Interview with professor Jan Rowinski, conducted on the 19th of March 2012 by Marcin Jacoby

MJ:
Professor, the first question is about how it all started. First of all, where did your interest in China come from and how did it develop at the beginning? Some books maybe, or maybe by accident? In case of many people, their career was not planned.

JR: It was one big coincidence. I was interested in China only in so far as that first period in the 1950s is concerned. As I remember, my very first experience connected with China was a big map in 1949, which suddenly appeared on Unia Lubelska Square in Warsaw, and depicted the offensive of the People's Liberation Army and how it all changed. A crowd was gathering in front of the map. There used to be an international newsagent there, now there is the Prószyński bookstore. This is what placed China [in the world for me]. The second thing, one year later, was also this kind of a map, at the same place, but this time it was about the Korean War. So this impression [when you saw] how it was all changing, until only Busan was left [outside control of the Communists].

MJ: Yes, it was the last spot at the very South of the Peninsula which was still holding out against the Communist forces.

JR: And then everything disappeared, probably in September. Overnight, without any explanation. An ordinary passer-by would not know why (unless he or she listened secretly to the forbidden Western radio stations, such as the BBC or Voice of America). A “liberation of Busan” could not explain this change, and so the conclusions were easily understood: if the war was still going on, that would mark the beginning of a catastrophe [for the Communists]. Only later did we learn that American troops landed at Incheon and everything was going in the opposite direction – to the North, and to the Chinese border, where the “liberated lands” were liberated again.

MJ: And did you take any interest in China at school?

JR: After the primary school and high school the subject of my interest was first of all the Soviet Union. I was reading a lot about that. After the 10th grade at high school and before
my graduation exam I went to Płock. It was in 1953. There are two historical high schools in
this town, boasting a 100-year tradition: the Jagiełło High School, and the Malachowski High
School. I was at the Jagiełło High. But I came there right before the final exams. And this is
where I first met the Chinese. They came to visit Płock, and our school. It was a group of
first Chinese students who were studying in Poland, and they visited to have a look at this
historic town. They were very nice people, and I'm in touch with many of them even until
now.

MJ: So that was the first exchange group?

JR: The first group came in 1951 or in 50. Most of them studied at the University of Warsaw,
mostly at the Department of Polish Philology, others at the Warsaw School of Foreign
Service [WSFS].

MJ: We haven’t heard about that school, what was it?

JR: It was the school that trained cadres for the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

MJ: It was under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?

JR: Practically yes, but formally, it was under the Ministry of Higher Education. Famous
Polish diplomats, such as prof. Daniel A. Rotfeld, Longin Pastusiak, Stanisław Parzymies,
Janusz Symonides or Jerzy Nowak, all studied there. The Chinese students who were
somehow connected to this school and were studying there, later became ambassadors,
counselors. Every time I’m in China, I try to visit them.

MJ: How did you communicate with the guests at the school in Płock? In Russian or in Polish?

JR: They were speaking Polish or Russian. They had been in Poland for two or three years by
then, and besides, those scholarship students had been picked from the most talented youths
to study abroad. Just for example, people that were in that group later became leading
translators from Polish language, who introduced a great part of Polish literature to China,
including the oeuvre of Polish Nobel Prize winners, such as Władysław Reymont, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska.

MJ: Do you remember who was in that group?

JR: Yes, but I’m sure I cannot recall all of them. There was, for example, Wang Yan, in Polish we called him Jaś (Johnny). He spoke excellent Polish. When you were in another room you couldn't tell he wasn't Polish. I remember that in that group there were probably also the later higher ranking Chinese diplomats, ambassadors and counselors, secretaries such as Liu Yanshun, Luo Yisu, Pei Yuaning, Li Haidi, Li Tieying, Tan Pingar, Gao Peiyu and many later distinguished translators, professors of universities in Beijing, and back then just students or interns of the University of Warsaw. Among them were later distinguished translators and scholars who were awarded Crosses of Merit for Polish Culture by Polish Presidents, for example prof. Cheng Jizhong, prof. Yi Lijun, prof. Lin Hongliang, prof. Zhang Zhenhui, Yuan Hongrong, and others.

MJ: And how did you end up going to China to study?

JR: It so happened that in my class at the Jagielllo High School there were only 18 people. Very talented people. Six of us took the national exam for studies abroad and all six got formally qualified to be sent abroad.

MJ: What was the procedure?

JR: The procedure was that we submitted our candidatures, the school wrote recommendation letters and it was all sent to the Ministry of Higher Education.

MJ: Similarly to government scholarships nowadays?

JR: And later they announced exam time. It must have been a regional or even a national exam because the hall was full. We took written and later an oral exam, a kind of interview with specific questions. We took the exam in Warsaw. And later we were waiting for the results. All of my friends, five of them, got notices. At that time the main direction was the
Soviet Union, East Germany (DDR), Romania, Czechoslovakia. Nobody said anything about China.

MJ: But it was an exam to go to one particular country or just one general exam?

JR: A general one. You could declare where you wanted to go. I wrote USSR, because I was interested in it. You could choose different faculties basing on your specific interests: medicine, humanities, etc.

MJ: So it wasn't an exam for foreign service?

JR: No. They decided where to send you basing on people's abilities, but I imagine they would additionally filter candidates... [according to political criteria]. Although it was 1954, in those times... [political criteria were not that strict]. So my friends got the notice, I didn't. I wanted to go to WSFS, I was very specific about what I wanted and what I was interested in.

MJ: The Foreign Service School you mentioned before?

JR: Yes, I mean foreign service. If sent to Moscow, I wanted to go to the Moscow State Institute of International Relations.

When everybody passed and I didn't, I wrote to them that I hadn't got any information [about my exam] and I have to apply for University and I have to get my papers back. And imagine that after 3 or 4 days I received a telegram from Warsaw. Not a mail, but a telegram saying that I have to come to the Ministry of Higher Education right away. So I arrived at the Ministry. There was a very nice director, his name was F. Sznajder. He said: “We lost your papers, but as you contacted us, we found them, and we found out that you were one of the best, we feel very sorry for this [situation]. Unfortunately [study in the] USSR is no longer available. Everything is settled. You will be sent to China, and you have 2 hours to decide if you want to go.” I asked him: “China? Is there a faculty of foreign service there? This is what I'm interested in and if there isn't, I'm not going.” He answered: “Yes, there is one. For the first time the Chinese are accepting students there, because they are opening an Institute of Diplomacy. This is a school of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But you have only 2
hours. Please contact you family...” I replied: “That will not be necessary. I’m responsible for my own decisions, and I'm going.” And this is how my adventure with China began.

MJ: At one point later on you had to choose China, in your professional career, over the USSR.

JR: It wasn’t any of my [conscious] decision.

MJ: And can you recall what people thought about China at that time, was it an exotic destination?

JR: It was something fascinating, adventurous. The paths of my life were very complicated and life was very hard until that time. It was an adventure for a young man who was fully responsible for himself. [I thought that] as long as there was the faculty [of my choice] in Beijing, it would be fascinating to go. Of course I didn't know the language, [it was like] someone jumping into a swimming pool without checking if there was any water.

And later everything took its course. Some health check ups, vaccinations, there weren't many of these, though. They organized a meeting with all the students, a three-week preparatory course. But it wasn't focused on China at all. And at the end of August I flew there.

MJ: Was the course for everyone who was to study abroad?

JR: For everyone. There were three or four people who were going to China with me, because student exchange was a part of inter-governmental agreements on co-operation in education, science and culture starting from 1951. Every year there were four or five students or graduates (called “aspirants”, basing on the Soviet model) from Poland going there.

MJ: Every year?

JR: Every year. The first group starting from 1951, and the following group a year later. In China, the students would go to the People's University (Renmin Daxue) with faculties such as: politology, international relations, administration and law. This is where the first group ended up, including Roman Slawiński (the later professor of the University of Warsaw and
At the Beijing University (Beida), there were Chinese and foreign philology, history, philosophy, law, geography, etc. This is where the following Polish students from the first groups ended up: dr Genowefa Zduń (the later lecturer at the Sinology Department in Warsaw), Jadwiga Solarz (who married a same-year colleague at the university in China, a Hungarian student, and later a distinguished professor of economics and a diplomat – Talas Barna), Teresa Kowalska, Łucja Sobecka (the later curator of Chinese collection at the National Museum in Warsaw), also Zdzisław Kucharski (the later diplomatic and consular employee, and sworn translator), and the married couple Gusta and Stanisława Kuczera (aspirant). Later, in 1956 or 1957, other “aspirants” joined them at that University – the geographers: Joachim Koczy, Bohdan Kikolski, also Teresa Ostrowska, who later worked at the Planning Committee. From those early students, some also went to the Fine Arts Academy and the newly created Applied Arts Institute: Tosia Podsiadłowska (who married her Bulgar colleague), Jan Sierek, Radosław Desput, Stanisław Dura, and Stanisław Tworzydło. At the Foreign Trade Institute there were, for example, Edward Rutkowski (who died in a plane crash in Siberia), Tadeusz Kowalski (the later department director at the Ministry of Foreign Trade and long-serving trade counselor of the Polish Embassy in Beijing), Zdzisław Góralscyk (the later Polish ambassador in China). At the University of Hangzhou there were two students of sericulture, Mirosław Kowalczyk and Józef Berent, who later pursued a career in the Army, getting their second diplomas from the prestigious Military University of Technology in Warsaw. They consequently served as military attaches, also in P.R.C. In the second half of 1950s, there were also several students and graduates of the University of Warsaw Sinology Department who came to China, mostly to Beijing, for one-year language perfection internships. Among them was one of the most distinguished Polish sinologists, prof. Mieczysław Künstler, also dr Tadeusz Żbikowski, a well-known translator and expert on Chinese literature. There was also Ms Marzena Szlenk, who translated Shijing, and Agnieszka Łobacz, the later Counselor-Minister and Charge d’Affaires at our Embassies in Jakarta and Beijing, as well as Consul-General in Hong Kong. Also Stanisław Pawelczyk – Polish Consul-General in Shanghai.

Our five-person group left for China in August 1954. So this was how I met all the people that were going with me: Marysia Kalisz (who studied Chinese philology at the 1956 r. Beijing University, and later became a Korean philologist studying at the Kim Il Song University in Pyongyang – a lovely person), G. Desput and S. Dura (studying at the Fine Arts Academy. Dura was a distinguished painter and illustrator.
MJ: Can you tell me something about your first flight to China?

JR: We were flying together and by the mere fact of taking the plane it was an adventure. We were flying via Minsk, Moscow. This is where we split. I stayed 2 days in Moscow, and they flew on, taking the set route: Kazan, Sverdlovsk (today Yekatenburg), Omsk, Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkuck, Ulan Bator, and Beijing, with landings in all these places.

MJ: And how was your visit to Moscow?

JR: That was my first stay at the „Rome of the Communist world of the period”. I wanted to visit all the monuments and museums, and had insatiable interest in everything. Of course, the first place I visited was the Red Square. There was a terribly long queue to the [Lenin] Mausoleum. The guards asked me [in Russian]: “Where are you going?” “I'm a foreigner” [I answered]. “Show me your passport, I will put you in line”. And this is how I saw them both [Lenin and Stalin] lying next to each other.

MJ: But wasn’t Stalin still alive then?

JR: No, he died in March 1953.

MJ: So it was a fresh thing?

JR: Absolutely fresh. All made up, maybe not as much as Mao later on. They had been late, so they had to apply all those balms and makeup. Lying next to each other, hands on the quilt...

I continued the journey two days later, and arrived in Ulan Bator. When we looked down on the airport [from the plane], we could see a huge sheep herd right there. We landed, and one very nice Mongolian girl came aboard, Manaljab (Manaljav), and she said to me that her family came to see her off and that was why the herd was there. I later heard that she held some ministerial posts. We took off and, imagine, we caught a storm. We were flying in a small plane called P2, and it was quite a rock. Not to mention the consequences...

MJ: Did the Mongolian girl turn out to be tough?
JR: Because the plane was small and there weren’t many of us, we took places apart from one another...
So we had to land because of that sand storm, and a completely drunk Russian technician said: “So kids, we go for a 2-day hunting”. But the storm passed very quickly and we took off to Beijing within an hour. The Beijing Airport had no solid landing strip, just hardened ground...

MJ: But was it at the same place as now?

JR: No! Totally different place, almost in the city center. I think it was on the 28th of August 1954 and it was my first meeting with China.

MJ: So you went to China all by yourself, not knowing a person there?

JR: Not by myself, accompanied by a lady. Later on we were in one study group at the Beijing University: two Polish artists-to-be, Marysia Kalisz, me, and three Germans from East Germany (DDR). Oh, and there was also one Slovak guy from Czechoslovakia at that time. Later, another Pole joined, although he was in another group. It was Leon Gladecki, an exceptionally gifted person linguistically. He chose Chinese language and literature as his fields of study.

MJ: What about Ms Teresa Kowalska?

JR: She was in a different group. She arrived in China one year before us, and at the beginning she planned to study language and literature. Later, however, she changed the profile of her studies, she also went to the Institute of Diplomacy.

We lived all together (only foreigners) at the Beida campus, and were taking the Foreign Students’ Specialized Course (Waiguo liuxuesheng zhuanxiuban).

MJ: You went to Beijing University first, to learn the language?
JR: Modern Chinese language only. We all had no previous knowledge of Chinese. We had a wonderful teacher who couldn't speak any other languages, so we had no choice but to communicate in Chinese, it was a kind of advantage.

MJ: Which textbook did you learn from. Did you have any textbooks at all?

JR: We did. I think I still have it. You know this book, apart from the language basics, was filled with very simple and powerful propaganda of the first years of the PRC. It’s hard to imagine how different from that are the Chinese language course books published today in China. The textbook was like that, but the teacher was great and everything was as it should be. But you know already about the beginnings of learning this language.

MJ: What was the methodology? Did you get to read political texts, it's a very difficult language...

JR: In the beginning we didn't know any characters. Nobody had anything to do with [Chinese] before. Do you remember how it was when you started studying at the Chinese Studies Department?

MJ: Yes, learning characters was like drawing pictures.

JR: Yes, exactly.

MJ: But we were learning using simple words, such as: “enter”, “thank you”.

JR: We had those too. At first we had characters, then romanisation and then characters... We were in-between. At that time Ms Zhang had already received an instruction to think about using Latin alphabet to write: bo, po, mo, fo and pinyin.

MJ: Bopomofo had been in use since the 1930s

JR: Yes, that was first, and later [pinyin]. We learned traditional characters, later we had to learn simplified. We cursed that. But later it was very useful.
MJ: And did you learn *bopomofo*?

JR: Yes, at the beginning. It was the only phonetic form of writing. Later the *pinyin* appeared. Those who wanted to study philosophy, history, literature and, I think, medicine had 2 years of Chinese. We had one. The Germans were the best of course. They were very hard working, accurate. They were also very closely watched, not only by their fellow countrymen, and were heavily indoctrinated. In my group there was the prominent professor of University of Leipzig and Humboldt University in Berlin – Roland Feldber. He studied history of China. Generally, we were a good team.

MJ: And how many classes did you have every day? Would you study for a whole day, or just several hours?

JR: It was more intensive, but I can’t recall exactly now. During one year we were supposed to learn material that would theoretically allow us to start our studies. So the speed of teaching as well as expectations from us were very high. Every year we were given grades, every six months they were sending our evaluations to the embassy: how we were studying and if we expressed any anti-socialist opinions.

MJ: What did it look like from the political perspective? Had you received any instructions when still in Poland?

JR: We were given some basic instructions, nothing other or more detailed. Of course there was a party organization and a student organization of that Polish group, which would gather at the embassy, and we were attending the meetings. We were under the control of the embassy, but it wasn’t too strict, and there was no strong political indoctrination from the side of the Polish embassy.

MJ: Did you have to become a member of some organization like the Union of Polish Youth?

JR: Almost everyone was a member of UPY, which was dissolved in 56 and then, naturally, the Student Union. There were some, who were already members of the party.

MJ: Students?
JR: Yes, students, but you had to be over 18 to become a member.

MJ: What were you relations and contacts with the Polish Embassy in Beijing like?

JR: In general they were good. We used to be invited to main anniversary events, meetings with Polish ex-pats, and with the official delegations that would visit China. Among them were top level delegations with Polish leaders such as B. Bierut, J. Cyrankiewicz, M. Spychalski, A. Zawadzki, or E. Gierek. There were also visits by ministers, distinguished researchers, writers, artists, culture and art animators. That was a period of the flourish of our relations with China. Later, several of us got regularly invited to interpret during official talks, both in Beijing and outside the city. We would interpret for delegations from Poland, but also for the embassy employees in their journeys around China. I was one of the “chosen few”, thanks to which I could meet and get to know a number of leading Chinese politicians, and see a lot of China, which I would never afford from my modest scholarship. It confirmed the old Chinese saying that “one hundred things heard do not match one time you see something for yourself” (百闻不如一见). Besides, such interpreting is a great way to learn the language better.

MJ: What was the atmosphere in China like at the time when you got to Beijing?

JR: Are we getting back to the years 1954–56? We arrived in China nearly right at the celebrations of the 5th anniversary of the establishment of the P.R.C., the “new ancient State” (Xinhua). That was a special moment and the atmosphere was filled with celebration. For the first time after Stalin's death all the “creme de la creme” of the governing elites of the “camp of peace and socialism, led by the Soviet Union” came to Beijing: Nikita Khrushchev, Boleslaw Bierut, Wilhelm Pieck, Kim Il-song, Ho Chi Minh, Matyas Rakosi, Klimen Gottwald, Geoghiu Georgiu-Dej, Enwer Hodza etc. All the VIPs were standing in the grandstand on the 1st of October, in front of the Gate of Heavenly Peace (called so since 1651) leading to the Winter Palace.

MJ: Was the Tian’anmen Square enlarged at that time already?
JR: The square was clean, with a beautiful view through those city walls and the Front Gate (Qianmen), which was closing the view of the square. Today, the view is partly obstructed by Mao Zedong’s Mausoleum. At that time, the overpowering buildings of the Revolution and History Museum, and the National People’s Congress have not been built yet. They were built in 1959 in the spirit of socialist realism, and unfortunately (although it’s a matter of personal taste) they did not show much in common with traditional Chinese architecture. Similarly to the Palace of Culture and Science in the centre of Warsaw.

MJ: Could you participate in the festivities on the Square?

JR: Foreign guests weren't that many, so since we came as well, we were treated as foreign guests. We were seated in the grandstand, and accordingly to the Chinese hierarchy, we were at the bottom.

MJ: The most important at the top?

JR: Always at the top, accordingly to your rank. No revolution and no system changed that. It was like this before, now, and it will be like that in the future. We were only foreign students, but the hosts also prepared a nice surprise for us. After the festivities they organized a short meeting with our Chinese peers (also 18–19 year olds) Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama. Both made their mark in history.

MJ: Apart from the Eastern Bloc were there any students from the “rotten imperialist” countries?

JR: There was nobody from there. There were, as far as I can remember, 16 American soldiers who, after the Korean War, “chose freedom” and asylum in China.

MJ: Oh, that's interesting. Not in Korea but in China...

JR: Oh yes, in China. I met them at the Beijing University. They were learning Chinese. There were also Afro-Americans among them, and they were the first to tell us about the Korean War, what it looked like. Who else was there? Mostly students from the Eastern Bloc: Hungarians, Czechs and Slovaks, Bulgarians, Romanians, Albanians, and I’m sure there were
some North Koreans and some Vietnamese. In mid-50s there appeared at Beida a group of several students from India. I remember one Indian student named Vidia Dutt. He later became a well-known professor and Chinese expert in New Delhi, I met him after many years in Beijing and Warsaw. There were some Indonesians, but we would not mingle with them. So as you can see: the international campus was divided into races or continents. Imagine that in 2010, on the occasion of celebrating the 60th anniversary of the student exchange, I could meet many of them in China again. The Chinese hosts selected representatives from these groups to take part in the celebrations. According to official information provided by the Xinhua Agency, during these 60 years more than a million people made their way through Chinese Universities.

MJ: Can we go back to the Americans from Korea please? What was the Chinese attitude towards those Afro-Americans? They must have created quite a sensation?

JR: Well, they were the ones who chose [to stay in China], so this was appropriately publicized.

MJ: But they chose to stay because they were terrified by the brutality of this war and were traumatized?

JR: This is another issue. I think, as I look back to what they said, at first they were saying what they were expected to, and later their conversations became less controlled... I think that there were many reasons for their decisions: the attitude of white officers, problems they had in their country, maybe some of them were also communists, it is also possible that during that counteroffensive they were surrounded, pushed back and became an object of a bargain... Remember that 18,000 Chinese soldiers were taken prisoner [by the Americans], and these 18,000 soldiers refused to go back to China. Mao said: “Send them back or we will fight with you for them”. But later he decided that in the end 18,000 wasn't that high a figure. Most of them went to Taiwan, some of them to the US....

MJ: And what became of these 16 Americans who got asylum in the P.R.C.?

JR: As far as I know, some of them married Chinese girls, had families, but nearly all of them sooner or later left China, and did so with mixed feelings, if I can put it this way.
MJ: You mentioned a meeting in 2010, after many years, was it to celebrate anniversary of the beginning of student exchange between China and other countries?

JR: As I mentioned above, I met only some of those students again in 2010. The Chinese hosts have chosen 50 persons from among us, and 7 of them could not come. Officially, the Chinese talked about representatives from across the 60 years of student exchanges, but I got the impression that the so-called “veterans” were preferred. There were 5 of us invited from Poland, so this made quite a substantial representation.

MJ: Who was that?

JR: Zdzisław Góralczyk, Ksawery Burski and myself, and later there was a reunion of first students of Qinghua University from 1951, for which Roman Sławiński and Bogdan Dąbrowski from Poland were invited, as both started their Chinese language course at Qinghua. The Chinese hosts explained that the dates of these two events didn’t match, because President Hu Jintao couldn’t be present during the first event, but he insisted on his presence during the Qinghua anniversary, as it was his alma mater as well. His participation in that event really had a feeling of a „reunion after many years”, and it was a nice and sage gesture from his side to be present.

MJ: Let's go back to your student life, did you have any contacts with Chinese students?

JR: Not that many during the language course. We had a separate canteen, different dormitory. But it was more party-like. We didn't study with the Chinese students, there was no such possibility. This international group would stick together. They took care of us of course, they organized trips, we were in Tianjin, during the winter break they took us to Shanghai. There was this dage, older brother, who was taking care of us, and was watching us carefully.

There were also some international political events we took part in. Our Polish student group was even performing. Remember that in 1953 the Polish folk ensemble Mazowsze visited China. And it was an absolute hit, with about 273,000 people watching their shows. And their Kukuleczka became a number one song in China.
MJ: Did you often go outside the university campus and to the city?

JR: Of course. The first thing I bought with my scholarship money was a bike. The distance from Beida gate to the city center was about 18–20 kilometers.

MJ: Was the scholarship high?

JR: Formally it wasn’t that high but we received a bonus from the Polish embassy. So we were millionaires, because everything was counted in million yuans then. Some time later they did the denomination 1:10,000.

MJ: The bills were with Mao?

JR: Yes they were with Mao from the beginning, only the design was changing.

MJ: Were the average Chinese on the streets interested in you, would they approach you to talk to you?

JR: Generally speaking, the atmosphere in this big country after the Great People’s Revolution was very special. Please remember that the home war between Guomindang and the Communists lasted since 1927 (there was a formal truce between 1937–1945), and resistance against the Japanese invasion lasted since the 1930s. The Chinese sources tell us about 41 million people who were somehow affected by the war. To this we need to add famine, poverty, inflation, lawlessness, and huge corruption. It was an extremely tired society. It was a “peasant revolution”, done in the name of the peasants, which spread to the cities. Just like in Poland after the tragedy of war, there was a feeling of something which can be called spontaneous solidarity in the face of grand historical events happening before people’s eyes. But you could also see terrible things, as always in the times of revolution, fundamental political, economic and social change. There were big political campaigns aimed at the so-called class enemies, radical reforms and social changes. All of these were happening in China in the 1950s, for example the land reform, which cost lives of about 5 million people, or the collectivization of farming and crafts, the factual nationalization of companies belonging to the middle classes (the „national bourgeoisie”) or cleansing of intellectuals. The years 1954–1956, if we talk about attitudes towards the intellectuals, were not free from all
this, although generally, the situation was not so radical then. But this was connected with Mao's appeal in 1950 to the Chinese intellectuals: “Return to build New China” (huiguo jianshe xin Zhongguo)

MJ: And what did the streets of Beijing look like? Passages between rows of walls?

JR: Those hutongs, hutongs, hutongs, or mud huts and muddy alleys between them. Only rickshaws, sometimes cars and bikes, bikes, bikes. There were no tall buildings in Beijing. Not even one. Just an ocean of mud huts with distinctive points of old architecture.

MJ: And your one year at Beida...

JR: I liked our teacher, who used to say to me (apparently I must have been a little dumb): “You know, Lo Wen (my Chinese name) you speak bravely.” How delicate the criticism about somebody’s command of the language! And later there were normal contacts, as spontaneous as possible.

MJ: With Chinese girls as well?

JR: With Chinese girls too.

MJ: So it wasn’t forbidden?

JR: Well, the attitude of the authorities was quite a complicated, changing process. At first, any sexual contacts among the students, and especially between the Chinese and foreign students were strictly prohibited. Also such contacts at universities between the Chinese themselves were considered improper and harmful to the great goal of learning, as set by Chairman Mao and the Party. From our Communist block, I think that only Germans would send young, married couples to China, among other nations it was exceptionally rare. Speaking of East Germans, I remember some of them telling me that also in Germany, such contacts even with students from other „brotherly neighbors states“, such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia, were not accepted as „damaging to the reputation of DDR”, and could result in suspension from study in China or even expulsion. The consequences were much worse for Chinese female students. If their love affairs were discovered, they
were expelled from university and sent to remote parts of the country. In was only during the mid-50s, after gaining official acceptance of the central authorities of China (often due to interventions by different Ambassadors), such prohibitions were lifted. But this is a topic for a separate conversation. As far as I can recall, four of my colleagues married Chinese. At first it really was extremely difficult to get permission from the Chinese authorities. First of those would be made at the highest level, that of the P.R.C. Prime Minister. Later, depending on the period and political atmosphere, it was different. I think professor Sławiński and ambassador Góralczyk could tell you more about this, as their marriages with Chinese females opened the way for other such relationships.

MJ: And going back to our main topic...

JR: After finishing that one year at Beida everyone went to his or her specialized university. I went to the Institute of Diplomacy. It was supposed to be ready, but they didn't make it on time.

MJ: So this was the very beginning of this institution? First year?

JR: There wasn’t any similar institution before, at least officially, under such a name. Formally, the Institute of Diplomacy (Waijiao Xueyuan) was formed from the International Relations Department of the People’s University (Renda). The Russians, and more specifically the rector of the MGIMO played a big role in organizing the Institute, preparing the programme of study, etc.

At the very beginning, we didn't have where to have classes, so until the opening [of the new building] we had classes in the old Japanese military barracks near Yiheyuan (Summer Palace). It was autumn, winter, biting cold, only 4 degrees centigrade in the classroom. We had classes together with Chinese students. We were living in dorms in rooms for three students: one foreigner and two Chinese. There was absolutely nothing, just a mud hut which served as our canteen. So we used to go there after the whole day, including sport classes. We taught the Chinese cooks in these small, muddy canteens how to make good scramble eggs, we made quite an effort at that.

At the beginning there were two of us from Poland: Teresa Kowalski and me, and also two Hungarians: Sandor Potoky i Geoerge Ujloky, who later became ambassadors. In the following years, others would join us: Ksawery Burski and Bogusław Zakrzewski (aspirant).
They were very talented, and later served for many years in Polish diplomatic corps. Burski was later ambassador in Indonesia and in China, Zakrzewski in Tailand, Portugal and Brasil. There were also colleagues from DDR, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and Albania. Most of them at some point later would become ambassadors of their countries in Beijing. At first, between 1955 and 1956 there was a 6–8 people group of young diplomats from the USSR, already aspirants, university graduates. All of them later held important posts at the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For example, Genadij Kirejew took part in border negotiations, first as a translator (in 1964), and much later as delegation head. It is his signature which you can see on border agreements between the Russian Federation and the P.R.C. from 1991 and 1994. The only Russian graduate of the Institute was N. Ragulin. In the 1970s he was, among other posts, counselor of the USSR embassy in Warsaw. One of his duties was monitoring Polish-Chinese relations. The later Yugoslavia Minister of Foreign Affairs and ambassador to China, Ilia Djukic, also received graduation certificate of the Institute. In the 1950s, as far as I can remember, there were only students from East and Central European “brotherly nations”. I don’t recall any North Korean or North Vietnamese students. Starting from the first half of 1960s foreign students were no longer admitted to the Institute of Diplomacy.

As to our Chinese colleagues in the first years of the Institute, there were different groups there. There were high school graduates, youths like us, there were students selected from various universities, there were children of old revolutionary activists, but also distinguished Party activists (middle-aged or even older). We called them Yan’anists¹, and they were there to prepare for missions at diplomatic posts abroad. Many were learning the basics, including using knife and fork. At the beginning, it was similar to us, only we were learning how to use the chopsticks...

MJ: Can you tell us a few things about your student life? What did you drink? Beer?

JR: We drank beer as well, but mostly the cheapest baijiu mainly baigan, or erguotou, sometimes other liquors. Alcohol was very cheap...

MJ: Did you use to drink mijiu, fermented but not distilled alcohol?

¹ The name comes from Yan’an – the „Red Capital of China”, where the Party’s Central Committee was operating between 1935–1947.
JR: There was something like that as well. In any case, after drinking you would smell like a distillery.

MJ: How did you get around the city, did you use busses?

JR: At the beginning we would take busses, but later everybody would use bikes, it was my first and most important purchase in China. We used to ride them everywhere.

MJ: How many students were there, more or less? How big was the Institute at the beginning?

JR: I think that at the beginning there were around 200–300 people, but the numbers would change. Also, there was a group which we didn't know, and which was very important, a group for more specific tasks. They were trained at the same place as we were, but separately. We were witnessing first hand this unbelievably interesting process of indoctrination that took place in China. We weren't just some foreigners from the campus. Of course we were gaobizi'er, but theirs, or with them. We also had this advantage that in those old Japanese barracks we could have a brazier, so those two Chinese living with us had additional benefits.

MJ: Oh, for foreigners they had braziers...

JR: Yes. During the night it was so cold that the water in the mug froze.

MJ: What kind of sports did you do?

JR: There were not good conditions for sports there. We would do mostly group gymnastics, and running, which we would practice during set hours, we used to begin a day with that. Later, when we moved to a new building, we did football, volleyball, basketball, light athletics... We participated in championships within the Institute and also among all the universities of Beijing.

MJ: Did you have any military training?

JR: We were not included in this.
MJ: But the Chinese had the training?

JR: The Chinese had something but we didn't.

MJ: So, you spent one year at Beida and four – five years at the Institute?

JR: One year at Beida, and after half a year at the “provisional Institute” they moved us to this newly opened school. In the city, although it was Xizhimenwai, but on Zhan’anguan street. Our rector was Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs – Zhou Enlai himself.

MJ: Did you have any contact with him? Did he appear at school?

JR: No, no, from time to time he would come to school and when he had speeches we were all there. This was absolutely fantastic, when compared to all other universities in China. We participated in all those campaigns. The conditions there were incomparably better. At the beginning there were also some troubles with the radiators, but we were given charcoal. So we were heating in turns. One of my roommates was the grandson of marshal Zhu De. The other one later became ambassador in Hungary. As you look at all this now, [you can see] how extraordinary this all was. Our command of Chinese was very poor, to the degree that when I opened the book The History of Ancient China I could recognize maybe a few single characters on the first two pages. It was hopeless. I remember that during the first lectures I couldn't understand a thing. With my Hungarian friends we were playing battleships (a kind of game on paper). But we were living with Chinese students. One of my two roommates was learning Russian, the other one English. So when I went to Poland [for holidays] I brought a big radio called Sonata with me.

I understood that at such a university they were obliged to regularly report about me. I can’t say what was in these reports, I can only guess. But when you live together it is a bit different. When we met again not that long ago, they said: “We are so grateful for that radio of yours, we could learn the language.” “You were learning not only the language” I answered. They replayed with a laugh. They really were good friends. I have warm feelings for them, and am really deeply grateful for all the help they gave me during my studies. Both of them later became important diplomats at the MoFA, and held managerial posts in various organisations for co-operation with other countries, as part of “people’s diplomacy”.
EP: And how long did you study in this new building?

JR: Till graduation. Five years. I was in the first group of students graduating from this school. But I finished one year earlier, as I already wrote my M.A. dissertation and passed the final exams. One of the conditions was also internship at one of the offices responsible to the Chinese MoFA, but the hosts didn’t give us permission for that. And so I did some internship in the our consulates in Canton, Shanghai and Beijing. On my diploma the year of graduation is 1959, but I left China in the summer of 1960.

MJ: So you were in China for 6 years.

JR: 6 years. After returning to Warsaw I nostrified my diploma at the Main School of Foreign Service.

MJ: So you received the diploma and came back to Poland.

JR: Yes, but in the meantime some other events happened. I remember that later I could understand more and more. I didn't use Polish virtually at all. We spoke only in Chinese. So we were learning very fast. The additional factor was that we did everything together.

I was in the school representation team of volleyball, football, but first of all, light athletics. I was the fastest and I set the new school record. When I came back to China in the 1980s after the ”Cultural Revolution”, I paid a visit to my school. During that tragic decade, it was closed for a number of years, similarly to other universities in China. There was no teaching, the professors and the students alike were sent to work manually in farming communes, the so-called „8th of May schools”. When I came back, I was greeted cordially as a xiaoyou (colleague from school), and informed, which was hard to believe, that the school’s 100m track record which I set remained unbroken until that day. I understood why, when I saw that the running track simply wasn't there anymore - they built some building there...

We took part in everything there, in life, with all the positive and negative consequences. We took part in the Hundred Flowers Campaign (shuangbai) – “let the hundred flowers bloom, let the 100 schools compete” and I remember that atmosphere. I remember what it looked like. We were called to participate in the fandui sihai yundong campaign, which was fighting with sparrows, mosquitoes, flies and rats. But we didn't do it. With our Hungarian friends we
were sunbathing on the school roof and playing table tennis. Why? Those thousands of people shouting and those poor little sparrows, which were flying away from one tree to another and dying out of exhaustion... Those old Russian trucks full of [animal bodies], carrying them away. I understand, mosquitoes, flies, even rats... but sparrows? The Chinese soon discovered, as warned by their own scientists and farmers (who knew it first hand), that the campaign brought massive losses to agriculture. And so they retreated and never came back to the idea again.

MJ: How was it during the Hundred Flowers?

JR: It was indeed a period of liberalization. Something that really could be compared to the Spring and Autumn period, which was consciously evoked in the slogans. I remember, after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) the hall at Renda University, three hundred people there, and the discussions. The students were talking about problems in China. For example, a question: “Shall I read the Khrushchev’s secret report?” And the discussion: “Was it shaving the mistakes of socialism or cutting its head off”? Extraordinary atmosphere. My professor had been lecturing at Cambridge and he came back to China. He taught me a lot of things, or tried to teach me at least. How I should understand China, what I should pay attention to. Basic things. And he taught me some truths. For example, that it was important how you wrote, but what was more important was how you read what was written. Not in the sense of the right tone, but in the sense of the right meaning. The same characters could mean completely different things. When comparing things, he taught us to make sure that the meaning is the same. I'm not talking about [for example] huochetou – train engine, but about words like ziyou, falü, quanli (freedom, law, rights). He used to say: “It seems that you speak about the same things but the meaning is different.” The third thing is, you must remember about the differences in the way of thinking and analysis. So if you don't understand something, ask your Chinese interlocutor about his way of thinking, (siwei). So when you are discussing something and cannot agree, you know that you need to make a step in his direction, until things become absolutely obvious for both of you. You can then feel that if you were in his shoes you would say exactly the same thing as he did. You will at the same time know where is the line which you cannot cross, in order to protect your interests. Understanding doesn't mean agreeing, but it’s crucial to try to find a compromise, or
something that brings you together, remembering at the same time about things that differ you from one another. This can be called a skill of friendly disagreeing.

MJ: How did people like that Cambridge professor found themselves in the reality of the political campaigns? After coming back to China?

JR: The persons I got to know were not only exceptional minds, but also great patriots who loved their country. They would forget that China was not Britain, France or the United States. I remember the discussions, and those statements. They were brave. They were also right in their opinions, but in those conditions and in that system, they had no chance of succeeding in being considered, let alone accepted by the authorities. Soon after, when the political winds changed direction, their ideas were labeled „rightist, bourgeoisie, anti-party”. They were repressed. I told my professor: “Please, don't be so brave, please, don't say such things, just wait. I come from a similar country, we started building socialism earlier than you...” He answered me angrily that I do not understand China. He was right, but not in that case, because here the issue was not the long Chinese tradition of State governance, but universal mechanisms and instruments of the political system that was installed in China in 1949. It ended very sadly. As rightists, they... you know...

MJ: But that was after the Hundred Flowers campaign?

JR:. Mao at the secret meeting of the Politbureau in April said: “It's now time for a hundred whips”. In the meantime, one of the Yan’anites caught hold of me in the corridor. He looked around and whispered: “Lo Wen, be careful. Excessive democracy is over. (Tai duo minzhu wanle). Before long you’ll see heads rolling”. So in June all the horrifying things begun.

MJ: Was the professor criticized by students?

JR: These were large-scale mass meetings devoted to „fighting the rightist elements”. They returned to them at an even larger scale during the Cultural Revolution. It was public, and mass brain-washing. They called it gaizao sixiang (ideology building). Students criticised the professor publicly, but not only them. He was a scapegoat. As a “rightist element” (youpai fenzi) this aging man was sent to the countryside to plant rice, and after half a year or maybe a year he died. It was inevitable, they didn’t have machines then, so they were sitting in water
all the time, working like slaves for 12–14 hours every day. This is what it was like at the laogai (the Chinese gulags – camps of ideology reeducation through labour). The brother of Fu Cong was expelled from our Institute. Formally, in was for a statement he had made. In reality it was for being Fu Cong’s brother. Their father was one of the most outstanding translators of French literature in China. He was practically murdered (he died of exhaustion) during the “Cultural Revolution”, but that was 10 years later.

MJ: But Fu Cong ran away?

JR: That was because later in Poland, when he got an order to immediately return to the country, his professor, Z. Drzewiecki, organized an escape route to England. For over 10 years he was labeled “traitor of the motherland” (zuguo bantu), and only then was he rehabilitated, and cleared of the charges.

MJ: Did he also die, Fu Cong’s brother?

JR: No. I met him not long ago. I knew him as a student, because he was one year lower than me. But he was on the same year as ambassador Ksawery Burski, and they were friends.

MJ: Did you know what was going on in Poland then?

JR: Of course. I had my radio, and besides that, I was at the embassy then.

MJ: As a young man, how did you perceive all this indoctrination and did you identify with this? As a foreigner, a person from a different culture who could see and experience all this, how did you find yourself in China?

JR: My views were leftist and I thought that big things were going on in China. I tried to understand what was happening there, but on a personal level. I was terrified that it can come down to something like this. My visits back in Poland during that time were of crucial

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2 It’s enough to invoke several names of famous intellectuals out of the 500 thousand person group of repressed inhabitants of cities, and over 5 million person group from the countryside. These were writers and poets: Ai Qing (father of the famous artist Ai Weiwei), Ding Ling, Xiao Yuan, Wang Meng, Li Yuan; the critic Feng Xuefang, Chen Jixia; scientists, like the great confucian philosopher Feng Yulan, or the demographer Ma Yinchu, who was rector of the Beijing University (Beida). Years later the Party officially admitted that only in 2 percent of the cases were there any grounds for the charges of “rightist” tendencies.
importance, and taught me a lot. In 1955 we were brought back to Warsaw to translate during the Youth Festival. Normally, there was the rule that after two years we would get free tickets to go back to Poland. Because of the Festival, we had an additional opportunity to go back. We were all hired there at the Festival.

MJ: How long did you stay in Poland for the Festival?

JR: One month. In September the school was starting. We went back by trains because it was cheaper.

MJ: And did you come back to Poland again in 1956?

JR: The trip in 1955 was an additional one. I witnessed the changes in Poland in 1956, but from a Chinese perspective. I think that this short period of the Hundred Flowers, without precedent in China, and the liberalization and the whole atmosphere in Poland during the 1956–56 were basically similar in nature, and gave hope that “socialism with a humane face” could be built. We were brought back to Poland in 1957 when the fight with the “rightists” started. It was a huge step back for China, the atmosphere of terror and fear. Whereas Poland was a completely different world, and atmosphere. We had the music club Stodoła\(^3\), it really was completely different.

I remember several years later, during the first and the most violent phase of the „Cultural Revolution” in mid-1960s, I was working in China and I saw these events with my own eyes. In March 1968, straight out from the „Cultural Revolution” I suddenly found myself back in Warsaw in just one day. It was the 8\(^{th}\) of March, and my wife, who was assistant professor at the Medical Academy at the main campus of the University of Warsaw was just about to come back home. Even though she had the lecturer’s ID, she was not allowed to go outside the University gate. I felt as if I had not left China at all... Here, in Warsaw, we had our own “Cultural Revolution” taking place right then, it was a witch-hunt, only that it had Polish characteristics\(^4\). It seemed as if every country in that political system had to go through

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3 Stodoła was a famous student club which organized concerts and trend-setting events and parties, which were a must for many young Polish of the time. It was a place of freedom and rebellion.

4 In March 1968, caused by pro-democracy protests at the University of Warsaw and other places, as well as political rivalry within the Communist Party, an anti-Semitic campaign begun, leading to more protests. Many prominent Polish citizens of Jewish descent were stigmatized and forced, or persuaded to leave the country. Most emigrated to the newly formed Israel. The campaign is one of the most shameful pages in the history of Communism in Poland.
bigger or smaller “cultural revolutions”, which remains a dark stigma, and a warning recorded in history. So this was the second period when the cycles of events in Poland and China seemed matching.

MJ: Going back to the October events in Poland, or after you returned in 1957, did your Polish friends ask you about China, what was their attitude like?

JR: The interest was big, and the public opinion in general believed that in October 1956 Mao Zedong „saved us” [from the Soviet invasion]. However, very few people knew anything about what was happening in China since the spring of 1957. Most news would be coming through the [illegal] Western radios in Polish and in English, despite the interferences to the signal by the authorities. But the process was rather long.

MJ: Would you say that a sort of gratitude to the Chinese for their decisions during the October events in Poland was common knowledge?

JR: As for the street and students, it was common knowledge. The problem was of course the degree, to which such a stand by Mao and the Chinese leaders was motivated by a wish to weaken USSR’s position in the camp, and broaden Chinese influences on political decision-making in Moscow, so that they give account to Chinese interests and world-power aspirations. Any changes in the unequal relations between the USSR and the satellite countries would increase and strengthen P.R.C.’s position and presence in this part of Europe. In my opinion, for China it was a clever, tactical move. No matter how we look at it now though, in had some positive effects of restricting the absolute dominance of Moscow, and its interference in dependent countries. Beijing’s stand in October 1956 to a large degree saved us from the Soviet military intervention. This was what Gomulka meant when he said that we had reasons to be grateful, and he was grateful. What could have happened would soon be seen in Hungary, when the Red Army violently pacified the national uprising, with Mao’s active support. And so, the second half of September and October 1956 were months of ”Polish Euphoria” at the Institute back in Beijing. The staff and the students, both the “Yan’anites”, who were usually better informed, and the ordinary students, expressed their support for what was happening in Poland, and for Gomulka. In neither country of the bloc apart from China, was there such a wide and favorable coverage of news from Poland. It’s worth noting that Renmin Ribao was the only newspaper of the ruling Communist party in
any of the states, except for Borba in Yugoslavia, to publish the full text of Gomulka’s speech at the key 8th Plenary Meeting of the Polish Communist Party’s (PZPR) Central Committee on October 19th, 1956.

Shortly afterwards, we were plunged into the mayhem of the Hungarian events. At first we thought the Chinese would behave as they had in the Polish case. At the beginning, the events in Budapest were not seen as “counterrevolutionary”. Everybody congratulated our Hungarians. We drank *maotai*, (which then cost 4-6 yuan a bottle). So it was a big shock when Beijing suddenly backed down. In the declaration of the Chinese Government from the 30th, transmitted through radio, there was a mention of Poland and Hungary, but after that appeared an urgent correction in the text by Xinhua, where after the word “Poland”, the word “Hungary” was simply removed. Knowing the attention to detail of our hosts, we were filled with the worst feelings. The amended text was published the next day on the front page of *Remin Ribao*. My Hungarian friends wept.

Four days later, the massacre in Budapest was presented in the Chinese press and radio as a “glorious manifestation of proletariat internationalism”. "The importance of the great friendship of the Soviet Union for the socialist countries of East Europe has been gloriously proved once more in the events in Hungary”.

I remember a passionate discussion with part of the faculty and student leaders at our Institute. We were bewildered by the Chinese shift and blamed them for the Soviet intervention and bloody suppression of the Hungarian uprising. It was explained to us that "in Poland events were all along under the control of the Party (which) guaranteed the development of socialism in accordance with Polish conditions", and that “the Party had given no chance to the counterrevolutionary conspiratorial activities of reaction and imperialism. In Hungary, by contrast, it were these very forces which had staged a coup. That being so, the Chinese leadership could not remain silent and took firm steps to persuade the Soviet comrades of the necessity of intervention on behalf of socialism”. I said during one of the meetings that I believed that the intervention is unacceptable. At the Institute, the political debates resulting from Hungarian events died out almost completely. The “Yan’anites“ spoke confidently of the “end of thaw”. The Hungarian students came close to being expelled from the Institute. It didn't happen, partly thanks to our Ambassador, who, as he once mentioned to me later, managed to persuade his Hungarian colleague (before he himself was summoned back to Hungary), to keep the students in China.
MJ: Who was the ambassador at that time?

JR: Stanislaw Kiryluk.⁵

MJ: And did you yourself encounter any problems?

JR: The Chinese were writing reports about us to the Polish embassy. I translated them and I saw that one of them contained the following passage: “Comrade Lo Wen has taken a keen interest in political problems, diligently keeping abreast of current affairs and reacting in sensitive fashion to new phenomena. During events in Hungary he showed signs of erroneous views, maintaining for example that the entry of the Soviet troops [to Hungary] was a case of interference in internal affairs”

At the time I was lucky I was not a student from East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania or Bulgaria: I would perhaps never have graduated. I know of cases where criticism of the Soviet intervention in Hungary by the Chinese resulted in their expulsion from university, and over ten years in labour camps.

MJ: Going back to Poland, would you can say that young people in Poland had a very positive attitude towards China after 1956?

JR: The events in October created a very positive atmosphere, which lasted for some time. We also made some gestures, you have to remember that it was mutual. At the national level, there was political co-operation (we were in the international commission on Korea, and later there was Indochina, we took part together in the Geneva Conference on Korea, Vietnam and Laos), economic and maritime assistance (for example the founding in 1951 of Chipolbrok – the first joint venture company in P.R.C., a foreign capital company founded on the principle of mutual interests). We co-operated also in the fields of science and technology, culture, art and education. So the contacts with China in the years 1954 – 1962 were closer than those of any other Eastern European country of the Soviet bloc (excluding, of course, Albania, and later Romania). And that was in spite of growing discrepancies between Moscow and Beijing.

⁵ He remained ambassador of Poland in Beijing for almost seven years (1952–1959).
MJ: Let's go back to the attitude of those ordinary people. Did you feel that there was more awareness about China in Poland of the time? Or maybe China still remained just an exotic country?

JR: No, no, those contacts were very natural. Remember that for the intellectuals, the main interests in China circled around ancient culture, literature, the arts. For ordinary people it was first of all the great people's revolution, which led to fundamental changes. In Warsaw, China was held in great esteem, especially after 1956. Problems started only later, practically after 1957 or in 1958. The chaotic decisions of the Great Leap, radicalization of internal and foreign policy, ideological blindness, expressed in the slogan “Never forget about class struggle” (yongyuan buyao wangji jieji douzheng) or in the slogan “Politics is the Marshal (zhengzhi guashuai), etc. Gradually, when restricted and fragmentary information about the negative changes in Chinese political life (like the „fight with the rightists”) were beginning to reach Poland, the positive picture of China started eroding. That was especially at the end of 1958, and even more intensely in 1959, when the effects of the political, economic and social folly (e.g. the communisation of the countryside) started taking its toll. The Great Leap was a big shock. And this reaction was right, considering those 20–25 million people who starved to death in China. The Cultural Revolution was horrible. The burning of piles of books, destruction of historic monuments, etc. Do you know what kind of joke was circling at that time in Warsaw? That the optimists are learning Russian, pessimists – Chinese. That was the reverse of what people thought in 1956.

MJ: In the Polish press there was also negative, critical coverage of the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution?

JR: That was later. At the beginning we didn't make any statements. I remember that when I was going to China as a very young Second Secretary, Adam Rapacki, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, was telling us: “Do everything to keep your contacts”. Why? It was in 1965. (…)

In my opinion Gomulka was afraid, rightly, that if the relations between Russia and China were going to deteriorate, Moscow, fearing “fighting on two fronts”, would make concessions towards the West, sacrificing Poland. Apart from this, he was grateful for what had happened in 1956. It was later when it turned out differently. At the Moscow Conference in 1960, Liu
Shaoqi, in his conversation with Gomułka, said: “We supported you in 1956, it's time for you to support us.” As I said before: one thing is objective action, the other all of its motives. For us, these actions were positive, but Gomułka, after the conversation, lost all illusions that the motive had been “the love of Poland”.

MJ: Let’s go back to your personal history. In 1960 you came back to Poland, and...

JR: In 1960 I came back and I was hired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs right away. I worked in the Second Department dealing with Asia, and I was working with China.

MJ: And you were the only Chinese specialist educated specifically in the field, and speaking Chinese?

JR: At that time there was also Mr. Dembowski, but he was in Beijing. He was Second Secretary and he had a Japanese wife. He spoke Chinese a little. Later he went to Ghana where he was recruited by the Americans and became agent of the CIA. As for the rest of my colleagues, those who had gone to study in China, their career was different. For example, Roman Sławiński went to the University of Warsaw to the Chinese Studies Department. Bogdan Dąbrowski went to Hungary. So in my department at the Ministry I was then the only one. Maybe it doesn't sound humble but I was prepared very well for the job, educated at the school for the cadres of the Chinese MoFA.

MJ: And you stayed in Warsaw until 1964?

JR: No. I had a several month break in 1961, when I went to Beijing and worked as interpreter at the Great Polish Industrial Exhibition in Beijing. Then I stayed in Poland, and did my Ph.D. under prof. Karol Lapter. My promoter was an outstanding person, he emigrated in 1968. Myself, I left Poland right after my Ph.D. defense, in the spring of 1965. I worked at the Polish embassy in Beijing nearly until the end of December 1968. At first I was Second Secretary, later First Secretary, and suddenly the youngest Chargé d' affaires. That was due to the lowering of the diplomatic rank of representation of the embassy, which was a protest against the massive calling back of diplomats from their posts in Warsaw by China.
MJ: I have one more question about contacts with prof. W. Jabłoński and the contacts with the Chinese Studies Department. Because it seems as if these were two different worlds.

JR: Because they were two different worlds. I personally didn’t have any contacts with the Chinese Studies Department at the University of Warsaw. At that time, as I remember, there was only one person from the Department at Beida. I don’t remember if that person was there when professors Olgierd Wojtasiewicz and Witold Jabłoński came to Beijing. I ended translating for the ambassador, as he invited me to this meeting.

MJ: So you were at the embassy when they came?

JR: Yes, I was.

MJ: But you didn't know them before, you didn't know who they were?

JR: I did know who they were, but I hadn't had any contact with the Chinese Studies Department before.

MJ: And how did prof. Jabłoński speak Chinese? Because I've heard from Ms Irena Sławińska that he didn’t speak that well...

JR: … Next question please... This was the man of unbelievable knowledge about China. Remarkable individual, with incredible flair. I had the feeling of participating in something that was enriching me deeply. For me as a human being it was a very unique experience.

MJ: Would you say that in 1950s until the mid 60s there was a will in Poland to build specialist knowledge base about China, to analyses China?

JR: There was such a thinking, but it wasn’t a priority. The importance of China was growing since 1956 or even 1954, right until the mid-60s. From the Polish perspective, the interest was mostly, I think, because China was “the biggest neighbor of our biggest neighbor”, we needed to understand the relations between these two big players, and wanted to be present in Asia.
MJ: At the end, could we go back to your personal experiences during the Great Leap Forward? I know that you have many memories and stories about it.

JR: Yes, I took part, with my colleagues, in the mass iron-smelting campaign. We were doing these in “ancient bloomeries”, which we would build ourselves, calling upon the millennial experiences of the Chinese ancestors. Please don’t ask me what kind of steel came out of it, and at what price, as iron was gathered from everywhere, even our radiators and sometimes door knobs ended up there. If I was in Beijing, I also took part in other campaigns. Everything happened in the spirit of great political mobilization. I had the privilege of looking at what was happening in the country as the interpreter of the two counselors of the Polish embassy: doc. dr Alekxy Dębnicki and dr Stanisław Flato. In 1958 and 1959 we traveled well over 5,000 km. I saw iron-smelting campaigns in the countryside, when over 100 million peasants were dragged from the fields to topple the absurd targets of steel making. I could also observe the process of establishment of people's communes in the countryside, and even the cities, although fortunately the second idea was soon abandoned. In the autumn of 1959 I observed growing disarray and steeping food shortages, a direct consequence of the "communization" of agriculture. In Southeast China I saw food, chiefly fruit, rotting by the tons. Why? "Food is the general, and steel continue to be the marshal" (liangshi shi jiangjun, gang shi yuanshuai), and “the marshals have precedence over generals”. This was the graphic phrase used by Chen Yi, Vice-premier since February 1958, the Foreign Minister of the P.R.C., and... the new rector of our Institute, replacing Zhou Enlai. In 1959 cuts began to be made in rice, oil and cotton rations, but even these reduced quotas could not be met, and rationing spread to include more and more products. On the tenth anniversary of the P.R.C., the supply situation was incomparably worse than that on the fifth. By mid-1960 you could talk of famine...

I had been away from China for a year. When I returned in 1961, it was as if I came to a different country. The crisis, one could already sense in the air in mid-1959, in the meantime enhanced and gathered momentum. In the second half of 1960 and in 1961 it reached its peak.

I remember Beijing in those days: trees with the bark eaten away, meadows in the parks converted like every other spare scrap of earth into vegetable patches. On the black market food prices reached 2,000 percent of the official price. Walls were covered with posters broadcasting the names of persons "caught stealing red-handed" and the drastic penalties imposed. Most crimes were related to the theft of food. Beijing was full of rumors of food...
riots in villages and cities, there was a massive rise in shop robberies, referred to as 
"counterrevolutionary acts", there was also a suicide epidemic in the army, seizures of land 
by peasants, and the break-up of people's communes. At the same time there was no way of 
checking the truth of such stories, though they all seemed very plausible. Confirmations came 
later. In March 1962 in Warsaw, I read in "Hongqi" that according to a report by Vice-
Premier and Minister of Public Security, Xie Fuzhi, there had been "250,000 
counterrevolutionary incidents" in 1961, the vast majority of which were robberies of grain 
and food warehouses. There were 3,738 armed revolts and 1,235 killings of functionaries.

How many people died of hunger or malnutrition? I doubt that we will ever learn the full 
truth. Professor Sun Yefang has written of 20 million, but this has been questioned by 
demographers citing official statistics, published for the first time after almost twenty years, 
at the beginning of the 1980s, which indicate that 10 to 12 million people died in the "Great 
Leap Forward". But there are other researches made abroad, for example by the Hawai'i 
University, which estimate the total number of casualties of the famine at as much as 35 
million... In 1961 in Beijing I saw nobody actually dying of hunger, but I did see people – 
and many of them – swollen from malnutrition. Life seemed to proceed in slow motion. 
Rickshaw drivers barely able to pedal, porters struggling with loaded carts, tens of thousands 
of cyclists moving as if they were asleep. The energy so typical of this society had given way 
to lethargy and resignation: you could see lack of any hope in the eyes of passers-by. For 
foreigners staying in hotels there were special allocations of food, and they could also shop at 
stores from which ordinary Chinese were barred, and the windows of which were curtained. 
The entrances were guarded by police. These special shops were located in hotels and certain 
other parts of the city, for instance at the intersection of Hadamen and Wangfujing, or inside 
the Wangfujing department store. Chinese acquaintances frequently asked me to buy them 
some food for their children or elderly parents.

In the national press there was not even a whisper of famine; at most you could find very 
general statements of difficult or complicated situation, attributed at first to the weather and 
mistakes in the implementation of the otherwise correct "Three Red Banners" policy. In 
official conversations, there were increasingly frequent murmurs of sabotage by Moscow, 
which had "in underhand and treacherous fashion withdrawn its specialists from China in 
1960". Local cadres were also accused of being incapable of "putting into practice the 
strategically brilliant line of Chairman Mao". That only bred frustration and protests within 
the Party.
Privately, friends spoke of a bitter controversy at the top, caused by demands for punishment of “those responsible for the situation”. Deng Xiaoping was supposed to have said in June 1961 that "climatic conditions are not the main thing; the main thing are the mistakes made by people", and also: "Hunan peasants are saying that it’s 30 percent natural disasters, and 70 percent people. Mistakes and shortcomings are the chief cause. Stop repeating that mistakes are just one finger." This was an allusion to Mao, who had said that if all reasons for the failure of the "Great Leap Forward" were counted with 10 fingers, only one finger would represent the mistakes, and the remaining nine would stand for natural disasters, treachery of Khrushchev, sabotage by malefactors and enemies. Mao believed that the enemies made up 10 percent of the Party.

While I was in Beijing, in January 1961, the Party adopted a more liberal “Eight Character” policy, which was especially visible in agriculture. There were also some hopes concerning a new program for industry and changes in trade and services policy. It is amazing how quickly the tragic situation was brought under control and turned around as soon as the society was allowed to act in accordance with common sense, freed from the doctrinaire assumptions, which were light years away from the facts of life.

At that time thousands the victims of the "campaign against rightists" began to return from labour camps and rural exiles, not all of them, but a substantial number of those branded as "rightists" in 1957/58. I had the opportunity of talking with one such "rehabilitee", a university professor. Gray-haired, haggard, his face weather-beaten, his hands gnarled, he told me of 14-hour a day back-breaking toil, the ever-present sense of exhaustion, the hunger, the endless sessions of "exposure of class enemies", and degrading self-criticism.

Censorship was relaxed in literature and arts. The world of learning had more room to breathe. The "thaw", to use Ilya Ehrenburg’s phrase, was a modest one. One of my old friends lent me a much-thumbed book, telling me I must read it because "it is about now". At first I was puzzled. The title was "The Dismissal of Hai Rui" and the author was Wu Han, the deputy mayor of Beijing. Hai Rui was a senior official of the Ming dynasty who dared to accuse the emperor of numerous misdeeds and was punished with banishment. The allusion was all too obvious: in Aesopian language the book told of famous clash between Mao and marshal Peng Dehuai at the Party’s Plenary in Lushan in 1959.

Today, after 55 years since these events, I know more about them. Numerous books have been published about that period, but what is both sad and symptomatic, none in Mainland China. It’s all Western research centers and universities. To my knowledge, until today no Mainland researchers have published in China about that period, and of course, the central
archives have not been opened to the public on this. And it is provincial and city archives that contain the richest information in this matter.

MJ: I’ve heard that you have also worked as volunteer during the construction of the Shisanling dam near Beijing in the summer of 1958? That must have been an unusual experience. Could you tell us about it?

JR: The authorities decided to build the dam right next to the tombs of the Ming emperors in part as a political statement. They would say that the dam would "free the people from the disasters of floods and droughts and ensure water for irrigation canals, electricity for the population and clean water for the city". It was emphasized that "for 230 years the sole concern of the Ming dynasty rulers was how to build themselves posthumous palaces but never did it occur to them to think of protecting their subjects against the floods descending upon them from the mountains". The decision was taken at the highest level, probably at the turn of 1958 and presented as an initiative of the working masses of Beijing which had been blessed with "enthusiastic approval and support of Chairman Mao".

It was an enormous enterprise, mobilizing some 300,000 laborers working around the clock in three shifts. The army was involved as well, and Beijing factories and institutions were required to release staff to work there.

The turn of the Institute to participate came at the end of July. I volunteered, sensing an intriguing adventure. I wanted to see how things looked from the inside. Because the original one year schedule to complete the construction was being gradually shortened to mere 6 months to show the zeal and the enthusiasm of the masses, by the time we got there, the race against time was at its peak. The project was to be completed by autumn, a date which before would seem completely unrealistic. Before leaving Beijing for the dam, we had a week’s practice on the Institute's sports ground. Each of us was given a bamboo pole and two baskets which we filled with stones; the number was steadily increased. Wearing straw hats we jogged round the track in the Beijing heat. At first I was complacent, sure I was strong enough to manage without having to train. Luckily our physical training instructor did not share my optimism and persuaded me to give it a try. Later I was immensely grateful. By the end of the day my legs were completely numb and my back sore and swollen. Moving steadily forward while keeping the weight of the baskets (40 – 60 kg) balanced is easier said than done. The first few days were murder, but eventually I got the hang of it.
There were 50 to 60 of us from the Institute. The journey from Deshen Men to the site was made partly on foot, partly in trucks. We supplied our own work clothing (coolie hats, cotton gloves); the tools – baskets, yokes, shovels – were issued. Shovels were in short supply, so they were issued only to the select few, of whom I was one. There was no machinery. Operations went like clockwork, despite there being 300,000 people to direct. The work-force was subdivided into units of ten, then a hundred, and so on. Each ten had its own overseer who knew his men and answered to the next man up the chain of command. We slept in tents put up by the military or in peasant mud huts. We were issued sleeping mats and sleeping space of about 70 to 80 cm per person.

Our group was lucky in having a well. Otherwise, water was delivered by truck and its distribution supervised. As well as hygienic articles, the chief of which was a basin, our personal belongings included chopsticks, a bowl and a spoon. Our day started at five, with exercises, toilet, and a breakfast of rice soup, vegetables, and mantou (steamed rolls). We then marched some 5 km to the site and at seven began working. It was not very complicated: shoveling earth into baskets and dumping it into wheelbarrows. The workers needed no spurring for greater effort. Enthusiasm prevailed, fed by a deep belief that participation in this collective effort, multiplied by thousands of similar projects, would change the face of China. SAN NIAN XINKU - WAN NIAN XINGFU ("Three years of hard work, ten thousand years of happiness") proclaimed a slogan on banners hung all over the site. At twelve there came, as everywhere in China, a break for lunch, which was much like breakfast. Occasionally, there was meat, but only rarely, and more nominal than real. We all ate the same, at least on the site. Work ended at 4.30 and we made our way back to the camp. A brief rest and then supper followed by a meeting at which each of us assessed the day's work and listened to comments from colleagues and superiors. Anyone accused of slacking had to deliver a self-criticism and account for his lack of zeal. Like a refrain came the question: To what extent has today's work affected your world-view? And each day I gave the same – truthful – answer: "I have noticed no changes." Then there was a rundown of the news, and if it involved "the squalid actions of class enemies at home and abroad", an impassioned denunciation of such machinations was in order. These meetings soon became a boring ritual conducted in a sleepy atmosphere. We all repeated the same slogans and longed only to get it over and done with as quickly as possible. Our educational commissar pressed us to write poems celebrating the dam and the reservoir, and the best of them were pinned up on the camp bulletin board alongside the wall-posters edited by workers. Attempts to get me to write one of these eulogies were a total failure. In the first place, I was too exhausted. In the second place, for all my still
fervent approval of the "Great Leap Forward" I felt that it could get along perfectly well without the rhetoric. And in the third place, or rather above all: I have never been able to write a poem, even in my native tongue!

One of our duties was catching 5 to 10 flies or mosquitoes which had to be put (preferably) in a matchbox and shown to the foreman. The results were recorded on a special board. Competition in this event aroused immense interest and great excitement: the campaign against the "Four Great Pests" (sihai) – flies, mosquitoes, rats, sparrows – was still in full swing. The daily target was not excessive, as there were still plenty of flies and mosquitoes. Only the sparrows had been wiped out long ago.

At ten we finally returned to the sleeping quarters. In normal circumstances I would find the sleeping conditions less than comfortable, but tired as I was, I dropped off at once and slept like a log. My Chinese colleagues treated me with utmost consideration. We worked the same shift, ate the same food, lived in the same conditions, had the same obligations and enjoyed the same rights. Never before or since have I felt so thoroughly accepted by the Chinese.

Working on the dam as one of the many millions of "ants" engaged in the hundreds of similar projects all around China, it came to me that this was exactly how the Great Wall, the Imperial Canal and the nearby Ming tombs had been built. Behind the immaculate organization lay centuries of similar undertakings. Shisanling Shuiku was not – and could not be – an exception. Success depended on the efficient organization of labour of tens of thousands of people armed only with bamboo yokes, baskets, shovels and wheelbarrows.

Three weeks later, tanned and eleven kilos lighter, I returned to the Institute. It had been a fascinating experience. In the autumn, when I went back, the project was nearly completed. Between Hang and Hanbao there stretched a dam 627 m wide and 29 m high. The width at its base was 179 m, at its spex 7.5 m. On its southern face huge white marble characters proclaimed: THIRTEEN TOMBS WATER RESERVOIR. On the eastern side was a plaque with a brief history of the project and quotes from the leaders who, like Mao, worked on it. Among the names were Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De and Zhou Enlai. The reservoir was still empty. On April 4, 1959, its flooding began. On May 18, the generators in the hydro-electric plant were switched on. But it was not all that smooth. The haste with which the blueprints had been drawn up resulted in miscalculations. The reservoir could not be filled. Professor Romuald Cebertowicz was hurriedly called in from Gdansk. His method of freezing the
ground proved effective. Was this the most badly planned great design? I have my doubts which to this very day have not been dispelled. However, for my contribution I was awarded a medal and the title of "model worker".

In the spring of 1987, I was sitting in our old mess hall at the Institute with a group of my former colleagues and teachers. It was our first meeting in over 25 years. We recalled old times. One of them said: "You know, Lo Wen? It was only at Shisanling that you finally won our trust."

MJ: And how would you sum up today your experiences with China, which span nearly 60 years?

JR: I feel very lucky that my life led me this way. In China and through China I learned how difficult, complicated, and full of painful experiences is the road one has to take to find own path, changing, learning from others, but remaining yourself. I don’t know any other big country which in such a short time has done so much in its path of rebirth and modernisation. China today is yet again a world power. I keep telling my students: “My life was a great adventure, but it was just the peripheries. For you, three points of reference will be of key importance: EU, integrated Western Hemisphere with the US, and East Asia with China. This will be your everyday life.”

And yet the question remains, how much of these experiences of their fathers and grandfathers will the new generations of the Chinese remember? To what models of the flourishing Middle Kingdom will they reach? They come when everything is already done, will they wallow in the power and greatness, trying to rebuild the World according to their likeness, enforcing pax sinica on the whole Globe? For this kind of ambition is bound to fail! Or maybe they will learn from the past, becoming an integral, key part of the World, accepting its norms, rules, and values? In other words: China’s World, or global World? I truly, and emotionally believe in the second choice, as China has become my second home – di erge guxiang.