

“Songs of Ancient China” – A Myth of “The Other” Appropriated by an Emerging Sinology

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Abstract

Legendary Czech Sinologist Průšek was attached to the ideal world created by Mathesius. And as can be seen from the words of contemporary senior Sinologists, the power of Průšek’s translations had a universal appeal among Czech readers at that time, inspiring interest in Sinology. The poet Mathesius, and later the Sinologist Průšek, with his authority of a scholar and teacher, used Chinese poetry to build up the idea of China as a world that would be an alternative to their own imperfect reality. This vision was transmitted to Průšek’s pupils and through the power of popularization, which was according to Průšek an integral part of the academic duties of each scholar, was spread all over the cultural public. This alternative imaginary world enabled them to immerse in a beautiful fairy-tale, yet at the same time a fairy-tale in which familiar things could be recognized and desired, a world for which it is worth living among all the tragedies and desperation of the lived reality

Keywords: Průšek, Mathesius, Czech Sinology, Czech Sinologist, Chinese poetry

1. Introduction

In our interviews with former students of Jaroslav Průšek (1906–1980) and scholars broadly related to as members of the “Prague school” we repeatedly encountered the same reply to our question what motivated them to study Chinese: it was Chinese poetry in translation by Bohumil Mathesius (1888–1952). For the generation of Czech scholars who started to be interested in China either during WW II or shortly after the war, being a Sinologist meant also being an enthusiast for classical Chinese poetry presented by a non-specialist.

Mathesius discovered Chinese poetry on his own basing himself on French, German, Russian and even Latin translations, and his interest in Chinese poetry is to some degree related to the second wave of chinoiserie fashion of the early 20th century. Unlike the translations of Chinese poetry in other European countries,

Mathesius' adaptations of Chinese poetry were more than a literary experiment and had a lasting impact also on the general public.¹

Reading prefaces, post-faces, translator's remarks and other explicit comments on the translations by Mathesius the image of Chinese poetry (and ancient China) in the eyes of Czech readers during the formative period of Czech Sinology may be reconstructed. This reconstruction brings forward interesting results for deliberations about Sinology as a western discipline. It demonstrates the existence of a certain ideological network that combines traditional topoi about the Orient with genuine and serious study of Chinese civilization.² As a result we may ask a more general question: to what extent was the creation of Sinology in postwar Czechoslovakia part of a romantic enchantment and un-reflected search for "the Other", and also to which degree might scholarship on China be shaped by a romantic idealization of the object of its study.

2. Mathesius

It is symptomatic that the person that inspired future Czech Sinologists was not a specialist on China. Bohumil Mathesius established himself in the 1920's as a literary critic and translator of poetry from German, French and Russian (himself being an unsuccessful poet, author of several collections). He introduced to Czech readers with considerable success such important European poets as Schiller, Blok, Jesenin, and others. He also made an important contribution to Czech theory of translation, expressed explicitly in essays on the topic. His approach to the translation of western poetry participated in a broader understanding of the issue of poetry translation as it was developed by Czech scholars and translators since the late 19th century, and it could be called formalistic and linguistic. He carefully studied the language and form of the original in comparison to the potential of Czech language to express not only the meaning of a poem, but also the formal and stylistic qualities of the original in the most natural and aesthetically satisfying way. In such an approach the condition of working exclusively with the original

¹ Fascination with Chinese poetry in early 20th century was not exclusive to Czechoslovakia. As another little studied example Miloš Crnanski and the beginnings of Serbian modernism can be mentioned (Tatjana Micic, Anthology of Chinese Lyrical Poetry by Miloš Crnjanski: The Similarities of Spiritual and Poetic Aspirations as a Reason for Translating Chinese Lyrical Poetry into Serbian Language, *Azijske in Afriške Študije* 8 (2), 2004: 3–22.). Czechoslovak example is extraordinary in the widespread popularity of Chinese poetry, going beyond the intellectual circles.

² The interplay of stereotyped topoi with genuine attempt to overcome them is discussed mainly in studies about the impact of China on Western literature, such as Rolf J. Goebel, Constructing Chinese History: Kafka's and Dittmar's Orientalist Discourse, *PMLA*, 108 (1), 1993: 59–71.

language was prerequisite.³ However in the case of Chinese poetry, Mathesius suddenly put aside all his persuasion in good poetry translation based on intimate knowledge of the original, and did not mind doing free adaptations working with translations from third languages.

We could say here that Mathesius (1975, 206) exercised criteria of topicality on his translations: “We should translate what the receiving cultural organism needs to be translated.” Mathesius’s interest in Chinese poetry became a concrete and very special fulfillment of this statement. Naturally, this idea of Mathesius makes the individual translator free in responsibility and choice – and Mathesius himself made very avant-garde choices in his whole life.

Mathesius published his first book-length translation of Chinese poems – mostly by Li Bai – already in 1925, at that time not arousing much interest among readers. It was only in 1938, shortly before the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, that Mathesius returned to Chinese poetry for the second time, this time with great success. He first translated poems for the Czech translation of *My Country and My People* by Lin Yutang (Prague 1938; with the introduction by Pearl S. Buck). The book by a Chinese author introducing Chinese culture to western readers became immediately popular in Czechoslovakia. One year later Mathesius published *Songs of Ancient China*, his second anthology of Chinese poetry. This time the response of Czech readers was enthusiastic and the publication started a general interest in Chinese poetry in Czechoslovakia. Here Mathesius’s understanding of topicality finally and definitely met the public need.

Mathesius approached Chinese poetry in a haphazard way bringing together without distinction poems from the *Shijing* all through an aria from a Ming dynasty drama; majority of poems in the anthology, however, present Tang poetry, and among the authors, Li Bai, Wang Wei, and Du Fu dominate.⁴ This anthology was so successful that in 1940 Mathesius published a continuation titled *New Songs of Ancient China* (second printing in 1942, followed by several re-prints after the war – 1946, 1947, 1949). During the war also a private print of Chinese poems on drinking wine translated by Mathesius occurred, which had

³ On Mathesius see Jiří F. Franěk, Bohumil Mathesius, Praha: SNKLU, 1963 and Anna Zádřapová, Čínská poezie česky. Otázkainterpretace a překladučínské básně v českém prostředí 20. století (Chinese Poetry in Czech Language – On the Interpretation and Translation of Chinese Poetry in 20th Century). M. A. thesis, Prague: Charles University, 2009. Mathesius was also author of original poetry, but in this respect his contribution is less visible.

⁴ Mathesius does not identify his sources, but these could be at least partly reconstructed. The impact of German translations by Klabund (pseudonym of the expressionist writer Alfred Henschke, 1890–1928) is evident, as well as Russian translations of the Sinologist V. Alekseev (1881–1951). The impact of Judith Gautier (1845–1917) is also visible – either direct, or through Russian retranslations by Gumiliev (on Gautier and Gumiliev see Maria Rubins, Dialog across Cultures: Adaptations of Chinese Verse by Judith Gautier and Nikolai Gumiliev, *Comparative Literature*, 54 (2), Spring 2002: 145–164.).

only a limited circulation. This was a year before the bibliophile edition of Li Bai's poems was published as the result of the newly started cooperation of Bohumil Mathesius and Jaroslav Průšek.⁵ In 1949 Mathesius published *Third Songs of Ancient China*; this time the translation was prepared in close collaboration with Jaroslav Průšek.⁶

Mathesius commented on his translation of Chinese poetry several times making explicit what attracted him to Chinese poetry and what he wanted to achieve. First of all, Mathesius was aware of the difference between his other translations based on careful study of the language and style of the original, and his "Chinese" translations, which he called "variations on a literary theme"⁷. Despite this self-restrained statement, translations of Chinese poetry since the very beginning were of essential importance for Mathesius, who viewed them as more than just a playful exercise. In an essay from 1940 Mathesius⁸ explicitly distanced himself from the vogue of chinoiserie ("these are fake objects covered with Chinese lacquer with falsely applied Chinese motifs"). He regarded the Chinese poems he was rewriting in Czech as a truthful expression of alien culture bringing to the Europeans an important lesson in humanity.

Mathesius expressed his belief in a substantial, philosophical difference of Chinese tradition and it was this difference that interested him. Through poetry he hoped to achieve true understanding of Chinese culture, and even to identify himself with it. In the above quoted essay he further said:

"To get inside the other culture means to acquire a good knowledge about it, which means to explore thoroughly five or six key words and emotionally identify with them, those key words which are the most different from us, and through which they [the Chinese] perceive the world in a unique way, different from the others."

Further on he explains how he achieved such identification with Chinese poetry: through careful reading of the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*,⁹ after which

⁵ Bohumil Mathesius, *Krásná slova o víně* (Beautiful words about wine), Praha: Private print, 1943. Bohumil Mathesius, *Li Po. Dvacet tři parafráze starého čínského básníka* (Twenty three paraphrases of the ancient Chinese poet), Praha: R. Kmoch, 1942.

⁶ After WW II Mathesius was also invited by Jaroslav Průšek to participate in translations of classical novels and stories from Chinese, whenever there were poems to be adapted into beautiful Czech verse (Liu E: *Lao Can youji*, selections of *huaben* stories, and some other.)

⁷ Bohumil Mathesius, *Zpěvy staré Číny* (Songs of ancient China), Praha: Melantrich, 1939, 83.

⁸ Bohumil Mathesius, *Nové zpěvy staré Číny* (New songs of ancient China), Praha: Melantrich, 1940, 50; the following quotations are from the same text.

⁹ *Daodejing* was available to Mathesius in a careful Czech translation by Rudolf Dvořák, *Lao-tsi ovakniha o Tau a ctnosti* (Laozi on Dao and Virtue), Kladno: Jaroslav Šnajdr, 1920; Olga Lomová, *Tao-te-f'ing v proměnách času (1878–1971)* (*Daodejing in historical perspective (1878–1971)*), *Fragmenta Ioannea Collecta Supplementum*, no.3, 2010: 203–16.; as for *Zhuangzi* he most probably read the book in German translation by Richard Wilhelm, though also a Czech version of this translation existed.

“half of everything was in front of me as an open book”. Mathesius also briefly mentions his studies about Chinese poetics,¹⁰ which created conditions for the poets “to be concise and earnest”. (In his first translation from 1925 he did show more interest in the structure and style of the original, and made observations on some formal aspects of Chinese – we should say Tang – poetry, but later did not elaborate on this anymore.)¹¹ After acquiring this knowledge Mathesius started to translate, or rather rewrite the Chinese poems – in his words he “transferred them into primordial language of emotions, into a human mother-tongue of lyricism.”

In other words, confronted with Chinese poetry, Mathesius forgets the linguistic and formalistic approach to translation adopted with European poetry, and suddenly does no longer think the language of the original is of any importance, because the core of the poetic message is hidden “behind the words”. According to him this core message can be studied in a rational way (through the study of Chinese philosophy, literary history and poetics), but it also can be acquired in an irrational way, through subconscious identification with the lyrical message of a poem – and this was exactly what Mathesius believed he was doing. It should be pointed out that behind the idea of irrational identification with “the Other” was Mathesius’ belief in universal humanity inherent in deeper layers of all different traditions and culture. This is based on the conviction that people in China think differently, but that deep inside they share the same primordial emotions and are the same humans as people in the West.

Mathesius ignored the original language of Chinese poems and used translations in different languages, without even questioning the relation of his source to the Chinese original. On the other hand the language of the Czech version was of utmost importance for him. He carefully deliberated every single word in all the shades of its meaning, and as he confessed, it sometimes took him weeks before he finally decided about a single expression. It is a paradox hard to explain, how a translator so meticulous about every detail of the language he works with, could believe in truthful recognition of the original via randomly collected translations of Chinese poetry in various languages of various quality.

What is so unique about China that Mathesius discovered in Chinese poetry? In an afterword attached to the 1950 volume of *New Songs from Ancient China*, he speaks metaphorically about a “gurgling stream of clear water” which he can hear in Chinese poetry. This pronouncement, later borrowed also by Průšek, summarizes the idea of Chinese poetry as a source of purification and vitality.

¹⁰ He does not mention his sources but most probably he read articles by the Russian scholar V. Alexeev. He could easily get acquainted with them as he was reading and translating a lot of Russian literature.

¹¹ He mentions „a well formed structure, perfect control of the subject, sense for detail and concise evocative expression, dynamism, perfect coincidence of the theme and imagery“ (Bohumil Mathesius, *Černá věž a zelený džbán* (Black tower and green jug), Praha: Otakar Štorch-Marien, 1925: 44).

Since his first encounter with Chinese poems already in the early 1920's, Mathesius was convinced that this poetry was an expression of a civilization which was an antipode of Europe, which was at that time shattered by the First World War and experiencing a deep spiritual crisis. According to Mathesius (1925), Western civilization "endowed with contradiction of mind and heart, not reconciled and irreconcilable" led Europe to "eternal grief, endless worries, and fatigue". In his view this failure of Western civilization could be mended by the "simplicity and purity" expressed in Chinese poetry. Fourteen years later, on the eve of the Second World War, Mathesius (1939, 83) similarly speaks about the crisis of Europe when praising Chinese poetry:

"It seems to me that now, when so many things have broken down, we have found ourselves in a situation where we have to look from a distance at ourselves and at human life in general. We have to knock at the pillars, buttresses and beams of our humanity."

In other words, Mathesius viewed ancient Chinese poetry as a mirror for Europe to recognize its failure and offer a new viable alternative to war. His earlier negative view about western civilization received deeper meaning and clearer contours with the approaching Second World War. In Mathesius's view, Europe had become victim of its own ambitions, capriciousness, expansionism, and also the pursuit of individualism and originality. As a result, individuals suffered, were unable to achieve real happiness, and society as a whole suffered social inequality, disharmony, and a threat of all-destructive wars. Unlike in Europe, in China, Mathesius believed (and we know how naive this belief was given the war situation in China at that time), there existed "unity and harmony – unity of heart and mind in the sense Confucius had already spoken about – permanence, stability, non-violence, an absence of the wish to conquer, as well as the art of discovering happiness in the smallest things of this world."

Mathesius did not mention the encroaching war, but it is clear at the first sight that he targeted facts from the political situation of Central Europe: The Munich Agreement in which French and British allies sacrificed Czechoslovakia to Hitler, and the Nazi expansion which Mathesius – and not only him – perceived as a total failure of European civilization.

3. Jaroslav Průšek

We do not have any evidence of Jaroslav Průšek's early interest in Chinese poetry. According to his testimony in *My Sister China*,¹² when he entered the University in Prague in 1925, he was attracted to the history of the ancient world.

¹² *My Sister China* (Sestramoje Čína, first edition 1940; English translation Prague 2003) is Průšek's memoirs of his visit to China in 1932-1934. Here he also mentions his personal contacts with Chinese intellectuals as well as impressions about Beijing and Xi'an.

Only during his study of the campaigns of Alexander the Great to the Orient, he started to be interested in Eastern civilizations, and soon after that decided to explore ancient China. Because there was no way to get instruction on this topic in Prague, he travelled to Germany, Sweden, and later to China and Japan. When in China Průšek was in contact with intellectuals representing the May Fourth inspired efforts to re-evaluate the domestic cultural heritage, and also to create modern literature. He returned to Czechoslovakia at around the same time when Mathesius published with stunning success his *Songs of Ancient China*, and soon they started to collaborate on further translations of Chinese poetry (already during World War II, in 1942, they published translations from Li Bai¹³). Interestingly, the translations produced in collaboration with a Sinologist did not essentially differ from the “variations on the Chinese theme” produced earlier by Mathesius without any knowledge of Chinese sources. The Sinologist accepted the interpretation of the poet.

Since 1946 Jaroslav Průšek also joined Mathesius in writing introductions and afterwords to the translations, commenting on Chinese poetry in general. In these sometimes rather long texts, we can see explicit expressions of the fact that Průšek embraced the romantic vision of the translator and that he, using his authority of a sinologist, basically confirmed the ideas expressed by Mathesius earlier. There is a certain process visible in the way how this happened. In his first essay on Chinese poetry (published in April 1946) Průšek first keeps a certain distance. He confesses, even with a touch of sarcasm, that *vis-a-vis* Mathesius’s translations he is giving up his own opinion as an academic:

“I, as a professional Sinologist tempered by academic experience, should write on other topics: I should compare the translations with their Chinese originals, discover and criticize the differences, seek the origin of each poem and trace the way how it got into the collection, demonstrate my erudition and heuristic intelligence. But I give up (...) I recite these verses in silence and I do not care whether the origin was a carefully done Russian translation by Alekseiev, or a free adaptation in German or French, I do not care whether the original really compared melancholy to a pine tree resin aroma. Perhaps I am usually uncompromising, even irritable in academic matters, but I do not want to be like that when it comes to poetry. I am content that Mathesius uses his own poetic language to express the same voice I hear from Chinese poetry, poetry which is the most beautiful eternal tomb of the human race.” (Průšek, 1947, 87-88)

Průšek here indirectly admits that the translations, in terms of philological study, are far away from their Chinese original. But at the same time, when he says that he “recites silently” the verses of melancholy, and hears voices from the “most beautiful eternal tomb of the human race”, he also confesses to be

¹³ Bohumil Mathesius, Li Po. Dvacet tři parafráze starého čínského básníka (Twenty three paraphrases of the ancient Chinese poet), Prague: R. Kmoch, 1942.

under the spell of the topoi of Western imagination about the Orient prevailing in intellectual circles in early 20th century Europe. This ostentatious resignation from Průšek's position of a critical scholar is even more noteworthy in the light of his reputation as a conscientious academician.¹⁴

Průšek confirms Mathesius's original understanding of Chinese poetry expressed in the metaphor of a "gurgling source of clean water". Průšek's statement is even more surprising given the fact that in his research of Chinese literature he was inspired by the structuralist approach of the Prague Linguistic Circle, which emphasizes the importance of the language. But suddenly, when confronted with Chinese poetry, it seemed unimportant that the translator did not read the poems in its original language, that the sources of the translation became irrelevant, and that even the original metaphor could be changed. What was, after all, important? What made this poetry distinctly Chinese in the eyes of its translator and enchanted readers? And why was it so appealing to its Czech readers that it even inspired them to become Sinologists?

In the same essay where he confesses that he put aside his academic erudition when reading Chinese poetry in Czech translation, Průšek also mentions his personal experience from his visit to China. He remembers how he experienced a revelation of eternity after he climbed up a tower of a "medieval Chinese town" and watched the Yellow River below. And it is this eternity, which according to Průšek (1947, 87) "found expression in Chinese poetry. This feeling was captured by Mathesius, he gave the feeling a word and rhyme, and let it flow like a river in eternal melancholy." In other words Průšek says here Chinese poetry is predestined to capture the eternity as a quality and value present in China itself. His further writings reveal that eternity, whatever he means by the word, is China's contribution to mankind, it is of universal value, it is the "beautiful eternal tomb of the human race", from which future resurrection will come. We hear from Průšek that the reason why Chinese culture is eternal and thus worthy of emulation in the West, is that it teaches humility, the most important virtue needed for attaining harmony, stability, and eternal peace. Apparently under the impact of the war, which had just ended, Průšek (1947, 88) writes:

"There is no eternity in the high and mighty of the world (...). Only a culture based on humility, life which does not brawl against the Grand Smelter when smelting and transforming everything into new forms, is eternal."

¹⁴ According to Průšek in the Introduction to the collection of his papers *O čínském písemnictví a vzdělanosti* (On Chinese Literature and Scholarship) „Most of essays collected in this volume are based on my own study of the original sources; I never made my work easier. Although it is possible to pretend to be authority in arena without competent critic and go round problems without anyone noticing it, I would despise such work, and I would have to disrespect myself if I walked that way.“ (Jaroslav Průšek, *O čínském písemnictví a vzdělanosti* (On Chinese literature and Scholarship), Praha: Družstevní práce, 1947B: 9.)

Reading Průšek’s travelogue *My Sister China*, we can find more evidence of this feeling, not only limited to poetry. For example when observing and experiencing Chinese landscapes, Průšek(2003, 306) is also getting carried away by ideas of eternity, time passing and human being in history. “Diving into this labyrinth of bare rock faces, clay incisions, steep-banked beds of rivers and brooks that contained no water but are filled with sun-scorched grey red boulders (...) I invariably succumb to the same overwhelming, intoxicating feeling of abandonment, escape, dissolution. Here among these hills I am no longer an entity of much value (...) Here one is just a lump of earth temporarily vegetating there where rains have not yet carried away all the topsoil wedged in between the rocks, after a while destined to return again to its origins.”

Thinking about Průšek’s strategy in reading Chinese poetry in Czech translation, one is reminded of his wartime writing about the Tang poet Li Bai. In 1942, when introducing the life of the poet, Průšek used popular legends rather than historical facts.¹⁵ The following words about his decision to give preference to legends over facts signal conscious romantic idealization of Chinese poetry:

“We do not care that the legend has probably nothing in common with reality, that in fact Li Bai must have been in his young years a sort of a buster, later served for a short time at the court of Emperor Minghuang, and eventually died in his bed at home as an old inebriate, his liver and kidney destroyed by alcohol. How much more truthful to poetry is the legend than the sober facts of history!” (Prusek, 1947B, 138)

Let us go back to Průšek’s afterword appended to the anthology of Chinese poetry prepared by Mathesius, and published shortly after WW II in 1946. In complete accord with, and as a supplement to Mathesius, Průšek(1947, 88) claims that European people have lost their former self-confidence, their “belief that they are exclusive, stronger, more powerful, more beautiful, more interesting, more attractive, than the others.” Průšek expresses the opinion that a lesson must be taken from Chinese poetry (and hence also culture, though this is not explicitly said so here) about humility, and subordination to a larger community. According to him, eternity rests never in the individual, but it can be achieved in the totality of the human beings.

A generally positive feeling of people in Czechoslovakia toward China after WW II, together with political interests of the Czechoslovak government, found expression in the establishment of the Czechoslovak-China Society in December 1945. Jaroslav Průšek was elected as its first president (and

¹⁵ Originally the essay was published in *Třidvacetparafrázistaréhočínskéhobásníka* (Twenty three paraphrases of an ancient Chinese poet), Praha: 1943. Later republished in a book *O čínském písemnictví a vzdělanosti* (On Chinese literature and Scholarship), Praha: 1947).

B. Mathesius, symptomatically, his vice-president). In his inaugural lecture¹⁶ titled “Hodnotyčňnskĳkultura” (Values of Chinese culture) Průšek in an explicit way formulated his ideas about China being an example for Europe.¹⁷ His words were just as emotional and passionate as those used by Mathesius earlier. Průšek summarized the basic values of Chinese culture as he saw them and which he already expressed in *My Sister China*: permanence of an ancient culture, tolerance of thought, and harmony among people and with nature as it is expressed in marvelous poetry, painting and philosophy (Tao), in opposition to self-assertion and violence resulting in the war in the West. He also mentioned the disillusion of the Europeans with the belief in progress and power of modern technologies and the need for the renovation of humanistic moral values.

Further, Průšek in his speech painted an idealized picture of Chinese (Confucian) political ideology, juxtaposing it with “Machiavelistic ideas about government ruling over Europe at least for the last 400 years”. He said:

“Especially today, when also we in Europe seek a way how to replace the blind play of free economic and political forces without any restrictions, conflicting with each other, we definitely can find great inspiration in Chinese philosophical-political concepts, or in other words, fashionable today, in Chinese ideology. The reason is that [the Chinese system] is the only one in the history of mankind which was not based on religion, but only on philosophy and world view, and that this order in principle viewed all people as equal, and – most importantly – the order that in his whole way of ruling strived for employing moral criteria. The Chinese system of government never followed any rule which would apply different criteria to the behavior of a politician and to a private person.” (Průšek, 1945-46, 16)

In his inaugural speech Průšek discusses also the “values for sophisticated and cultured spirits” inherent in Chinese culture and literature. He admires “the perfect balance inherent to Chinese painting, architecture and literature”, comparing it to the *sophrosyné* of the art of ancient Greece. While praising the qualities of Chinese art, according to Průšek “pursued, but so far not achieved by today’s [Western] artists”, he uses such epithets as “monumentality, yet simplicity”, “timeless beauty”, “perfect esthetic balance”, “refined taste rooted in thousands of years of totally uninterrupted tradition”.

¹⁶ Held in the Oriental Institute in Prague on 19. 12. 1945. On the occasion the ROC ambassador to Czechoslovakia was present together with a representative of Czechoslovak ministry of foreign affairs. (On those events see Ivana Bakešová, *Legionáři v rolidiplomatů. Československo-čňnskĳvztahy 1918–1949* (Legionaries and diplomats. Czechoslovak-chinese relations 1918–1949), Praha: Univerzita Karlova, Filozofickáfakulta, 2013, 190)

¹⁷ Jaroslav Průšek, *Hodnotyčňnskĳkultura* (Values of Chinese Culture), *Nový Orient* I (5–6), 1945–1946: 14–16. The journal was established shortly after the end of WW II on the initiative of Zdeněk Hrdlička (1919–1999); students and scholars of various Asian languages and cultures participated.

Admiration for Chinese art was another important aspect of Chinese culture which attracted the Czech public already in the pre-war period, and continued to do so after the war, inspiring future Sinologists.¹⁸ Průšek (1947-48, 28-33) again elaborated on the aesthetic appeal of Chinese art and its relevance for the post-war European art in 1946, on the occasion of the exhibition of modern Chinese ink-paintings organized under the auspices of the ambassador of the R.O.C. to Czechoslovakia, as well as Czechoslovak minister of foreign affairs Jan Masaryk.

We can assume that the huge task of improving Western civilization could be assigned precisely to ancient Chinese poetry because of the fact that this poetry was enough distant in space and time from the actual post-war Czechoslovakia. It seemed totally different, alien, and as such could be thought of as offering solutions for a humanity shattered after the war.¹⁹ As a result, not only a translator without any academic background in Sinology, but also Průšek, a rigorous scholar with broad knowledge of Chinese history and culture and also somebody who had personal experience from a visit to China, could perpetuate the Orientalist myth. After the horrifying experience of WW II, Průšek and Mathesius alike searched for a “touch of eternity” in what they both imaged was an ancient, harmonious, collectivistic society, where every man and woman knows his place and can prosper as a small part of a larger unity, not differentiated from the others. Behind these ideas we can see the old European topos of China “lifelessly frozen in (...) vast, timeless immobility”²⁰ reinterpreted in a positive way.

This belief in the lesson to be learnt from the otherness of China is reflected in another feature which Průšek admires in Chinese poetry – the reputed lack of originality understood in a positive way. As much as eternity means belonging to the totality, the ambition to become unique in artistic creation turns out to be nothing but foolish. Průšek says: “Why not to have thousand exquisite variations

¹⁸ In an interview with Zlata Černá. Interest of Czech general public, but also artists and critics, in Chinese painting during the 1920's and 1930's would deserve separate study. Several Czech painters started to collect Chinese art, and Emil Filla (1882–1953) even wrote a theoretical essay on landscape painting inspired by Chinese traditional painting theory. After WW II Filla also created two series of large experimental paintings in which he combined in an original way theoretical knowledge of Chinese art with his own modernist vision. See also Michaela Pejšochová, *The Formation of the Collection of 20th-Century Chinese Painting in the National Gallery in Prague—Friendly Relations with Faraway China in the 1950s and Early 1960s*, *Arts Asiaticques* No. 67, 2012.

¹⁹ Upon the political change in both countries, when China and Czechoslovakia alike embraced the Soviet model of socialism, Mathesius started to translate, and Průšek to study, also the poetry of New China, hardly to be described by such epithets as humble, or reflecting eternity. This episode however is not in the focus of the present study.

²⁰ Zhang Longxi, *The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West*, *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1), (Autumn) 1988: 116. On the image of eternal immobility as created in 19th century see also p. 123–124. The topos of China “frozen in timeless immobility” is discussed by many scholars of Orientalism and images of China in the West.

onone perfect theme?” And further he adds: “Perfection excludes originality, once something truly perfect is made, it can be only repeated, otherwise we abandon the quality previously achieved.” (Průšek, 1947, 89)

4. The Impact of New Ideology

Another information we get from reading Průšek’s postwar essays on the topic of Chinese poetry is the smooth transformation of the earlier romantic idealization of Chinese poetry into the ideology of New China in the context of revolutionary change happening in both post-war Czechoslovakia and in China. This can be illustrated by a special number of *Nový Orient* dedicated to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and published in November 1949. The cover of this number is embellished with a reproduction of Qi Baishi’s 齊白石 (1864–1957) painting of blooming red plum. Inside, a long speech by Jaroslav Průšek held on the occasion of a meeting celebrating the establishment of the P.R.C. In this speech Průšek summarizes recent Chinese history interpreted as a process of emancipation of the masses culminating in the Communist victory. This is followed by other articles dealing with Chinese agriculture and land reform, biographies of Mao Zedong, Zhu De and Zhou Enlai, and an overview of the civil war in China before the Red Army won. These articles dealing with politics and using official rhetoric, are literary framed with Chinese poems translated by Mathesius; it is a mixture of Tang masters (Du Fu and Li Bai), and 20th century authors, some of them authors of revolutionary poems. Of the modern poets, only one modernist, Du Yunxie 杜運燮 (born 1918), could be identified.²¹

The literary dogma both in post 1948 Czechoslovakia and post 1949 China shared the same basic values derived from the Soviet concept of socialist realism: admiration for “the people”, the concept of class struggle, keeping a critical distance from the “decadent, false and artificial Western (imperialist) culture”, accentuation of “simplicity”, and “realism”. Průšek did partly adopt the language of official ideology in his popularizing essays about Chinese poetry published in the 1950’s, while keeping to his earlier admiration for values of simplicity and eternity. In doing so, he could not avoid claims that were highly problematic; at times he was even contradicting himself. In the beginning of his postface to a new edition of *Collected Songs of Ancient China in Three Books* published in 1950, Průšek first attacks what he calls “Orientalist thinking and its mythology”, called here “the most infamous heritage from the period of imperialism” (Průšek 1950, s. 202). The “Orientalist thinking” was presented by him as an expression of colonial dominance and contempt for Asian cultures. “It is high time,” says Průšek, “to learn about the facts, and to do away with previous rash judgments

²¹ *Nový Orient* V (2–3), 1949.

and overbearing preconceptions. There is no reason to approach differently the nations of Europe, and Asia.”

Despite his certainly authentic commitment to universal humanity, Průšek at the same time still preserved the stereotyped understanding of Chinese poetry as the antipode of “decadent” western literature, as we have discussed it above. In a post-face to a 1950 edition of Mathesius’s Chinese poetry in Czech translation, Průšek generalizes about Chinese culture. According to him it has always been more natural, and of higher quality than Western culture. As an analogy picked to proof his claim he mentions the sophistication of traditional Chinese crafts. He compares the art of ancient Chinese poets who, as Průšek claims, embody the ideal of simplicity inspired directly by nature, to the perfection achieved by Chinese working men – craftsmen and farmers, using very simple tools (1950, p. 203). Further Průšek elaborates on Chinese nature poetry as an example of art interested in real nature, unlike depictions of nature in early Western literature, where plain nature “as it is” was according to him suppressed by religious symbolism. Comparing Chinese and Western approaches to nature, Průšek slips into ideologically motivated rhetoric concluding that Chinese nature poetry means „the first big victory of realism, in art as well as in thought” (Průšek 1953, s. 99).

Shortly after Mathesius’s death in 1952, at the time of the strongest impact of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia, a collection of his translations of Chinese poetry was published under the name *Zpěvystaré a nové Číny* (Songs of Ancient and New China; Prague, 1953). As the title suggests, in this volume traditional, mostly Tang poetry, was placed side by side with contemporary political poetry. Průšek wrote an extensive afterword for the book, in which he uses the concept of “people’s literature”²² borrowed from the theory of socialist realism to praise Chinese poetry. According to this interpretation, partly echoing also publications in the People’s Republic of China at that time, traditional Chinese poetry embodies the ideals of “people’s literature”, because it is believed that the sentiments of its greatest authors, Li Bai and Du Fu in the first place, were always with the common people, rather than with the ruling class. The argument of Průšek (1953, 99) is that Chinese poetry allegedly “in the absolute majority of cases, and especially in its best works, expresses the feelings of the people, not the feelings and caprices of the ruling class minority.” A close relationship between poets and common people can be seen, according to Průšek, in popular legends about the poets, and in the very fact that these stories circulated among the people for hundreds of years. Průšek (1953, 98) also mentions continuing popularity of ancient Chinese poetry among Chinese people in general, and contrasts it with the literature of the modern “decadent, capitalist West”, limited only to a handful of readers. As a result, Průšek concludes, the people of China can draw strength and inspiration

²² By „people’s literature” we translate „lidovost”, which is the Czech translation of the Soviet concept of „narodnost” (*reniminxing* 人民性 in Chinese).

for their fight for a better future only from the intimately known Chinese poetry, not from the West. Průšek also adds that during the entire human history, both Chinese and Western, humanity was oppressed by the exploitative classes and needs to be “cured with the medicine of true art” – which is Chinese poetry. We can see continuity with the idea expressed in the war-time essay on Li Bai, where Průšek gave preference to legend over the facts; this time “the poetic” coming in service of the demands of the new, communist ideology.

The 1953 anthology is interesting also as an attempt to bridge Chinese tradition with contemporary China building communism. Průšek finds continuity in the common attitude of the poets, who as he says “have always been on the side of the people”. Thus contemporary poets can be understood as continuing the efforts of their ancient predecessors – the differences of language, form, style and imaginations again irrelevant as were the Chinese originals irrelevant for Mathesius translating classical poetry – with only one big difference which gives the poets of the new China advantage over their ancient precursors: in New China, according to Průšek, poets can put their ideals into practice, they not only express the feelings of the common people, but also know how to help the people, how to bring freedom and a bright future to the people.

To sum up, Průšek reinterpreted his earlier romantic ideas about simplicity, universal values, and poetic power of Chinese poetry in accord with the dogmas of socialist realism. The language of this essay is particularly imbued with the diction of official ideology. We can only guess to which degree he did in sincere belief in the new dogma, or whether he borrowed the official rhetoric in order to protect the universal values he believed in, and which he found in ancient China. Especially the denial of Western inspired modern Chinese literature looks suspicious, as Průšek was an enthusiastic reader of modernist authors from China as well as from the West. He also was a personal friend to many protagonists of Chinese modernist literature, and he published research on it expressing high opinion of its achievement. Also some of our respondents claimed that those writings by Průšek conforming to the Stalinist ideology in the 1950's – mostly addressing a wider audience – were motivated by his wish to avoid possible censorship and to enable the publication of ancient Chinese poetry which he believed carried an important message for humanity.²³

Given the fact that Průšek first embraced the romantic vision of Chinese poetry, and later reformulated it in the rhetoric of Soviet socialist realism, does it mean that he failed as a scholar? That his academic knowledge was not sufficient? We do not think so, and there is plenty of evidence proving that Průšek himself was aware of the complex nature of the language and meter of traditional Chinese poetry. We have already mentioned Průšek's explanation

²³ Zlata Černá mentioned this during a panel discussion at the Conference of Czech and Slovak Sinologists held in Brno in November 2011.

why he used romantic legend to introduce Li Bai to Czech readers rather than sober facts, which reveals his awareness about the difference between myth and reality. In the same essay Průšek also elaborates in some detail on the language and style of the poet, concluding in these words reflecting the ideas and rhetoric of Prague Linguistic Circle: “All this makes Chinese poems have an original aesthetic structure, hard to imitate in other language material.” (Průšek 1947, s. 149). Similarly, in 1964 Průšek in a footnote to a translation of a poem by Mathesius, included in a selection of *huaben* stories, reminds the reader that this is not a true translation. He makes corrections to the translation, providing his own word-to-word “unpoetic”, yet “exact” version and explicitly pointing out what the translator omitted and what he added to the original in order to achieve poetic effects. (Průšek, 1947C, 301–303)

In the mid-1950’s when Průšek wrote a preface for the *Songs of Ancient China* to be later included in the 1957 edition, he opens a polemic with some of his own earlier romantic views. He criticizes the very concept of “Chinese poetry” as reflected in the anthologies consisting of poems from different periods and written in different styles, but translated in the same manner without any formal and stylistic distinctions, and believed to be expressions of the same “spirit of Chinese poetry”. He also says: “It is time to publish books on various periods of Chinese poetry, even on individual poets,” and goes enumerating the most urgent tasks for Czech Sinologists in the nearest future (Průšek 1957, s. 235).²⁴

On the other hand in the very same edition Průšek again advanced the idea of Mathesius’s translations as being truthful to the Chinese original, both in indirect and direct manners. Unlike in previous editions, this time Průšek arranged the translated poems in chronological order, implying that the translations reflect the history of Chinese literature. He also claims that the poems for which he provided Mathesius with prosaic translations “are not free adaptations, but exact translations – as far as we can speak about exact translations of poetry from Chinese where we have to leave out all considerations of the original form.” (Průšek 1957, s. 237). Contrary to what he wrote about the early translations earlier, in this essay Průšek also asserts that even the earlier translations based on versions of Chinese poetry in western languages are to a large degree truthful to the Chinese original. The main argument is that Mathesius studied articles about Chinese poetry containing translations by the Russian Sinologist V. Alexejev and thus achieved profound knowledge of Chinese literature.

²⁴ These tasks were partly fulfilled by Průšek’s students and book-size translations with commentary of Bai Juyi (1958), with a post-face by Jaroslav Průšek; anthology of Song ci in 1961; translation of Tao Yuanming in 1966; poetry by Pu Songling in 1974; a large collection of poems by Li Bai in 1977 followed by Han Shan (1987) and a book presenting in comparative perspective the recluse poetry by Wang Wei, Meng Haoran, and Bai Juyi (also 1987), already after Průšek’s death.

5. Conclusion

The fact that Průšek supported the myth, even though he was aware of its romantic idealization of Chinese poetry, reflects indirectly how deeply he was attached to the ideal world created by Mathesius. And as can be seen from the words of other senior Sinologists, the power of these translations had a universal appeal among Czech readers at that time, inspiring interest in Sinology. The poet Mathesius, and later the Sinologist Průšek, with his authority of a scholar and teacher, used Chinese poetry to build up the idea of China as a world that would be an alternative to their own imperfect reality. This vision was transmitted to Průšek's pupils and through the power of popularization, which was according to Průšek an integral part of the academic duties of each scholar, was spread all over the cultural public. This alternative imaginary world enabled them to immerse in a beautiful fairy-tale, yet at the same time a fairy-tale in which familiar things could be recognized and desired, a world for which it is worth living despite all the tragedies and desperation of the lived reality. People in general need this kind of imaginary world especially at times of crises and horrors brought by war. At such moments in history assurance is needed about the possibility of harmony and eternity, assurance which can be found in a persuasive way only in an uncompromised source – most probably a source not much known and seemingly alien, “the Other” created of *topoi* inherent in our own culture. Chinese poetry interpreted as an expression of the desired harmony, simplicity and purity thus became a reflection of everything the contemporary European society lacked and longed for in its own – known too well – world. This image could be manipulated in such a way that it would become incorporated in the new political ideology. It was so attractive that it lived on even after the takeover of the totalitarian ideology and could be incorporated in the image of New China perpetuated by the new political ideology. It is only natural that Průšek himself, as we know for example from his travelogue *My Sister China*, knew very well about all serious problems China had to deal with, but saw them more or less as transitional phenomena typical to a changing society – his main posture was of hope and a vision of a great future for China.

We shall never know to which degree Průšek was sincere in his effort to interpret classical Chinese poetry in terms of socialist realism, but as the widespread popularity of Mathesius's translations confirm, it was a successful attempt to negotiate, within the boundaries of the totalitarian ideology, a space for humanistic as well as esthetic values denying this very same ideology.

Deliberating about Průšek's ambivalent interpretations of Chinese poetry, we are reminded about conclusions from a comparative study of the image of China in the travel literature from the early 20th century (represented by Julius

Dittmar’s travel book *In neuen China* from 1912) and from some stories of Franz Kafka. Goebbel, referring also to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* says: “Dittmar’s travel book and Kafka’s self-reflective response show that the West’s experience of Asian cultures in the twentieth century, despite a commitment to empirical observation and realistic description, is necessarily implicated in the same ideological network that has characterized the history of European writings on the Orient, a network that combines stereotypical topoi with genuine interest in non-Western civilizations.”

The question is, whether the ideological network Goebbel is referring to is so impenetrable and eternal. We can argue against it demonstrating that Průšek and his students eventually in their academic research passed over the cultural construct of Chinese poetry as expression of the eternal and absolute Other, and they transformed their romantic imagination into serious scholarship. Thus, in the end they contributed to genuine knowledge of the cultural differences (and similarities) between Chinese and European traditions, very much in the way Zhang Longxi mentions in the end of his deliberations about China in western imagination.²⁵

List of Mathesius’ translations of Chinese poetry:

Mathesius, Bohumil. 1925. *Černá věž a zelený džbán (Black tower and green jug)*. Praha: Otakar Štorch-Marien.

Mathesius, Bohumil. 1943. *Krásná slova o víně (Beautiful words about wine)*. Praha: Privateprint.

Mathesius, Bohumil. 1939. *Zpěvy staré Číny (Songs of ancient China)*. Praha: Melantrich.

Mathesius, Bohumil. 1940. *Nové zpěvy staré Číny (New songs of ancient China)*. Praha: Melantrich.

Mathesius, Bohumil. 1949. *Třetí zpěvy staré Číny (Third songs of ancient China)*. Praha: Melantrich.

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²⁵ Zhang Longxi 1988.

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