

## Why did China disappear from public awareness in Poland in the last decades?

A classic example how ideas that spread along the CEE countries in the last 30 years led to their social and structural consequences is the media, and particularly the way they communicated information on China and the Chinese transformation in Poland. In this case both factors (those related to ideas and those related to structure that was reproduced by the ideas) played an intermingling role. In the sphere of ideas China was non-existent and either shown in a bad light or not shown at all. Chinese achievements and successes were ignored or depicted as temporary.

This news model quickly began producing an institutional structure of a similar nature. Specialists explaining or relating Chinese goings-on were not wanted; on the contrary — the few qualified to make statements were sacked or quit journalism. It appeared that there was no need for information, or more precisely, *high-quality* information on China. And there was no need because there was no coverage of China and its fascinating social transformation, or it was shown in an unattractive manner.

Thus rose the wall of misunderstanding. Lack of journalists speaking Chinese and having an understanding of China was particularly visible during events like the Olympics in Beijing or EXPO, with coverage often done by correspondents who had never before visited China (as still tends to be the case). Made without the knowledge of the language or culture, after a long journey and on a jet lag, their relations only widened the gap of misconceptions instead of closing it. Thus, rather than explain the way China went in the past 30 years they further distorted the general image of the country.

Bad climate and atmosphere surrounding China contributed to missing several possibilities that simply weren't taken into account because nobody realized the true picture of China and its 30-year development. How impressive would a list be (that sadly will never be made) of joint enterprises and projects that could have been done had the societies been accurately informed.

However, reasons for this were also structural and didn't stem solely from the fact that Poland (and CEE) adopted a different development model than China and media often served as an instrument to legitimize it (and the example of post-1978 China didn't really serve this purpose).

Pozostaw to pole puste, jeśli jesteś człowiekiem:

The major factor were also the changes that affected the modern media. They led to the disappearance of China — and more increasingly, of international affairs as such — from the horizon of public opinion and, even worse, of much of the elites. I would name five such factors:

First — tabloidization. When the media became businesses they began to experience the pressure of sales or click-through rate. The development of the Internet that shook the old business model and lowered incomes further increased the pressure of ratings. Information became a product and entertainment, and private publishers, when subject to the laws of the market, didn't want, or couldn't afford, to take up the mission of educating the society.

In Poland, where app. 8% of media consumers have interest in foreign affairs and in a CBOS survey over 50% of respondents couldn't name one most important event worldwide in 2011 and 2012, a publishers covering foreign topics (not to mention news from outside of Europe) would have no chance of getting the readers' or viewers' attention. The victim of this mechanism was not only the distant China but also international journalism as such since only shock and emotion stirring information can break through and attract mass interest.

Thanks to globalization for the first time in the history of Poland and, I believe, of several other CEE countries distant journeys became available for the growing middle class rather than only for the power, money and intellectual elites (similarly to contemporary China). Yet paradoxically, the widespread possibility to travel hasn't translated into interest in the world outside the borders. Several people, like the afore-mentioned correspondents sent to China, don't go into deeper analyses, don't try to fathom the complex social-cultural context but just focus on practical matters like where they can find fine weather, eat nice food, or what gifts they should buy for the family. In CEE we dreamed to reach this standard of life and of course there's nothing to complain about. After all, you can't expect the society to comprise of several dozen percent of intellectuals.

However, a few decades earlier when we weren't able to afford trips abroad and were limited by passport or visa restrictions we didn't expect that with the availability of travels would have so little influence on the international politics discourse, and that the media discourse would become so regionally oriented, focusing on local or, to make it worse, merely trivial matters.

Alongside tabloidization, the localization and narrowing of the perspective to local or insignificant topics are another reason why China and its transformation in the last 30 years have disappeared from public awareness. Unfortunately, the localization of thinking has affected not only Polish masses but also the elites, whose horizon covers the EU, USA,

neighbouring countries and Russia but often misses the rest of the world, including China.

This is a completely reverse process to what has been taking place now in China. Closed and isolated under Mao, today's China gradually adopts a going-out strategy and moves towards globalization. The increasing presence of China worldwide has been accompanied by phenomena disappearing the worldwide perspective across CEE, or at least in Poland. In China we observe a lot of media discussions on foreign politics and the emergence of institutes and think tanks dealing with regions that are distant or exotic to China. The Chinese awareness has been opening to the world while ours has been closing.

This is a consequence of another structural factor: as opposed to China, CEE countries don't play a significant role in the world, nor do they have the ambition to. Unlike China, no CEE country is a global powerhouse with interests in distant parts of the planet. Thus, Poland has no use for anything more than modest offices or consulates to issue visas and help Polish tourists (and even these small posts get closed, like the ones in Mongolia and Cambodia after 2008). Lack of interests leads to lack of structure and lack of reflection on the respective countries and regions.

Finally, the fifth factor contributing to the disastrous role of the local media's reports on China in the last 30 years is that pieces of information trickling down to Poland are often second-hand relations. This is because in the globalized news flow they go through the Western media. In this way — and I'll return to this later — CEE countries often adopt the Western perspective. And since the American media, sometimes are getting involved in the politics, which is the result of American rivalry with China, and sometimes tend to be biased and unobjective. As they are often treated in CEE like oracles, it further distorts the perception of China.

That information on, and evaluation of, the Chinese transformation should reverberate what's going on in the Western media comes as a paradox and surprise if we remember that after 1949 CEE used to have very close relations with China. When the PRC was established in 1949 CEE countries were one of the first to have recognized it and to this day older generations of the Chinese often recall *xiongdì guójia* (or fraternal nations). In the 1950s and 1960s CEE specialists would come to study in China when the country was still relatively closed to citizens of other countries. There's no doubt that in those times Central and Eastern Europeans had a deep knowledge and understanding of China, usually far deeper than their American or Western European counterparts (prof Jan Rowinski is the perfect example of that). However, China's conflict with the USSR curbed these relations and the Chinese transformation pushed the country towards Western countries, who could provide much more modern technologies as well as the capital and know-how. The following

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30 years made this delinking stronger and in the new configuration of international politics China discourse in CEE is a reflection of the Western discourse.

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