

The Great Wall of China in Polish and Serbian Travel Writings (from the 18th to the mid-20th century)¹

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The topic of the paper is the image of the Great Wall of China in Polish and Serbian travel writing. This construction is recognized as a historical border of China proper, which made it also a border zone between sedentary, farming Chinese civilization and nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples from the steppes and forests. In the paper we will analyze how the Great Wall was presented by Polish and Serbian travelers, who wrote about China in the 18th, 19th and the first half of the 20th century. We will concentrate not only on narratives a physical construction, but mostly on cultural and axiological aspects of descriptions of the famous edifice. The methodology of research is based on Vladimir Gvozden's concept of travel writing, imagology, Pratt's idea of a contact zone, Edwards Said's concept of creative geography and as well as on post-colonial theory.

Key words

The Great Wall, China, imagology, postcolonialism, travel writing, borders

Introduction

A typical narrative about the Great Wall of China, which can be found on the UNESCO World Heritage List website for one, maintains that the Wall is the only man-made structure visible from the Moon, a structure that “was continuously built from the 3rd century BC to the 17th century AD”, boasting a total length of more than 20,000 kilometres, and whose “purpose was to protect China from outside aggression, but also to preserve its culture from the customs of foreign barbarians” (*The Great Wall of China* 2017). Information given by UNESCO should be trustworthy, however,

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the oft-quoted statements here above are part of a widespread myth. Not only is the claim of visibility from the Moon rejected (Hvistendahl 2008; López-Gil 2008), based on works of Arthur Waldron (Waldron 1990) and Julie Lovell (Lovell 2006)², such popular statements can be confronted with opposing views among historians. This imposing brick wall, parts of which are often visited by tourists, were built during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The history of construction of fortifications in northern China started more than 2000 years ago; however, the famous wall of Qin Shi Huangdi is not the same as the brick fortifications observed today. According to Waldron, problems appear already at the level of terminology. A Chinese expression *chang cheng* (长城), with a literal meaning of “a long wall” and nowadays translated as the Great Wall, appeared in Chinese sources from the 1st century BC. Still, the term was used to designate any long wall. In the Ming period, when many of barriers (currently described as “The Great Wall of China”) were constructed, frontier fortresses were called *jiu bian zhen* (九边镇), “the nine border garrisons” (Waldron 1990)³.

In stereotypical views, the Great Wall became a border between agricultural civilization and “barbarian” nomads of the steppes, and helped preserve peace-loving Chinese from attacks. However, such a point of view is an oversimplification. Interactions between nomadic and settled societies were complicated, while trade may have had as big a significance as military conflicts. Some Chinese dynasties stemmed from nomads. Furthermore, some walls were built far away from farming territories, and may seem “less land-protecting than land grabbing” (Lovell 2006: 21).

The myth of the Great Wall can acquire various nuances. The structure is considered a symbol of China and a prestigious trade mark, so it comes as no surprise to find brands of cars or wine called “The Great Wall”. Besides constituting a border between civilization and barbarism, it has also taken on many other meanings:

‘The Great Wall,’ another wall theorist has projected, ‘is not only to be understood as a barrier, but also as a river uniting people of various ethnic background and providing them with a common haven and meeting place.’ Luo Zhewen, vice-president of the Chinese Great Wall Society, has transformed the wall into the ultimate multipurpose historical mascot, declaring that it is simultaneously a product of feudal society and an inspiration for ‘the Chinese people to forge ahead on the road of constructing socialism with Chinese characteristics’; that it created the first unified, centralized Chinese nation *and* helped build a multinational China (Lovell 2006: 13–4).

² Both of these books tackle the problem of the myth of the Great Wall; however, it should be emphasized that Lovell’s book, newer than Waldron’s, is less original and more biased.

³ A quotation taken from an e-book provided by Amazon.com in azw format, hence page numbers are not given.

The structure can also have a negative meaning. Its construction is also seen as a waste of resources and lives. Futility of fortifications is also emphasized, because many at times, these barriers did not actually save China from conquerors. The ancient wall of Qin Shi Huangdi served in Chinese literature as a figure of tyranny and cruelty. For instance, a legendary widow by the name of Mengjiang broke the wall up by her sobbing and revealed bones of her husband and other workmen who died trying to realize the will of the emperor. This legend was in an interesting way reinterpreted during the Cultural Revolution. The first emperor was described as a visionary who wanted to unite a country, and a widow was presented as a pro-Confucian reactionary and “Great Poisonous Weed” (Waldron 1990).

Travelers on the Great Wall

In this paper, an analysis will be made of how Polish and Serbian travelogues in the period from the 18th century until the middle of the 20th century interpreted the Wall and its myth⁴. Travel writing can be seen as a textual trace of a journey, the outcome of a dialogue between the writer’s personality and intellectual judgement when faced with new experiences (Gvozden 2011). Contemporary studies analyse links between travel writing and production of knowledge, imperial rhetoric, and representation of other cultures (Said 1977; Pratt 2011; Spurr 1993; Huigen 2009)⁵. The representation of China was analysed in general terms (Dawson 1967; Mackerras 1989; Spence 1998) or from the standpoint of a specific group in a particular period of time (Лукин 2007; Fogel 1996). By looking at writers from Poland and Serbia, it makes it possible to introduce an interesting comparative perspective. Furthermore, Serbian and Polish authors are especially valuable for analysis of the imperial dimension of travel writing and representation of China. In the period from the 18th to the middle of the 20th century, Poland and Serbia did not participate in political, military and economic exploitation of China; on the contrary, these countries themselves were subjected to imperial manipulation. Nevertheless, Poles and Serbs often travelled to China while representing foreign institutions. Hence, Polish and Serbian travelogues can allow for an interesting ambivalence between imperialism and eurocentrism on the one hand, and sympathy towards abused nation and aversion to great powers on the other.

⁴ For general information about Polish travelers in China, see Kajdański (2005); Kałuski (2001); Cyrzyk (1966). For Serbian authors, see Pušić (1998; 2006).

⁵ It should be noted that the aforementioned works represent sometimes very different approaches, e.g. Huigen is very critical of Pratt.

In the eyes of a diplomat

Probably, the first Serbian traveller who visited China was Sava Vladislavić (1668–1738). Ever since he moved to Russia in 1708, he became involved in military affairs and achieved successes in trade and diplomacy⁶. In 1725-1728, Vladislavić was a Russian envoy to China. This mission ended with signing of the Treaty of Kyakhta, which is recognized as a very significant event (Мясников 1990; Mancall 1971: 255). According to two secret points added to Vladislavić's instructions, he was concerned with gathering intelligence (Бантыш-Каменский 1882: 434–55). His findings are included in *Секретная информация о силе и состоянии Китайского государства* ("The Secret Information on Strength and Situation of the Chinese State"), a secret report, which has been called one of the most important pieces of writing on China (Мясников 2006: 442).

Vladislavić's text was an intelligence report, so more often than not he mentioned the Great Wall within the context of possible military actions by the Russian army, as well as in the context of Chinese history and the meaning of the Wall for Chinese politics, e.g. Chinese never sent an army bigger than 50,000 beyond the Great Wall (Vladislavić 2011: 178–9). While writing on the history of China, Vladislavić repeated, probably following his Jesuit sources, a widespread assertion that the Wall was built during the reign of the Qin dynasty to save the country from Tatars. Sava's remarks emphasized the enormity of the structure, its length and the number of people involved in its construction (allegedly 60 million). The Serbian diplomat's intelligence report was written in a dry manner, so adducing so many numbers can be seen as a sign of great interest in a structure. As we will see, many travellers quoted numbers to express their admiration for the Great Wall. It seems to be one of many examples of a common perception of China as a land of excess (Kerr and Kuehn 2010: 1). The description of the structure was also a sign of respect, especially when in other parts of his report Vladislavić was very Eurocentric, full of confidence in the power of European armies and biased towards the "barbarian" Chinese⁷. Aleksandr Lukin does not mention Sava in his analysis of Russian perception of China; however, the researcher's general conclusion on Russian views of the Middle Kingdom in the 18th century can also be applied to that of the Serbian diplomat: Russian Empire was perceived as part of a progressive European civilization, to be contrasted with backward Asia (Лукин 2007: 46).

⁶ For biographical information about Sava Vladislavić, see Dučić (2004); Sindik (2012); Kosanović (2009).

⁷ For a detailed analysis of Vladislavić's writings on China, see Ewertowski (2014).

Glorification of Chinese achievements

As a Serb serving on the Russian court, Vladislavić is an instance of accommodation to imperial gaze. Another Serbian author, Milan Jovanović (1834–1896), shows how a democratic and liberal worldview can lead to a positive image of China⁸. In the late 1870s and early 1880s, Jovanović travelled around the Mediterranean and Asia while working as a ship's doctor for the steamship company Lloyd from Trieste, hence his travels in Asia were conditioned by the steamship revolution and European commercial expansion. The Serbian author represented liberal and humanistic ideas, therefore he became very critical towards European imperialism⁹. His writings expressed a strong sense of European identity, even though he was also willing to appreciate the achievements of Asian civilizations, which led him to idealization of China and the Chinese. The Great Wall was for Jovanović an example of the Middle Kingdom's greatness:

In his work, a Chinese does not ask how much time he will need: he works, and what he will not finish today, he will continue tomorrow, and like that for many years, and if he dies while working, someone else will continue. This continuity can be seen in any kind of work, and mainly in economy and literature, so these works have broad fundamentals. A book after a book like a canal after canal and its continuity there is a plan, which is executed by whole generations. The Great Wall of China and Chinese literature have the same proportions (Jovanović 1895: 179)¹⁰.

In Jovanović's words, we can find an echo of stereotypes characteristic of Jesuit writings on China, which emphasized rationality and efficiency, as well as the Middle Ages image of China as a land of "richness and plenty" (Dawson 1967: 9–34).

A similar perspective can be found in the writings of a Polish author, Przeclaw Smolik (1877–1947). As an Austrian subject, he was taken prisoner by the Russians during the First World War, lived in a POW camp in Siberia, and after the October Revolution was one of many Polish refugees who came to China¹¹. This author had a positive attitude towards East Asian peoples, and wrote

⁸ For Jovanović's life and work, see Tartalja (1984); Maksimović (2008). On Jovanović's travel writing, see also Kostadinović (2012).

⁹ On Jovanović's attitude towards colonialism and the perception of China, see Ewertowski (2016).

¹⁰ All translations into English are our own, unless otherwise indicated. For the convenience of readers, all Serbian Cyrillic texts have been transcribed into the Latin script. The original says: "U radu svom Hinez ne pita koliko će ga ovaj stati vremena: on radi, pa što ne svrši danas, nastaviće sutra, pa tako kroza čitave godine, i ako ga u tome zateče smrt – nastaviće neko drugi. Taj kontinuitet opaža se u svakoj vrsti rada a poglavito u ekonomnoj i književnoj, te su s toga u njih ovi radovi na širokoj osnovici. Knjiga se ređa na knjigu, kao kanal na kanal, i u tome kontinuitetu ima plana koji izvršuju čitave generacije. Hineski zid i hineska književnost jednake su proporcije".

¹¹ Besides Smolik, a few other authors wrote travelogues based on their escape from revolutionary Russia to China, e.g. Kamil Giżycki *Przez Urianchaj i Mongoliję. 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*. General information on Polish migration in East Asia due to the war and revolution can be found in Cabanowski (1993: 42–72); Kałuski (2001: 97–104). A migration movement caused by the First World War and Russian revolution included Serbs and other Yugoslavian nationals. E.g. Aleksandar Đurić, *Ka pobeđi*, Jovan Milanković, *Uspomene iz*

books about Buryats and Mongols. Smolik observed fortifications in Mukden (nowadays Shenyang), the old capitol of Manchu state, which today are not considered part of the Ming Great Wall itself. Nevertheless, an observation of local ramparts prompted the Polish author to write a discourse, linking it with the myth of the Great Wall. “What I saw, even today makes an imposing impression, a structure built by giants, next to which remains of our Middle Ages fortifications (...) look like children toys”¹² (Smolik 1921: 131). Similar to Jovanović’s account, the Wall was perceived as a symbol of great achievements of the Chinese civilization, which dwarfed European buildings. It revealed that the Middle Kingdom’s inhabitants, masters of crafts and manual skills, were also able to construct huge barriers to defend themselves from “wild barbarians”. Based on these assumptions, he formulated this generalization of the Chinese:

(...) gentle and cheerful as a child, and as a child honest; diligent over any European merits, attached to his family and his land (...), bred as sand in a sea and populate still new virgin and barren lands of Asia, in front of which a white man falls back, and where he [a Chinese] quietly brings his wonderful, eternal culture (...). Indeed this nation deserves appreciation and imitation, in spite of bad smell of garlic and bean oil¹³.

Smolik glorified the Chinese, also dealing with aspects of everyday life, which often were criticized (e.g. bad smell). Comparisons with Europe are also very important. In the previously quoted fragment, the Great Wall was dwarfing European fortifications, now Chinese traits, which allowed them to build the majestic structure, are presented as enabling them to colonize lands inhabitable for Europeans. Being very favourable to the Chinese, the analysed account still remains in the framework of European imperial discourse. As David Spurr points out, at the end of the classical period, classification moved to assessment of “a character based on the internal principle” (Spurr 1993: 63). While observing a phenomena, a deep root is being looked for. “Such a system of understanding—one that orders natural beings according to function and establishes a hierarchy based on internal character—has consequences for the classification of human races in the Western mind” (Spurr 1993: 63). Smolik is prompted by an observation of the Wall to classify its builders and in the process prescribing some essential characteristics to them.

Sibira 1918–1919 i put okeanom u domovinu 1920, Vlada Stanojević, *Moje ratne beleške i slike*, Arton Mihailović, *Kroz plamen ruske revolucije*.

¹² „To, co zobaczyłem, czyni jeszcze dziś wrażenie imponujące, budowli, przez gigantów stawianej, przy której resztki naszych średniowiecznych fortyfikacyj (...) wyglądają jak chłopięce igraszki!”

¹³ „Chińczyk (...) łagodny i wesoły, jak dziecię i jak tylko dziecię dziś u nas uczciwy; pracowity ponad wszelką naszą europejską miarę, przywiązany gorąco do rodziny i do swej ziemi, (...) rozmnaża się niby piasek w morzu, i zaludnia wciąż nowe dziewicze i jałowe przestrzenie Azji, przed którymi cofa się biały człowiek ze strachem, i w które wnosi on cicho swą cudowną, odwieczną kulturę, (...). Zaiste — naród to godny, by go uwielbiać i naśladować, pomimo niemiłego zapachu czosnku i oleju z bobów (...).”

Finally, the Polish traveller presented a sharp criticism of European imperialism that is also analogical to Jovanović's views. He wrote that in vain "a white barbarian" was trying to teach the Chinese how to kill, East Asians are a great nation without such instincts (Smolik 1921: 132). A moral, social and state discipline made the Chinese human, while "white tigers from the West" were not humanized by Christianity even after two thousand years (Smolik 1921: 133). By describing Europeans as "barbarians", Smolik seemed to adopt a Chinese point of view; however, it should be noted that he also projected Western ideas onto China. Colonizing new lands, civilizing mission and humanism are seen as merits of value. Furthermore, his views on the Chinese can be treated as a reinvention of a "noble savage". He appreciated the achievements of Chinese civilization, but while writing on people he used a patronizing tone, calling "a Chinese" a child who did not know the value of his deeds. As Spurr states, Western writers' idealization of extra-European peoples in a "noble savage" style was often prompted by a crisis in their own culture, so Smolik's apotheosis of the Chinese can be linked with experiencing the horrors of the First World War. Criticism of the West and glorification of China were conducted from within a Western worldview, which is not surprising, considering that his stay in East Asia was a relatively short episode in Smolik's life.

Emphasizing Chinese troubles

An inversion of the thoughts of Jovanović and Symonolewicz can be found in a description of a trip to the Great Wall written by the well-known Polish architect Stefan Bryła (1886–1943) from his book *Daleki Wschód* ("The Far East"). This author also used the Great Wall to formulate a general conclusion on the Chinese culture, however, his assessment was totally different. Bryła visited a section of the Great Wall near Beijing. His account began with the description of a landscape and esteem for a fascinating setting. Yet a closer examination of the structure led to a claim of its futility.

Its [the Wall's] cobbled surface is made out of big, mighty stones. They still hold, however mosses and weeds have squeezed among them; and time started to bite them. It has made huge breaches already (...). Guards do not stand at the gate. The wall is just a trace and a witness to a giant, not very productive work, but will not fulfil its role. It did not fulfil it in days of yore, two and a half centuries ago!¹⁴ (Bryła 1923: 178)

¹⁴ „Brak jego z wielkich potężnych kamieni. Jeszcze trzymają się, ale już wcisnęły się pomiędzy nie mchy i chwasty; a czas je gryźć poczyna. Wyrwy poczynił już wielkie (...). U bramy straż już nie stoi. Mur jest tylko śladem i świadkiem ogromnej, niezbyt produkcyjnej pracy, ale roli swej spełnić już nie zdoła. Nie zdołał jeszcze ongi przed pół-trzecia wiekiem!”.

During the trip, while observing Chinese workers and comparing them with his experience in America, the architect-turned-writer claimed that the Chinese did not know how to work, because their diligence was just a routine repetition. Where Smolik and Jovanović praised diligence and perseverance, Bryła just saw a lack of innovation. Jovanović extolled a continuity in Chinese work, Bryła despised it, saying that small toys started by a grandfather and finished by a grandson resulted in disrespect for time and punctuality (Bryła 1923: 181). This is also reflected in thinking about the Great Wall. Smolik saw it as a great structure which protected China from barbarians and overshadowed European fortifications, whereas Bryła emphasized the fact that the Wall was in ruins and had been ineffective. The architect's disquisition was crowned by his consideration of the Wall as a symbol of Chinese backwardness and isolation. Between the Middle Kingdom and the rest of the World, there was the Great Wall of China, stronger than a stone one, which had not been crossed yet. The Chinese must demolish it themselves (Bryła 1923: 182). Using the Wall as a symbol of barriers preventing communication between the Middle Kingdom and the world is also found in the works of another Polish traveller, the well-known sinologist Witold Jabłoński (1901–1957);¹⁵ however, this author wrote about “the wall of our prejudices”: “Then thousands of our prejudices and biases separated us from China as a wall more unreachable than the famous Great Wall of China”¹⁶ (Jabłoński 1958: 201).

A sublime experience

Works of Jovanović, Smolik, and Bryła used the Great Wall as a pretext to make general statements about the Chinese civilization. This dimension is also present in an account by Milutin Velimirović (1893–1973), but a dominant feature in this author's is emotions. Velimirović stayed in China in 1918 as a member of the Russian-Mongolian trade mission, and in this period he also visited Mongolia and Japan (Pušić 2006: 129–30). Descriptions of the Great Wall can be found in two Velimirović's travelogues – *Kroz Kinu* (“Through China”) and *Po Japanu i Mongoliji* (“In Japan and Mongolia”)¹⁷. The most interesting is a fragment from the first book:

The Great Wall of China is one of the wonders of the world, created by human hand. It leaves extraordinary and heavy impression; a thought is strange itself, that the Wall spreads for three thousand kilometres, winding on mountain slopes and crossing streams and deserts, and was built 230 years BC.

¹⁵ On Jabłoński's biography and research, see Golik (2009).

¹⁶ „Wtedy tysiące naszych uprzedzeń i przesądów oddzielało nas od Chin murem bardziej niedostępnym niż słynny Mur Chiński”.

¹⁷ For more on the image of China in Velimirović's works, see Ewertowski (2015).

This Great Wall, which is above 11 meters high and on which a few carriages can pass each other, was to defend China against invasions (...) (Velimirović 1930: 23)¹⁸.

Even if Velimirović reproduced information that are analogical to others', still his emotional tone made a difference. He admired the Wall, but simultaneously he was overwhelmed by its enormity. This feeling can be described by the theory of the sublime. The sublime creates excitement and may appear to contravene the limits of one's power of judgment, and thus called an outrage on the imagination (Kant 2004: 132). The greatness of the Wall is such an outrage, so it left on Velimirović quite a heavy and extraordinary impression. Later, he also claimed that the majesty of the Wall was transformed into "incomprehensibility" (Velimirović 1930: 24).

Still, there was one aspect of the structure which gave Velimirović bad feelings. He mentioned that not seldom workers rioted because of hunger. Unrests were brutally quashed and hundreds of men were buried in the Wall.

Nevertheless, his final words on the ramparts are full of appreciation. He even stated that their grandeur and boldness could be compared only with canals on the surface of Mars, thus elevating the structure to an interplanetary level. Furthermore, contrary to Bryła's thought about the destruction of a barrier, Velimirović claimed that even if ancient walls were not in good shape, damage was caused by people, not by time. Thus, to Velimirović the Great Wall was a timeless monument, and he remarked that only Chinese patience and workforce can accomplish such a colossal work. In this way, he classified the essence of the Chinese national character on the basis of observations of the Great Wall, as with other authors before him.

In terms of emotions, we can compare his account with the passionate words of a Polish aristocrat, Paweł Sapieha (1860–1934), who travelled through Asia in 1888–1889. Sapieha made a journey from China to Mongolia and observed various fortifications, all of which are treated as Chinese walls. The most interesting is a fragment devoted to "the furthest, the oldest, great wall of China": "Unheard, magnificent view. We are on a great altitude, I am sitting under a half-ruined, completely black fort, under my foot [there is] this ancient wall, today only a heap of blacked stones marks a place where the wall was"¹⁹ (Sapieha 1899: 307). Then followed the description of a

¹⁸ „Veliki kineski zid – to je jedno od zemaljskih čuda, koje je stvoreno čovečjom rukom! On ostavlja neobičan i težak utisak; čudnovata je i sama pomisao da se taj zid prostire u dužinu od 3300 kilometara, vijugajući po planinskim kosama i prolazeći preko strmeni i pustinje, a da je sagrađen 230 god. pre Hrista!/ Taj Veliki zid, koji je visok preko 11 metara i na komes e, na bedemu mogu nekoliko kola mimoići, trebao je da zaštiti Kinu od najezda (...)”.

¹⁹ „Widok niesłychany, przepyszny. Jesteśmy na wysokości ogromnej; siedzę pod rozwalonym na poły, zupełnie zczerniałym karaułem; u stóp moich ów prastary mur, dziś już kupa kamieni zczerniałych, znaczy zaledwie miejsce gdzie stał mur”.

scenery: “(...) further away there are mountains, rocks are piling over terraces higher and higher, up to the clouds, from which far away, (...) magnificent, sapphire peaks are protruding – they are probably the Himalayas!”²⁰ (Sapieha 1899: 307). According to Grażyna Królikiewicz, within romantic perception, ruins belonged simultaneously to culture and nature, and contemplation of them showed a mechanism of memory and imagination (Królikiewicz 1993). We can see it in Sapieha’s account. His imagination, impressed by a crumbling wall and scenery, was able to take in the Himalayas despite the fact that they were a few thousand kilometres away. This incomparable experience is expressed once again at the end of the fragment which is devoted to the Wall:

I have never seen in my life anything equal to this view, anything so touching. After all I had a third of Asia at my feet, in front of my eyes: these two colossuses, China and Mongolia. Behind Mongolia, one can feel also the third: “holy” Russia (...) I admit that sitting there and watching and involuntarily looking, if somewhere in this expanse I will not see the lord of these worlds, the Satan, I was trembling as a leaf – if because of cold, or because of emotions, let others judge; but only they, who can look at such colossuses and expanses with an eye different from an ordinary tourist²¹.

Analogic to Velimirović, the Wall and the view from it gave Sapieha a feeling of the sublime, which overwhelmed the subject, so he felt deeply moved and vulnerable, “trembling as a leaf”. Postcolonial analysis of writings concerning the observation of a landscape introduces a rhetoric gesture: “monarch of all I survey” (Spurr 1993: 17–9; Pratt 2011: 283–92). In this kind of stylistic manner, a writer proceeds with aesthetic or economic valorization of the landscape before turning a foreign country into a painting, thus expressing the idea of domination. Some aspects of this rhetoric can be seen in Sapieha’s account, however his writing lacks a strong colonial subject. Sapieha was not a Victorian explorer with the ideology of the British empire in his backpack, but rather a romantic-minded traveller, concentrated even overwhelmed by a subjective experience of the sublime. This kind of sensitivity is also expressed by a contrast between the elitist outlook of the traveller and the ordinary gaze of the tourist. This dichotomy is typical for 19th century and 20th century travel writing, and is often used to emphasize the distinction between a subject and “others” in many fields, including class (Gvozden 2011: 187–207). As might well be expected, Sapieha, an aristocrat, presented himself as a sensible traveller in opposition to the ordinary run-of-the-mill

²⁰ „(...)dalej znowu góry, skały piętrzą się terasami coraz wyżej aż pod chmury, z których (...) sterczą szafirowe teraz, przepyszne szczyty — to już chyba Himalaje!”

²¹ „Nic równego jak ten widok, nic tak przejmującego w życiu nie widziałem. Wszak prawie trzecią część Azji miałem u stóp, przed oczami: te dwa kolosy, Chiny i Mongolię. Za Mongolią czuć mimowoli trzeciego: Rosyę «świętą»! (...) Wyznaję, że siedząc tu i patrząc i mimowoli szukając, czy gdzie w tem przestworzu nie ujrzę unoszącego się pana tych światów, szatana, dygotałem jak listek — czy z zimna, czy ze wzruszenia, niech osądzą inni; ale ci tylko, co umieją na takie kolosy i przestworza innem jak zwykłym okiem turysty spoglądać”.

tourist²². Another very interesting figure is the reference to Satan as “the lord of these worlds”. Such a formula adds sublimity to a described landscape in a way that can be associated with dark romanticism’s convention. It can also be read as the reflex of a tradition which has its roots in the Middle Ages, in which distant Asian lands were presented as belonging to evil powers.

Imaginative history and geography

Another author who modified geography while standing on the Wall was Roman Fajans (1903–1976), one of the most highly regarded Polish reporters of the 1930s (Szczygieł 2015: 261). This journalist visited China in 1937–1938. In his book *W Chinach znowu wojna* (“A war in China once again”), he described a trip to a section of the Great Wall next to Beijing. He was very impressed by the landscape, but analogical to Bryła he wrote that the fortifications were empty. They were regarded by him as an effect of the emperor’s despotic whim (Fajans 1939: 312), a waste of resources. But had it not been for the emperor’s urge, “we would not have had one of the greatest and most picturesque panoramas in the world” (Fajans 1939: 313)²³. The view is breath-taking: “looking towards four sides of the world, we gaze towards the Mongolian steppe and towards Cheli, towards Tibet and the fertile lowlands of Southern China” (Fajans 1939: 313)²⁴.

Fajans had a double point of view. On the one hand, in terms of rational analysis he saw the Wall as the emperor’s useless extravagance and a place of suffering for his people. On the other hand, he was deeply impressed by the aesthetic qualities of the structure, and in a way similar to Sapieha he imagined a new geography, linking distant lands. To some extent, it can be seen as an effect of a strong connection between the Wall and the idea of the border. Looking at the structure with this idea in mind could have inspired such an imaginative geography, in which fortifications became a boundary between faraway territories.

In the works of Fajans and Sapieha, we encountered examples of an imaginative geography, and in the Serbian traveller Miodrag Rajčević’s account we met an imaginative history. Of course, as Hayden White shows, history is in general a narration, so inevitably it involves storytelling and imagination. Most of the analysed authors reproduced popular myths about the structure, and they could not be blamed for it, because they simply used knowledge that were available to them at the time. However, if we agree that imaginative geography and history “help the mind to intensify its

²² For a different interpretation of this scene, see Mazan (2010).

²³ „jednej z najpotężniejszych i najbardziej malowniczych panoram, jakie istnieją na świecie”.

²⁴ „Widok za to jest z góry niezrównany: patrząc w cztery strony świata, spoglądamy ku mongolskim stepom i ku Cheli, ku przedpolom Tybetu i ku żyznym nizinom Chin południowych”.

own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (Said 1977: 55), then Rajčević can be singled out because his travelogue contained the best example of such a process of intensifying one’s identity, even if his method is about linking, rather than dramatizing, the difference. This Serbian author was a globetrotter who travelled around the world in the first half of the 20th century for several years. While writing about the Great Wall, Rajčević revived a famous myth that Rome fell because China built the Wall, thereby redirecting the Huns to the West. Rajčević went even further, implicitly linking all historical invasions from Asia to Europe with the building of the Wall, claiming that because of those Chinese fortifications, the Serbs had been subjected to Turkish rule since the 1389 battle of Kosovo (Rajčević 1930: 113–4). An imaginative history of the Wall even became a trigger for the expression of Serbian identity.

In the eyes of a reporter

The last author to be examined is another reporter, but also a poet and editor, Aleksander Janta-Polczyński (1908–1974), who wrote two books in the 1930s about his travels in Asia: *Ziemia jest okrągła* (“The Earth is round”) and *Na kresach Azji* (“On the frontiers of Asia”)²⁵. More attention is paid to the Wall in *Na kresach Azji*. Janta recognized that the Wall could make a big impression, but his attitude is to some extent different from the other authors in that he is more critical towards stereotypes. He wrote that while seeing the Wall for the third time in his life, he laughed at some news about fortifications from the European press, e.g. about the idea of building a highway on top of the structure (Janta-Polczyński 1939: 173). And while giving information about its visibility from Mars, he indicated his source for it, Hendrik van Loon’s *Geography*. The writer was surprised that there had been no expedition along the whole Wall, from Shanhaiguan onto the depths of Mongolia, where the Wall allegedly ends. According to Janta, such an expedition could have discovered how long and how full of tangles of fortifications the wall truly is. His research interest and scepticism set him apart from the other authors. Nonetheless, we can still notice some inaccuracies, e.g. the expedition described by Janta had already been conducted at the beginning of the 20th century (Geil 1909).

Conclusion

The written accounts analysed above have a number of common features, especially the repetition of historical myths or being impressed by the sheer size and length of the Wall, along

²⁵ For more information on Janta-Polczyński, see Palowski (1990).

with its spectacular setting. However, the authors' views seem to be determined by their individual predilections, personalities, as well as their social and intellectual background. The best example is a comparison of Bryła's criticisms with either Smolik's or Jovanović's idealisation. Writers of romantic sensibility are more emotional and can be carried away by the sublimity of any such fortifications, e.g. Velimirović and Sapieha. Imaginative history and geography of the Wall can enhance the subject's identity, the most telling example being the Serbian traveller, Rajčević. In the field of imperial rhetoric, authors whose identities are strongly linked with the powers that be at the time seem to be much more critical towards the Chinese and are full of self-confidence, e.g. Vladislavić. This variety of approaches is not insignificant. Robert Dawson once titled his book on the European perceptions of China as "The Chinese Chameleon"; as it turned out, the Great Wall has also proven to be one such chameleon.

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