

# Scent of the Dragon: On the Poetics of the Senses in Travel Writing on China

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This article was written under the auspices of the research project “China in Polish and Serbian Travel Writing (Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries).” This project was funded by the NCN (National Research Center) awarded in resolution 2014/15/D/HS2/00801.

Recent decades have witnessed a surge of interest in travel writing among scholars, shaped in large part by postcolonial discourse. Travel sketches have proven to be a particularly useful reservoir of material for scholars seeking to map out the ramifications of European expansion, as they both depict Europeans’ activities and shed light on the ideologies and motives that loomed behind the colonial project.<sup>1</sup> Following the impetus of Edward Said’s foundational text *Orientalism*,<sup>2</sup> a great deal of scholarship has explored representations of alterity and their ideological underpinnings, often relying on travel writing as source material. To find excellent examples of diverse applications of this paradigm, one might look to research surrounding the Balkans,<sup>3</sup> Eastern Europe,<sup>4</sup> Siberia<sup>5</sup> and South Africa.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C. Thompson, *Travel writing*, London–New York 2011, p. 3. See also: D. Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire. Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*, Durham–London 1993; M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, New York 2007

<sup>2</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978

<sup>3</sup> M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford 2009; B. Jezernik, *Wild Europe: The Balkans in the Gaze of Western Travellers*, Ann Arbor 2004

<sup>4</sup> L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford 1994.

<sup>5</sup> M. Bassin, *Inventing Siberia: Visions of the Russian East in the early nineteenth century*, “American Historical Review” 1991, vol. 96, issue 3, pp. 763–794; M. Bassin, *Imperial Visions. Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865*, Cambridge 2004.

<sup>6</sup> S. Huigen, *Knowledge and Colonialism: Eighteenth-century Travellers in South Africa*, Leiden–Boston 2009.

These texts are united by their tendency to privilege sight as the dominant sense, as one might even discern from their titles. I would venture the claim that postcolonial and “opto-centric” impulses are closely bound. The “images” of foreign countries tend to be analyzed “in the eyes of” the travelers, and by examining this, we are able to draw conclusions on the mechanisms of imperial domination and colonial rhetoric in travel writing. This also seems to be the paradigm that dominates scholarship on tourism. Scholars such as Krzysztof Podemski and Anna Wieczorkiewicz have both pointed out the widespread tendency to approach tourism as a form of visual consumption.<sup>7</sup>

There might be something to gain from turning our focus to examples of travel literature criticism that diverge from this paradigm and instead belong to what is often called the anthropology of the senses. In her writing on Venice and Italy, Aleksandra Achtelek pays special attention to sensory experiences of the cities comprising the Italian Peninsula.<sup>8</sup> In her study of tourism in countries of the former Soviet Union, Anna Horolets sets aside an entire chapter for sensations of taste.<sup>9</sup> Anna Wieczorkiewicz has published several analyses of tourism that emphasize the multisensory valences of the tourist’s experience. Krzysztof Podemski analyzes 20-30 pieces of travel writing describing India with a special focus on sensory experiences. Podemski unambiguously makes the argument that the traveler’s encounter can by no means be reduced to sight.<sup>10</sup> The reflections I offer in this article belong to a greater effort to reflect on the poetics of the senses in travel writing while attending to the postcolonial paradigm.

I am primarily interested in travel accounts from China written by Polish and Serbian authors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bronisław Grąbczewski (1855-1926), a Polish traveler in the Russian service, referred to China as “the land of opposites, where everything is the inverse of how it is at home.”<sup>11</sup> Due to the geographical and cultural distance between Europe and the Middle Kingdom, this country is perceived as no mere place, but as a form of “otherness without compromise.”<sup>12</sup> This gives us all the more reason to analyze travel writers’ sensory experiences of the otherness of East-Asian space. A large body of scholarship has already emerged around Anglo-Saxon travel writing, Japanese writing about China,<sup>13</sup> and the image of China in the overall European cultural sphere.<sup>14</sup> Most of this research conforms to the paradigm noted above, although some examples do address travelers’ descriptions of

<sup>7</sup> K. Podemski, *Socjologia podróży*, Poznań 2005, pp. 9–10; A. Wieczorkiewicz, *Apetyt turysty: o doświadczeniu świata w podróży*, Kraków 2012, pp. 133–138.

<sup>8</sup> A. Achtelek, *Wenecja mityczna w literaturze polskiej XIX i XX wieku*, Katowice 2002; A. Achtelek, *Sprawcza moc przechadzki, czyli polski literat we włoskim mieście*, Katowice 2015.

<sup>9</sup> A. Horolets, *Konformizm, bunt, nostalgia. Turystyka niszowa z Polski do krajów byłego ZSRR*, Kraków 2013.

<sup>10</sup> K. Podemski, *Socjologia podróży...*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> B. Grąbczewski, *Podróże po Azji Środkowej*, Warsaw 2010, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> *Sinographies. Writing China*, ed. E. Hayot, H. Saussy, S.G. Yao, Minneapolis–London 2008, p. x.

<sup>13</sup> J. Fogel, *The Literature of Travel in the Japanese Rediscovery of China. 1862-1945*, Stanford 1996; S.S. Thurin, *Victorian Travelers and the Opening of China, 1842-1907*, Athens 1999; *A Century of Travels in China. Critical Essays on Travel Writing from the 1840s to the 1940s*, ed. D. Kerr, J. Kuehn, Hong Kong 2010.

<sup>14</sup> For research on Western European travel writing, particularly Anglo-Saxon examples, see: R. Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon. An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilisation*, New York 1967; C. Mackerras, *Western Images of China*, Oxford–New York 1989; J. Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent. China in Western Minds*, London 1998. For more on the image of China in Russia, see: A.B. Лукин, *Медведь наблюдает за драконом. Образ Китая в России в XVII-XXI веках*, Moscow 2007.

cuisine.<sup>15</sup> The selection of Polish and Serbian authors collected in this article offer a remarkable comparative perspective. Poland and Serbia did not participate in explorations of China in the early modern period. On the other hand, Poles and Serbs did make several voyages to East Asia as emissaries of European powers. This wealth of material allows us to piece together a comparative perspective and expose certain ambivalences between Eurocentrism and sympathy for the Chinese.<sup>16</sup> In existing scholarship on Polish and Serbian travel writing, themes of cuisine and its representation have already drawn much attention,<sup>17</sup> so in this article, we will limit our focus to sensations of smell.

My approach rests on Vladimir Gvozden's definition of travel writing. Borrowing language from Mikhail Bakhtin, Gvozden identifies a set of factors that constitute travel writing: chronotopes (configurations of time and space) of travel, and encounters in which the writer, conditioned by his subjectivity and intellectual background, enters into dialogue with the new and the strange.<sup>18</sup> Our main preoccupations here will be the way in which the encounter with otherness has been recorded in the form of textual representations of scent-based impressions, what means were used to describe them, and what role these portraits played in the text.

## Scent as a Signifier of Identity

The expansive territories of China are home to a vast diversity of cultures and climates, yielding a vast range of scent-based experiences. We might begin this study with the scent of soybean oil (called "fava bean oil" among travelers). This substance is almost ubiquitous in travel texts due to its prevalence, specificity and distinctiveness. For Józef Gieysztor (1865-1958), who joined a scientific expedition to Northeast China (Manchuria) and Japan in 1903,<sup>19</sup> this aroma was a sign of what it means to be Chinese: "Through the open doors of the wagon pours the garbled noise of a hundred voices, the soft patter of felted shoes, and that scent of fava bean oil that clings so consistently to the chinese [sic!]. We must be back in China."<sup>20</sup> Gieysztor does not describe the scent itself, but utilizes it as a self-sufficient identity marker. In his book, Gieysztor reminisces on the odor constantly, although he tends to avoid describing organoleptic senses pejoratively, as so many other travelers have done. In another pas-

<sup>15</sup>R. Forman, *Eating out East: Representing Chinese Food in Victorian Travel Literature and Journalism*, [in:] *A Century of Travels in China. Critical Essays on Travel Writing from the 1840s to the 1940s*, ed. D. Kerr, J. Kuehn, Hong Kong 2007.

<sup>16</sup>Overviews of Polish travelers in China can be found in these works by E. Kajdański: *Długi cień wielkiego muru: jak Polacy odkrywali Chiny*, Warsaw 2005; M. Kałuski, *Polacy w Chinach*, Warsaw 2001; L. Cyrzyk, *Literatura podróżnicza o Chinach w Polsce XIX w.*, "Przegląd Orientalistyczny", 1966, vol. 3(59), p. 205–216. Two anthologies of Serbian travel writing on China have been published: *Kapija od žada. Putopisi Srba o Kini: 1725-1935*, ed. R. Pušić, Belgrade 1998; *Podnebesko carstvo. Srbi o Kini 1725-1940 (putopisi i članci)*, ed. R. Pušić, Belgrade 2006 (throughout this article, Serbian-language texts are uniformly written in the Latin alphabet).

<sup>17</sup>T. Ewertowski, *Chiny a polskie podniebienie – reprezentacje chińskich kulinariów w polskich tekstach podróżopisarskich*, [in:] *Spotkania Polonistyki Trzech Krajów – Chiny, Korea, Japonia – Rocznik 2014/2015*, ed. K. Morita, Tokio 2015, p. 135–146.

<sup>18</sup>V. Gvozden, *Srpska putopisna kultura 1914–1940. Studija o hronotopičnosti susreta*, Belgrade 2011, p. 39–40.

<sup>19</sup>For more on Gieysztor, see: E. Kajdański, *Długi cień wielkiego muru...*, pp. 243–258.

<sup>20</sup>J. Gieysztor, *Na Dalekim Wschodzie*, Warsaw 1904, p. 134–135. Emphasis – T.E.

sage, Gieysztor writes of the “soapy scent of fava bean oil...that specific aroma of Chinese apartments.”<sup>21</sup> Here, the oil’s aroma again figures as a sign of Chinese-ness, although in this instance, it bears an epithet. Relaying these experiences, these writers inscribe Chinese otherness into their knowledge systems by assigning it consistent attributes. We will encounter similar applications of aromatic figures later on in this article.

We come across a similar impression that this scent and the Chinese essence are inextricably bound in the book *Kroz Kinu* (“Through China”) by Milutin Velimirović (1893-1973). This Serbian writer and doctor spent time in East Asia in 1918 and 1919 as a member of a Russian-Mongolian trade mission. He is acclaimed among Serbian scholars for his style and sensitivity.<sup>22</sup> Describing the phenomenon of Chinese emigration dispersed from the eastern parts of Siberia to India and Iran, Velimirović notes that throughout all these lands, Chinese immigrants carry along their unflappable merchant’s spirit and the scent of fava bean oil.<sup>23</sup> Here, the scent figures as an identity marker. It is important to note that in this instance, the writer refrains from describing the actual sensation and instead utilizes the concept of the scent as a signifier.

In Velimirović’s prose, we encounter yet another feature that has proven to be a hallmark of aromatic experiences of China: sensory descriptions of unpleasant or repugnant organoleptic impressions: “I often smell the scent of garlic throughout the entire home. When mixed with fava bean oil, this produces the unpleasant and singular stifling atmosphere of Chinese alleyways.”<sup>24</sup> Velimirović uses the generic epithets “unpleasant” and “specific” to emphasize the sensation’s idiosyncratic quality without rendering it at all accessible to the reader. This is a common strategy for constructing a lexical representation of sensory phenomena. We encounter a similar tendency in descriptions of scenic views or feminine beauty: authors delight in deferring to the convention that “there are no words to express this thing,” or “you would have to see it for yourself.” When they describe scents, they often rely on vague epithets or simply emphasize the specificity of the impression without articulating its actual attributes.

The scent-based impressions of Mieczysław Jankowski (1878-1961) are also framed in a negative light. Jankowski passed through Northeast China in 1904-1905 as a soldier in the Russo-Japanese War. He wrote: “the chinese [sic!] know nothing of bread; in its place they bake patties made of millet flour and fried in bean oil, which produces quite a stink.”<sup>25</sup> Scents of oil and garlic are uniformly described as unsavory and are used to project an extremely pejorative portrait of the Chinese. These observations quickly escalate to a Chauvinist discourse

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid*, p. 60.

<sup>22</sup>V. Gvozden, *Srpska putopisna kultura...*, p. 88, 93; *Podnebesko carstvo...*, p. 129–130; H. Jin, *Opis Kineza u putopisu Milutina Velimirovića “Kroz Kinu,”* [in:] *Ljubomir Nenadović i srpska putopisna tradicija*, Priština 1995, pp. 159–162.

<sup>23</sup>M. Velimirović, *Kroz Kinu: putopis*, Belgrade 1930, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid*, p. 31. Unless otherwise noted, the translations are provided by Eliza Rose, who translated this article into English. These translations use the author’s Polish translations as a reference point. The original citation reads: “Zadah belog luka oseća se često po celoj kući, a pomešan sa bobovim uljem on stvara jedan neprijatan, specifičan zadah kineskih sokačića.”

<sup>25</sup>M. Jankowski, *Mandžurja. Wrażenia i wspomnienia*, Warsaw 1909, p. 36.

on the “stinky” and “dirty”, which according to David Spurr is a signature feature of imperial rhetoric.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, several examples run counter to this tendency. In his book *Przez lądy i oceany. Sześć lat na Dalekim Wschodzie* (*Over Land and Seas: Six Years in the Far East*), Przemysław Smolik (1877-1947) writes a genuine *apologia* of the Chinese. After enumerating their many virtues, he states that “Truly — this is a nation worth adoring and imitating, **despite the unpleasant scent of garlic and bean oil** that pervades its clothes and ‘fanzas’ (huts)!... ”<sup>27</sup> Smolik, who was a subject of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was captured by the Russians during World War I. After the October Revolution, he found himself in China along with a wave of refugees.<sup>28</sup> Smolik exhibits a consistently warm attitude towards the people of East Asia. His book describes his interactions with the Chinese, Mongolians and the Buryat people. Although he does acknowledge a lingering unpleasant scent, this comment is trivial in the context of his overall apology to Chinese society.

## Scent (or its Lack) as a Symbol of China

The conventional constellation of symbols for China associated with the turn of the twentieth century includes tea, chopsticks, opium, braids, rice, calligraphy and silk. Interestingly enough, fava bean oil (soybean oil) is not usually included in this set. However, as we have demonstrated already, when it comes to sensations of scent described in the period, this oil’s role was profound. This dissonance between the traveler’s experience and the stereotypical image of China might be of some interest.

We might also take a closer look at other symbols and their impact in the representations of sensory experiences in travel writing. Ozren Subotić (1873 – sometime after 1941) found himself in East Asia on the suggestion of his brother, Dejan Subotić, who was a general in the tsar’s army. Subotić studied at the Eastern Institute in Vladivostok and served in the army. In his memoir *Iz žutog carstva* (*From the Yellow Kingdom*),<sup>29</sup> he repeatedly recalls a certain “aromatic Chinese drink.”<sup>30</sup> In Chinese culture, tea is inextricably tied to a host of social and

<sup>26</sup>See the chapter titled *Debasement: Filth and Defilement* in: D. Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire...*

<sup>27</sup>P. Smolik, *Przez lądy i oceany. Sześć lat na Dalekim Wschodzie*, Warsaw–Krakow 1921, p. 132. Emphasis – T.E.

<sup>28</sup>Aside from Smolik, several other authors wrote travel accounts describing their experiences as they fled to East Asia from a Russia embroiled in revolution. These accounts include: Kamil Giżycki *Przez Urianchaj i Mongolię. Wspomnienia z lat 1920-21* and *Ze Wschodu na Zachód. Listy z podróży*, Ferdynand Antoni Ossendowski *Przez kraj ludzi, zwierząt i bogów*, Jerzy Bandrowski *Przez jasne wrota*. For more on the subject of Polish immigration to East Asia spurred by war and revolution, see: M. Cabanowski, *Tajemnice Mandżurii. Polacy w Harbinie*, Warsaw 1993, pp. 42–72; M. Kałuski, *Polacy w Chinach...*, pp. 97–104. Serbians and representatives of other South Slavic states also took part in this wave of migrations. Several books of Serbian travel writing are partially devoted to describing East Asia in the context of this experience. These include: Aleksandar Đurić, *Ka pobeđi*, Jovan Milanković, *Uspomene iz Sibira 1918–1919 i put okeanom u domovinu 1920*, Vlada Stanojević, *Moje ratne beleške i slike*, Ariton Mihailović, *Kroz plamen ruske revolucije*, Hrvoje Grgurić *Na Dalekom Istoku. Uspomene našega dobrovoljca iz Sibirije, Mandžurije, Mongolije i Kine* and *Kroz tamnice i crvenu maglu*.

<sup>29</sup>For more on this writer’s biography, see D. Samii, *Ozren Subotić - novosadski istraživač Dalekog istoka*, “Sveske za istoriju Novog Sada”, 2016, issue 17, pp. 41–45.

<sup>30</sup>O. Subotić, *Iz žutog carstva*, Novi Sad 1921, p. 85, 90.

cultural issues, while for foreigners, it figures as a major symbol of the Middle Kingdom.<sup>31</sup> What's more, in the Early Modern era, the tea trade played a fundamental role in the global<sup>32</sup> economy, with China remaining its sole producer until the late nineteenth century. It is no wonder, then, that the drink is referenced regularly in travel writing, although it usually comes up in the context of the economy or customs. Its aroma is rarely emphasized, even in the off-hand manner Subotić demonstrates in the passage above.

Father Ignacy Posadzy (1898-1984) describes the city of Tianjin from his travels through Asia towards the end of the 1930s. In this text, he introduces yet another substance that often figures in this period as a symbol for China: "Open storefronts invite passersby inside, lured by a glimpse of vibrant textiles. The sounds of clamorous melodies came from all sides. Here and there, through open doors, wafted the **soapy-sweet scent of opium**."<sup>33</sup> This quote describes several simultaneous sensory impressions, with opium representing the sense of smell. This description helps complete the sense of place and becomes one of many elements constructing a multisensory portrait of the city.

Similar examples are easy to find. Witold Jabłoński (1901-1957), Professor of Chinese Studies (Sinology) at the University of Warsaw, traveled throughout far-flung areas of Western China in the 1930s.<sup>34</sup> Here he describes a particular settlement: "The houses stand on top of one another, their eaves sagging. All a bunch of ramshackle roadside inns. In the dark abyss, steam rises from rice on the stove and the pervasive odor of **opium** lulls travelers, beckoning to them to have faith that here they'll find everything they need to be happy."<sup>35</sup> Scent is but one of many elements of the settlement's multifaceted nature. Both Posadzy and Jabłoński fall back on epithets to describe the aroma of opium. Yet interestingly enough, their descriptions diverge. The juxtaposition of the "pervasive odor" with the "soapy-sweet scent" suggests that the authors are in fact describing two different sensations, although both are referring to the same substance. Again, we find ourselves broaching the problem of how to generate lexical representations that adequately capture sensory impressions. Linguistic resources ultimately fall short of being able to vividly reproduce an impression without explicitly naming its subject. If they did not call out "opium," the reader who encounters the phrases "pervasive odor" and "soapy-sweet scent" would have no way of knowing that the author is speaking of narcotics.

In opium references, we encounter the same problem associated with tea: the popularity of the subject does not come hand in hand with a universal consensus on how to represent its sensory experience. The archetype of the opium addict has often been exploited as a symbol

<sup>31</sup>J.A. Benn, *Tea in China. A Religious and Cultural History*, Hong Kong 2015, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup>R.W. Jamieson, *The Essence of Commodification: Caffeine Dependencies in the Early Modern World*, "Journal of Social History" 2001, vol. 35, issue 2, p. 283-284.

<sup>33</sup>I. Posadzy, *Przez tajemniczy wschód*, Potulice 1939. Emphasis – T.E. The version consulted here can be found on the website: <http://www.patrimonium.chrystusowcy.pl/kandydaci-na-oltarze/sluga-bozy-ks-ignacy-posadzy>, (October 14 2017). This website also offers a biography of Ignacy Posadzy and a series of texts about him.

<sup>34</sup>For background information on Jabłoński's biography, see: K. Golik, *Witold Jabłoński – niesłusznie zapomniany polski sinolog*, "Azja-Pacyfik" 2009, vol. 12, pp. 218-229.

<sup>35</sup>W. Jabłoński, *Przed ćwierćwieczem po niezmiernych obszarach Chin (1932)*, [in:] *Ze wspomnień podróżników*, ed. B. Olszewski, Warsaw 1958, p. 245. Emphasis – T.E.

of Asiatic decadence. The narcotic substance and its trade were instrumental for the political expansion of Great Britain in Asia and the formation of colonial capitalism,<sup>36</sup> so it is no surprise that it makes its way into so many travel accounts. Ozren Subotić and Mieczysław Jankowski (cited above), Polish reporter Roman Fajans (1903–1976), and the Serbian traveler and writer Milan Jovanović (1834–1896, author of the seminal book *Tamo amo po istoku*) all describe their visits to smoking dens and offer economic analyses of the opium trade. However, we rarely encounter descriptions that even casually reference the drug's scent. Milutin Velimirović, for instance, offers a rather detailed account of a smoking den, but alludes to sensations of smell only once: “the air was so saturated with opium that one sensed the narcotic even without smoking it.”<sup>37</sup> Aleksander Janta-Pończyński (1908–1974), a journalist and poet who collected accounts of his travels through Asia in the 1930s in two books,<sup>38</sup> devotes a few pages to an analysis of the philosophical and sociological issues attached to opium smoking. Yet beyond the remark that he himself “smokes opium” (which can be understood in several ways), he restricts his scent-based impressions to one reference to the “aromatic smoke.”<sup>39</sup> In the interests of specificity, I should mention that this excerpt is in reference to his time in Vietnam.

## Scent and Constructing Representations of Place

We have already analyzed many cases above that represent scent in order to construct the perception of a given place. This category might be filled out with a few similar examples that expand our understanding of these poetics.

Lalja Velimirović, who was related to Milutin Velimirović, spent her childhood and youth in East Asia. Her father directed the Bacteriological Institute in Harbin. After moving to Belgrade, she wrote a short series of travel sketches that were published in the newspaper *Vreme*.<sup>40</sup> Describing the nature in Hong Kong, Velimirović points out the easy access to the tropics, where nature, the greatest artist of all, expresses her full grandeur. Alongside the streaming light and enchanting greenery, she describes “sweet slumber overflowing with aromatic air.”<sup>41</sup> In this case, we might say that the spell of tropical nature has its own scent. The poetic tone that pervades Velimirović's sketches is conveyed through her allusions to the many senses alongside epithets and metaphors.

<sup>36</sup>See: C.A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800–1910*, Ithaca [N.Y.] 1990; C.A. Trocki, *Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy: a Study of the Asian Opium Trade, 1750–1950*, London; New York 1999; C.A. Trocki, *Opium as a Commodity in the Chinese Nanyang Trade*, [in:] *Chinese Circulations. Capital, Commodities, And Networks in Southeast Asia*, ed. E. Tagliacozzo, W. Chang, Durham-London 2011, pp. 84–104. See also: The critical review of Trocki's second book, A. Klimburg, *Some Research Notes on Carl A. Trocki's Publication "Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy,"* “Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London” 2001, vol. 64, issue 2, pp. 260–267.

<sup>37</sup>M. Velimirović, *Kroz Kinu...*, p. 112.

<sup>38</sup>For background information on Janta-Pończyński, see: F. Palowski, *Aleksander Janta-Pończyński. Ballada o wiecznym szukaniu*, Warsaw - Krakow 1990.

<sup>39</sup>A. Janta-Pończyński, *Na kresach Azji*, Warsaw 1939, p. 145.

<sup>40</sup>For background information on Lalja Velimirović, see: *Podnebesko carstvo...*, pp. 184–189.

<sup>41</sup>L. Velimirović, *Šetnja kroz Hong-Kong...*, „Vreme”, 4.10.1932, p. 4. Original: “slatkom dremežu razlitom u mirisnom vazduhu.”

Travel reportage by Roman Fajans offers a strong contrast. Fajans, who is lauded as a major journalist of the 1930s,<sup>42</sup> visited the Middle Kingdom in 1937-38 and collected his observations in the book *In China there is War Again* (*W Chinach znowu wojna*). Here, he describes the situation in Canton after the Japanese air raid: “**The foul smell of something burning and the stench of blood make the head reel.** It’s terrible, a hundredfold worse than on the front...An army doctor tells us they’ve already collected sixty corpses.”<sup>43</sup> Like Velimirović, Fajans incorporates sensations of smell here as one constituent element of a multisensory portrait of the event, although his literary conventions are a far cry from the Serbian author’s poetic prose. In Fajans’ reportage, concrete descriptions of scents conveyed through predicate modifiers outweigh epithets and metaphors. It is perhaps of note that Fajans is not the only author whose accounts of the war in China reference the smell of something burning. We find this same scent in the accounts of pilot Witold Urbanowicz (1908-1996). As a Division 303 Pilot, Urbanowicz fought in China in the American “Flying Tigers” squadron during World War II. In his book *Fire Over China* (*Ogień nad Chinami*), also published as *Flying Tigers*, he recalls the smell of something burning in his descriptions of an air raid’s fallout.<sup>44</sup>

Halina Bujakowska (1907–1971) rode a motorcycle with her husband Stanisław Bujakowski from Poland through the Balkans, the countries of Western and Southern Asia, and eventually to China in 1934-36. Her memoir, published posthumously in 2011 and titled *My Man, My Motorcycle and Me*, describes the boisterous streets of Canton in details.<sup>45</sup> Scent often figures as one of many elements: “But this is a street of lacquer, with gongs, giant bowls and ornate boxes spread out on its cobblestones. In the depths of the gloomy slipshod shops it’s all red, gold and black, while one alleyway over, banners swoop to the ground over a great spread of roosters and fancifully painted dusters with golden feathers. Decadent racks of elephant bone hold a spread of silk and paper crafts. Jewelers sit in the corners, tucking away their workshops in discreet nooks. **The scent of sandalwood hovers in the air**, and a boy paints Mahjong pieces onto little jade tiles.”<sup>46</sup> The list is a rhetorical figure often relied upon to describe the foreign. Bujakowska’s technique of listing these sundry items conforms to the convention of representing China as a “rich and exotic marvel.”<sup>47</sup> Aromatic impressions conspire to generate a suggestive portrait of the detail-rich streets of Canton.

A few terms noted above also appear in Ozren Subotić’s compelling description of a Chinese temple: “An enigmatic dim half-light filled the interior of the main temple. You can smell the Chinese lacquer, aromatic papers burning, incense, the rare scent of rosewood and that all-pervasive *odeur chinois* so characteristic of all that encompasses the Chinese, following

<sup>42</sup>100/XX+50. *Antologia polskiego reportażu XX wieku. Vol 3.*, ed. M. Szczygieł, Wołowiec 2015, p. 261.

<sup>43</sup>R. Fajans, *W Chinach znowu wojna...*, Warsaw 1939, p. 197. Emphasis – T.E.

<sup>44</sup>W. Urbanowicz, *Latające tygrysy*, Lublin 1983, p. 220.

<sup>45</sup>Virgil Ho, a historian of interwar Canton, argues that the fascination with the noise of street life played a prominent role in descriptions from this period. See: V.K.Y. Ho, *Understanding Canton. Rethinking Popular Culture in the Republican Period*, Oxford 2005, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup>H. Bujakowska, *Mój chłopiec, motor i ja*, Warsaw 2011. Chapter title: *Hotel czterech ocenów*. Emphasis – T.E. This quote was found in the digital edition distributed as a MOBI file by the online bookstore Virtualo, which is why I have provided no page number.

<sup>47</sup>C. Mackerras, *Western Images of China*, Oxford 1987, p. 16.



them wherever they go.”<sup>48</sup> This description contains a whole inventory of exotic aromas. It is worth noting that Subotić uses both epithets and concrete descriptors here to convey a sense of the actual substances. The temple is filled with a dim half-light and silence, which opens up a space for describing a rich plurality of aromatic sensations. Listing scents, just like the gesture of listing products in Bujakowska’s quote above, helps convey an exotic portrait that simultaneously functions as an identity marker. It is also significant that in this rather fanciful excerpt of his recollections, Subotić uses scents to construct a static description of the setting. Later on in the text, certain events intrude upon the static scene, and once this shift occurs, sensations of sight and sound move to the foreground.

## Degradation and its Relativity

Milutin Velimirović, whose references to the scent of oil were cited above, mentions the characteristic “stench” of Chinese alleyways, while Mieczysław Jankowski claims that the Chinese “stink.” All too often, evocations of scent in travel writing are manipulated to project a deprecating image of Chinese cities and the Chinese themselves. Even authors who demonstrate a more positive attitude towards the Middle Kingdom revert to this tone to describe what they smell. Hrvoje Grgurić (1893–1981), a Croatian writer who spent several years in East Asia during the October Revolution,<sup>49</sup> describes Chinese cities as a labyrinth of narrow alleys saturated with a “terrible stench.”<sup>50</sup> He also compares the cleanliness of Japanese markets to the “filth and stink” of Chinese cities.<sup>51</sup> Unpleasant scents come up not only in reference to China; they are also used to describe Chinese people living abroad. In his book describing his journey around the world in 1888–89, Count Karol Lanckoroński (1848–1933), an aristocrat and acclaimed art historian, describes San Francisco’s Chinatown thus: “The opium dens are rather repulsive for their filth and stench, and the holes where they zealously play poker and some kind of dominoes are not much better.”<sup>52</sup> Lanckoroński’s vocabulary is by no means neutral; his word choice consistently carries negative connotations. The hunter Waclaw Wasilewski<sup>53</sup> associates the Chinese diaspora in Siberia (referred to as “*manza*”) with an unpleasant scent. In the 1880s, Wasilewski spent time in territories of East Asia that had been annexed to Russia in 1860 (Outer Manchuria). He writes, “From each man, but especially from the simplest *manza*, radiates a unique and unbearable scent felt at some distance. Even at night, from fifteen or more feet away and against the wind, you can distinguish the *manza* from the Russianman [sic!]. This scent is produced by their remarkable lack of hygiene, the wild garlic that

<sup>48</sup>O. Subotić, *Iz žutog carstva...*, p. 22. In the original: “U prostorijama glavnog hrama vladao je tajanstven polumrak. Osećao se miris kineskog laka, spaljenih aromatičnih hartijica, tamjana, retkog palisandrova drveta i toga neizbežnog *odeur chinois*, koji je tako karakterističan za sve to što okružava Kineza, i koji ga svuda prati”.

<sup>49</sup>For background information on Grgurić, see: F. Hameršak, *Nepoznati Hrvoje Grgurić*, “Kolo: časopis Matice hrvatske” 2000, vol. 10, issue 4, pp. 25–40. I have decided to include this Croatian author in a text devoted to Polish and Serbian literature because Grgurić served in a division of Serbian volunteers during World War I, and his experiences have much in common with the fate of so many Serbian soldiers who made their way to China after the outbreak of the October Revolution.

<sup>50</sup>H. Grgurić, *Na Dalekom Istoku. Uspomene našega dobrovoljca iz Sibirije, Mandžurije, Mongolije i Kine*, Zagreb 1931, p. 87.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>53</sup>A short biographical sketch of this writer can be found in *Polskie opisanie świata: studia z dziejów poznania kultur ludowych i plemiennych. T. 1 Afryka, Azja*, ed. A. Kuczyński, Wrocław 1994, p. 170.

is their favorite seasoning, and their constant consumption of tobacco and opium. This same scent fills their *fanzas* [homes] and permeates their surroundings. Simple *manza* carry it with them wherever they go: it is their signature Chinese scent.<sup>54</sup> Lanckoroński consistently depicts scent in a negative light, using the word “stench” and the adjective “repulsive.” On the other hand, Wasilewski describes sensations of smell in a somewhat analytic tone, specifying how they circulate (including the figure “from fifteen feet away and against the wind”) and explaining where they come from.

The acclaimed writer, ethnographer and political figure Waclaw Sieroszewski (1858-1945) introduces yet another method for characterizing sensations of smell. Sieroszewski’s *Pages from a Journey (Kartki z podróży)* describes his passage on board a Chinese ship.<sup>55</sup> His descriptions mention odor, but he conveys sensory impressions from a comparative perspective: “between the cleanest Chinese man and the average European, we find the exact same difference that separates an Englishman who bathes daily and a Polish peasant who perhaps bathes once every few years. I do not advise travelers sensitive to disagreeable scents and somewhat ‘tawdry’ food and accommodations to set sail on Chinese ships. Even without the boat’s gentle rocking, you can easily become sea sick from the pervasive, unbearable odor drifting off the ship’s crew and its opium-smoking passengers.”<sup>56</sup> This excerpt demonstrates how authentic experiences can easily be woven into an imagological discourse premised on generalizations and stereotypes.<sup>57</sup> Comparisons and analogies are signature devices of travel writing that are often manipulated to grasp otherness and sort it into a logical order more legible for the writer and his readers. Descriptions of unpleasant scents and other misadventures on the ship in the mode of generalizations and analogies not only reproduce stereotypes about the Chinese; they also project stereotypes of Englishmen, Europeans and Polish peasants. Sieroszewski’s critical remarks on Polish peasants somehow softens the orientaling slant of his words, although his choice to identify colonized people with the urban lower class is a hallmark of imperial discourse.<sup>58</sup> As an aside, we might note that Sieroszewski’s three “Chinese” novels are full of allusions to sensations of smell. This, however, falls beyond the scope of this article.

To fill out the observations collected in this section, it is important to note that these travel writers’ negative impressions do not only target the Chinese. Ignacy Posadzy, who was cited above, describes the scent of Europeans thus: “I have learned that the dogs here only bark at white people. Someone has explained to me that a European’s body gives off an idiosyncratic scent that is imperceptible to our senses. The scent is produced by a diet dominated by meat. Chinese people, meanwhile, give off a much more delicate scent thanks to their diet of rice,

<sup>54</sup>W. Wasilewski, *Z krańców Sybiru. Zapiski myśliwego-turysty*, Warsaw 1886, p. 161.

<sup>55</sup>For more on Chinese themes in Sieroszewski’s work and issues of colonialism and postcolonialism in his oeuvre, see: J. Bachórz, *Waclaw Sieroszewski o Chińczykach i Chinach*, [in:] *Początki wiedzy o Chinach w Polsce*, Gdańsk 2008, p. 85–106; A. Kijak, *Odkrywca innej Syberii i Dalekiego Wschodu. O prozie Wacława Sieroszewskiego*, Krakow 2010.

<sup>56</sup>W. Sieroszewski, *Na Daleki Wschód. Kartki z podróży*, Warsaw 1904, pp. 292–293.

<sup>57</sup>“Imagology” is understood here as the study of discourses of representing the other in literature and culture. See: *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey*, ed. M. Beller, J. Leerssen, Amsterdam-New York 2007.

<sup>58</sup>See: R. Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination. Empires Entwined*, Cambridge 2013, p. 110.

fish and grains.”<sup>59</sup> As an author, Posadzy unambiguously speaks on behalf of a Catholic and patriotic value system. For a number of reasons, he seems to be less sensitive to cultural relativism than the other authors discussed here. On the other hand, it is precisely through his evocations of the senses that his writing gains a relativist perspective. In this case, it is the Europeans whose scent deserves scorn.<sup>60</sup> It is also curious that Posadzy’s patriotic and Catholic-oriented text includes yet another eloquent instance of relativism: he describes a few Chinese men bursting into laughter after hearing an excerpt of *Pan Tadeusz* recited, since the sounds of Polish speech strike them as hilarious.<sup>61</sup> The two scenes cited here show how some prose can undermine Europeans by evoking the Chinese experience. It is also worth stressing that these excerpts are not consistent with the overall tone of Posadzy’s text. It is often said that travel writing reveals more about the traveler than it does about the destination, but in spite of this, the encounter with otherness does yield some moments in these travel narratives that are radically distinct from the prevailing ideological tendency.

## Conclusion

Sensations of smell evade language. They are characterized by descriptive or evaluative epithets or articulated more concretely through descriptions of their origins. They may be approached via analogy, but the “scent in its own right” is beyond language. Take, for instance, the curious juxtaposition of Jabłoński and Posadzy’s parallel descriptions of opium. In reality, both reference the same substance, but the language used is inconsistent. Representing scent plays a distinct role in travel writing, although travelers are much more likely to rely on sensations of sight and sound, since they are evocative and easier to articulate concretely. The scent of products construed as symbols of China, such as tea, opium and rice, rarely attract the traveler’s attention. The authors discussed here write about these substances and often even devote mini-treatises to them, but relegate sensations of smell to the background. Soybean oil, on the other hand, has earned the status of an identity marker. Aside from this function, it is also evoked for descriptive purposes. Scent figures as one of many components of multifaceted portraits of specific destinations or situations. In the case of Ozren Subotić’s description of the temple, sensations of smell are pulled to the foreground. Descriptions that emphasize a stench or odor tend to belong to an imperial and orientalist rhetoric, and these descriptions are often wielded at the expense of the Chinese. Sometimes, as in the case of Sieroszewski’s writing, we encounter an entire system of stereotypes. In Przemysław Smolik’s writing, on the other hand, despite his rather typical descriptions of scent, the writer attempts to distance himself from imperialism and offer a form of apology to the Chinese.

<sup>59</sup>I. Posadzy, *Przez tajemniczy wschód...*, op. cit.

<sup>60</sup>For contrast, see writing on the relativist function of descriptions of European cuisine from a Chinese perspective: R. Forman, *Eating out East...*, p. 69.

<sup>61</sup>I. Posadzy, *Przez tajemniczy wschód...*, p. 139.

# KEYWORDS

poetics  
of the  
senses

s c e n t

P O S T C O L O N I A L I S M

CHINA

*travel writing*

ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE SENSES

**ABSTRACT:**

The aim of this article is to disrupt the “optocentric” paradigm that dominates criticism on travel writing. The main focal points are scent-based impressions and their formulation and function in the text. To this end, the article analyzes a sampling of Polish and Serbian travel writing on China from the turn of the twentieth century.

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