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China in the Geopolitical Imaginations of the Polish Pop Music after 1989

Abstract: This paper focuses on the issue of geopolitics in the pop culture interpretation as illustrated by the Polish pop music after the year 1989. Songs selected from various trends of the Polish popular music made the source material of the text. The primary study method involved the analysis of the lyrics discourse. The Polish geopolitical imaginations used to revolve around the basis axis of better West and worse East, symbolized mainly by Russia, but its image was transferred over entire Asia. Asia, including China, was scarcely present in the geopolitical imaginations contained in the pop music, which, at the same time, reflected the irrelevant interest of Polish elites in global problems. The discourses in the musical texts about China frequently adopted the West's perspective, where Poland made part of as seen by our elites. The rhetoric strategy concerning China in popular music featured two essential views, which references Orientalism as specified by E. Said. It explains the frequent use of the postcolonial discourse by the Polish elites, also the music ones, which promoted the supremacy of the West over the rest of the world and the universal nature of the Western world values which were meant to be implemented into other civilizations and nations for their own sake. China was presented as a growing threat for the dominance of the West, the USA in the first place, as an alternative model of globalization and international deal putting off the world by its cultural and geopolitical alienation, as well as indicating negative effects for Poland.

Keywords: *geopolitical imaginations, critical geopolitics, popular geopolitics, popular music, Poland, China*

Introduction

Over the recent decades, we have very often encountered the opinion, the key one for this publication, that mass media and popular culture (including pop music) are presently creating a specific “cultural deal”. This peculiar filter imposes the way we perceive the world and, subsequently, geopolitics. This filter has an impact on the social imagination, the geopolitical one including by creating in human minds images more permanent than the real geopolitical phenomena.

The realm of sound, including music, has been overwhelming us all our lives. Music consists of sounds produced by humans on purpose, played and sung for others' sake, and is supposed to influence their emotions and have a widespread impact on them, which is part of our life experience and, at times, our activities. Thus, it is dependent on social and cultural processes; it does not mean merely art or entertainment. "All music, every arrangement of sounds is therefore a tool for constituting or reinforcing publics, a certain entirety. It is this which makes bonds between power and its subjects, thus – in general meaning – it is the attribute of power in all its forms" (Attali, 2010, p. 29).

The essence of listening to music, in the case of this survey the pop music, is a creation of imagination through lyrics and sound to receive a musical message. This opinion is shared by Polish rock artist, Muniek Staszczuk, who means that music "stimulates imagination" (Staszczuk, Księżyk, 2019, p. 53). As it happens, imagination is strongly conditioned by emotional shape and the life experience as well, which is well-rooted in identity and culture, which also makes a significant part of geopolitical imagining.

The phenomenon of popular music is not easy to define as it is a vibrant, dynamic, and changeable creation continuously putting forth new forms of transmission and new music styles. It is subject to the ongoing particularization of the musicians and the public. In my study, I have been analyzing particular trends of Polish pop music – yet not all – from authors' original songs, poets' songs through pop music to pop-rock and disco polo.

Methodology

Popular culture, popular music, and the social imaginaries created by them have been studied in various aspects and by multiple sciences (such as sociology or culture science), which can easily be noticed in many publications in Poland. Given this, the geopolitical research area has only emerged over the latest decades, specifically in the West; very few studies have been published in Poland. The studies presented in this paper are of a pioneer nature, both in the event of Poland and elsewhere. The Author is trying to find answers to the questions about the marginal position of Asia and China in the geopolitical imaginations of our pop music, their characteristic features, and connections with the imaginings the political elites and the society might have.

Songs are the most common forms of popular music where sound and word interact but also image when it comes to TV, the Internet or a concert. In this survey, it is the lyrics that make the source basis, although I am aware of the fact that in the messages reaching people, the semantic layer is commonly less important than the sound, voice intonation, or extra-verbal communication, which are inherent parts of popular music. What is more – today's aesthetics is dominated by visual culture; the ocularcentrism in other words. For this reason, images and imaginings have been more emphasized than words. However, one has to be aware that simultaneous analysis of lyrics and music as one entirety is complicated. Therefore, the interpretation should be split, which is why I am looking into the wording layer of songs.

The geopolitical discussion in pop music has been going on chiefly with the use of language used in songs. Therefore, the song lyrics discourse analysis and the context make the primary study method typical of critical geopolitics. It must be reminded that the notion of “discourse” is vague, differentiated mainly in terms of content and notion range. Thus, it evokes many controversies, both theoretical and methodological ones, it is overused too, yet it has well-rooted in the humanistic and social sciences. The study of discourse is characterized by a multitude of approaches and research methods.

For the sake of this study, the opinion that a discourse, dispersed as it may be, outlines the framework of thinking and argument finding within a given area of social life seems significant. Thus, it does not represent a mere collection of texts and expressions but a combination of language and contexts with circumstances of their occurrence, including the historical ones. Context seems an important notion here understood as the environment which has an impact on the discourse interpretation. A discourse has links with speech communication: who speaks to whom, in what situations, how and for what purpose.

Geopolitical Imagination

The Author is well aware of the polysemic nature of the phrase “geopolitics” yet, simultaneously, spots in it a chance and challenge for new interpretations of the geopolitics research field. Because the imagined spaces make the basis of studies presented in this book the acknowledgment of the same by scientific analysis occurred as late as the appearance of postmodern geopolitics, with the critical geopolitics little known and studied in Poland in the first place, whereas in the case of popular culture and music it is the popular geopolitics (next to formal and practical geopolitics) which deals with this study area. The title geopolitical imaginations refer to the notion of *imaginative geography* coined in the late 1970s by Edward W. Said, an outstanding authority on imaginative geography, which is regarded as the foundation of the approach to geopolitics by the representatives of critical geopolitics. The crucial factor of the said approach is the division, even unconscious, of the space between ‘ours’ and ‘foreign’ accompanied by evaluation: everything which is ours, is known to us tends to be valued as better than that which is not ours, foreign, worse. This kind of attitude contains a certain load of xenophobia turning culture into a theatre of rival ideologies, attitudes, visions of the world, imagination, stereotypes, etc. (Said, 2019). Also, Geraroid Ó Thuathail, the founder of the ‘critical geopolitics’ notion, shared the same dichotomy by acknowledging in 1996 the division of the space between “ours” and “theirs” as the basis of the geopolitical discourse studied by that geopolitics school. Hence we have the key meaning of the “ours” - “theirs”; “we” - “they”; “here- “there” dichotomy (Ó Thuathail, 1996, p. 13)¹.

¹ The big impact of Said’s concept on the popular geopolitics is confirmed by other outstanding scientists: (The Origins and Evolution, 2018, pp. 26-27).

It made the basis for the notion of ‘geopolitical imaginations’ coined by the French geopolitical school of “Herodote” followed by critical geopolitics, which is very difficult to define in a precise way. The culture-oriented understanding of the above, which I consider crucial for this paper, is the approach presented by the Polish geopolitics researcher Jakub Potulski, who said: “Geopolitical imaginations create the maps of the world and make one of the elements of cultural and political self-identification. It is responsible for the way some influential social groups define states, nations and the world” (Potulski, 2010b, p. 65). In other words, through geopolitical imagination and its components in the form of particular geopolitical imaginations, critical geopolitics studies the manner space is perceived by people and what role is played by dominating social institutions. Thus, the geopolitical imaginations are not any objective normative “laws” or “principles” but pluralist and subjective representations instead, created, promoted and often imposed on the society by specific groups of people or a person, usually involved with the ruling powers. As a rule, these imaginations are conditioned by contexts. Therefore, they are strongly linked to ideologies, cultures, and history (Ó Thuathail, 1996, pp. 42-43; Potulski, 2010b, p. 260).

Popular Geopolitics

The problematic and interdisciplinary area of scientific penetration, the popular geopolitics, entered the critical geopolitics in the form of demands in the early 1990s, and the first study was published in 1993 (*The Origins and Evolution*, 2018, p. 25-26). The area of its study is the appearance of geopolitical imaginations in pop culture and mass media. Many scientists emphasize this strong link between critical geopolitics and popular culture. One of the leading representatives of the critical school within geopolitics, Klaus Dodds observes that “if one of the tasks of critical geopolitics is to challenge hegemonic representations of global politics then we need to be attentive to the interconnections with popular culture and the way in which newspapers and other media might either reinforce or contest geopolitical images and or representations” (Dodds, 2005, p. 74).

Jason Dittmer’s findings are important for the analyses presented here, who states that popular geopolitics “refers to the everyday geopolitical discourse that citizens are immersed in every day. In a democratic society (which is not a given, of course), popular consent is necessary to some degree for the conduct of foreign policy” (Dittmer, 2010, p. 14). It is about some common sense-based geopolitical knowledge rather than grand theories or concepts. Every geopolitical discourse dominated by elites must be widely propagated to become popular. It must be formulated ‘from the bottom’ at an elementary level, deeply rooted in the given society’s system of signs and symbols to make it understandable to a greater public to be consumed by the same. It is where the key role of mass media and pop culture comes up.

In contrast to the fact that in the contemporary world, it is chiefly cultural or ideological attractiveness that is indicative of the nations’ and states’ standing and power, frequently

expressed by the buzz word “soft power” created by Joseph S. Nye in the late 1980s (Nye, 2004), the popular geopolitics revolves around the mentioned relations of the power, dominance “over people’s hearts and minds”, seizing the sphere of signs and meanings. It is about control over an individual, their imaginations and through this, over the Imaginarium of entire social groups and nations. Media and pop culture colonize our personal experiences, give them meaning, steer the interaction with other people and community bonds. In the event of popular geopolitics, they produce the “geography of global politics and international relations, meant for public consumption” (Potulski, 2010a, p. 152). Therefore, the relationship between the imagined and real world, between imagination production and its consumption, always seems crucial. Simultaneously, one must not forget that the images generated as geopolitical imaginations are often away from reality or simply replace it. Yet, after all, they happen to decide about the manner and directions of the international activities of geopolitical entities, states above all (Ó Thuathail, 1996, pp. 178-179).

Different study models can be observed within popular geopolitics. Among them, the most popular and typical of critical geopolitics is the elite model, i.e. the relation downward ‘from top to bottom’. It is because the medial, creative elites, the celebrities, along with political elites, make up part of symbolic elites influencing the social image of the world by creating its ideological and political frames. Thus, it must be studied how the popular culture texts generated by the elites are turned into messages and in what way they become popular among the masses shaping their geopolitical imagination, thus imposing their approach on geopolitics as a symbol of the ruling power’s relation. There is the pluralistic model of study, on the other hand, which is based on a binary opposition: elites – non-elites focusing on the analysis of how the geopolitics popular imaginations/representations (for the sake of this paper, both phrases are synonymous) created by non-elites correspond to or compete with the dominating meanings; how they affect the political activities of the elites, the foreign affairs policies and in what way they set the division lines separating “us” from “them” (Pickering, 2017, p. 90-91).

The other study area is far more complicated than the first one, but it brings the analyses much closer to the essence of popular geopolitics discussed in this paper understood as ‘everyday geopolitics’. In a fairly typical opinion presented by cultural studies, it assumes that there exist no authority relations or dominance without resistance. This analysis manner seems to be part of the critical geopolitics – the ‘anti-geopolitics’ understood as the geopolitics of resistance, which also employs pop culture. The aim of critical geopolitics is to generate anti-geopolitics, the practice of resistance against the images of the world imposed by the government institutions controlled by the elites (Strukov, 2018, pp. 76-78). A well-known analyst and promoter of this expression, Paul Routledge, referred to the above by stating that anti-geopolitics challenges the opinion that the interests and imaginations of political elites be identical with the interests of societies. He explained this counter-hegemony as an objection undermining the material and cultural power of the dominating geopolitical interests of governments and their elites. Common citizens, journalists, celebrities or teams

of activists may be the authors of such a rebellion, who also use the texts or images of culture to question the dominating geopolitical imaginations created by the elites (Routledge, 2003, p. 245; Dittmer, 2010, p. 134).

Two Imaginations of China

The basic criterion containing and evaluating the Polish geopolitical imagination for the last 200 years has been the cultural and geopolitical opposition along the East-West line. It is still considered one of the major study areas within our geopolitics. The exclusion was its essence based on the ruling power discourse, artificially ranking the West on top of the hierarchy to reach the “better” civilization position and as a model for us against the “worse” East, or putting it more broadly – Europe (West) vs. – East (Russia in the first place, identified with Asia) which looks like a dualistic division into Europe and Non-Europe. In Poland, speaking about the “East” gave the associations with Asia, i.e. wildness, barbarity, or backwardness, which also impacted the creation of the image of China in pop music (Czapliński, 2017, p. 150).

During the first phase of the transformation, Asia did not often appear in the Polish geopolitical imaginations. The political elites were chiefly busy with rooting Poland in the Western political and economic structures and working on improving the relationships with the neighbors. It is where the Western-centric pattern of geopolitical imagination comes from. The lyrics discourse and the trends among the societies were alike. The scarcely marked imaginations of Eastern regions or countries, except Russia obviously, resulted mainly from the considerable distance. It was straightforwardly expressed regarding Asia in the lyrics of a song by a rock band Hey (2012):

“Asia might exist somewhere
Yet I cannot see it from my window.”

Metaphorically, the window outlines the framework of the look, and if one cannot see something through a window, there is no specific need to deal with it. In this case, the distance expresses accessibility and the extent of being keen on it, interests in other words. The latter results from the importance of people, phenomena, processes, and objects to each of us. The popular music imaginations, in this case, reflected the common social stereotypes of little significance those regions or continents presented to the Polish way of life, and subsequently to politics, which, while emphasizing their civilization awkwardness, deepened the ‘us’ from ‘them’ distance (Tuan, 1987, pp. 66-69; Macała, 2018, p. 43).

The geopolitical imaginations of Asia, China including in very few pictures contained in Polish pop music after 1989 and created generally by older generation musicians brought up in communist Poland, had two different yet linked appearances referring to two basic images of the Orient in the West, fairly typical of postcolonial approach according to E.

Said (Said, 2019)². The first of the two was the feeling of fear and threat built upon the North-South conflict, which posed a risk to the Western ruling powers, the USA in the first place. This emotional discourse fueled by conspiracy elements exposed the paternal belief of the civilization supremacy, boon, and need of the West's universal authority to dominate over the whole world and, at the same time, willfully stigmatized any threat to that power. The Polish elites seemed to acknowledge the American hegemony in the world as a useful tool for the westernization of the states in the conventional South, such as Asia, for their own good covering the strive to freedom, democracy, and development regardless of all the shocks or problems (Brzeziński, 2008, p. 130). The Polish artists' musical message was supposed to justify and enhance the legitimization of such attitudes some musical celebrities seemed to have fairly much difficulty with when expressing the anti-geopolitical objection to the narration presented by the political elites.

It is because for a particular group of Polish musicians, these relationships stood for the hierarchy of power and the linked USA hypocrisy needed to maintain their dominance in the world under the banner of freedom, democracy, market economy, etc. The Washington hypocrisy was also unmasked because the promotion of democracy did not cover powers that might organize effective resistance. Therefore the USA does not intend to fight for democracy in such a country as autocratic China (Dezert, 2010). The discourse was well fixed in the Polish musical, very fearful, the imagination of China shaped in the early 1990s which bore references to 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre exposing Beijing as a city and country not only of fascinating ancient civilization but above all of the bloody and brutal communist dictatorship. It is what in the eyes of communist Poland educated musicians and their public within the same generation, confirmed the negative experiences and stereotypes concerning communism:

“We are the power, let the world realize it,
Every one may turn to be enemy, even your brother,
We know what is good,
For you Tiananmen is the lesson” (Proletaryat, 1990).

Another popular musician, Kazimierz (Kazik) Staszewski, referred to the same massacre and hypocrisy of the West who did nothing about it by singing (1995):

“Li Peng gave order for tanks to flatten
One thousand young people protesting in the square;
They were surrounded by army and political police
Fire was opened [...]

² This double image of China also appears in the American pop culture regarded by Polish musicians as a model, and especially in films (Homewood, 2018, pp. 174-193).

The world says nothing for there is no concern
This is merely internal matter of China.”

In very few 21st century songs, China has been presented as an economic and geopolitical power, the world’s factory whose success manifests the changes to the current model of the world order, the growing power of Asia and faltering West, where some of our political elites had been outlining similar transformations in the world (Macała, 2018, pp. 43-44). However, for the majority of our musicians, the clear Chinese success proved a discouraging example to follow. In their imaginations, an alternative model of capitalism was built by the communist dictatorship and slave work, which was not the Western one. In the imagination of many authors of popular music, this power of the Middle Kingdom was equal to human rights abuse, labor camps, prisons, and work done for next to nothing. Overwhelmed with consumerism, Western governments and societies turned a blind eye to it because how else could they survive “without buying the Chinese made items”. Hence the gloomy vision of the future emerging from Dezerter’s song, a punk band rebellious towards the elites:

“Hypocrisy, lies
Of the Western world
Don’t help the communists
Unless it’s profitable.
Now governments face a problem
And must bow down
Because the flags of all the countries
Have been made in China” (Dezerter, 2010).

It was not a coincidence when our political elites who had improved their understanding of the transformations occurring in the world and the Dezerter band alike constructed the discourse of fear of the growing power of China, which stimulated their aspirations to play the global role and to arrange the world their way, which was explicitly hazardous to the hegemonic position of the West:

“The answer is in Tibet
The Chinese rule there today
Tomorrow in the whole world” (Dezerter, 2010).

The intentional reference to one of the German anthem’s stanzas, which was sung during the Third Reich time, builds up a negative image of Beijing’s imperial aspirations through associations with the tragic history of Poland and the world. The black geopolitical scenario, the so-called Beijing Consensus, based on dictatorship, no freedom and democracy, and the model of capitalism controlled by the government replaces the liberal and democratic

Pax Americana. It would have been fateful for our musicians, for the West and Poland (Marszałek-Kawa, 2011, pp. 106-108, 123). However, many researchers deem this “Asian mirage” a little plausible for the moment, although they do not deny the conflict between the USA – or in a broader meaning – the West and the Chinese People’s Republic is growing, which also includes opposite concepts of the global order.

The other picture of the conventional Southern countries created in the Polish pop music lyrics was different from the one portrayed above; rid of the threat, hazards, wars, or conflicts. It openly referred, probably unintentionally, to classical Western theses about Orient specified by E. Said, which were based on the orientalization of culture. To some extent, it resulted from the fashion of introducing exotic motives into the Western pop-culture which, beginning with the 1990s, operated as a hegemonic model to be followed by some of our pop music artists (Said, 2019; Terlecka-Reksnis, 2013, p. 193). Fairly often did the pieces of music present the images of the countries of the South as simply fairy tale lands, mysterious, detached from the real life which was very fueled by the little knowledge of the people in Poland had and which enhanced at the same time the division into “us” and “them”.

Those other “bewitched lands” of dim civilization were so different from the uniform Western pop culture, the rationalism and boring arrangement of the rich Western areas that contributed to the more realistic image of the world the Poles were surrounded by. On the other hand, they stimulated the need to learn, travel, break from the routine and relax, change and sum up their lives, make themselves feel with their hearts, senses rather than experiencing life only through mind combined with calculation. This narration was accompanied by the certainty that curiosity of the world is the condition of freedom, of deciding about one’s self and every journey results in a new experience, observations of other people and their lifestyles, inclines to profit from new goods and pleasures and to compare the way we live to the way they do (Krajewski, 2003, p. 77, 174).

This type of image of the South was framed in some dominating rituals of knowledge and conducts, i.e. relations of the authority (Said, 2019). The tourist picture referring to the colonial creations appeared here as a function of geographic imaginations and the geopolitical significance of places and areas created in this way. It was then that the mentioned imaginations about distant lands made the surrounding meaningful, generated a system of interconnections, organized its structure and value. It is doubtless that for the Poles, including the famous music artists, it was the West that generated the modernity and wealth standards in their imaginations, the exotic experiences were only possible there where people live not only in a different way but incomparably worse and poorer lives as well, which is in this conventional South. This kind of exoticization acknowledged the hierarchy model of the world headed by the West (Tuan, 1987, p. 117; Borys, 2019, p. 87-89).

For this reason, in this typical orientalization style, China used to be presented in the discourse created in some early 1990s pop lyrics as a form of escape from the transformation process that was making many Poles weary. The Middle Kingdom seemed nearly a fairy-tale, distant land of quite different civilization which “by the bliss of knowledge and mystery/

covers me in the dark night”. The leading ‘Disco Polo’ band, Bayer Full (2013), also known to the Chinese, made a simultaneous use of colorful metonymies: “in the poetry of flowers and silk”, “My China painted in sound”, “Behind the great wall of longing”. Another pop group, Papa Dance (2005), also referred to this motive of magic, dream, journey of a lifetime in their songs by talking about “the road to China” where “the gold dragon”, “incense and smoke”, “the tea mist”, “Chinese kite” and “Beijing” or “the Great Chinese Wall”.

Conclusions

The underlying structure of Polish geopolitical imaginations used to be placed along the model axis of better West and worse East, which also referred to Asia. Asia, China including, were not very clearly present in the geopolitical imaginations employed by pop music, which reflected the Polish elites’ weak interest in global problems. The arrival of the 21st century saw slow changes within this matter. The lyrics discourse about China adopted chiefly the perspective of the West part of which was Poland as seen by our elites. The political elites and the society generated similar imaginations. The rhetoric strategy created in the songs about China covered two basic perspectives that fitted the orientalism model, outlined by E. Said. It explains why Polish elites, the music ones including, often employed the postcolonial discourse justifying the West’s supremacy over the rest of the world and the universal nature of the Western world values that should be implemented into other civilizations and societies for their own sake. No matter whether they desire it or not. China was presented as a growing threat for the dominance of the West, the USA in the first place, as an alternative model of globalization and international deal putting off the world by its cultural and geopolitical alienation as well as indicating negative effects for Poland.

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