

Some Remarks on Propaganda and Slovak Travel Literature (1955 – 1958)

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Work methods

This article was born out of the contribution presented at the conference "Orient and Occident" held in Naples in November 2008.¹ The objective of the contribution was to analyse the relationship between the myths constructed by the socialist propaganda and the myths linked to the Orient in the Slovak culture, focusing on the travel prose published at the turn of the 1950's and 1960's. This work has proved more complex than expected, given the intrinsic difficulties of such an analysis, as both areas taken into account (that is the propaganda business of the regime for foreign countries and the myths linked to the Orient) are still virgin territory for contemporary Slovak research.² This article is in fact

¹ "Orient and Occident. Themes, genre and images within and out of Europe", University of Naples "L'Orientale", "Suor Orsola Benincasa", "Federico II" in collaboration with La Fondazione Mediterraneo, Naples 13th – 15th of November 2008.

² There are many possible explanations for which areas are left unexplored. Regarding the analysis of the Oriental myths we must take into consideration the fact that in traditional Slovak culture there isn't a travel literature on the countries of the Far East, or other forms of text related to travels in Eastern countries nor a cultural or literary interest in the Far East, as indicated by the absence of translations of Eastern texts from their original languages in Slovak until the end of the 1950's in the (cfr. Gálik 1985). This situation has influenced the development of Slovak Asian studies and still up until today there are not, for example, studies of the imagologic type on the Orient, analysis on Orientalism and exotism related to the Asian countries. For completely different motives, the analysis of the regimes propaganda is similar. The analysis of the propaganda is tightly linked to the necessary historical re-reading of the past, to the analysis of

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a first step of exploration and analysis of the relationship between categories of ‘myths’ as indicated above and on a limited number of texts.

The texts under examination are a part of a vast group of travel reports published between the mid-1950’s and mid-1960’s, countries that were only considered socialist or as ‘friends’: China, Vietnam, Egypt, Korea, Cuba and also some European countries like Bulgaria, Georgia, and Albania.³

They were usually brief visits during which the travellers did not have the possibility to get to know countries according to their interests, but instead had to follow organised routes for delegations of foreigners. Other than the organization of trips, the state organs also provided financial coverage, utilising the written texts for propaganda purposes. The travel reports have, for the conditions in which they were born, a “propagandistic matrix”.

By “propagandistic matrix” we mean a text that responds to objectives and criteria established by the organs of propaganda and that, arriving to the reader, provokes in him a specific reaction and expectation from the organs themselves. The academic A. Besussi outlines as follows the objectives of propaganda:

The purpose of the propaganda is to create and disseminate a consensus around a vision of the world and a set of beliefs that are functional to a strong state power or to an interest group. This vision of the world, highly stylized, substitutes moral judgement for the rational process of knowing reality. The specific purpose of the propaganda is not to describe the world, but to judge it, building up a system of good to set against a system of evil, when in reality the facts are entirely neutral to the concepts of good and evil (Besussi 2005: 30).

the national myths and to imagology. The historical and cultural analysis of the 1950’s is recent. In this area in fact first steps forward are being made thanks to the work of Marína Zavacká, an expert on propaganda during the communist period, author of the first book that specifically looks at foreign political propaganda during the periods between 1956 – 1962 and the principle point of reference of this work.

Special thanks goes to Assoc. Prof. Martin Slobodník (Comenius University, Bratislava) for his courteous availability to provide some of the texts analysed and for the information about Chinese studies in Slovakia.

³ For a brief list see Marčok 2004: 355.

The objective of this type of publication was to give the reader a clear position on single countries. The historian M. Zavacká wrote: “The picture of the world offered to recipients of communist propaganda was meant to enable the masses ‘to take the right standpoint’. The formulations always hinted at the correct answer to the question of ‘which side we should stand on’” (Zavacká 2005a: 63). The purpose of those publications is well outlined by Marčok: “helped by the status of travellers, propagators of the successes of the ‘construction’, they complete the map of the ‘new world of socialism’, as it was usually written then” (Marčok 2004: 355).

The travel prose, the report, is the genre that greatly defines the idea of a country; Nucera writes: “the works of the travels are exactly those that for nature provide images of places and people, and making it wide-spread at a high level” (Nucera 2002: 129). The need for propaganda to construct the image of certain countries is found to be an extremely useful instrument in the travel prose, thanks to its value in direct testimony. Affergan, in his study on ethno–anthropology, observes: “Starting from the Renaissance, the personalised observation will be sufficient to testify the truth” (Affergan 1991: 132). The travel reports are direct testimonies, therefore true, of a country. Affergan also wrote: “eye witnessing works as a legitimacy rule. It is a procedure based on authority that was already used in Medieval times” (Affergan 1991: 132). For the testimony to be completely true, it is necessary also the consciousness of the author: therefore they are chosen journalists, very rarely writers accompanied on their travels with photographers and illustrators. The consciousness of the author and the truthful value of his testimony is further made “objective” by the presence of photographers and illustrators: a photographic or illustrating apparatus, more or less widespread, is a common element in all examined texts.

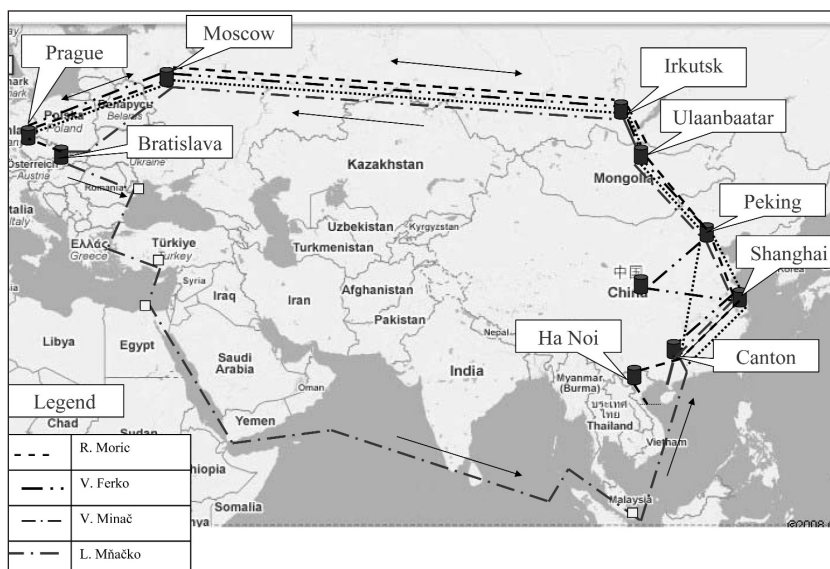
The travel reports, inasmuch direct and truthful testimonies of the reality, allow the propaganda to create a prejudged stable and standardized opinion on the outside world opinion. Besussi observes: “An indispensable instrument of the propaganda is in fact the prejudice, an a priori opinion that anticipates the use of reason, that anticipates even the perception itself of the event and that encourages a strongly stereotyped vision of the reality” (Besussi 2005: 30).

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It is necessary to specify that the travel reports published between the 1950's and the 1960's, while responding to a desire of the organs of the propaganda to "build the world", didn't have a preset and planned editorial design, fulfilled ad hoc; in fact these travel reports were published by different publishing houses and in different series. I chose to focus on four texts: *V krajine, kde vychodí slnko* [In the country where the sun rises] (Mináč 1955); *Pri zakliatej rieke* [Along the enchanted river] (Moric 1958); *Ďaleko je Whampoa* [Whampoa is far away] (Mňačko 1958) and *Tajfún je dobrý vietor* [Typhoon is a good wind] (Ferko 1959).⁴ The criteria of choice was to confront authors that are among themselves very different whose common destination was a country of crucial importance for the new socialist world, and that was China; whereas the text by R. Moric (who also lived in China) allows us to analyse the perception of Vietnam, not well known back then. Both of the countries visited had a very well defined and stratified in the collective memory image: it is difficult, in fact, to think of Vietnam without thinking of the long war with the United States of America. Even more complex are the cultural references evoked by China: *The Million* by Marco Polo; the glories of Imperial dynasties; the cultural revolution of Mao Zedong; the tragic events of 1989; the recently held Olympic Games.

The texts under examination testify the journeys made between 1955 and 1959, a very short period of time that focuses our attention on the two countries that were visited. Firstly we must underline the fact that the trips in China happened before the Sino-Soviet crisis that started in 1960. In 1957 Mao participated in the world conference of the Communist parties in Moscow. In China the Hundred Flowers Campaign had just been launched (1956) and there still were not murmurs of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966). Vietnam, vi-

⁴ Ladislav Mňačko (1919 – 1994) between 1954 and 1966 went to numerous European and Asian countries; in 1956 is appointed vice editor of the magazine *Kultúrny život*; in 1967 he emigrated to Israel. Rudo Moric (1921 – 1985) in 1959 became the director of the publishing house "Mladé letá" and in 1964 he became the head of the "Slovenský literárny fond" (Literary fund of Slovakia). Vladimír Mináč (1922 – 1996) from 1955 was the vice director of the literary magazine *Slovenské pohľady*. From 1956 he dedicated himself to literature; he was one of the sustainers of the normalization (he sustained as well the campaign against Solzhenitsyn). Vladimír Ferko (1925 – 2002) from 1949 till 1964 was writer for the daily *Smena*.



Map 1: The travel routes to China of Slovak writers.

sited by R. Moric in 1958, had just come out of the first Indochina war (terminated in 1954) and it was a country divided into two states after the conference in Geneva: North Vietnam (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam), governed by Ho Chi Minh, supported by China and the Soviet Union, and South Vietnam of Ngo Dinh Diem, sustained by the USA and other occidental countries. R. Moric, as it is easy to imagine, visited only North Vietnam arriving to the border, at the height of the 17th parallel.

These texts are somehow similar, both for their origins and for issues faced; this is because, as mentioned at the beginning, the journeys were organised and controlled by the state organs. The four authors visit almost all the same cities: Beijing, Shanghai and Canton and all four follow the Yangzi River (see Map 1). They also repeat some topics: river populations, the reforms, women's rights, religion, tradition, and also the relationship with Czechoslovakia. The common propagandistic nature of the texts did not prevent the single authors in maintain-

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ing a particular character to each ones prose. Mňačko, other then writing his report, develops a series of philosophical reflections on the trip itself, motivated also partly by the choice to go by ship towards China and then re-entering into Czechoslovakia by train, passing through Mongolia and the Soviet Union. Mináč dedicates a large part of his book to the anti-Japanese resistance war and to the Chinese civil war; Ferko aims to talk about the New China; Moric concentrates on the war and on the changes in Vietnam made by the government.

Having to move in a “virgin” research area, I chose to study the necessity of propaganda, and therefore the functions the reports had to carry out, having influenced the narrative discourse. The analytical work is shown as the mapping of the four texts based on three elements: the presentation of the visited countries; the people interviewed; the direct experiences, in our case the cuisine. The choice of these three topics is linked to the wish to analyse the voluntary and involuntary narrative mechanisms, in which the travel reports under examination “play” the part for which they were commissioned. The three narrative areas that we have chosen to map out are the four reports responding to three modalities to communicate the “reality”: the description of what you “see”, the narration of what you “hear” and of what you “try”. We can define the first two fields as belonging to an objective sphere of communication (what you see and hear is an “objective” fact), whereas the experience with the cuisine belongs to a subjective sphere inasmuch as you have to express in first person if it is something you like or not.

1. Description of the Country

China is a vast country. Our measurements and our days are not enough [to describe it]. Its size, diversity of landscape and customs, lifestyle and problems, its ancient and amazing culture, its stormy and beautiful presence, its wisdom, hard work and modesty – all these features are small in Europe and here they are magnified. We feel this very intensively during the last days of our stay (Ferko 1959: 104).

The entire China seems to be a marvelous country from the airplane. Even if we had not read it somewhere before, the first thing that

one realized, was that nowhere else in the world human labor had changed the landscape so much as people in China, in this country of ancient culture, had (Mňačko1958:121).

It is the Pearl River. It flows from the mountains in four fast streams, from the north, south, west and east. ... Big European rivers are nothing compared to it. I saw the Danube near its delta in the south. The Danube is an impressive river. It can do a lot of things and damage. In old but already historical times it changed its direction and created a new bottom but it is nothing to what the Pearl River does (Mňačko 1958: 122).

The image of China is closely linked to the vastness of its territory and to its thousand years old cultural traditions; Vietnam is presented through nature.

As soon as the train moved, he forgot about a bump on his head, because he got, just like us, interested in the unusual tropical nature. Bamboo was sprouting straight to heaven, ripe fruits were hanging from banana trees, and papaya palms with rich fruit grew around cottages. And wherever there were no cottages or rice fields, there was a jungle. A real and thick jungle, connected with lianas! Finally my childhood dream came true: I will get to a jungle where tigers, cheetahs, elephants and chimpanzees live! I will be able to pick a ripe banana from a tree, and to touch a slim trunk of a palm! I could not hold it. I screamed and firmly hugged a painter Ľubo, who gave me a scared look (Moric 1958: 50).

It's nature that, on arrival into the country, is tropical (we could say erotically tropical), and that, when departing, becomes almost bucolic.

Rice fields, like mirrors, are intertwined with carpets of silk crops and grain, and seem to be endless! I see people running with a burden – with buckets on a stick. The veils of sampans soar over the tops of bamboo vegetation, ploughmen walk behind bulls, and shepherds behind zebu cows (Moric 1958: 143).

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The depictions read evoke a typical image of China, seen as a “fabulous” country: the dimension, the vastness of its territory, the thousand year old culture. If we follow the reading of the texts, we can see that the description follows a different point of view.

The surface mine in Fu-Chung has Chinese measures: it is more than 16 km long, and its widest spot is 1.5 km long. It is up to 200 meters deep. And in this vast abyss with numerous terraces, curves, tunnels and railways, there is coal, black blood of new China, and over the coal there are slates from which they make gas, oils and paraffin in the close factory (Mináč 1955: 62).

So this is ‘a more modest’ hotel! Only for the Chinese! We do not think so because from the outside, it gives a fresh impression. Five floors, a portal decorated by columns, and nice chrysanthemums on the stairs. The building has two adjacent wings on sides, thus it has a U shape (Moric 1958: 18).

China is presented as the country of the industry of the working class. The velocity in the construction of buildings and roads are present in all four texts:

China has railroads, and constantly keeps building new ones; China builds roads with unbelievable speed (Mňačko 1958: 122).

A Chinese worker does not need a supervisor. He ‘bites’ into work, and does not waste his force. His perseverance and a steady pace are remarkable. ‘How much do they make in a month or in a year?’ I asked him (Ferko 1959: 51).

We live in a brand new hotel in Mongolian suburb. This hotel was built in 6 months, and it was built for us. Really, just for us. For guests from the Soviet Union and people’s democracies, for those guest who were supposed to participate in the festival of the 1st of October. They built the hotel on time. The night before the 1st of October, they finished the tennis courts, as well as basketball and volleyball grounds (Mináč 1955: 15).

The language of the propaganda is often organised on dichotomies:

in the case of China and Vietnam the image is mainly structured on the two opposites; freedom – oppression. Communism is not represented as a “simple” defender of freedom, but as it’s ultimate expression.

How much this nation has experienced! We came to this southern country to get familiar with a post-war development but it is still too connected with everything that happened two years ago. The wounds are still fresh and open. All that has been going on is connected with the 8 years of the struggle for life and death. The life won, the truth of Vietnamese people won but the price for it was enormous (Moric 1958: 70).

Many people asked me after I came back: ‘Tell me, but honestly: do Chinese people really adhere to the government as firmly as they say?’ This always made me think of farmers from Mo-di-cho, of hundreds of farmers that I had met. How could these people, how could hundreds of thousands of Chinese farmers who had nothing but the right to die, how could these people who benefited from the liberation, and who got the right to lead normal human lives, who could these hundreds of millions not adhere to its government, to its Communist party, to Mao Tse-tung? (Mináč 1955: 107).

The description of the industrious people of China, the power of China, the fight for freedom conducted by communism, are even more highlighted in the comparison that the authors show between the past “oppression” and the present, in which they have direct experience. Using that which Nucera defines as the “subversive nature” of the journey, because it is in itself a denial of the previous readings about the countries visited (Nucera 2002: 133), the authors put under discussion the legend of exotic China created by “Westerners”. The case of the river population is emblematic:

A mother is sitting motionless with folded legs, and peacefully talks about her life in sampan, about a life of a beggar without any shine and romanticism. [She describes it] in a manner very different from colorful leaflets of British tourist agencies. A boy is already asleep. He wears a silver bracelet around his left ankle. This is to avoid death or drowning (Ferko 1959: 61).

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The world opens for river people, like it did for all Chinese workers. The world in which one can live a human life. People's government has been drying up the 'river of tears'. The Pearl River will be beautiful, like in a fairy tale, like in a romantic dream, without tragedies and without humiliating people (Mináč 1955: 103).

And yet, seen through the communist prism, the descriptions of China have an "Orientalistic" matrix. Mináč's description of the coal mine follows a description of the imperial palaces by many other travellers; though the richness is not recognized in the pomp of the imperial palaces, but in the vastness of natural resources that sustain the industrialisation.

In the same way, the speed in constructing and building appears almost as a magic gift of the Chinese people, sending directly back to the image of a mysterious country, where miraculous things happen.

The image of China that comes out of these texts is that of a miraculous place, where problems are resolved because socialism has liberated its very nature. That which these texts offer is a China that became, like the USSR, the "paradise of communism", where "dreams of communism have already become real" (Zavacká 2005b: 231).

Dynasties of emperors that built the Great Chinese Wall were unable to build a bridge across the Yangtze. How much one government can do in a couple of years! And how much many of those of little faith have changed! This bridge connected their hearts with the heart of the Republic. In a wood, there are always more modest and useful birds than bad ravens. Thousands of robins do not make noise in a wood. One screeching raven can be heard in the entire wood (Ferko 1959: 77).

China. A superpower. A country that shifted the balance of world power towards Socialism in the south-east Asia. A country that brought new truths into the treasury of Marxism. In London and Washington, they call its colossal political, economic and cultural success, with a hardly hidden fear, 'a Chinese miracle'. This country is on our side. Socialism has deep roots in China. It penetrated the soul and heart of Chinese people (Ferko 1959: 105).

They march, and one has to think of the borders in the world, of the American fleet in Taiwan, of Taiwan heavily armed, of human anger and greed for money. No, nobody will conquer the eastern border of our world! This force is ready and determined, self-confident and sure about its power, as if cast from one piece of steel.(...) The Chinese people march, and one has to think of a miracle. Because it is a miracle which resembles a fairy tale about Sleeping Beauty (Mináč 1955: 12-13).

2. Characters

The second field of inquiries is of the characters that appear in the tales. In this case I have analysed the characters whose conversations with the author have been made into a form of direct speech. The direct speech gives authenticity to the content of the dialogue, thanks to its mimetic nature towards the oral speech that it is ascribed to. The long dialogues are often placed separately in the tale, divided by paragraphs that are before and after them, and they often are separated by chapters.

To simplify the speech I have inserted each single analysed character into a table:

Tajfún je dobrý vietor (Ferko 1959)

Character	Who is he? What does he report?	What does he represent	Physical Description and Characteristics (page)
Kuo Ling so	Former owner of a commercial centre with different branches that are now property of the state. National bourgeoisie, director with the 5% of earning on annual sales.	Capitalistic re-education	“Elegant” (p.61)

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Nien Sao-ke	Factory worker. Sold as a baby to an estate owner. Slave. Married 3 times: 1. estate owner; 2. Kuomintang sustainer; 3. worker. Beaten by first 2 husbands.	Liberation of women from the feudal system	“26-years-old Worker” (39)
Zhan Shu-nu	General from Taiwan. Comes to China after finding the truth about the reforms of the People’s Republic Government and the lies of the nationalist propaganda of Taiwan.	Taiwan = lies China = truth	“A house owner in civil clothes” (43)
Lian Ta-sau	Woman that lives in sampan. Ready to join her husband who works on dry land.	Government reform in order to give all people a dignified life	(61)
Lu Czin-chao	President of the tea-producing cooperative. At first, with very low output they cultivated the best quality tea. With the cooperative productivity increases, a primary school for children is built.	Liberation of the peasants	“23—years-old Communist” (50)
Jan Zhoun-lü	Chief of the birth office, Health Minister. China limits the numbers of births in order to guarantee the survival of newly born babies.	The topic of birth control is instrumentalized by the West	“Dark haired comrade” (81)
Two monks	Mongolian monks, minority of Shan-hsi: travelled 5 days to see	Protection of minorities. Loyalty of the	“The silvery sparse beard contrasts with

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	who gave them the land for the 1 of October fest.	government to the poor	dark skin, the head is bald without a hair” (p. 99)
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V krajine, kde vychodí slnko (Mináč1955)

Character	Who is he? What does he report?	What does he represent	Physical Description and Characteristics (page)
Chen Shu-sen	Boss of the agricultural cooperative in Mo-di sa, near Canton. Orphan, parents died of starvation in a land that produces fruit and vegetables.	People’s Republic of China allows its peasants to live off of their work	“The 24-years-old president is a learned and energetic man” (104)
Chen You-ma	Peasant, head of mutual aid brigade. He met Mao Zedong in the caves of Yan’an. Mao helped the poor, the old and the farmers. With freedom he has land, food and clothes, he has learnt to write.	Mao as a person: he is gentle with the weak, attentive to the old and the poor	“young, he is 35 years old” (41)
Yang Yeng-hua	She lived in a dark alley in Shanghai, now she lives in a workers’ district. Fired from work as a result of an accident, her family is suffering from hunger. After her liberation she finds work and goes to night school.	Literacy. The Chinese government allows her to live in healthy homes in good areas	“She is a young and beautiful woman” (80)
Liu Tian-yü	Island of Sa-min, near Canton. Battles against	A long fight for Chinese freedom.	“A little man with white hair

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	Japanese and English, Americans and Chinese (Kuomintang army). Seaman and political agitator. Then head of section in the province of Luang-Tun.	“A rich and dangerous, bold and beautiful life for the Chinese communist”	with a small yellow face. His face is still young, with little wrinkles only his eyelids are heavy” (49)
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***Pri zakliatej rieke* (Moric 1958)**

Character	Who is he? What does he report?	What does he represent	Physical Description and Characteristics (page)
Old man in Wuhan (China)	Among the fishermen that helped the communist army to cross Yangtze in the night of the 21st April 1949.	For Mao, people of the river and people of the land are Chinese all the same	(44)
Le Ba Phien	Young boy from South Vietnam that passes over the border to go to school. His mother looks for him, frightened by what is said about communist Vietnam. She finds him in good health and with some weight put on. She returns to the south to take all her family to the north.	In communist Vietnam children have the right to study	“His intelligent eyes were observing for his dark face” (124)
Van so	Poet. Teacher at a school in the jungle during the war. Inventor of the “market system”: the illiterate go to school for 2 hours	Engaged intellectual. Fight against illiteracy.	“An already old man, serious, thin face, almost without strength, his hair like milk” (104)

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	before going to the city market.		
Fam Van Vy	A miner in the mines of Cam Pha. Has worked under the French and Japanese. Inhuman working conditions. The Japanese killed his daughter for not having completed the daily required load of coal.	Being under a foreign yoke.	“The over-60-year-old Fam Vy is surprised, his face consumed by the coal dust lights up” (101)
Thai Thi Lien	Pianist, graduated in Prague, returned to Vietnam.	Engaged intellectual and artist. Relationship with Czechoslovakia	“Woman with a beautiful face, almond eyes and straight hair” (7)
Sy Ngok	Teaches children music. Teacher at the Art academy. Was a soldier during the war.	Whole population took part (participated) in liberation of Vietnam, even artists	“painter” (68)
Nguyen Tuan	Writer, his son studies in Budapest. Wife educated in the old system, she doesn't take part in her husband's life.	The weight of cultural tradition on the relationship between Man and Woman. Relationship with friendly nations	“writer” (73)
Tien Loy	The director of the first Vietnamese film, a documentary on the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Got his specialization in Czechoslovakia.	Consciousness of the importance of art and of history. Relationship with Czechoslovakia	“A young man not very tall with a long face and very prominent cheek bones [...] sparkling eyes” (76)

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Nguyen Sinh Son	Uncle of Nguyen Sin Cong (Ho Chi Min) that lived with him for 5 years. He was different to the other children, he liked to think; he defended the weak; he had access to books thanks to the work of his father.	“Uncle” Ho Chi Min liberator, cultured and right. His names: Than (winner), Quok (lover of his country) Ho Chi Min (wise)	“Crinkled face, sparse beard and, instead of a moustache, two long hairs” (119)
Gion	Partner of the translator during the war, whose life he saved.	You can see real friendship in difficult moments	“Dark boy with high cheek bones” (86)

***Ďaleko je Whampoa* (Mňačko; 1958)**

Character	Who is he? What does he report?	What does he represent	Physical Description and Characteristics (page)
Zhen Tzu-huan	Commissar in the fight against opium. Describes the process of destructing the cultivation and use of opium.	Legacy of British interests. War against opium = social priority	“he appeared severe, had an expressive face, heavily marked” (142)
U kai	Fisherman. Orphan. Head of the Yangze fishermen’s brigade. If he doesn’t arrive at the required quota, the state pays the difference.	No one dies of hunger. The state guarantees to everyone a minimum standard of food	“22-years-old Fisherman” (159)
Wang	Returned to China after living in Lima where he was a co-owner of a chain of hotels.	He has faith in the New China	(190)

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Woman	Second wife of a factory owner. She works in the industry to enable her son to study. According to the new law she is free, but she cannot make use of freedom ... Her son has improved perspectives	Old masculist legacy: the older women cannot get used to the freedom	“Delicate face, deep set melancholic eyes, a very delicate mouth” (184)
Hygienist Chen	Battle against dirtiness. Flies and rats carry diseases.	The government educates the people about hygiene	(137)
Old man	Care taker of a former temple where Mao stayed. To be a communist is difficult, but it is an honour.	Integrity of the communists	“An old Chinese” (228)

Looking at these tables we can see that every person belongs to a social class and each one faces a different problem. These characters are metonymies of the social and/or working category that they belong to. The dialogues are written into direct speech in order to underline the “truth” of the narration: these characters become theatre masks for the show “the new socialist world.”

Among the characters of the “show” a fundamental role is played by Mao Zedong and by Ho Chi Min. The characters of which the dialogues are reported, and that confess their acquaintance with their leader, here they have the role to testify their nature of wise and good men, according to mechanisms that are similar to that of canonization: both Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Min as young boys were different from their pairs because of their sense of right, lack of prejudices and their attention to the suffering of their people. Like the description of the country, the dialogues are also often structured on the opposition before / after.

In the fourth column are the reported words that the authors have used to introduce the characters with whom they spoke to, and whose

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interview they decided to report in direct speech. If present, there is also their reported physical description. We see how the authors often define the characters by their profession or political beliefs. It is striking the fact that the physical description of these people is sketchy and at times absent. Often we find the description of their gaze (the young boy that met Moric has intelligent eyes) and hair and eye colour. The authors rarely indicate the skin colour, the texture of the hair (the absence of curly hair) and the form of the eyes.

The choice to censor as many physical particularities of the people is so that the reader does not perceive any difference between himself/herself and the character of whom is read about. The physical element, that is an element of difference, becomes almost completely left out: the physical description refers only to the colour of the eyes and hair. Moric, for example, creates a very detailed description of only two characters: the fisherman Kim (Moric 1958: 96) and a woman that belongs to the ethnic minority group Man (Moric 1958: 130). About the fisherman he writes that he doesn't belong to the Vietnamese "norm", while the woman is described as the "incarnation" of a generic "far Orient".

The physical characteristics, says Zavacká, are utilized by the propaganda to build a common image, mainly of the "enemy". In the case of China, she notes, "the faces of Taiwanese emigrants resembled the "yellow peril", while the continental Chinese are mild, good looking, and tall. Enemies such as Syngman Rhee, Vietnamese allies of the West, or Japanese Prime Minister Kishi suffered from physical deformation" (Zavacká 2005a: 77).

An ulterior element used to reinforce the representation of this common identity is given by the continuous references to the presence of Czechoslovak workers and machines, in both China and Vietnam. Such a closeness is not simply a form of help for these countries that have just come out of years of war, and therefore needy for an external backing, but the expression of a brotherly relationship based on the common socialist identity. A prime example is the case of Vietnam, where Czechoslovakia and socialist Europe in general are constantly present in the narration (see Map 2), with relationships from cultural exchanges to the praise of the Jawa motorcycle (Moric 1958: 111).



Map 2: Relations between Vietnam and socialist Czechoslovakia.

3. Direct experiences

All that we have said up until now, shows us that the Orient from the analysed texts can be defined as “legendary”, but not exotic. The two areas studied until now, that of the presentation of the country and of the encounters with the characters are linked to the documentaristic nature of the reports; the area that we are going to study in the third part of the analysis that I made is different from the previous ones because of the inclusion of the authors in first person and of a sense that is difficult to control with a command: taste.

Chinese cuisine is enormously diverse and varied (Ferko 1959: 86).

Firstly, nowhere else people are able to prepare a delicate meal from so many, at the first glance, inedible ingredients. They eat all in China,

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from chrysanthemum flowers to sepias and snakes. Secondly, in China it is not only about stuffing yourself; the important thing is to enjoy food, or as we say, to lick one's fingers after a meal. Therefore in this country more than anywhere else, various ingredients, sauces, and spices play significant role (Moric 1958: 38).

Snails look like mushrooms in vinegar. They cook, bake, and fry mushrooms of various kinds, they pour stuff over them, they add various spices, or eat them raw. There is a strange sauce with every meal. It can be liquid, semi-liquid, or it can be a sort of raw (Mňačko 1958: 239).

The description of the Vietnamese food is the description of a fairy tale world, rich with fruits never seen before (Moric 1958: 62).

Moving away from that which we called an objective area to a subjective one, we can't find any more the analogy between the culture of the writer and that of the country described. The passage to a subjective dimension open to the findings of difference: the experience of taste is the only space that permits us to see the confrontation of the author with the diversity. The reaction to the flavors of the Chinese cuisine are different from author to author:

One of the finest delicacies in the Chinese cuisine is shark but we could not get it into our mouths. Pieces of shark looked like maid's hair, and were similar to nylon strings. They could not flatter our taste buds. Almost every person from Europe only eats them twice: the first and the last one (Ferko 1959: 86-87).

Especially those sea monsters were not suitable for our European stomach. (...) We did not dare to try only the 'most Chinese' meals which some travelers mention with awe, and some with hesitation. Sengena nests, shark, sepia, or snake meat – we never put these into our mouth (Moric 1958: 39).

Oh, the roll fell apart as a result of awkward maneuvering with the chopsticks, and goodie inside was – a cricket. A cricket, still with hair and legs, a big black cricket. This is where one faces his own limits. This is where one has to decide whether he is or is not able to eat Chinese food... Ten people sit at the table, and they all got silent. They all

feel it. And I am pondering moral dilemmas. It is the right moment to ask myself: 'Did you enjoy the first roll? Yes, you did. It was delicious. So why not picking a cricket with chopsticks if you enjoyed the first roll?! (Mňačko 1958: 242).

The subjectivity finds an expression in the moment in which the author goes from those highly idealogised and idealogisable areas to those considered as "less important". At the same time Mňačko, the only author to eat habitually with the citizens of the location, is aware of the anthropological significance of his action. As Rath wrote, "to eat the same meal links the single to the others that incorporate the same food and therefore recognise an idealized common substance. (...) The other that shares his bread becomes a comrade, kummel, copain (from the latin 'panis' – bread)" (Rath 2007: 244).

It is worth observing how reported pieces here belong to three books only. Mináč, author of *V krajine kde vychodí slnko*, never abandons the "royal road": in the text we never find any reference to personal experiences, to impressions or to anecdotes that place at a distance the narration of the People's Republic of China. For Moric the experience of food in Vietnam, more than focusing on the author's taste, is based on the discovery of diversity.

In the description of food we find that the Orient is a "fantastic" place, rich with strangeness, of things never seen before, a reality that can be the complete opposite to the authors' own. These small spaces of "direct" experiences allow us to see the meeting between the authors and the differences, the diversity from ones own culture without propaganda filters. In the texts analysed we meet this type of experience essentially and only with food: from the theatre to the clothes, the modality of approach is calibrated on how much and how you could or should speak of a friendly nation. The motive of this "freedom" is easily traced back to the fulfilment of a process of homologation supported by the propaganda that was mainly based on the external element: the attention was focused on those systems of signs that firstly represented the social differentiation and the relationship between the single and the community (not by chance the Chinese cultural revolution imposed uniformity in clothing). Food is perceived as an instrument of differen-

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tiation in regards to the possibility to have it (let's think back to the reports of the tea cultivator, who did not have any tea for himself), but not in regards to the taste, that was clearly perceived therefore as a totally personal expression.

In reality the studies in alimentary anthropology have instead revealed that even the taste is an expression of the cultural system. The flavour, as observed by Montanari, "is a sensory evaluation of what is good and bad, what someone likes and dislikes: and this evaluation, as we have stated, comes from the brain before that of the tongue. From this point of view flavour is not at all a subjective and incommunicable reality, but rather a communal and communicated one" (Montanari 2004: 74). Rath writes: "the sensation of like and dislike linked to the taste of the single person has always a certain strained relationship with the cultural canon of the good taste" (Rath 2007: 246). The quoted pieces reveal a difficulty by the authors not so much for the flavours and consistence of the Chinese cuisine, rather for the ingredients themselves: nests, snakes and crickets. A proof in that sense is the fact that Mňačko must complete a "mortal leap" in order to eat the cricket: eating the cricket signifies the forcing of the system of taste and of the nutrition that regulates what is "food" and what is'n (Rath 2007: 244).

Conclusion

The present analysis is only the first incomplete step of a work of investigations about the myths of communism and of the mechanisms through which those were channeled. One of those mechanisms is the travel prose that allows to "tell" the world determined necessities and through proceedings established by these necessities. The "truth" of the travel reports allows the reader to forget that, as the scholar Bassnett wrote, "to map out, travel and translate are not transparent activities. They are predetermined in a precise way, with specific origins, perspectives and ends" (Bassnett 1996: 171). The comparison between the objective and the subjective area has made it evident how certain areas are ideologized more than others: the seen and the felt. Affergan observes: the transcription of what was seen in the travel reports is the re-

sult of a voluntary choice to see determinate things and to not want to see others (Affergan 1991: 130). The ideology finds a greater space in the dialogues and in the choice of the characters, putting into action a direct speech with the reader.

The investigation made has revealed two peculiar aspects of how China and Vietnam are “narrated”: on the one hand a legendizing of Mao’s China, on the other the construction of a common socialist identity based on analogy. The analysis of this encounter with food has revealed how the “new man of communism”, Czechoslovakian as well as Chinese, maintains its own in depth cultural legacy, including the refusal of food that in his cultural system is not considered as such. Moreover, the analysis of the experience of taste has allowed the observation of how some areas of every day life were not perceived by the propaganda as “fundamental” for the building of opinions with which the “masses” had to “know” the world.

The four texts have the typical structure of the travel reports in the Orient. They eliminate those elements that were contra posed with the myth of communism, such as the romanticism of nature, the splendour of the empire, the mysticism of its culture. Mináč repeats constantly the words “today” and “future”. China and Vietnam are not less “magic” in these texts, those which change are the agents that make them so: before the Oriental exotic, now the strength of communism.

Nucera observes how the travel prose has a double function regarding the concept of diversity: “it is remarkable that the diversity concept functions in two directions and is useful to define at the same time, attributing distinct polarity, both the others as well as us. We see ourselves and we see more clearly how our borders (that are the limits beyond which the object stops to be what it is to become something else) are then discussed. Different is, as a definition, that which you find beyond the frontiers that define the identity” (Nucera 2002: 133). As we have observed analysing the characters, these texts want to describe the closeness between socialist countries, defining the borders of the new socialist world. China and Vietnam allow the construction of this identity also thanks to the fact that they can offer a tale essentially organized around the opposition communism-capitalism: it is sufficient to think of the episode reported by Moric about the young boy that crosses

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the border of North Vietnam in order to study or that of the general that finds the “lies” of the Taiwanese propaganda.

The analysis has revealed two contrasting elements: from one side the effort to create a common identity based on analogy, on the other a mechanism of legendizing, especially China, that somehow ignores the previously mentioned attempt to closeness. Indeed, if we widen the horizon, we can see how these two aspects put themselves in a mechanism of creating a “superior” myth, complex and composite: the legend of the construction of Communism.

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S u m m a r y

The objective of the contribution is to analyse the relationship between the myths constructed by the socialist propaganda and the myths linked to the Orient in the Slovak culture, focusing on the travel prose published at the end of the 1950's to socialist countries. This article is in fact a first step of exploration and analysis of the relationship between categories of ‘myths’ as indicated above and on a limited number of texts. They were usually brief visits during which the travellers did not have the possibility to get to know countries according to their interests, but instead had to follow organised routes for delegations of foreigners. Other than the organization of trips, the state organs also provided financial coverage, utilising the written texts for propaganda purposes. The travel reports have, for the conditions in which they were born, a “propagandistic matrix”: these texts want to describe the closeness between socialist countries, defining the borders of the new socialist world. China and Vietnam allow the construction of this identity also thanks to the fact that they can offer a tale essentially organized around the opposition communism-capitalism. The analytical work is shown as the mapping of four texts based on three elements: the presentation of the visited countries; the people interviewed; the direct experiences, in our case the cuisine.

