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## **China and Europe as Geo(bio)graphical/ Auto(geo)biographical Spaces: Croatian Experiences of the Interwar Period**

The terms *geo(bio)graphical spaces* and *auto(geo)biographical spaces* belong to a discourse bordering on literature and geography; they are connected with forms of articulation of the geo-biographical experience (Konończuk & Sidoruk, 2015, p. 7). In a broader perspective, they emerge from the spatial/topographical turn (Arias & Warf, 2009) in literary and cultural research, as well as literary anthropology. In Polish literature, this research has resulted in reflections on the new regionalism, cultural landscape, autobiographical places, relations between space and memory, and geopoetics (for example: Angutek, 2013; Browarny et al., 2015; Budrewicz & Sienko, 2014; Chojnowski & Mikołajczak, 2016; Chojnowski & Rybicka, 2017; Czermińska, 2011; Frydryczak, 2014; Frydryczak & Ciesielski, 2014; Kalinowski et al., 2014; Konończuk & Sidoruk, 2012, 2015; Kronenberg, 2014; Mikołajczak & Rybicka, 2012; Mikołajczak et al., 2016; Rybicka, 2014). Resorting to tools developed as part of research into the links between literature and geography in a biographical

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context seems unavoidable when travel accounts are the subject of interest because they are autobiographical texts in which the author–narrator–protagonist and the space he traverses and describes come to the foreground as a geographical, autobiographical experience.

The subject of my interest in this article is two Croatian texts from the inter-war period that are marked by the autobiographical geographical experience: Hrvoje Grgurić's *Na Dalekom Istoku – uspomene našega dobrovoljca iz Sibirije, Mandžurije, Mongolije i Kine* / *In the Far East – the memories of our volunteer from Siberia, Manchuria, Mongolia and China*, Zagreb 1931, and Miroslav Krleža's *Izlet u Rusiju: U Drezdenu (Mister Vu-San-Pej zanima se za srpsko–hrvatsko pitanje)* / *Journey to Russia: In Dresden (Mister Wu San Pej is interested in the Serbo–Croatian issue)*, “Književna republika” 1924. Grgurić's work is a travel writing book. Krleža wrote only an essay that describes an episode during a trip to Russia that was included in a work published under the title *Izlet u Rusiju* in 1926. For this reason, I devote more attention to Grgurić's work, which remains almost unknown and absent from the Croatian study of travel writing. In the first case, this Croatian travelling author recounts his own experiences and knowledge gained from his stay in China. In the other case, Krleža reports on (creates) experiences and acquisition of knowledge about Europe by means of a newcomer (traveller) from China. In the two texts, the places of observation and the spaces of interest are different, but different cultures and different worlds meet, and both texts have certain features in common. The experiences reflected in these works include several aspects: being put to the test, meeting the Other, encountering the incomprehensible, but also facing danger and threats to life. Other aspects include sensual experience, sensory experience, subjective confirmation of contact with geographical reality and with the Other, and eventually experiencing as giving testimony (“experiencing”, “proving”, “declaring”) (Nycz, 2006, pp. 12–16).

### ***Homo Geographicus***

Hrvoje Grgurić was a Croatian publicist and a First World War volunteer who fought in the Austro–Hungarian army and found himself on the Russian front (the Galician front). There, in the summer of 1916, he was taken prisoner but managed to escape and get back to Austro–Hungary, where he joined a Serbian

voluntary division. After the February Revolution, he joined the Russian army and then again (at the beginning of 1918) he was accepted into the volunteer Serbian division (admittedly under the official name Dobrovoljačka divizija SHS, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians Volunteer Division). Together with other volunteers from Romania, he tried to join the troops in Vladivostok. Unfortunately, chasing the troops turned out to be pointless, so in Harbin he accepted the fact that he would not do so. From that moment until 1924, he travelled through parts of Siberia, Manchuria, Mongolia and China (see Hameršak, 2000, 2013; "Hrvoje Grgurić", 2002).<sup>1</sup> As a Homo Geographicus, Grgurić was always on the road, somewhere not only between specific places on the map but also between everyday life and different boundary situations<sup>2</sup> – between logic and metaphysics. Grgurić's biography and experiences are perfectly supported by Jacek Kaczmarek's findings: "Homo geographicus is an individual biological and social entity that exists in the world here and now. His biography is largely determined by the place. Space determines the real foundations of human existence, while limiting and stimulating the behaviour of individuals. Homo geographicus has a spatial history. His path of life is marked by situations taking place somewhere in-between; they are the starting point for the routine of everyday life, the uniqueness of boundary situations, and crossing the boundaries between logic and metaphysics. The life of homo geographicus is filled with constant movement, a change of location in the world. Homo geographicus constantly sets out on the road. He is a wanderer in the world of choice and emerging barriers. He makes rational decisions, at the same time entering the area of metaphysical surprise (Kaczmarek, 2013, pp. 32–33). The aforementioned work, *Na Dale-*

<sup>1</sup> We know that, among other things, he was in the service of Grigory Mikhailovich Siemionov, an ataman of the Cossacks and member of the White Guard, as well as Baron Roman von Ungern–Sternberg, commander of the Asian Mounted Division. He also worked as an accountant in Chita, where he probably founded a family and also got involved in trade and gambling. He was also imprisoned in Soviet prisons (Hameršak, 2013). In his book *Kroz tamnice i crvenu maglu – doživljaji u zemlji nove ideologije* (*Through prisons and red fog – experiences in the country of the new ideology*, Zagreb 1932 – two editions and 1934), which was also an international success, he described the period he spent in prisons in the Far East and the Soviet Union in 1921–1923.

<sup>2</sup> A reminder: according to Karl Jaspers, boundary situations are experiences of death, illness, suffering, struggle, historical limitation and guilt. Grgurić's boundary experiences include being a prisoner of war, imprisonment, starvation, typhoid fever, to name just a few. Another type of boundary experience is observation of the behaviour of the condemned just before execution (Grgurić, 1931, pp. 47–49), or a beggar dying (Grgurić, 1931, pp. 165–166).

*kom Istoku – uspomene našega dobrovoljca iz Sibirije, Mandžurije, Mongolije i Kine*, is a literary document of Grgurić's autobiographical Asian experiences as Homo Geographicus on a spatial pathway in a specific stage of his life which might be conceived as an event of topobiography.<sup>3</sup> In Grgurić's book the kind of metaphysical bewilderment referred to by Kaczmarek, a direction towards what is eternal, what is beyond the objectivity and subjectivity of time and space (Kaczmarek, 2013, p. 34), what transcends rational explanation stem from interjections about the specificity of the Far Eastern soul, the mysterious, the infinite, the eternal (Grgurić, 1931, pp. 19–20), the supernatural (Grgurić, 1931, p. 24), philosophical serenity and stoicism (Grgurić, 1931, p. 128), mystical uncertainty about origins (Grgurić, 1931, p. 175), and so on.

The book's nature is that of a memoir, written from a certain distance in time, but based on (authentic or fake) notes from the trip and the stay. While it has some features of a travel diary, its "plot" is not based only on travelling through space or describing places as the narrative follows the development of "action" in time and is arranged according to the chronology of events only in the initial parts. The first three chapters describe specific parts of the journey and the space: I *Od Vologde do Mandžurije*, II *Od stanice Mandžulije do Hajlara*, III *Od Hajlara do Harbina*. Chapter XVII, *Put do Tien-tsina*, is similar in character. Three more of the chapters cover selected cities (Harbin, Shanghai, Beijing), while four cover selected characters (Ataman Semyonov, Baron Ungern-Stenberg, Cecen Han Navaanceren, Mongolian Minister of Justice, a Chinese called Tsi-ču,<sup>4</sup> with whom he falls in love). However, the remaining 10 chapters are devoted to problem stratification, where Grgurić seems to break with the genre or modify it according to the objective, namely presenting a comprehensive image of China. His account can be classified as cultural geography<sup>5</sup> since he combines a presentation of his own spatial experi-

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<sup>3</sup> "So far, the spatial route of human life has been called geo-biography. However, considering that the path of life runs in a topocentric reality and consists of a number of spatial and temporal sequences, the term topo-biographies has been introduced. The plural form is used here because there is no single topo-biography. The path of life manifests itself as a series of sequences that mark the successive stages of the journey on Earth, between temporary stops" (Kaczmarek, 2013, p. 29).

<sup>4</sup> Where I could not confirm the correct spelling of names, not knowing if a character really existed, I left the original spelling used by Grgurić.

<sup>5</sup> I am aware of a certain terminological misuse because a discipline called *cultural geography* has been developing since the 1980s, half a century after the publication of Grgurić's memoirs. The founding text of the new cultural geography is the work of Cosgrove and Jackson (1987); see Rybicka (2012).

ences with interest in a wide range of cultural phenomena, including the culture of everyday life. By deepening, interpreting and giving meaning to some phenomena, he performs a “mapping of meanings”. Grgurić merges intimacy with a sense of mission; he wants to include as much knowledge as possible about the country he is visiting, including knowledge accessed from guides, mentors, translators and interpreters. These procedures result in a considerably varied narrative, from artistic, ‘high-literary’, moving away from a ‘realistic’ description, to factual, documentary, such as the passages containing historical data (Grgurić, 1931, pp. 27–32), historical figures (e.g., Ataman Semyonov ; Grgurić, 1931, pp. 33–50), the Great Wall (Grgurić, 1931, p. 143), the agrarian system, etc. When sharing information about nightlife (Chapter XI), Chinese women (XII – *A Chinese woman as a wife, mother, and lover*), soldiers and the army (XIII – *Chinaman as a soldier*), the agrarian system (Chapter XIV), beliefs (XV – *Confucius, Lao-Tse and Buddha*), foreigners in China (Chapter XVI) or theatre (chapter XIX), he gives the floor to his interlocutors. He complements and strengthens the “I have seen things, so I know things” strategy (see Nycz, 2006, p. 14) with the “I’ve heard things, so I know things” strategy; both are used to achieve the impression that the information conveyed is truthful. He also complements and sometimes even replaces the subjectivism inherent to the autobiographical narrative by “objective” arguments advanced by ‘experts’. These ‘experts’ and the conversations held with them are most likely an element of literary fiction (the same is true of Krleža’s interlocutors), and the knowledge they ‘pass on’ came from Western studies that Grugurić had access to on his return to Europe. For example, there is talk of Confucianism, whereas this term was not used by the Chinese themselves (Nadeau, 2012, pp. 5–6) This issue deserves a separate study. The work is wrapped up with a temporal bookending, describing the arrival and the departure.

While four destinations are listed in the title – Siberia, Manchuria, Mongolia and China – the non-Chinese areas make up a tiny part of the book, to the extent that it can actually be regarded as a China travel diary; moreover, as Hameršak points out (Hameršak, 2013, p. 198), it is the first Croatian work of this genre that describes a journey to China, travelling in China, and staying in China. The first Croatian to travel to China (who left no account of his journey) was the Jesuit Ivan Vreman (see Yuchao, 2024). China was also one of the places visited during a journey around the world in the nineteenth century by the Croatian Tomo Skalice, a resident of Slavonic Brod, who for political reasons fled from the services of Alexander von Bach’s absolutist and centralist machine and became the Minister of the Interior in Franz Joseph’s I (the Emperor of Austro-Hungarian Empire) government in 1849, since

at that time the Empire incorporated the northern Croatian lands. Tomo Skalica's report on his stay in China is marginal in his work *Journey Around the World (Put oko svijeta)*.<sup>6</sup> Much more information about China was conveyed much earlier by Marco Polo, born in 1254. Croats like to consider this well-known traveller, one of the first Europeans to arrive in China via the Silk Road, to be one of their kind. Although Marco Polo's birthplace is said to be Venice, a document was found on the Croatian island of Korčula, which at that time belonged to the Venetian Republic, proving that Marco Polo and his family came from that place. Marco Polo's travels *Book of the Marvels of the World*, also known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*, c. 1300, were written down by Rustichello da Pisa when Marco Polo was held in captivity in Genoa. "Descriptions of Polo's travels laid the foundation for the early modern European representations of China and the Orient" (Bakota, 2024, p. 16).<sup>7</sup> In this context, Hrvoje Grgurić's report is undoubtedly the first Croatian travel diary on China. He was probably inspired to write by the Polish traveller and writer Ferdinand Antoni Ossendowski and his book *Bogowie, ludzie i zwierzęta [Gods, people and animals]*, to which Grgurić makes a direct reference in his text.<sup>8</sup>

## **Between the Middle Kingdom and the Far East – between Europe and Croatia**

In his foreword, Grgurić draws attention to two perspectives still present in discourse and perceptions related to China, reflected in the terms "the Middle Kingdom/Empire", used as a local name (emphasized by the author), and "the Far East", which takes a colonial perspective. As a result, he puts Europe in the centre of the world, a perspective most often used by the author-protagonist. "The Far East" appears four times in the short Foreword (1.5 pages) and opens three consecutive paragraphs, thus becoming

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<sup>6</sup> Only 10 verses on a high level of civilization in every field of knowledge, craftsmanship and commerce, of a civilization going back 2000 years. According to Skalica, China's lack of openness to the world hampered its development. He also mentions the high population density and a population exceeding that of the whole of Europe (Skalica, 2007, p. 174).

<sup>7</sup> Bakota's article was published after my text was submitted for publication. It is the first overview paper on the development of Croatian research and knowledge about China.

<sup>8</sup> Also known under the title *Przez kraj ludzi, zwierząt i bogów. Konno przez Azję Centralną*, Warszawa 1923, Poznań 1927, repr. Białystok, 1991; Poznań, 2019; Dziekanów, 2010.

a leading keyword, an identifier of the space described. A number of space attributes are mentioned in the introductory text that serve as encouragement for the reader: *strangeness* (or unfamiliarity), *uniqueness* (speciality, originality), *patriarchalism*, and subordination to strange, *incomprehensible* law. In the short paragraphs that follow, the author describes the Middle Kingdom, mainly exposing its *extreme distinctness* in comparison with what is familiar to Europeans.

Croatian literature of the interwar period also speaks of misunderstandings, ambiguities and complexities of European reality, especially in the Croatian–Serbo–Yugoslavian context that a Chinese coming to Europe tries to understand. During his Russian travel, Miroslav Krleža, the most significant but also controversial personality of Croatian literature of the twentieth century,<sup>9</sup> recounts a conversation with a Chinese man, Mr. Vu San Peij, whom he met in Dresden<sup>10</sup>. Meeting a stranger from a distant world allows Krleža to expose several paradoxes inherent to the Croatian identity issue of that time (rooted in the distant past and present to this day), resulting from a combination of factors: 1. Peripheral location on the outskirts of Western Europe, combined with a strong sense of belonging to European culture, with its roots in the Mediterranean (Pieniążek-Marković, 2015). 2. Being part of foreign and supranational state structures as from 1102 (a personal union with Hungary) to 1991 (split from the structures of Yugoslavia), Croatia did not exist as a state on its own and belonged in parts to foreign states: after 1918 it belonged to

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<sup>9</sup> Krleža is known for his critical and polemical attitude towards Croatian reality and literature. In the first of his controversial polemical and revolutionary assessments of the entire literary tradition to date, namely a text under a meaningful title *Hrvatska književna laž* (The Croatian literary lie), published in 1919, he negates the entire Croatian modern literature. Krleža's lampoon, growing out of an avant-garde, revolutionary and utopian point of view, and from a polemic with the modernist aesthetics of Eternal Beauty, emphasizes the need to return to Croatian origins, which in his opinion are epitomised only by the peasantry of Northern Croatia. Krleža condemns both the subordination of literature to ideology (the Illyric movement) and the desire to keep pace with Europe (modernism), which in his opinion is epigonic. He sees the true value of national art in telling the truth about "a rural, backward country, still deep in the barbaric and semi-colonial Balkan stage of development" (Krleža, 1984a, p. 140), which is not reflected in literature.

<sup>10</sup> The fragment in question, as well as two more from his stay in Germany, and a part related to his stay in Vienna, were not included in the subsequent editions of *Izleta u Rusiju* prepared while Krleža was still alive (1958, 1960, 1973, 1985); they were replaced by other previously published texts. They later became part of Krleža's travelogues: *Knjiga studija i putopisa* (1939) and *Putovanja, sjećanja, pogledi*, 1985 (Bogišić, 2011; Brebanović, 2016, p. 131; Flaker, 1993).

the State of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (29.10.1918), then the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1.12.1918), then, after 1929, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and after 1945, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1943. Democratic Federal Yugoslavia 1946. Federative National Republic of Yugoslavia, 1963. Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) from which Croatia broke (together with Slovenia) in 1991, declaring independence. 3. Involvement in the Serbian-Croat discourse of differences, similarities, identities (language, origin, religion, territory).

## **Is Croatia in Europe? The Croatian identity paradox**

The first paradox is that Krleža, who in his texts undermines Croatia's membership in [of] Europe, takes on the role of not only a representative of Europe but even a host, talking about the history and the future of Europe and about the issues of European culture. Before this author-narrator goes on to recount his meeting with Mr. Wu San Pej, he presents Dresden as a place of his intimate memories, as an autobiographical place (Czermińska, 2011), in a way "a place of his own", experienced by senses and intellect, "consumed" (he recalls the fragrant gingerbread from Dresden, the Baroque Zwinger building described in his youth, Arthur Schopenhauer, whom he calls a mentor and teacher important for the development of his personality). Entering the role of a host to Europe is also an opportunity to take an ironic look at the place of Croatia in Europe: "There I was, standing in front of the Zwinger, absorbing the warm and intimate atmosphere created around old and well-known things and events, when Mr. Wu San Pej approached me and asked where the Zwinger was. As a good European – much more familiar with the Zwinger and Dresden than Mr. Wu San Pej, who has not tried the gingerbread from Dresden as a child, who has not been a spiritual disciple of a philosopher from this city and who has not written any essays about the Zwinger, a "beautiful Baroque building" – I took on the duties of a host and I talked to the Chinese gentleman about Europe the whole day. [...] That evening, Wu San Pej learned that I was not German and, moreover, not a European. He was extremely surprised" (Krleža, 1984b, p. 201).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The adaptation of the European 'metropolitan gaze' ('internalized the metropolitan gaze', (Milutinović, 2011, p. 15) by non-European-identifying Serbs in contact with Chinese

The second paradox is related to the lack of a state of one's own, with a name identical to that of an ethnic group and language that would lead to unambiguous identification of the nation and the territory. In 1924, when Krleža wrote about his meeting with Wu San Pei, Croatia was part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The narrator decides, however, to simplify the name of the country, hoping that he will not have to explain the complex South Slavic relations, especially the Serbian–Croatian ones. He says that he comes from Yugoslavia (i.e., the state of Southern Slavs). In this way, however, he gets involved in another problem: the idea of Yugoslavian unity, to which he has an ambiguous attitude. In his book *The Croatian literary lie*, he questioned if Croatia was a part of Europe and if Croatian literature was European literature. During his trip to Dresden, he revealed the truth about the Yugoslavian idea and the Yugoslavian community that had been preached in Croatia since the 18th century (by Pavao Ritter Vitezović, a writer, historian, philologist). This truth was fundamentally important in Romanticism in the 1830s and was promoted under the banner of the Illyric movement, whose main ideologist was Ljudevit Gaj (another controversial figure). According to Krleža, Croatian self-definitions and self-identifications are therefore founded on lies.<sup>12</sup>

This attempt to make it easier for the interlocutor to locate Croatia (as part of a southern Slavic state) on the map of Europe turned out to be a failure, as Mr. San Pej mistook Yugoslavia for Czechoslovakia, mistakenly calling it “Chekoslavia”. Efforts to unravel European Slavic complexity increased even further in the eyes of the Chinese; Krleža ridicules the Eurocentric view of the world when one realises how microscopic European divisions are seen from the monumental “synthesising” Chinese perspective:

– You are not German? Where are you from?

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culture is discussed by Zoran Miltunović in his book *Getting over Europe. The Construction of Europe in Serbian Culture*. In this context, I also recommend Tomasz Ewertowski's monograph *Images of China in Polish and Serbian Travel Writings* (Ewertowski, 2020, p. 71).

<sup>12</sup> “At that moment and in that mood, it simply felt silly to provoke myself and I did not tell Mr San Pej the truth. I forgot that there was a Serbo–Croatian problem and that there was no Yugoslavia [...] I simply lied in the name of some fictitious idea of Yugoslavian unity, and I felt like a wretched liar and fraudster in front of the Chinese man. However, I remembered at that moment that this was how we had been lying and deceiving the world and ourselves for sixty years: we claim the existence of something that is not there. I sighed. I was not a man of character enough not to lie. There was a lie in the very origin of the idea of Yugoslavian unity” (Krleža, 1984b, pp. 201–202).

– I'm from Yugoslavia, Mr. San Pej!

[...]

– Oh! Chekoslavia! [...]

– No, no, Mr. San Pej! You're wrong! Yugoslavia is not Chekoslavia, Chekoslavia is Chekoslovakia. Slovakia, Slovenia, Slavia, Slavonia, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia are all different countries, different nations, different states.

– That's weird! It all sounds the same. Panslavia!

[...]

– Panslavia, Mr. Wu San, is a Romantic, petit-bourgeois, nineteenth-century illusion. Yugoslavia is not Chekoslavia! Chekoslavia is a republic and Yugoslavia is a kingdom. The Chekoslavia Republic is five hundred kilometres from Yugoslavia. These are two different countries! [...]

– I beg your pardon [...] from our Chinese perspective, from several thousand kilometres, five hundred kilometres does not make such a big difference. [...]

– I completely cannot imagine where your Yugoslavia is located. [...]

– Yugoslavia is a Balkan country, sir. The Balkans!

From Wu San Pej's watery blue, fish-like eyes one could conclude that, although he had heard of the Balkans, he could not really get the grasp of the countless islands and peninsulas of Europe among which he got lost. (A European gets lost in the same way when he hears the names Ton-kin, Haj-nan, Shan-tung, Liao-tung, Bal-kan). We stood up and approached a hotel map hanging in the lobby. [...] – It dawned on me for the umpteenth time that in European schools we learn geography in a schematic and stupid way. We place Europe in the obvious and fixed centre of the world [...]. Mr. Wu San Pej saw Europe as a bunch of grapes hanging from the Iberian Peninsula. This point of view allowed me to fully feel the relativity of our European perspective. (Krlježa, 1984b, pp. 201–204)

The perfect irony of this “revelation” or enlightenment experienced by the Croat–European narrator destroys and ridicules the Eurocentric point of view, based on the attitude of superiority to other civilisations, the Croatian sense of importance, and the Slavic ideas of community. Magdalena Koch, the author of an article that discusses the problem of the Balkans from the colonial and post-colonial perspective, provides the following conclusion to her comment on Krlježa's text: “By introducing an ‘exotic’ Other – which ridicules not only the Balkans but also Europe in general – we get our own anti-colonial narrative, which can be classified as a post-colonial instrument of Croatian literature” (Koch, 2009, p. 84). Krlježa's mockery, however, touches upon broader issues: it presents the Chinese perspective, from which European miniature states and regions with their fluid borders – bound in an impermanent way by ideology, culture and language – seem ridiculous. If we were to map Europe according to not political, ethnic or religious factors but to, for example, culinary and sensory ones, the continent

would be divided into much larger and more homogeneous cultural areas. A sensory geography would perhaps map the territory of Dresden gingerbread with its relatives throughout Central Europe: Poland (old Polish gingerbread of Toruń), Croatia, Serbia (*medenjaci*), the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary.<sup>13</sup>

## **Auto/bio/geo/graphies by Krleža and Mr Wu San Pej**

Krleža's narrative, full of ambiguities connected with European and especially Southern Slavic identities, (self)identification and nationality, is inextricably linked to the geo-biographical experience that Elżbieta Konończuk defines as "an experience that reflects how human life is shaped by the specificity of the geographical places where it took roots" (Konończuk, 2015, p. 64). Northern Croatia and Zagreb, where Krleža was born, lived, worked and died (1893–1981), is a peripheral area that often changed its administrators and nationality. This area, like its inhabitants, including the author of the journey *In Dresden*, is subject to various ideologies: from narrowly perceived, Croatian, Magyar, Austro-Slavic, Pan-Slavic to Yugoslavist, which was quite strong also in the interwar period. Mr Vu San Pej's interlocutor is, therefore, unable to answer a simple question: "What is your nationality?" In his long and convoluted account, Krleža achieves mastery in sarcasm, (self)irony, criticism of Croats and of their tendency to seek communities and to form alliances against current enemies, often former allies. He alludes to the complicated Croatian history – the question of religion, the linguistic autonomy – all this in the context of the problems resulting from the Croatian–Serbian closeness and hostility. Here lies the third paradox in Croatian identity struggles (there is no place to explain them here) that, in Vu San Pej's mind, further complicate the image of Europe. The greatest paradox, however, is that the substance of these insoluble problems – derides Krleža – lies in the subtle difference in accents (Krleža, 1984b, pp. 208–209). The writer presents to the interlocutor an ideological landscape created under the influence of specific national concepts and historical memory that serves as a battlefield for the meaning of specific national and ethnic groups, not a neutral geographic area (Rybicka, 2012, p. 16). Having been introduced to the European reality by the Croatian writer, the Chinese man – whether really met by Krleža or an imaginary figure (the question of fiction

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<sup>13</sup> More on the culinary mapping of Central Europe, see Rybicka (2014, pp. 390–407).

or reality does not matter here) – expresses his autobiographical experience of Europe in a few insights: “Everything is very complicated in Europe”, “I don’t understand”, “Strange”, “Unbelievable!”, “That’s a paradox”, “It seems to me that there are only contradictions!” (Krlježa, 1984b, pp. 208–210). By creating an imaginary Chinese interlocutor, Krlježa reduces the world’s biggest population to (an extremely important) function in the Croatian national discourse, namely that of showing the relativity of identification struggles and civilisational and cultural achievements. Krlježa summarises the image of China in a short paragraph, relying on stereotypes, but this procedure perfectly achieved the fundamental objective. He writes: “we (Croats, Europeans) are not the centre of the world”, and compared to China we have achieved nothing much:

Standing next to me is Mr Wu San Pej, with thousands of years of history behind him, of which we have no idea. The Great Wall of China, fantastic architecture, immeasurable tea and rice fields, lacquer, ink, dye and silk factories, an ancient civilisation and its wise religions, gas lighting and printing when we were pagans, the compass, voyages across the Pacific Ocean, porcelain, majolica, aviation, astronomy, lyricism.... I, on the other hand, represent the civilisation of Zagorka’s novel *The Witch of Grič*, and the Society of Croatian Women named after Countess Catherine Zrinjska. Naturally, I represent the European centre, and I am surprised that Mr Wu San Pej does not comprehend that the city in which I had the honour of being born is the centre of light and civilisation’. (Krlježa, 1984b, p. 204)

## Mentors and co-authors of *In the Far East* by Hrvoj Grgurić

Both texts (by Krlježa and Grgurić) are aimed at creating an impact, evoking emotional reactions from readers. While Krlježa’s comic reactions tend to devise a strategy of self-reflection and self-recognition, Grgurić’s accounts, as published in the *Zabavna Biblioteka* [Funny Library] series, concern a process which aims to transfer knowledge through play, especially knowledge of the Other. In Grgurić’s book, hosts providing information about the lands traversed by the author–narrator–protagonist are like guides providing information, unlike in Krlježa’s case, where the host obfuscates the readers. The text by Grgurić has many features of an educational journey, so the role of “guides” is different. Of course, Grgurić is a writer of a different calibre, so in his texts there is no trace of Krlježa’s virtuosity, but the purpose of the text is different too: to pass on knowledge about a foreign land. While Krlježa mainly aims to surprise his interlocutor, Grgurić

turns into a meticulous secretary, giving the floor to his mentors and quoting their long statements. Every aspect of the life, history and atmosphere of cities and the specificity of a land is introduced by a different “insider”, of whom there are a dozen or so. We do not know how many of them are real people met during his stay in China, and how many are elements of the text structure, fake “sources of knowledge” to convince readers that the author’s account is true. There are many indications that Grgurić’s interlocutors (or the conversations with them) are fictional. Some situations are entirely improbable, such as a lecture about Chinese theatre given with two rickshaws running side by side (Grgurić, 1931, p. 181). The memoirs *Na Dalekom Istoku* were written after his return to Croatia, but it is uncertain whether Grgurić took notes during the trip or recalled what he had learned during meetings and conversations.

Grgurić uses quotation marks (most often) or points out that he reports information provided by an insider without using them. The keyword for his travel narrative and for the preface is *ličnost*, which stands for personality, individuality, persona. While it sometimes happens that the people were met accidentally, most often they turn out to be exceptional: they have outstanding knowledge, social position, a mission – they are experts in their fields. They lead the traveller through “the lands of childhood dreams and fantasies”; “they open the door to the soul of a great nation” (Grgurić, 1931, p. 6), and the knowledge gained in this way, combined with his own observations – claims the narrator – makes it possible to draw conclusions, assess, judge and love “the unusual nation with prominent cheekbones and slanting eyes” (Grgurić, 1931, p. 6). The characters – guides in the spiritual world – emerge from memory as if from an archive and “shaking off the dust of several years of idleness, they enter the stage full of energy again” (Grgurić, 1931, p. 6). Giving them the voice, the narrator withdraws to the position of a reporter. In the sentence closing the Foreword, he writes: “they are the ones who will tell you about what I saw and met while wandering through the infinite spaces of mysterious lands”.

Grgurić meets the first expert in the Far East, supposedly a well-known professor of linguistics from Vladivostok, on the train, just before entering the intriguing territory. Referring to the present day, it can be said that the professor’s story played the role of today’s guides, blogs, internet articles and texts that a tourist reads before going on a journey, therefore entering something new but in a way familiar. The professor speaks about an unfathomable country, the uniqueness of the people, their special conduct of life marked with a distinct morality, worship of ancestors, defence against external influences, deep philosophy of the human soul, motives,

thoughts and actions. Other experts live in the places visited. Grgurić learns about Manchuria and the Manchurian tribe from the stories of Mr. Juan-san-tsi, a kind host and first-tier government official. He is introduced to the world of Chinese taste sensations – unmistakably positive – to the culinary habits and household interiors by the hospitable Li-tung, a deputy governor of Zhejiang province, a Mandarin government official of the first three tiers, born in Beijing “and very proud of it” (Grgurić, 1931, p. 64), a rich descendant from a respected family from the north.<sup>14</sup> A friend of Li-en-fu’s, a boss of a German export company, is a guide to the forbidden world, the urban nightlife in China. With him, he visits a brothel, an opium den, and a casino. Another friend, Šan-ja-tse, walks him around his property, talks about the agrarian system in China along with the ceremonies that accompany work in the field: “he introduced me to the secrets of a great nation, as huge as contrasts in its tragedies, wealth and poverty” (Grgurić, 1931, p. 65). A feminist Šan-li from Shanghai projects a multi-coloured image of the life of Chinese women, while Čai-fang-lu, a garrison commandant, tells him about the Chinese army. The secrets of beliefs and of the three Chinese religions are revealed by Ja-tse-min, a superior of the Temple of Heaven (Tian tan) in Beijing. He also finds a guide to the pagodas (Čin-fulien). In a chapter devoted to Beijing, he refers to the narrative of “an old writer”. Čen-Huan-šang, a writer (supposedly well known, allegedly a favourite figure at European colonists’ parties, permeated with the European spirit but also proud of his tradition), describes the specificity of Chinese theatre.

## **Authenticity and randomness or precise orchestration?**

Grgurić’s guides to China are therefore exceptional people, “insiders” with important social functions, descendants of wealthy families. The travel diary does not say how the traveller meets them, who arranges the meetings, to what extent they are orchestrated and prepared to satisfy the needs of a traveller from distant southern Europe, and how spontaneous they are. The narrator wants the reader to believe in randomness and authenticity:

Thanks to accidental encounters in China with people who know the local reality, to a few years’ stay in the Middle Kingdom and to direct contact with Chinese nationals, I am able to see more and more new aspects of this nation’s life”. (Grgurić, 1931, p. 96)

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<sup>14</sup> A sign of a person’s wealth is their long nails, which can only be grown by someone who does not have to work (Grgurić, 1931, p. 65).

Grgurić's description of China is the result of meetings with specific locals, while very little is said about the life of the largest group, the lowest social strata, apart from generalities about poverty and some experiences gained during night walks. Even people he accidentally makes contact with during his travels are exceptional figures, such as the rich merchant Čang-lu, a progressive father. In addition to the traditional patriarchal principles that have allowed the Chinese people to remain cohesive and compact for more than 50 centuries, he teaches his daughter foreign languages, broadening her horizons more than traditionally allowed in China. Grgurić's and Krleža's imaginary mentors and interlocutors are an element typical of travel writing, a genre that is, to varying degrees, imbued with factuality and fictionality. Like other forms of intimacy, the travel narrative is an oeuvre built on or inspired by autobiographical experiences, although there is travel writing that is complete fiction. An autobiographical/referential pact is 'in force' in travelogues:

any narrative characterized by a nonfiction dominant that (almost always) relates in the first person to a journey or journeys that the reader supposes to have taken place in reality while assuming or presupposing that the author, narrator and principal are but one or identical. (Borm, 2004, p. 17)

Supposedly, it was also by accident that Grgurić met Mr. Wan-li on the Blue Express train, "a Chinese man respected for his professional position, education and social situation", (Grgurić, 1931, p. 142) who, as his story shows, was a close collaborator of Yuan Shikai (Ju-an-ši-kaj in the Croatian version), the first President of the Republic of China. In Grgurić's travel story, he is depicted as a genius with extraordinary abilities, an exceptional psychologist, a far-sighted diplomat, the saviour of China, yet he is quite a controversial figure. Wan-li also presents the problem of the Chinese attitude towards foreigners (Grgurić, 1931, pp. 140–151). His social position is evidenced by his long nails and traditional garments: a caftan and trousers made of thick black silk. According to the narrator, he looks like a typical representative of his race.

## **Transfer of knowledge**

The co-authors of the text and the experts in the issues at hand are a medium for the transfer of knowledge about China, which is then made available to Europeans in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina in the form of a publication in Croatian. The paradox of this (and other travel accounts) is that the author has not

only imparted knowledge gained during his stay in China but has also undoubtedly mediated from other Western books. However, as Tomasz Ewertowski concludes,

In Europe, some Enlightenment writers praised the Chinese social order, and chinoiserie was fashionable; however, the rise of the Western powers, as well as the consolidation of an imaginary opposition between West and East together with the emergence of progressive, universalist ideas, led to a negative assessment of the Chinese civilization. (Ewertowski, 2020, pp. 65–66)<sup>15</sup>

Despite their autobiographical form, all personal, intimate threads (apart from the love thread) have been suppressed in favour of “objective” facts. The discoverer unravels the unknown worlds to readers in the memoirs and written accounts of his guides. For this reason, the travel story has the characteristics of an “applied journey”, elaborating on the selected problematic entries as if in a lexicon. The term “applied journey” is inextricably linked with the educational nature of travelling, full of dangers, border situations and adventures (adventure travel). Education takes place through a personal sensory experience that includes all senses – sight, taste, hearing, smell<sup>16</sup> – and in the method of “learning lessons”. The student is accompanied by guides who help him or her to get a better understanding of space, culture, customs, history, who introduce him or her into the social life and the otherness, who help them “step through the threshold”. The figure of the guide is extremely important, as without it the traveller does not enter any area of Chinese reality. Exploring the country is about meeting someone who knows more, who can explain the landscape broadly understood: the culture, the spirituality, the past. Knowledge can be gained under one condition: the ability to adapt, to use mimesis:

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<sup>15</sup> As in Ewertowski’s (2020, p. 66): “About these changes in the perception of China, see Dawson (1967, pp. 65–89); Mackerras (1989, pp. 28–65); Lukin (Лукин, 2007, pp. 46–50); Blue (1999, pp. 60–78, 2000, pp. 6–7)”. “With regard to research on images of China, a short presentation of the most important works in this field will help introduce the essential topics. Raymond Dawson analysed European conceptions (although he also included American authors) of Chinese civilization and concluded that China was like a chameleon because the country was represented in many different ways (Dawson, 1967). Nigel Cameron presented an overview of Western travellers’ activities in the Middle Kingdom (Cameron, 1989). Colin Mackerras divided his analysis of Western images of China into three parts: images of China’s present back until 1949, images of China’s past prior to 1949, and images of the People’s Republic of China (Mackerras, 1989)” (Ewertowski, 2020, p. 9).

<sup>16</sup> The sensory experience is dominated by remarks about the beauty of the landscape, tasty food, disturbing noise and the irritating, omnipresent smell of soybean oil. More on China’s smell in travel reports from China written by Polish and Serbian authors in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century (See Ewertowski, 2018).

Driven by my unrestrained curiosity and the need to get to know this extraordinary “slanted eyes” people, I was trying to accommodate all those who could be useful in this respect, by giving me directions or by acting as guides in the labyrinth of the Chinese life structure. [...] Like in a colourful kaleidoscope, a procession / a train of people of all classes moved before my eyes, people of all cultures and civilizations, white and Asian people of various social and economic backgrounds. Each new acquaintance revealed new horizons, broadening my insights in studying the Middle Kingdom. Nowhere in the world can this research be more difficult than in the country of the sons of the Yellow Dragon, who are inaccessible, distrustful and hostile towards foreigners, who jealously guard their national holiness, so that the “white devil” does not defile it with his touch and does not stigmatize it for eternity. (Grgurić, 1931, p. 176)

Grgurić spent many months or perhaps years in China (certainly the whole of 1924), travelled thousands of kilometres, visited many places and met many people, probably listened to many stories, all of which was not enough for the narrator to talk about a profound understanding of the country, which remained mysterious. Despite being initiated into it by local experts, the author reproduces stereotypes about an inaccessible country closed to foreigners, thus confirming a truth that researchers have already noticed many times: we look at a foreign country in order to see what has been dictated by patterns embedded in the collective imagination. In this specific case, the conventions of European literature on China were used. However, it is also important to bear in mind the political context, to which Bakota draws attention:

The political context of Grgurić’s biography indicates a certain Krležian post-WWI zeitgeist of a disillusioned officer in search of a new country and ideology, fragments of his writings revealing China as a sort of cultural tabula rasa awaiting a civilizing mission or providing a space for a new wave of ideological Puritans escaping sinful Europe. (Bakota, 2024, p. 20)

This confirms the inseparability of culture and landscape in the auto/bio/geo/graphical experience.

## Conclusion

The auto(bio)geographical experiences of the protagonists in these Croatians’ travel stories confirm the thesis about the fundamental role of guides in the perception of the visited and discovered lands. In Krleža’s text, the narrator is the source of knowledge about Europe, struggling with the Croatian

self-identification issue that dominated his story about Europe and complicated its image. The protagonist (the author and the narrator) of Hrvoje Grgurić's journey through China is accompanied by guides who clearly explain the historical, cultural and economic complexities of local traditions, customs and phenomena. Paradoxically, however, in both cases the travellers conclude their experiences with remarks on the mysterious and difficult-to-understand nature of the land. The texts once again confirm the thesis about the dominance of stereotypes in the perception of the place visited and its inhabitants. In both texts discussed, the stereotype lies in the conviction that mutual understanding is impossible. However, both authors refer to different perceptions of China. Krleža, who did not have an auto/bio/geographical Chinese episode in his biography, used matrices presenting China as an ancient and wise civilisation, boasting numerous achievements in a variety of fields encompassing agriculture, industry, transoceanic expeditions, science and culture. It is an area of supremacy over European, South Slavic and Croatian immaturity, backwardness, and blurred identity. In this way, he reinforced the self-critical pronouncement of his statement. Although Grgurić got to know the country personally, he 'fell into the trap' of European negative images of China. The overriding impression is that they come to the fore in the process of literalizing the auto/bio/geographical Chinese experience – under the influence of European Orient-flavoured narratives at that. Despite a long time spent in China, Grgurić accentuated the stereotype of a country full of contrasts, closed to strangers, mysterious. As a result, an incomprehensible image of the foreign emerges from both accounts (China in Grgurić's text, Europe and the Serbo-Croatian issue in Krleža's), together with complementary and simultaneously contrasting images of China. In each case, however, the auto/bio/geography speaks of China as the Other.

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## **Chiny i Europa jako przestrzenie geo(bio)graficzne/auto(geo)biograficzne. Chorwackie międzywojenne doświadczenia**

Przedmiotem zainteresowania autorki są dwie chorwackie relacje z podróży powstałe w okresie międzywojennym, w których dochodzi do spotkania europejsko-chińskiego. W tekście *Izlet u Rusiju: U Drezdenu (Mister Vu-San-Pej zanima se za srpsko-hrvatsko pitanje)* (1924) Miroslav Krleža kreuje narratora usiłującego Chińczykowi rozsypać sieć europejskich (zwłaszcza południowosłowiańskich) identyfikacyjno-terytorialnych zawilości, co staje się okazją do podważenia europocentrycznego spojrzenia na świat i zaprezentowania mistrzowskiego autokrytycyzmu. Hrvoje Grgurić w relacji *Na Dalekom Istoku – uspomene našega dobrovoljca iz Sibirije, Mandžurije, Mongolije i Kine* (1931) wprowadza w tajniki kulturowego krajobrazu Chin. W obu tekstach autogeobiograficzne doświadczenie przestrzeni jest (i pozostaje) zde-rzeniem z tajemnicą i niepojętą odmiennością.

**Słowa kluczowe:** chorwackie podróżopisarstwo; Miroslav Krleža; Hrvoje Grgurić; Chiny; *homo geographicus*; przewodnicy; krajobraz kulturowy

## **China and Europe as geo(bio)graphical/auto(geo)biographical spaces: Croatian experiences of the interwar period**

The subject of this article is two Croatian travel accounts created in the interwar period, featuring an encounter between Europe and China. In the text *Izlet u Rusiju: U Drezdenu (Mister Vu-San-Pej zanima se za srpsko-hrvatsko pitanje)* (1924), Miroslav Krleža creates a narrator who tries to explain to a Chinese the intricacies of European (especially South Slavic) identification and territorial issues. As a result, an opportunity availed itself to challenge the Eurocentric view of the world and to present first-class self-criticism. In his accounts entitled *Na Dalekom Istoku – uspomene našega dobrovoljca iz Sibirije, Mandžurije, Mongolije i Kine* (1931), Hrvoje Grgurić introduces the reader to the mysteries of the Chinese cultural

landscape. In both texts, the auto-geo-biographical experience of space is (and remains) a clash with mystery and incomprehensible otherness.

**Keywords:** Croatian travel story; Miroslav Krleža; Hrvoje Grgurić; China; *homo geographicus*; guides; cultural landscape

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