

The Orientalization of a European Orient: Turkquerie and Chinoiserie in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Poland

一個歐洲東方觀的東方化過程
(論十六至十七世紀波蘭的土耳其風和中國風)

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Abstract

In the 16th and 17th centuries the myth of the origin of the Polish noblemen among ancient Asiatic nomads called Sarmatians flourished. The impact of Polish-Turkish wars in the 17th century popularized Oriental knowledge and art. Polish noblemen dressed in Oriental fashion and furnished their homes with Oriental artifacts. As a result Poland was often considered by Western European countries as the "Orient of the West." In the late 17th century Western and especially English and French fascination with Chinese art and culture passed to Poland. The myth of the "Wonderland of Cathay" was mirrored in art, architecture (especially in garden architecture) in the style called "Chinoiserie". Contrary to the direct impact of Turkish on Polish culture, which was assimilated and became an integral part of the Polish nobleman's identity, in the 18th century the fascination for China was indirect and formed a false image of this country as it was constructed in the Western countries. By analyzing Chinese artifacts and examples of "Chinoiserie" in Polish collections, this paper will argue that even if Poland had direct links to the Orient, a Westernized fantastic image of China made a stronger impact and lasts till today in Polish culture. Contemporary Polish popular culture is filled with "Chinoiserie" (interior design, medicine) which has little in common with the "real" China. The image of China even today is formed by an "imperial" knowledge and imagination.

摘要

在十六和十七世紀時，盛行著一種說法，認為波蘭貴族的血統源自於亞太游牧民族中名為薩瑪遜 (Sarmatians) 的種族。十七世紀時，波蘭和土耳其的戰爭帶來了東方的知識和藝術，波蘭的貴族們在戰後開始以東方的流行來打扮自己，也以東方的藝術品來佈置住家。久而久之，波蘭便被西歐國家認為是「西方中的東方」。十七世紀晚期，西方世界，尤其是英國和法國，也將對中國藝術和文化的迷戀傳到了波蘭；當時對「古中國仙境」的神秘想像，可見於在具有中國風的藝術和建築（尤其是庭園建築）中。土耳其文化對波蘭文化具有直接的影響，並且在十八世紀時被同化並內化成為波蘭貴族文化的一部份。相對於這種現象，歐洲對中國文化的迷戀並非藉由一種直接接觸的方式，而是由西方國家自行建構其形象，這因而形成了對中國的錯誤印象。藉由分析中國的文物和「中國風」的波蘭收藏品，這篇文章的論點認為：即使波蘭和東方有直接的關連，西方世界對中國的浪漫化想像直到今日都還有強烈的影響。當代的波蘭通俗文化充滿了各式「中國風」（室內設計或是醫藥），但這些卻和「真實的」中國沒有多大關連。即使到了今日，中國形象仍組成自一種「帝國的」知識和想像。

The aim of this paper is to present two features of 17th- and 18th-century Polish culture: its Orientality and Orientalization. The Orientality of Polish culture from the latter half of the 16th through the 17th centuries is related to geopolitical and historical factors (Poland's location in Eastern Europe and its eastward expansion) as well as cultural factors (the combination of Oriental influences with Sarmatism, i.e. the culture of Polish nobility in the latter half of the 17th century). On the other hand, the Orientalization of Polish culture from the late 17th through the 18th centuries is related to the "vogue for the Orient" imported from England, France, and Germany, which found favorable ground in 19th-century romanticism and sentimentalism and has survived in Poland up to the present day.

My argument is that even though from the late 16th through the 17th centuries Polish culture assimilated some elements of the *Oriens islamicus*, those elements have not survived in any distinct form, as did the fantastic ideas of the fairylike East and the "wonderful land of Cathay" which were part of the "vogue for the Orient." We might conclude that the superficial fascination with the Orient (Orientalization) influenced the formation of modern Polish national identity to a greater extent than the assimilated authentic Orient ("Sarmatian" Orientality), and, further, that "pretended otherness" (dressing up, masquerade) is one of the foundations of modern identity, both in Poland and elsewhere.

The period from the mid-16th to the mid-17th century was the golden age of the Polish Commonwealth (the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania joined in a real union). Situated at the meeting point of the East and the West, the Commonwealth was, after Russia, the second most important country in Europe, a country which was both multinational (Lithuanians, Ruthenians, Germans, Jews, Armenians, Tatars) and multireligious (Catholics, Protestants, members of the Orthodox Church, Jews, Muslims).

From the late 15th to the late 17th centuries Poland had direct connections with Middle Eastern countries, which involved some degree of openness to the cultural influence of the Orient. Those connections resulted from four factors: firstly, the Jagiellonian monarchy shared the border with the Ottoman Empire (until the battle of



A Polish costume (*zupan*) from 17th c. (Museum of Applied Art, Poznan)

Mohacz, 1526) and the Crimean Khanate; secondly; the geographical proximity of Orientalized Ruthenia; thirdly, 17th century wars with Turkey; lastly and most importantly, the myth of the ancient origin of Polish nobility, allegedly descended from the Asian nomadic tribe of the Sarmatians who were believed to have conquered the Slavonic tribes living between the Odra and Dniepr Rivers and to have originated a new ruling class.¹ This legend, based on sheer speculation and an invented genealogy, gave rise to a specific culture, way of living, and ideology that prevailed in Poland in the 16th and 17th centuries. Called Sarmatianism after the name of that ancient tribe, this culture became a lasting foundation of Polish national identity. During that period Polish culture absorbed many elements of the culture of the Islamic East: Turkish, Tartar, and Persian influence on Polish culture could be compared to Moorish influence on Spanish



Coffin portrait of Polish nobleman (17th - 18th c.)

culture. Those Oriental influences permeated the everyday life of the Polish nobility and were manifested in language (words of Eastern origin, such as *rumak* ‘steed’, *bulawa* ‘baton’, *bazar* ‘bazaar’, *kilim* ‘kilim, rug’) as well as in the appearance and clothing of men. Polish noblemen wore robes called *kontusz* and *żupan*, modeled on the Eastern way of dressing. From the mid-17th century the most characteristic and most spectacular item of their clothing was a broad silken belt; such belts were initially imported from Turkey and Persia, and later manufactured in Poland as well. Another Middle Eastern import was a specific way of shaving heads.

The influence of the Islamic Orient was also visible in weapons (sablers, e.g. the so-called “armenians” and carabellas - curved sabres which became a symbol of Polishness; richly ornamented light shields called *kalkan*), clothing

¹ In his study *Descriptio Sarmatium Asiana et Europiana*, published in Kraków in 1521, Maciej Miechowita argued that the Polish nation originated in the East, and derived the genealogy of Polish nobility (and not the whole nation!) from the Scythians.



Turkish mace
17th C.

(scale armor and headdress, such as casques); saddles and harness; and tokens of military rank. The latter included the horsetail ensign, which marked the commander's location; the baton – the token of the hetman's authority; and the mace (*buzdygan*) – the token of the colonel's authority. Those objects could be obtained as war trophies or imported from Persia or Turkey; they were also manufactured in a Lvov workshop run by Armenians. Batons and maces were richly ornamented, often with Oriental floral and plant motifs, inlaid with precious stones, or enameled.²

Furthermore, Orientality was manifested in interior decoration (carpets, wall hangings, kilims, table pottery and decorative pottery, porcelain – the so-called *farfury*, whose name derives from the Turkish word *fağfur* meaning the Chinese emperor).³ As Tadeusz Chrzanowski, an expert on this period of Polish history, noted, “At some point the Orient in Poland became practically an everyday thing.”⁴ For this reason Poland was perceived by Western countries as an exotic country which was part of the East rather than the West. The long robes of Polish noblemen, which the French associated with the Persians and Medes, were criticized for their “Eastern lavishness,” exoticism, and barbarism. They differed dramatically from the short bouffant trousers, stockings, and tight doublets worn at that time in France.⁵

² See Tadeusz Mańkowski, *Orient w polskiej kulturze artystycznej* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1959) chapter 7, “Broń wschodnia w polskim ręku”.

³ On this issue see, e.g., Andrzej Jakimowicz, *Zachód a sztuka Wschodu* (Warszawa: PWN, 1967) chapter 6, “Dawna Polska a Wschód,” and 7, “Chińszczyzna i inne mody”.

⁴ Tadeusz Chrzanowski, “Orient i orientalizm w kulturze staropolskiej,” *Orient i orientalizm w sztuce. Materiały z sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki* (Warszawa: PWN, 1986), p. 46. See also Tadeusz Chrzanowski, *Wędrowki po Sarmacji europejskiej* (Kraków: Znak, 1988), pp. 27, 185-190.

⁵ See Franciszka de Motteville's comments on Polish messengers entering Paris in 1645. Franciszka de Motteville, *Anna Austriaczka i jej dwór*, ed. Zofia Libiszowska (Warszawa, 1978), p. 91.



*A cabinet with "Chinese" scenes,
Saxony (?), 1739*

The late 17th century marks the beginning of the "vogue for the Orient," which reached Poland via England, France, and Germany and which involved the vogue for Chinese culture. This process could be described as the Orientalization of the Polish Orient. In contrast to the direct reception of the Islamic Orient, which was accepted, familiarized, and, as it were, naturally assimilated into Polish culture,⁶ the "vogue for the Orient" (India, China, and Japan) was a mediated import. We might refer here to Edward W. Said's concept of Orientalism. In this context Orientalization, which includes a "vogue for China," would mean a specific perception and representation of Far Eastern countries by the

West, a perception and representation which were founded on the belief in the superiority of Western culture and at a later time became instruments of Western domination.⁷ Thus, while in the 16th and 17th centuries we can speak of Orientality,⁸ which does not construe the Orient in negative terms but presents it as a source of wisdom, philosophy, and civilizational values (this defines the difference between Orientality and exoticism, which looks for simplicity, naivete, and primitivism⁹), in the 18th century we have to do with Orientalism, which repre-

⁶ Janusz Tazbir points out that Polish culture is marked by the clash of xenophobia and xenophilia. The Baroque (1620-1740) was a period of xenophobia, which however did not include a dislike of Turkish dress, Persian or Chinese carpets, or Tatar weapons. Such dress and such surroundings were considered natural and appropriate by noblemen who thought of themselves as Sarmatians, whereas noblemen who dressed according to the French fashion were suspected of supporting elections *vivente rege*. Thus, clothing expressed faithfulness to tradition and loyalty to the existing order. Janusz Tazbir, "Stosunek do obcych w dobie baroku," *Szlaki kultury polskiej* (Warszawa: PIW, 1986), pp. 186-197.

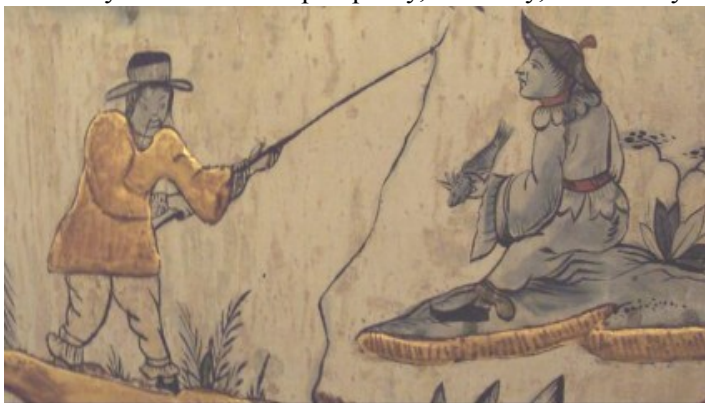
⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

⁸ Jan Kieniewicz defines Polish Orientality as follows: "From the 15th century Polish Orientality consists of a sum of borrowings [from Middle Eastern cultures: the Turks, the Tatars, the Persians] in language, clothing, weaponry, or manners of Polish noblemen," *Sąsiedzi i inni* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1978), p. 79.

⁹ As Jan Reychman argues in *Orient w kulturze polskiego Oświecenia* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1964), n. 9, p. 355.

sents the East in the fairground mirror of the West. The end of the 17th century also marks the end of active assimilation of *turkquerie* and the beginning of Polish imitation of the Western “vogue for the Orient.”

The vogue for China, imagined in an idealistic and fairy-like manner as “the wonderful land of Cathay” - the land of prosperity, harmony, and beauty - was reflected in Western European art of the late 17th and 18th centuries, and then also in Polish art, as *chinoiseries*. The latter demonstrate that Polish interest in China was a superficial fascina-



Chinese cabinet, fragment

tion ungrounded in any deeper reflection on Chinese culture. Such motifs as pagodas, representations of human figures in long robes and pointed hats, umbrellas, and characteristic plant or animal designs, all taken from popular pattern-books, were enough for an object to be perceived as “Chinese.” European faience imitating Chinese motifs; gardens designed after Chinese models; carpets, furniture, and other pseudo-Chinese artefacts provided some material evidence for the existence of that fairylike land, the better world. “The non-European world,” Emanuel Rostworowski argued, “served to create European myths... which contributed to transformations within Europe but did not influence Europe’s actual attitude toward the non-European world.”¹⁰

For Polish people Chinese culture was exotic not by virtue of its own exoticism, but because it had been made exotic by Western culture. The few *objets d’art* that were imported directly from China were no more exotic for Poles than the assimilated and familiar Turkish or Persian artefacts; rather, it was their mediation by the West that turned them into magical fetishes belonging to a fairy land. Orientalism became an element of Polish culture which later proved more persistent than Orientality.

¹⁰ Emanuel Rostworowski, “Wyobrażenia o świecie pozaeuropejskim,” *Historia powszechna wiek XVIII* (Warszawa: PWN, 1984), p. 305.

The vogue for Chinese culture reached Poland by degrees. It could first be observed as early as the late 17th century, during the reign of John III Sobieski, who defeated the Turks at Vienna (1683). He created a Chinese cabinet in the royal palace at Wilanów, whose contents can be reconstructed on the basis of surviving inventories.¹¹ We can assume, however, that the person who came up with the idea of the cabinet was not the Sarmatian Sobieski – he was more interested in the Turkish and Tatar Orient – but his wife, the French-born Maria Kazimiera d'Arquien, who played a part in bringing the vogue for China into Poland. At the same time, however, unmediated knowledge about China also reached Poland during Sobieski's reign thanks to Jesuit missionaries (among them the Poles Jan Mikołaj Smogilecki, d. 1656, and Michał Boym, d. 1731) who were in contact with Polish scholars. After his victory at Vienna the king himself sent his portrait to the Chinese emperor Kangxi (1662-1702). The portrait was accepted and the emperor replied with a letter, which unfortunately does not survive. This gesture is regarded by some historians as an attempt to establish direct relations with China.¹²

This period saw the development of Oriental and Sarmatian collections, particularly of weapons. The Baroque passion for exoticism brought to the royal court, and soon afterwards to magnates' and noblemen's houses, original objects from China (including those obtained as Turkish booty after the Succor of Vienna) and their imitations. Apart from *chinoiserie* in ornaments, clothing, or porcelain the presence of China in Poland involved the use of Chinese medicinal herbs, which were also utilized as spices (ginger, cinnamon, cloves). Tea, or "*herba thea*," was also introduced at that time. Orig-



Vases with Chinese motifs (Delft, The Netherlands, early 18th c.)

¹¹ See Wojciech Fijałkowski, "Orient w Wilanowie. Szkic do obrazu kultury artystycznej Wschodu i jej europejskich mutacji w dawnej rezydencji Jana III Sobieskiego," *Orient i orientalizm w sztuce*.

¹² See "Drogi poznania cywilizacji chińskiej," ed. by Józef Włodarski, *Chiny w oczach Polaków do XX wieku* (Gdańsk: Marpress, 2001), p. 44.

nally treated as a medicament and recommended e.g. as a remedy for headache, in the latter half of the 18th century it became a common stimulant.

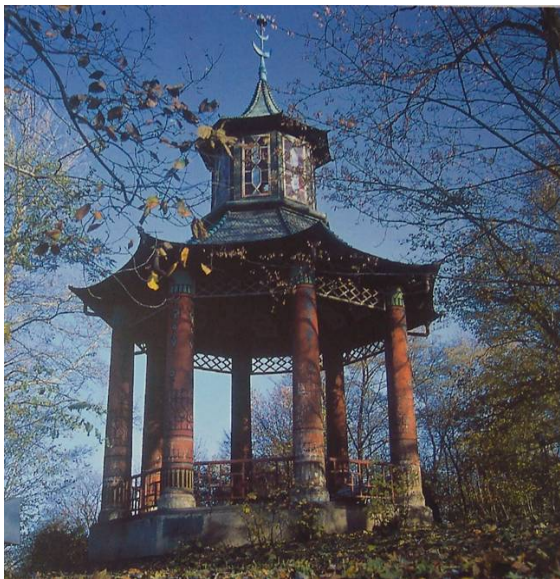
The next wave of interest in Chinese culture was initiated in the first half of the 18th century by the Polish kings of the Saxon dynasty: Augustus II the Strong and Augustus III. In 1709 Jan Fryderyk Böttger (1682-1719), Augustus the Strong's chemist-in-ordinary, discovered the secret of producing porcelain, and the king soon established a porcelain workshop in Albrechtsburg, Meissen. Poland was then flooded by German imitations of Chinese porcelain ornamented with imaginary scenes from Chinese life. Along with porcelaine figurines of Chinese and Japanese people, Africans, and monkeys, the Meissen workshop manufactured grotesque figurines of Polish noblemen, which shows that Polish nobility was similarly perceived as exotic.

The vogue for Chinese culture surged up again during the reign of King Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski. Jan Kieniewicz has distinguished three trends in 18th-century Polish Orientalism: noblemen's or Sarmatian Orientalism, which cherished domesticity and tradition; cosmopolitan Orientalism, which was manifested in imitating fashion that came to Poland from France, Germany, and England; and enlightened Orientalism, related to the critique of the feudal system.¹³ The 18th-century vogue for Chinese culture belongs primarily to the second, Cosmopolitan tend, as the first trend was still involved cultivating the Orientality of the Islamic East, while the third one was of a philosophical and literary character.

The spread of the "vogue for Chinese culture" was prompted in 1765-1767 by King Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski's court painter, the Frenchman Jean Pillement, who ornamented the Royal Castle in Warsaw with Chinese motifs and designed boats modeled on Chinese junks which were used for rides on the lake. This period was characterized by the eclecticism of rococo art, which often combined Chinese and Turkish motifs. Another vogue was collecting original Chinese objects, which were assembled in the so-called Chinese cabinets. The king himself had one at the Royal Castle in Warsaw.

¹³ Kieniewicz, "Orientalność polska", p. 84.

It must be noted that while in the 17th century the main recipients of *chinoiserie* were the court, magnates, and noblemen, in the 18th century it is the townspeople who become the chief clients for “Oriental” goods. Hence the goods in demand were no longer weapons but objects for everyday use and decoration, such as furniture, lamps, and caskets, and above all vases, plates, and trinkets manufactured in Delft and Meissen workshops, and later in the Polish city of Gdańsk. The vogue for Chinese culture can also be observed in garden



The Chinese bower at Wilanów 1805-1812 (current's view)

architecture. In the second half of the 18th century gardens in “English-Chinese” style appeared in Poland. They were inspired by the conceptions of William Chambers (1723-1796), whose book *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils* (London 1757) contained ready-to-copy designs which, however, were distorted because Chinese buildings from the Canton area were drawn according to Palladian rules of proportion and harmony. Typical of the “English-Chinese” garden

style were light, openwork kiosks, bowers, and pavillions with distinctive curved roofs modeled on pagodas.¹⁴ The gardens were decorated with Chinese flowers: peonies, chrysanthemums, gardenias, lotuses, magnolias, mallows. Another area of Chinese influence was philosophy.

Thus, the 18th-century vogue for Chinese culture was different from the previous waves of *chinoiserie* and was characterized by the so-called “enlightened sinophilia.” This came to Poland from France via the writings of the French encyclopedists, particularly Voltaire, who discovered China for the purpose of

¹⁴ See *Cudowna Kraina Cathay. Chińska architektura ogrodowa*. Exhibition at the Museum of Applied Arts, Poznań, September-October 2000 (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, 2000).

overthrowing absolutism and fighting the Church. This “literary chinoiserie,” according to Jan Raychman, served an ideological function and formed the peak of idealizing the East.¹⁵ The Orient became a vehicle of cultural values which the corrupted West lacked, and thus served a specific mission as the light of a new civilization.

In 18th-century Polish literature China was represented as an idyllic and fantastic land of rich cities, beautiful gardens, wise and just monarchs, and well-educated mandarins who could teach us wisdom and tolerance, gentleness, modesty, and virtue, the love of knowledge and respect for the elders. This idealized image of China was contrasted with the backward Poland, which should follow China’s example in the organization of the state and the virtues of its inhabitants. In 1765 the journal *Monitor* featured a series of fictional accounts of the Chinese sage Yunip’s travels in Poland, which included his advice on what Poland should be like. Ignacy Krasicki, an outstanding Polish author, used Chinese protagonists as vehicles of moral lessons in his “Oriental Fables.”¹⁶ Oriental stylization in literature served to express authors’ views on current political affairs, and sometimes was aimed at misleading censorship.¹⁷ China was construed as a social utopia antithetical to European reality.



“Chinese” mixed vegetables produced in Poland

In contemporary Polish popular culture, which itself is a new phenomenon that started after 1989 as part of the “Westernization” and capitalization of Poland, the “vogue for the Orient” is one aspect of the broader process of assimilating Western models. Thus, Chinese motifs can be seen in publications about health, which show a growing popularity of traditional Chinese

¹⁵ Jan Reychman, *Orient w kulturze*, p. 295. It was also a time when Confucius’s philosophy began to be taught at universities (e.g. in Kraków in 1785 by the Piarist Father Antoni Popławski).

¹⁶ Janusz Tazbir, “Moda na chińszczyznę w Polsce XVIII w.,” *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki i Kultury*, vol. XI, no. 3/4 (Grudzień, 1949).

¹⁷ See Jan Reychman, “Orientalizm,” ed. by Teresa Kostkiewiczowa, *Słownik literatury polskiego oświecenia* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1977), pp. 430-434.

medicine, healing methods, and relaxation techniques; in interior decoration (fengshui, stylized furniture, lamps, carpets, cushions); in crockery (including objects for everyday use, such as plates, ashtrays, vases, figurines and other decorative elements with “Chinese” patterns, as well as luxury porcelain); in martial arts; and in Chinese cuisine (Cantonese, Pekingese, Sichuan, etc.). We can eat “Chinese” vegetables, such as bamboo shoots, soy sprouts, mushrooms; spices (ginger, cinnamon); and, needless to say, drink Chinese tea. The presence of China in Polish popular culture involves constant references to its past and the reiteration of stereotypes. China is treated as a homogeneous unity, whose glorious and rich history – unknown to an average Polish person – is marked by the rule of wise if cruel monarchs, the cultivation of tradition, and respect for such values as honor and loyalty. Just as in the 18th century, today’s interest in the Orient seems motivated by a negative opinion about contemporary times, and today’s admiration for the China of the past appears to reflect a nostalgia for the feudal system.

Glossy magazines encourage us to follow a Chinese diet, which is based on balance between the yin and yang energies; they also tell us what to eat and when, how to prepare the food, and how to eat it. Books provide recipes for Chinese dishes, and grocery stores offer products for preparing them. Magazines encourage us also to give our apartments an Oriental look: “a well-chosen detail,



A modern apartment in Oriental style

a changed color of walls, or rearranged furniture is enough to create in the interior the exotic climate of distant Japan, China, or India.” Furniture made to look

like Chinese antiques facilitates concentration during work; laquerware red creates a warming and energizing effect; Chinese lanterns give a soft, diffused light; and prints modeled on Chinese characters emphasize the Oriental style. We are also recommended to decorate the interior with rhythmically arranged pottery. The whole should have an aura of peace and harmony, which will be conducive to attaining inner peace. Also helpful will be wallpaper with prints showing life in the Chinese countryside, which along with a stylized metal bird cage suggests the fairylike atmosphere of imperial China.¹⁸ Despite the passage of time the image of China as manifested in contemporary Polish *chinoiserie* is not much different from that of the 18th century. It is still the fairylike, exotic China inhabited by slim people in long robes and pointed hats; a country whose landscape is strewn with pagodas and gardens, where farmers cultivate rice and lead an idyllic life of fishing and drinking tea.



Polish poster for the movie "Hero".

Polish children read "Chinese" fairy tales which are based on imaginary Chinese legends or are written by Poles and openly teach some moral and patriotic lessons. Those who want to fight corruption and long for a return to tradition again, just as in the 18th century, recall Confucius, who demanded that "appointments to offices be not based on personal connections but on examinations" and whose teachings are very attractive for contemporary people.¹⁹

Just as the rococo *chinoiserie* in the 18th century, Oriental motifs in contemporary Polish popular culture – interior decoration, jewellery and clothing, cuisine – are meant to sat-

¹⁸ See "Nowoczesne mieszkanie w orientalnym stylu," *Olivia*, no. 12 (Grudzień, 2003), pp. 116-118.

¹⁹ See Andrzej Oséka's essay "Zdrajca w Paryżu" about the exhibition "Confucius: The Dawn of Chinese Humanism," *Wprost* 22 (Feb 2004), p. 102.

isfy the desire for the extraordinary, for acceptable otherness which can prevent boredom. They answer the need for the exotic, the longing for a better world, for variety and mystery, as well as – in the case of China – for elegance, health, spirituality, harmony with nature, and, interestingly, lost values such as honor, sacrifice, devotion to a cause, loyalty. It is not important that this artificial image of the Orient and of China has an aura of theatricality, pretense, or masquerade; what is important is that it creates an opportunity to become what one normally is not and to be in a place which is better than here.²⁰

²⁰ A question arises, however, whether such contemporary “make-believe non-European world” which I see in today’s Poland serves to create European myths or should be treated as evidence of other processes.