

CHINESE AND JAPANESE CHARACTERS
IN SELECTED POLISH MASS, POPULAR,
ORIENTALIST AND RELIGIOUS MAGAZINES
PUBLISHED IN THE 1930S

Both China and Japan fascinated citizens of the Second Polish Republic as their cultures were so different from those of Europe. Therefore, the Polish press printed in the interwar period tried to introduce readers to matters connected with the heritage of the Far East. Special attention was given to both the Chinese and Japanese writing systems, which were only known to a select few in the Second Polish Republic. Such people were usually diplomats, correspondents, orientalists and missionaries.

Jan Jaworski lamented in the Orientalist *Wschód [East]* that many writers and journalists writing about Far Eastern countries did not speak Japanese or Chinese. He commented that “a wealth of articles, correspondences and major publications that has been published bear testimony mostly to ignorance, and the authors’ sense of impunity. Authors believed that they could feed their readers with any lie if they sprinkled it with false exoticism and sensation”.¹⁾ However, *Na Szerokim Świecie [On the Wide World]* emphasized that journalists writing about China often consulted Poles who inhabited the Chinese city of Harbin when they had to write down city names: Nanjing, Beijing, Shanghai. Jan Jaworski also called for not using English transcriptions of Chinese words as the English phonetic system is different from the Polish phonetic system. He was also in favour of creating Polish transcriptions

¹⁾ Jaworski (1933: 40).

of Chinese words.²⁾ Nonetheless, totally different Chinese phonetics quite often caused many problems for the average citizen of the Second Polish Republic. For example, *Bluszcz* [Ivy] complained that an average European got confused with the names and surnames of the most important Chinese politicians and the names of Chinese provinces,³⁾ even though events in the Far East, especially the Chinese-Japanese conflict (1931–1945) and natural disasters, rarely left the front pages.

The subject of the Chinese and Japanese writing system was mentioned by mass magazines published by the *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny* [Illustrated Daily Courier], the sensational magazine *As* [Ace], a travel-geographic magazine *Na Szerokim Świecie* [On the Wide World], the Warsaw radio weekly *Antena* [Antenna], the illustrated tourist monthly magazine *Naokoło Świata* [Around the World], the socio-cultural magazine *Tęcza* [Rainbow], the woman's magazine *Bluszcz* [Ivy], the orientalist magazine *Wschód* [East], the artistic magazine *Arkady* [Arcades], the informative-religious Neo Unite magazine *Oriens* [Orient], the Catholic magazine *Przegląd Katolicki* [Catholic Review], and the Evangelical magazine *Zwiastun Ewangeliczny* [Evangelical Heralding].⁴⁾

The Polish press in the 1930s mentioned the Chinese and Japanese writing systems several times. Furthermore, the Polish press also commented on stereotypes around Chinese and Japanese writing system in Poland on several occasions. *Antena* [Antenna], which published long article on this subject, was one of the mass magazines that gave its attention to the Chinese writing system. The article was illustrated with uncaptioned pictures of Chinese writers and examples of Chinese characters.⁵⁾ Meanwhile, *As* [Ace] put emphasis on the Chinese language playing a crucial role in allowing people who spoke totally different dialects to communicate.⁶⁾ *Na Szerokim Świecie* [On the Wide World] claimed that the Chinese writing system was one of a kind, as it was due to the Chinese writing system that a nation of 400 million people was unified. It explained that if it were not for Chinese writing system, Chinese people, who often speak different dialects, would not be able to communicate

²⁾ Jak się pisze po chińsku [How to write in Chinese] (1937: 3).

³⁾ Szczęsny (1937: 16).

⁴⁾ Paczkowski (1980: 165, 248–249 and 278).

⁵⁾ Pismo Dalekiego Wschodu [Writing of the Far East] (1938: 11).

⁶⁾ Mier (1939: 4).

with each other.⁷⁾ The Polish press had a point, as “Chinese” is a common name for many languages that can be as different as chalk and cheese. Differences between Mandarin and Wu or between Cantonese or Min are as great as between French and Italian. Moreover, the Chinese language is often divided into dialects. Now, “Putonghua”, based on Mandarin, is the official language.⁸⁾

Na Szerokim Świecie [*On the Broad World*], like *Antena* [*Antenna*], presented at the same time its complexities. It explained that the Chinese language had around 450 sound components whose number, thanks to various combinations, rose to 1,600. Accent, aspiration, and tones played an important part in those components. It added that there are four tones: a high-level tone, a rising tone, a low or dipping tone and a falling tone. These are vital for communication, because, according to the tone, the *chu* syllable can mean [mister], [piglet], [kitchen] or [column].⁹⁾ The Chinese language is a syllabic tonal language, and its basic structural unit is formed by a tonal syllable. As a result, the number of combinations increases. Such syllables can be pronounced in several different ways that depend on tones. For example, Mandarin has four tones. Other Chinese languages can even have nine tones. Words are most often composed of two or three syllables.¹⁰⁾ However, the press provided incorrect example to illustrate this rule. The *chu* syllable indeed changes its meaning, depending on character and tone. Therefore, *chú* 厨, means kitchen, whereas *chǔ* (础) means [column], [pillar], [basis]. Moreover, this syllable has several more meanings: *hatchling, touch, store, dig, be afraid, hesitate*. However, pig is transcribed as [zhū] (猪), not [chū], and mister is a different word, [xiānsheng] (先生). On the other hand, when the Polish press mentioned mister, this might have alluded to Chinese surnames: Chǔ (储), Chǔ (楚) Chǔ (褚).

Na Szerokim Świecie [*On the Wide World*] quoted, in another article, the thesis of Herbert Wells that was formulated in 1901. Wells claimed that all Asian languages are influenced by the Chinese writing system and literature. This would be the result of the Chinese writing system starting to properly reflect sounds. Thus, it would become a worldwide spoken language. On the other hand, Japanese, including its literary variety, was to strive to being

⁷⁾ Za murem 50.000 liter [Behind the wall 50,000 letters] (1936: 8).

⁸⁾ Alleton (2009: 63).

⁹⁾ Za murem 50.000 liter [Behind the wall 50,000 letters] (1936: 8).

¹⁰⁾ Künstler (2019: 302).

fused with Chinese. *Na Szerokim Świecie* [*On the Wide World*] seemed to agree with this theory, but it stressed, at the same time, that currently Japanese is borrowing a lot of words from European languages and could probably adopt a phonetic writing system faster than Chinese, whose writing was characterized by pictures and ideograms.¹¹⁾

Na Szerokim Świecie [*On the Wide World*] was wrong in this instance, because the role of Chinese in Asia cannot be compared with the role of Latin in Europe. Nonetheless, Chinese was used in the Nara period (8th century) as the official language of the aristocracy. Literary works were created in both Japanese and Chinese, but in the case of the two languages, literary works were written down in Chinese ideograms, which were used to reflect the sound of both Chinese and Japanese words. The Japanese language was in full bloom in the Heian period (9th -13th century). Court ladies who were poets, novelists and memoirists played an important part in the development of Japanese. Since only men were allowed to study Chinese, court ladies used hiragana (one of syllabaries) to write their works.¹²⁾ When it comes to Japanese borrowings from Western languages, *Na Szerokim Świecie* [*On the Wide World*] was not wrong. Japanese languages have been under the influence of Western culture since the Meiji period (1868–1912). As a result, Japanese has borrowed many words from English (engineering, medicine), French (military, art, fashion, cuisine), German (medicine, humanities), Italian (music, cuisine). In the 1920s, it was not uncommon to mix two English words together and abbreviate them. Even today, words of foreign origin such as miruku (ミルク) [milk] and terebi (テレビ) [television] are written in katakana (another Japanese syllabary).¹³⁾

Przegląd Katolicki [*Catholic Review*] lamented that “according to an average Polish intellectual, the bizarre, funny and antiquated Chinese writing system is the opposite of the simple and practical European writing system. It proves that Chinese are an extremely impractical, stubborn and backward nation.¹⁴⁾ It emphasized that the Chinese worshipped their hieroglyphs as a gift from heaven itself. Furthermore, if they had renounced it, they would have lost the foundation of their entire culture. It added that it was not a loanword that was dear to them, but an “ancient writing system”, as it was

¹¹⁾ Mróz (1938: 4).

¹²⁾ Melanowicz (2012: 35).

¹³⁾ Niedbalska – Asano, Asano (2012: 244); Kotański (2018: 16–19).

¹⁴⁾ Wierzejski (1931: 361).

the creation of their mentality, and a means of expression. Furthermore, an “ancient writing system” had become a direct link to their past.¹⁵⁾

Przegląd Katolicki [*Catholic Review*] pointed out the Chinese writing system is practical. It explained that, thanks to their writing system, which can be compared with “written Esperanto”, Chinese people from various regions, where different dialect are spoken, could communicate with each other. Moreover, it explained that words sound very similar to one another and the difference in their pronunciation, caused by tones that were so difficult to distinguish for a European, was crucial in Chinese. It concluded that it is impossible to create a Latin transcription that could reflect both the significance of the Chinese text and the sound of language.¹⁶⁾

Wschód [*East*] also stressed that learning Chinese characters was quite difficult for a European, as no European alphabet was fully able to reflect the sounds of Chinese speech.¹⁷⁾ *Tęcza* mentioned the cultural barrier, because a European would see in Chinese characters only sound without the idea it expresses, and the pictogram itself would be a simplified picture, whereas the Chinese see a meaningful poem.¹⁸⁾ *Arkady* [*Arcades*] confirmed that communing with Chinese art makes it possible to appreciate and understand even picturesque Chinese letters, which reflected deeper and more beautifully the thought contained within them.¹⁹⁾ *Przegląd Katolicki* [*Catholic Review*] added that Chinese writing is “the mother of Chinese painting” and calligraphers were as appreciated as masters of painting. Calligraphic scrolls were the equivalent of Western paintings.²⁰⁾

Both in China and Japan, calligraphy is not merely an art of beautiful writing but also a subdivision of painting. It is one of the earliest and the most appreciated forms of Chinese art. It was a symbol of culture, education, self-discipline and eloquence. It was also believed that the manner of painting a character reflected the calligrapher’s soul. Therefore, calligraphy was considered to be a link between painting and poetry. For this reason, an outstanding painter was quite often also a calligrapher, and calligraphic scrolls were as appreciated as paintings, having the same price and decorating

¹⁵⁾ Wierzejski (1931: 362).

¹⁶⁾ Wierzejski (1931: 360–362).

¹⁷⁾ Bronowski (1932: 21).

¹⁸⁾ Bernatt (1934: 48).

¹⁹⁾ Studziński (1936: 594–595).

²⁰⁾ Wierzejski (1931: 362).

both offices and homes. It is an interesting tidbit of information that Chinese calligraphy uses several writing styles: regular style, cursive style, clerical style, seal style and decorative style.²¹⁾

Bluszcz [Ivy], stressed that Fu Liang Canqi, Chinese scholar who visited Poland, mentioned that Chinese characters are very difficult, and it was not until recently that children did not have to write at school essays in classical literary Chinese *Krassowska* (1937: 12). *Na Szerokim Świecie* [On the Wide World] focused on the mysteriousness of Chinese characters. The magazine printed on its title pages the picture of a glass ball inside of which there was a picture of American actress of Chinese origins: Anna May Wong. The glass ball was surrounded with Chinese characters.²²⁾ The magazine warned, however, against thoughtless use of Chinese characters as decoration quoting an anecdote. The wife of a diplomat, who lived permanently in Beijing, bought two lanterns which allegedly came from the Forbidden City and had them attached to her rickshaw. Later, she became interested in the meaning of inscriptions. A translator friend of hers explained to her that those characters meant “a concubine of the seventh category”.²³⁾

However, *Przełąd Katolicki* [Catholic Review] consoled its readers by saying that, although Chinese characters were “bizarre and antiquated” and the biggest dictionaries contained 40,000 characters, only 4,000 were commonly used, and an educated person knew around 6,000 characters.²⁴⁾ *Naokoło Świata* [Around the World], explaining the difficulties of this Oriental language, pointed out the knowledge of components of characters (keys) helps to master Chinese characters. It is seen that the author must have learnt at least basic Chinese, because he was able to professionally analyze several selected Chinese characters.²⁵⁾ *Na Szerokim Świecie* [On the Broad World] also calmed its readers down claiming that although Chinese has around 50,000 characters, you need to know only 10,000 characters to be considered a scholar.²⁶⁾

Chinese characters are composed of two elements: right and left, and upper and lower. One of them alludes to a broad category such as metals,

²¹⁾ Künstler (2019: 266); Kajdański (2005: 106); Greene (2009: 261).

²²⁾ Zagadka Wschodu [The Mystery of the East] (1932: 1).

²³⁾ Stolica żółtych tajemnic [The capital of yellow mysteries] (1932: 15).

²⁴⁾ Wierzejski (1931: 360–362).

²⁵⁾ Pismo chińskie [Writing of the Far East] (1933: 81–82).

²⁶⁾ Za murem 50.000 liter [Behind the wall 50,000 letters] (1936: 8).

plants, and animals, whereas the other informs us about the pronunciation. For example, both 鴨 yā [duck] 鸚 and yīng [parrot] contain the element: 鳥 (bird), while the elements: 甲 and 嬰 show us how to read them.²⁷⁾

It is impossible to estimate the exact number of characters. In the 18th century, a dictionary created on Emperor's Kangxi orders contained 40,000 characters. The Reform of Written Language Committee established that the current basic canon contains 7,000 characters, but the press commonly uses only 2,000. Primary schools teach around 700 characters.²⁸⁾

Murasaki Shikibu's language did not receive as much attention as Confucius' language. In fact, only *As* ["Ace"], *Antena* [*Antenna*] and *Przegląd Katolicki* [*Catholic Review*] paid attention to Japanese.

Felicja Stendigowa, the correspondent of *As* [*Ace*], wrote professionally and in detail about Japanese. She claimed that Japanese writing was a subdivision of painting. Moreover, it was considerably richer than the European writing system. She also focused on its formal and spiritual meaning, explaining that "calligraphy is part and parcel of Japanese lifestyle and inkstick, inkstone, cup of water and brushes are its attributes".²⁹⁾ It may be an interesting tidbit of information that Japanese calligraphy played the same role as painting. Emakimono, beautifully illustrated scrolls depicting scenes of a story, was the synthesis of both arts. It was complimented with calligraphed writing, containing fragments of the text. Beautifully calligraphed poems were often added to landscape paintings.³⁰⁾

She mentioned that, although the Japanese writing system is much more difficult than the Latin alphabet, Japan's literacy rate is extremely high. She explained that characters used in Japan are not a bunch of random lines, but a well-organized system. Using the character "thick" as an example, she explained the mechanistic elements: keys, she correctly called "radicals". Furthermore, she correctly noted that there are around 200 radicals. She made a point of stressing that each component not only indicated the meaning of character (showing its connection with metal plant, profession), but also hinted how it should be read. It is true that the Japanese language singles out 214 "key elements" that, like in the Chinese language, show the word

²⁷⁾ Greene (2009: 261–262).

²⁸⁾ Kajdański (2005: 196–197).

²⁹⁾ Stendigowa (1937: 14–15).

³⁰⁾ Varley (2006: 86).

category. For example, the characters: gin 銀 [silver], dō 銅 [copper], contain the element 金 [metal].³¹⁾

Felicja Stendigowa stated that, although dictionaries mentioned the existence of around 50,000 characters, the press only used 2,500, and an educated Japanese knew only 7,000 characters. She added that the opponents of hieroglyphs blamed this writing system for making many Japanese wear glasses. The supporters of this writing system claimed that it exercises visual memory as well as opening the gates to the world of beauty.³²⁾ In 1946, the number of essential characters in everyday use was 1,850, whereas today's official list includes 2,136 characters. Today, primary schools teach around 100 characters.³³⁾

One of the correspondents of *Antena* [*Antenna*] mentioned in his memoirs of his last journey to Japan that Japanese was extremely difficult. He also emphasized that a Japanese pupil had to master 2000 characters, and a well-educated person had to master between 3,000 and 4,000 characters. He added a tidbit of information that Mr. Miskiewicz, who was the secretary of military attaché of Japanese Embassy, had been learning Japanese since he was 10 years old and was one of very few Poles who managed to accomplish this feat.³⁴⁾

Przeгляд Katolicki [*Catholic Review*] stressed that the Japanese writing system was different from the Chinese writing system, because Japanese uses three systems: hiragana [!], katakana and Chinese characters.³⁵⁾ *Antena* [*Antenna*] further mentioned the broadcast of Witold Grabiński, *Dwaj przyjaciele z Dalekiego Wschodu* [*Two Friends in the Far East*], who explained in it the differences between the Chinese and Japanese languages. The scholar stressed that Japanese and Chinese characters were basically the same. However, he warned that Chinese and Japanese differ a lot from each other. He used the Chinese and Japanese translations of a sentence "This is a book". He analyzed in detail every character in the two languages.³⁶⁾

It is worth mentioning that, although Japanese does not belong to the same language family as Chinese, it adopted the Chinese writing system.

³¹⁾ Nowak (2009: 10).

³²⁾ Stendigowa (1937: 14–15).

³³⁾ Nowak (2009: 10); Kotański (2018: 18).

³⁴⁾ Wał (1939: 11).

³⁵⁾ Wierzejski (1931: 362).

³⁶⁾ Pismo Dalekiego Wschodu [*The Writing of the Far East*] (1938: 11).

At first, Japanese words were only written in Chinese ideographs, but later, during the Heian period, two additional syllabaries were created – hiragana and katakana – that were also based on elements of Chinese characters. Contrary to Chinese, Japanese is polysyllabic, and its words are conjugated and inflected. Furthermore, Japanese syntax does not coincide with Chinese syntax. For example, contrary to Chinese, where it is an exception that a verb is at the end of a sentence, a Japanese verb always ends the sentence.³⁷⁾

There were cases of the press confusing Chinese characters with Japanese katakana. For example, one of the logic puzzles printed in *Na Szerokim Świecie* [*On the Broad World*] alluded to Chinese culture. If you solved it correctly, you would be able to read the maxim of Laozi. However, the letters of the arithmograph were modelled on katakana. There was a picture of a Japanese woman next to it.³⁸⁾

Furthermore, the religious press mentioned several times that mastering both spoken and written version of the Far Eastern languages was vital for running missions in China and Japan. *Tęcza* mentioned that two missionaries from the Congregation of the Missionaries, who arrived at the end of 1929 in Chengdu, quickly mastered Chinese, and having studied it for a year, they managed to deliver a sermon in Chinese.³⁹⁾ *Orient* mentioned the ecumenical approach of the first Orthodox archbishop in Japan, Nikolai Kasatkin, and emphasized that he had studied Buddhism, Shinto, Japanese culture and history as well as the Japanese language. Moreover, he translated liturgical scriptures and the Bible into Japanese and celebrated mass in Japanese.⁴⁰⁾ Meanwhile, *Zwiastun Ewangeliczny* [*the Evangelical Herald*] mentioned the Chinese translation of the New Testament by the Chinese theologian, and the professor of Nanjing, Chu Paohwei, and Doctor Absalom Sydenstricker, who were the translators of the Bible from Greek into Chinese. It was an extremely difficult task, as Chu Paohwei prepared a 100-page commentary of Greek words, whose translation caused considerable trouble.⁴¹⁾ The magazine also added that Doctor Voskamp, a missionary working in China, translated the work of Martin Luther *On the freedom of a Christian* into Chinese.⁴²⁾

³⁷⁾ Künstler (2019: 265); Kotański (2018: 16–17).

³⁸⁾ Krak (1933: 15).

³⁹⁾ Krauze (1931: 12–13).

⁴⁰⁾ Olsztar (1934: 145–146).

⁴¹⁾ A.S. (1938: 298).

⁴²⁾ A.S. (1932a: 59); A.S. (1932b: 272).

In the 1930s, the Polish press, while writing about Chinese and Japanese writing systems, tried to debunk stereotypes about them. According to quoted magazines, the necessity of mastering a hundred thousand characters, the lack of logic in their composition, and the pictographic writing system being antiquated were the most widespread rumours. Therefore, articles focusing on this subject in most cases correctly explained the basic rules of Chinese and Japanese, as well as explaining the differences between those languages. It also stressed many times that Chinese characters played special role in society, as they served as a link between dialects. Nonetheless, the press quite often created new stereotypes by erroneously calling Chinese characters “hieroglyphs”.⁴³⁾ Chinese script is logographic: a syllabic system where one character corresponds to one syllable. Not always does one character correspond to one word. Hieroglyphs are graphic signs included only in pictorial script, where each sign corresponds to an idea.

Another topic present in Polish press was the fact that both Chinese and Japanese writing systems were an important cultural element. Furthermore, both writing systems can be perceived as art. The press was right to point out dissimilarities between Chinese characters, Japanese syllabaries and the Latin alphabet and their influence on difficulties in translating Japanese and Chinese into Western languages. Christian magazines insisted that an awareness of those differences and deep understanding of Chinese and Japanese writing systems was vital for translating religious texts. Nonetheless, sometimes a process of orientalisation took place, as the Christian press showed that people who used ideographic script were more spiritual than those who used Latin alphabet.

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