying to explore a war situation on the border between Japanese-controlled Manchukuo and China, which made their accounts different from other authors described in this article. Fajans' book *W Chinach znowu wojna* ("A war in China once again") already conferred a message about military focus in its title (Fajans, 1939). Janta-Pończyński's two books described his long travels in Asia and the Pacific Ocean (Janta-Pończyński, 1936, 1939), a narration about China and about the war in Northeast China was just a part of his travelogues. Because of the reporters' point of view and genre conventions, both authors mixed their personal impressions with stories of the local people and general conclusions. Their accounts showed how complicated was the situation in the border zone. E.g. Fajans wrote that Japanese control over Northeast China was based on railway lines and fortified train stations, outside of which there was only "no man's land" (Fajans, 1939, p. 313). Janta-Pończyński was surprised that Chinese peasants calmly reacted to the presence of Japanese soldiers (it was still 1934, before the full-scale Japanese invasion into China proper), because the well-disciplined occupying forces were treating them much more humanely than the unruly, pillaging Chinese army (Janta-Pończyński, 1936, pp. 53–54).

The aforementioned wars were attempts to achieve control over Northeast China by one of the warring sides. However, one of the effects of war was a transcultural material culture – i.e. cemeteries of fallen soldiers. As Madaleine Herren points out, "An increasing number of foreign cemeteries testify to the effects of both migration and imperialism. In death, so it seems, we can find the ultimate metaphor for an eternal claim on space" (Herren, 2014). Foreign graves on Northeast Chinese soil were mentioned by a few authors. Vlade Stanojević, a doctor and one of the soldiers who came to China from revolutionary Russia during the First World War, mentioned many cemeteries around the city of Mukden – hallmarks of the 1904–1905 war (Stanojević, 1934, pp. 165–166).

Aleksandar Đurić was a member of the same wave of soldiers who had to cross the whole of Siberia, Manchuria and then travel by ship to Europe. In his war memoirs, he recollected a moment of surprise when among high pagodas in Northeast China he saw a cemetery and a monument with a text in Russian (Đurić, 1938, p. 177). In the area then controlled by the Japanese, there were signs of Russian presence. Milorad Rajčević and Milutin Velimirović compared Russian and Japanese monuments to the soldiers killed during the war. Polish authors did not pay as much attention to war cemeteries; however, Symonolewicz wrote about another cemetery which signified the transcultural character of Northeast China – the Polish cemetery in Harbin (Symonolewicz, 1932, pp. 179–180).

Economy and demography

In a previous section, we saw how travellers described the political and military expansion of great powers. However, expansion also had an economic dimension, while the transcultural character of the Manchurian contact zone was connected to its complicated demography, which is the focus of this section.

Some travellers mentioned international commerce in Northeast China, describing the range of products in the shops and the activity of traders. Rajčević admired the city of Dalniy (today's Dalian) and its free port status and wealth. He extolled the international management of the place and the fact that business people from all over the world were coming there, exporting and importing goods (Rajčević, 1930, p. 85). Aleksandar Đurić was impressed by the commercial development of Harbin; he mentioned a great variety of goods from Russia, Japan, China, and America (Đurić, 1938, p. 168). Józef Gieysztor, who was a member of a scientific expedition to Manchuria and Japan in 1903 (about Gieysztor, see Kajdański, 2005, pp. 243–258), described the colonial patterns of trade in the port of Inkou (Yinkou): raw materials were transported to Japan, central China and Europe; European, American and Japanese industrial products were distributed in Manchuria (Gieysztor, 1904, pp. 134, 139). Gieysztor also mentioned a Chinese custom office managed by an Englishman, Sir Robert Hart, claiming that thanks to foreign control China's income from customs grew significantly (Gieysztor, 1904, p. 140). A clear sign of foreign domination over China is presented by the Polish author as a benefit, without mentioning that due to reparations demanded by the Boxer Protocol, virtually all income from tariffs was used to pay off debts to foreign powers, so the custom office controlled by Sir Hart was in effect

bringing profits to Western governments³. This shows some limitations on the travellers' assessment.

Among Polish writers, the issue of international trade is also mentioned by Symonolewicz and Fajans; however, they did it in a very different way from authors writing at the beginning of the 20th century. After the 1930's, and feeling themselves to be proud representatives of an independent, industrializing Poland of the interwar period, both authors were concentrating on possibilities for Polish commercial expansion in Northeast China.

As we have seen, all the aforementioned authors were impressed by the development of international trade. When writing about the development of commerce they were using words full admiration, so we see that international business was perceived in general as something good and worth pursuing. However, authors also emphasized the nationality of traders and the goods' place of origin, thereby making a strong claim that "capital has a nationality" – market activity would be one more field in the rivalry among nations, and thus Northeast China as a contact zone between civilizations was a place of commercial competition.

Symonolewicz's notion of Manchuria as an open field for Polish business reflected his general attitude towards this country: it should be a field for capitalist expansion. He made an interesting comparison between Northeast China and the Spanish conquest of the Americas: "The North of Manchuria is Eldorado for the conquistadors of the 20th century, who will come here armed with capital and machines"⁴ (Symonolewicz, 1932, p. 15). A few pages later Symonolewicz returns to this metaphor, linking it with the issue of Chinese peasants moving into Manchuria. He claimed that many of them died, fighting nature, bandits and their own Chinese administration, but finally they would own the land, and then Northeast China would become Eldorado for the 20th-century conquistadors (Symonolewicz, 1932, p. 22). The conquest of Manchuria meant both an enterprise of international capitalism and Chinese farmers' migration. It seems as if the Polish author did not believe in Chinese state institutions, but highly appreciated the endurance and hard work of the common people. They were the ones who would create in Manchuria conditions for development, but it would also

³ Western control of the Chinese custom service had already started with the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), ending the first opium war. William Rowe commented as follows: "the Qing gave away the sovereign right, presumably enjoyed by all nation-states, to determine its own taxes on imported goods; these rates could be adjusted in the future only with the agreement of Britain" (Rowe, 2009, p. 172).

⁴ „Mandżurja Północna – to Eldorado dla konkwistadorów dwudziestego wieku, którzy przyjdą uzbrojeni w kapitał i w maszyny”.

open up possibilities not only for China itself but for modern capitalism as well. However, it has to be emphasized that Symonolewicz was also very critical towards foreign privileges in China, writing that often foreigners behaved like unwanted guests (Symonolewicz, 1932, pp. 238–239).

One of the crucial Russian economic investments in Northeast China was the signing of a contract to create a Russian railway concession in 1896. Railway power can be seen as a “tool of empire”; in Manchuria “foreign-dominated railways helped set the conditions for the region’s political, economic, and social growth” (Elleman, Köll, & Tak Matsusaka, 2010, p. 6). Construction of the railway brought significant changes, one being the construction of the city of Harbin, which was visited and described by many Polish and Serbian travellers. The control over the railway was a bone of contention between Russia (later the Soviet Union), Japan, and China (for more information on the Chinese Eastern Railway, see Holm, 1991; Kajdański, 2000). Therefore it is not surprising that Polish and Serbian travellers wrote about it, especially as many of them travelled through Manchuria by train or even worked for this enterprise (Józef Gieysztor). A very common remark presents the railway as a factor linking Europe and East Asia. One of the first Serbs who left a travel account of his journey by the Trans-Siberian and China Eastern Railway from Moscow via Manchuria and Harbin to Port Arthur (today Lüshunkou, part of the Dalian agglomeration) was Stevan Stanišić (Stanišić, 2010). A short text by Stanišić shows how the railway contributed to creating a transcultural space, because the author left behind many remarks on cross-cultural encounters with the Chinese and other East Asian ethnicities in train compartments and at stations. For a 19th century reflection on railway travel, it was typical to talk about the “annihilation of space and time” (Schivelbusch, 2014, p. 33). While writing about railways in Manchuria and their links with the Trans-Siberian Railway, travellers showed that this “annihilation” also meant creating a way of life in which man could more easily follow his customs and habits. Ozren Subotić wrote with admiration that this gigantic railway connected two oceans and said that one could get from Vladivostok through Manchuria straight to Novi Sad. If one drank a cup of tea in Vladivostok, after just 15 days he or she could have a beer in Novi Sad (Subotić, 1921, p. 48). In the past, travellers crossing Asia were exposed to different cultures for months and had to adjust their way of life to local conditions; the railway made this obsolete, one could have tea in one place and after just two weeks drink a beer in another. However, the work of Schivelbusch, quoted above, dealt with the 19th century, so even for writers at the beginning of the 20th century, accustomed to the industrialized era, the merits and expectations might be very demanding. We could see it when comparing different

remarks about the railway journey in Sieroszewski's account. In one place he wrote that it became possible to get from Warsaw to Beijing, changing a train just (sic!) three times (Sieroszewski, 1904, p. 280) – this statement is quite similar to Subotić's. However, in another place he stated that going from Europe to East Asia by train was a lengthy torture: the road from Moscow to Port Arthur took 20 days and it required changing train three times (Sieroszewski, 1904, p. 62). As we can see, one author could see three changes as many or just a few. Sieroszewski, in general, wrote about the Russian railway in Manchuria in very positive terms and emphasized its economic and civilizing potential. Shortening the way to trade with "the East", the railway was necessary for industrial Europe (Sieroszewski, 1904, p. 59). Due to its international character, it would bring benefits, whose value could not be calculated only in monetary terms: "Furthermore, in its zone of influence, the railway will hugely improve the level of culture, increase salaries, teach natives to work diligently, quickly and precisely, make them accustomed to some comforts and to respect themselves"⁵ (Sieroszewski, 1904, p. 59). Pratt, analysing travel writing about South America in the 19th century, makes the point that many travellers were in fact motivated by European economic expansion and supported it, neglecting the interests of the local communities (Pratt, 2011, pp. 209–220). We can see this way of thinking also in the quoted paragraph. Exploitation of the land for the benefit of a European enterprise is presented as favourable to local communities. Although Sieroszewski was also an anthropologist and understood how dangerous modernization might be for the traditional way of life, in his description of the Manchurian railway he firmly used the capitalist discourse. His view was also patronizing towards the local people, because their development was seen as triggered only by the European enterprise.

What seems interesting is that a railway built on Chinese territory by a company created by the Russian government was still a source of national pride for both Serbs and Poles. Jovan Milanković, who worked as a Serbian consul in Russia and three times crossed Siberia to help Serbian refugees and soldiers during the First World War (for more about Milanković, see Golubović, 2014), praised the daring construction of the railway linking Harbin with Vladivostok, and wrote that it was built by Serbs, led by the engineer Jugović (Milanković, 1926, p. 31). Symonowicz, in the book "Miráže Mandżurskie", devoted four chapters to the history of the China Eastern Railway, and emphasized the Polish contribution (while

⁵ „Następnie w pasie swego wpływu kolej ogromnie podniesie poziom kultury, zwiększy stopę zarobkową, nauczy krajowców pracować sumiennie, szybko i dokładnie, przyzwyczai ich do pewnych wygod i do szanowania samych siebie”.

still mentioning Jugović). He wrote: “For us Poles, the China Eastern Railway is not only a creation of human genius, because we also took part in its construction and exploitation, done by an enemy, occupying power [Russia]⁶” (Symonolewicz, 1932, p. 179). When Maria Janion wrote about the “paradoxical Polish postcolonial mentality”, she emphasized a feeling of inferiority which is compensated by a narration about Polish suffering and moral superiority (Janion, 2006, p. 12). Symonolewicz’s words introduced a different dimension to this kind of mentality – resentment towards Russia is mixed with pride in taking part in a Russian imperial enterprise.

A narration about the railway was also used by the Polish writer to introduce the topic of cultural and demographic changes brought by this historical development. While spending a night at the small station in Barima, Symonolewicz was thinking about Northeast China’s past, considering the fate of the indigenous peoples: the Manchu, the Oroqen, the Daurs, and others. He claimed that their way of life had not changed for centuries. Then he met a Russian railway worker, who had been living in Manchuria for 20 years, and was criticizing the Chinese, saying that they “couldn’t speak human language” and were “too bossy”. When asked about the indigenous people, the Russian did not know their ethnic names but was complaining about them (Symonolewicz, 1932, p. 39). Symonolewicz’s anecdote suggests that in Manchuria different cultures met but did not communicate with each other. In addition, we see that Northeast China was not only a border between civilizations – European, Chinese and various nomadic and semi-nomadic steppe cultures – but also a contact zone of ways of life and even historical epochs. The Chinese Eastern Railway was seen as a tool not only for disseminating Russian political and economic influence, but also modernity. Symonolewicz’s narration about Manchuria’s past raised several interesting issues connected with cross-cultural contacts. He used the stereotype of a virgin land without history, which was often used in European literature, to encourage and justify colonialism. However, almost immediately he countered it, saying that historians had known all along that this land had had a long and horrible history (Symonolewicz, 1932, p. 40). The Polish writer recalled the empires of Bohai, Khitan, Jurchen and Manchu people, emphasizing that they were able to conquer China. However, he also claimed that this heroic past had already been dead: “The Chinese colossus subjugated its conqueror, swallowed up and showed us, foreign researchers, something unbelievable – a dead language and a dead literature of a living people” (Symonolewicz, 1932, p. 37). In the

⁶ “Dla nas, Polaków, kolej Chińska Wschodnia nie jest jednak tylko wytworem geniuszu ludzkiego, gdyż i w budowie jej i w eksploatacji, dokonywanych przez wroga nam siłę zaborczą, brałszy i my udział.

social sciences, this process is described as “glottophagy”, an absorption of a minor language by another (Kalve, 1981).

For a very long time, this part of the Qing empire was under military administration. The ruling dynasty attached special value to this territory as its place of origin. Han Chinese were forbidden to settle there. However, the Qing government’s response to encroachment by foreign powers was significant administrative reform. Between 1900 and 1911, the Qing incorporated the region into regular Chinese administration, and encouraged Han Chinese to move there (Chiasson, 2014). And so, Polish and Serbian travellers were observing not only political and military conflicts and exploitative actions of great powers, but also colonization by Chinese settlers. Symonolewicz’s remarks on the history of the Manchu people showed that Northeast China for centuries had been a zone of interactions between various cultures, but his conclusion is that these contacts led to assimilation via sinicization and modernization: “So, is this half-wild, dressed in raw-fur Oroqen the only remnant of the power which in the past conquered the whole of China? Sic transit... He remained... and heaps of books, but traces of the migrations of peoples are ploughed over by the Chinese colonist, and soon the triumph of civilization will be crowned with an American tractor.” (Symonolewicz, 1932, p. 38)⁷. “A Chinese colonist” was presented as an almost heroic figure in Symonolewicz’s book, its whole second chapter is devoted to the everyman-like figure of a settler, bringing Chinese culture to Northeast China. Furthermore, while wondering about the future of Manchuria in the epilogue, Symonolewicz pointed out three forces which would be decisive. The first would be Soviet-style communism, the second would be the strength and culture of the Japanese, and the third would be the waves of Chinese colonists (Symonolewicz, 1932, p. 290). These words once again show how the Polish author recognized Northeast China as a contact zone, but even more important is his conclusion: in history, the common Chinese people were always suffering, but their perseverance and numerical strength allowed their country to survive and expand (Symonolewicz, 1932, p. 291).

The issue of the Manchu’s wane was also raised by Velimirović in his writings about their former capital of Mukden. The palace courtyards are covered with grass, former emperors’ residences have lost their brilliance, and everything is immersed in a dream of the past (Velimirović, 1930, p. 13). Likewise, Symonolewicz and Velimirović, Mieczysław Jankowski

⁷ „A więc napół dziki łowiec Oroczon, w niewyprawione skóry odziany, jest jedyną w tych miejscach pozostałością potęgi, która niegdyś podbiła całe Chiny? Sic transit... Pozostał on... i stopy ksiąg, a szlaki wędrówki narodów orze socha kolonisty chińskiego. Miejsce jej zajmie ostry pług produkcji europejskiej, a niebawem triumf cywilizacji uwieńczy traktor amerykański”.

and Sieroszewski also wrote about the fading away of the Manchus under Chinese influence, which is especially interesting given that they were writing before the fall of the Qing dynasty. Jankowski, a soldier in the Russo-Japanese war and the author of a book about Manchuria, simply stated that even if the Manchus conquered China, later they “became Chinese” (Jankowski, 1909, p. 29). Sieroszewski’s conclusion is very similar to Symonolewicz’s: in the future, “there will be no trace of the Manchus. The Chinese people, the greatest conqueror of the world, spilling only their own blood, did what couldn’t be done by Alexander the Great, or Attila’s and Tamerlane’s regiments. The Manchus and other people, conquered by the Chinese by way of peaceful annexation, do not exist anymore”⁸ (Sieroszewski, 1904, pp. 78–79).

Transcultural phenomena in everyday life

In the previous two sections, we discussed political, military and economic interactions in the contact zone and how they affected the demography of Northeast China. These processes set up the conditions for transcultural identities. In this section, we will show how travellers described the various aspects of Manchurian life, which showed the transcultural character of the area.

Because 19th-century development in transportation made the railway station the entry point to the city (Schivelbusch, 2014, pp. 171–177) and many travellers came to Northeast China by train, at first we will look at how they described this experience. Subotić portrayed railway stations in Manchuria as massive constructions, built in “Russian-Chinese style” with a high, upturned roof and a dragon sculpture (Subotić, 1921, p. 94). Gieysztor also paid some attention to the transcultural style of train stations; however, for him dragon ornaments and roofs were a sign of moving deeper and deeper into Chinese territory (Gieysztor, 1904, p. 7). Stanojević described the railway station in Harbin as “European and modern”. However, even if the architecture of the building was European, the city itself surprised him by its half-European, half-Asian outlook. For instance, in front of the train station were “means of transport” from two continents: a Chinese rickshaw and a Russian sleigh (Stanojević, 1934, p. 158).

⁸ „Mandżurów nie zostanie ani śladu. Lud chiński, największy ze zdobywców świata, lejąc wyłącznie własną krew, uczynił to, czego nie mógł uczynić ani Aleksander Macedoński, ani Atylli i Tamerlana pułki. Mandżurów niema i innych ludów, zdobytych przez Chiny drogą pokojowego zaboru, też już niema”.

This transcultural nature of Harbin is the next topic to analyse, because this city provides “an example of the massive presence and density of transcultural processes in urban life” (Ben-Canaan et al., 2014, p. 8). Just as Stanojević was surprised, Jankowski also wrote that Harbin is a “strange city”. According to him, international relations in “the Far East” are strange, so the city, which was created as an outcome of these relations, also bore their mark (Jankowski, 1909, p. 16). Roman Fajans, in the late 1930’s also wrote that Harbin is “a strange city” and the point at which the interests of the three great powers clash. He admitted feeling lost in its international mosaic and labyrinth of complicated problems (Fajans, 1939, p. 357). Đurić, visiting Harbin in January 1918, emphasized how international was the population of the city and made a point about the transcultural character of Harbin’s night life: in one cabaret female artists represented “all colours and nations of the world”, from a petite Japanese to a strong American “mulatto”, including a Serbian girl (Đurić, 1938, p. 171). Once again, we see how the category of race is dominant. However, the city was not seen by Đurić as a multicultural idyll. As opposition to the character of a European city, he mentioned the bad impression made on him by the “wild” Chinese soldiers (Đurić, 1938, p. 165). A slightly different view on the transcultural character of Harbin is given by Milanković, who put emphasis on the quiet, pleasant and stylish urban life. He wrote that in Harbin one could see a Chinese child led by an English governess in a park (Milanković, 1926, p. 75), which seems to evoke racial harmony. Among other aspects of Harbin life which impressed him were shops full of Chinese and Japanese goods, as well as French restaurants with quick and noiseless Chinese waiters. Chinese processions were also mentioned as a very interesting curiosity. Although Milanković’s remarks about Harbin were very positive and pointed out its transcultural character, we can see that he presented European stylishness as the most valuable aspect, while the Chinese seem to be reduced to the role of pupils, waiters or being curious.

One of the authors who wrote about the many transcultural aspects of Manchurian life, stressing that even in such form of interactions there is always a distance between cultures, was Symonolewicz. As already mentioned, the Polish writer criticized the westernization of China, especially the new Chinese elite, educated in the western style. They were superficial, therefore aliens both to the Chinese and foreigners, which made them useless and a waste (Symonolewicz, 1938, p. 190). Even more critical were the words he devoted to mixed marriages. In Manchuria, contrary to the pattern common in many other contact zones, local people married foreign women, especially Russians (Gamsa, 2014). The Polish writer claimed that in most of these marriages cultural differences could not be

overcome. In this context, he twice referred in a very significant way to the East and the West as ‘polar opposites’ (Symonolewicz, 1938, pp. 93, 97). Symonolewicz described his Chinese friends and especially his former servant Wang in a very positive way, but also claimed that cultures are relative and borders between them could not be blurred.

A different view on transcultural interactions might be seen in Velimirović’s writing. Ross G. Forman shows interesting aspects of exoticism and relativism in descriptions of Chinese food in Victorian travel literature (Forman, 2007). Writing about food, Velimirović overcame the Eurocentric point of view and introduced the perspective of cultural relativism: “Maybe many dishes could be disgusting or at least strange, but also among us, in Europe, frogs and oysters are eaten, as well as stinky and mouldy, even wormy cheese”⁹ (Velimirović, 1930, p. 31). In the case of Velimirović, we could also talk about adapting one’s transcultural identity. This part of the travelogue does not describe Northeast China, but is very important for an understanding the Serbian writer in general:

We were drinking tea and talking about trade. It was unusual and simply funny that I, a Serb from Pirot [a city in southern Serbia] and a medic, sat with an experienced Chinese trader and we talked about trade and business opportunities in Mongolia, where we should go after a few days. It was taking place in his house somewhere close to Beijing, as a guest and a person to whom he was speaking frankly, using a mixture of languages; at that moment I really wanted somebody to film it so I could see later what I looked like. In the evening, while I was coming home, I seemed to myself unusual and strange¹⁰ (Velimirović, 1930, p. 152).

Staying in a contact zone changes one’s identity and an example of this process we can see in Velimirović’s writings. While living in China he changed his professional identity, interacted with people from different nations and walks of life, used an unusual mixture of languages. Velimirović described it as an uncanny feeling, for he was no longer a simple Serbian person anymore. He became an example of the meeting of “polar oppositions”¹¹.

⁹ „Možda bi mnoga jela kod nas izazvala odvratnost ili bar čuđenje, ali i kod nas u Evropi jedu žabe i ostrice, smrdljiv i buđav, pa i crvljiv sir“.

¹⁰ „Pili smo nezasađeni čaj i razgovarali o trgovini. Bilo mi je neobično i prosto smešno da ja Srbin-piroćanac i medicinar, sedim sa kinezom oprobanim trgovcem i razgovaram o trgovačkim stvarima, o trgovačkim i poslovnim prilikama u Mongoliji kuda za nekoliko dana treba da se krenemo. I to u njegovoj kući negde oko Pekinga, kao gost i ličnost, kojoj on na nekoj mešavini od jezika govori ozbiljno. U tom momentu mnogo sam želeo da nas neko snimi, pa da vidim posle kakav sam izgledao. Vraćajući se kući predveče, sam sam se sebi činio neobičan i čudnovat“.

¹¹ For a comparison of Symonolewicz’s and Vladimirović’s travelogues see Ewertowski (2015).

Another thought-provoking case of transcultural phenomena in everyday life is the description of a meal by Gieysztor. He and his companions were given forks, nevertheless they themselves were using only chopsticks, drinking tea without sugar, and in general showing off their sinicization (Gieysztor, 1904, p. 62). Some aspects of everyday life might also create “a bubble of familiarity” in a foreign land. Gieysztor wrote about how staying in a comfortable train carriage, changing clothes, and drinking tea transformed him from a nomad into “a European” again (Gieysztor, 1904, pp. 52–53). For Jankowski, a factor of familiarity and an example of cross-cultural exchange were vegetables like carrots or beetroot, whose cultivation was introduced into Northeast China by the Russians (Jankowski, 1909, p. 46). A very interesting case is also Subotić’s account of a celebration of Easter in Manchuria (Subotić, 1921, pp. 102–103). Easter cannot be called an everyday event, but still we see how a very typical European cultural experience looked very different when it took place on Manchurian soil during wartime. Subotić claimed that he felt very special, which sounds similar to Velimirović’s impression of strangeness.

Velimirović mentioned the mixture of languages used during conversation as one of the factors contributing to his feeling of uncanniness. The linguistic issue will be the last topic analysed in this section. In the previous section we mentioned an example of glottophagy; however, Polish and Serbian travellers were also writing about languages in a different way. A noteworthy case showing how language changes identity is given by Đurić. In Harbin, he met a man from Dalmatia who was fluent in Russian, Chinese, and Serbo-Croatian (Đurić used the term “our language”). He remarked on how this person changed when using different languages – while speaking Serbo-Croatian his face was calm, but when speaking in Chinese he grimaced and used unusual throat sounds, which amused the waiters who answered him in the same way (Đurić, 1938, p. 172). In general, languages form a field in which transcultural interactions may manifest themselves in a very interesting way. The common features of a contact zone are pidgin and creole languages. In Northeast China, Mongolia and parts of Siberia, a form of Chinese Pidgin Russian had been spoken there since the 18th century (Shapiro, 2010). This was also mentioned by authors analysed in this article. Gieysztor wrote about “a special local jargon” (Gieysztor, 1904, p. 144) in which Russian words are mixed with Chinese. In *Miraże Mandżurskie*, Symonolewicz mentioned Harbin’s local Russian-Chinese “dialect” (“narzecze”) (Symonolewicz, 1932, p. 218). In *Moi Chińczycy*, he was more articulate and also contemptuous, writing about “a wild dialect” comprised of Russified Chinese words, sinicized Russian words, and some strange expressions, foreign to both languages (Symonolewicz, 1938, p. 65).

As we can see, even in the field of language, the Polish writer looked on this transcultural phenomenon with suspicion.

His attitude is no exception among the writers discussed here. Travellers described various phenomena in which the transcultural nature of Northeast China manifested itself; nevertheless, quite often their attitudes towards such experiences were sceptical. This is not surprising, given that thinking in the monolithic categories of race and nation was widespread in the first half of the 20th century. Still, the most important conclusion drawn from the image of the border of civilizations in the analysed texts is that such borders are subject to constant changes. They are fluid because of cultural, economic, political or military pressure, sometimes in a very complicated way and at different levels.

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Chiny Północno-Wschodnie jako strefa kontaktu w polskich i serbskich relacjach podróżniczych w latach 1900-1939

Północno-wschodnie Chiny (Mandżuria) są historyczną granicą między Chinami a ludami wędrownymi, od siedemnastego wieku również między Rosją a imperium dynastii Qing. W drugiej połowie dziewiętnastego wieku, a zwłaszcza w pierwszej połowie dwudziestego szereg czynników (penetracja przez obce mocarstwa, upadek dynastii Qing, rewolucja w Rosji, ekspansja japońska i zmiany demograficzne) uczyniły z tego obszaru „strefę kontaktu” w rozumieniu Mary Louise Pratt. Głównym tematem artykułu jest sposób opisu strefy kontaktu przez polskich i serbskich podróżników. Ich dzieła dają bowiem szczególną perspektywę, gdyż Polska i Serbia nie uczestniczyły w kolonialnej penetracji Chin, jednakże Serbowie i Polacy podróżowali do Państwa Środka, często reprezentując rosyjskie instytucje. Z tego względu obserwowali Chiny jako reprezentanci imperium, jednak nie identyfikowali się z nim w pełni. Analiza obrazu północno-wschodnich Chin jako strefy kontaktu dzieli się na trzy sekcje: 1) ekspansja polityczna i militarna, 2) relacje ekonomiczne i demograficzne, 3) zjawiska transkulturowe w życiu codziennym.

Słowa kluczowe: transkulturalizm, pisarstwo podróżnicze, imagologia, Chinny Północno-Wschodnie, literatura polska, literatura serbska.

Note

Tomasz Ewertowski, School of Russian and Eurasian Studies Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai; Faculty of Polish and Classic Philology, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poznań.

tewert@amu.edu.pl

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