

Georgina Matusiak
Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology
Silesian University, Cieszyn

Polish-Chinese neighborhood in gossip and urban legend

Abstract

The paper concerns new immigrants (on the example of Polish-Chinese neighbourhood) but in two folklore phenomena: gossip and urban legend. The author demonstrates the process of formation the Polish-Chinese relationships resulting in – established in 2010 – economic cooperation between the city authorities and Chinese investors in the Silesian city of Jaworzno in Poland, where is located the Chinese largest Wholesale Center „Silesia Chinese Center” in the southern part of the country. The contact of such different cultures in the space of the city brought new urban legends and creates gossips, heroes of which were the Chinese people. Basing on her field research the author tries to answer the question of the source of these processes and their impact on the quality of Polish-Chinese relationships in the city.

Keywords: the neighborhood, legend urban, gossip, stereotype, the Chinese community

Since 2010 the district of my city Jaworzno-Jeleń has been the site of a Polish-Chinese neighborhood. The formation of this unusual neighborhood is the result of economic cooperation developing for two years between the authorities of the city and Chinese investors. The consequence of actions taken within the city was the construction of China's largest Wholesale Center „Silesia Chinese Center”, located in southern Poland. I have been doing my research in Jaworzno since the year 2010 – from the moment when the first members of the Chinese community began to come, and it is still continued. My research was supported by the interview based on the prepared questionnaire, and I also used newspaper articles in which there was information about the Chinese investment.

The aim of my research was to draw attention to the changes that result from the contact of two different cultures. In this article I present the following issues: the beginnings of the Polish-Chinese relations; adaptation of the Chinese community to the social system; the reorganization of urban space as a result of the

Chinese investment; the development of the relationship through the creation of urban legends. In my paper I am focusing primarily on the mutual neighbour relations between the Polish and Chinese. I was looking for the factors, that have shaped these relationships. I wanted to show common ground where two different groups are living together distinguishes different appearance, language, culture, religion, social norms, etc., and I think it had a significant impact on the development and quality of the neighbourhood. Before presenting what I have observed during my field research, I would like to present the characteristics of the city of Jaworzno-Jeleń and its neighborhood, which became the center of China's industry and culture. Jaworzno is a city with county rights located in the eastern part of the province of Silesia, on the border of Upper Silesia and Małopolska. It is located in the south of Poland and inhabited by almost 100 thousand residents. Jaworzno received city rights in 1901, but the origins of the town's history dates back to the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth century. The location of the city and coal mining, which started in 1767, was important for its development. The establishment of coal mines and zinc smelters led to the inflow of local people looking for work. With the development of industrial and craft companies the number of inhabitants steadily increased. The modern image of the city is the result of administrative reforms carried out after 1945, when the smaller municipalities and villages were included in the original precinct of the city. The Chinese chose one of the districts of the city for their investment – Jeleń. They opted for this choice because of the location of Jeleń and favorable price of the investment area.

Jeleń has been Jaworzno's district since 1977. It is located in the southern part of the city on the river Przemsza. In the past it was a separate village. The first historical information about Jeleń comes from about 1242. In 1958 Jeleń received the status of the housing and in 1973 municipal rights as a part of the former Chrzanowski County. Residents of the district are the local community, which share a common territory, social interactions, and psychological ties. Currently, the district is inhabited by 4 thousand residents. According to the residents, they form the urban-rural community. The sense of identity is affected by the fact that before changing the territorial limits of Jaworzno, Jeleń was a village and from 1973 to 1977 had city rights. To this day in Jeleń there are farms and others rural forms of life. Among inhabitants neighbour help and exchange is still strongly developed (Zawistowski 1996: 51–130).

In 2002 in the district government create Municipal Economic Activity Zone under the name of “The Jeleń Knot” (GSAG). On nearly twenty acres of municipal land there were formed plots of land in the immediate vicinity of A4 motorway Katowice-Cracow. The investment area located in GSAG won the national competition called “The Golden Land 2007” as the best prepared Silesian place for a productive investment in 2007. In the first auction of the four investment lands only one was sold. The investor was a company from China.

The company acquired the property with an area of 27,593 m² for the amount of 2,778,542.00 zloty net. The signing of the notarial deed took place on 28 May 2009 (“*Grunt na medal*” *ponownie na sprzedaż*). The opening of the first hall of

the Silesia Chinese Center Poland International Trade Center, "Silesia Chinese Center" was on 28 July 2010. In the area of 30 thousand square meters there are localized 160 of commercial stalls, administration offices and dining. Less than three months after the opening of the first hall, the construction of another investment was started. On November 12, 2010 in the presence of the city council, guests and residents of Jaworzno, the second hall complex was opened. The ribbon-cutting ceremony took place exactly at 9.58, because it is a happy time in China, which symbolize prosperity.

The newly opened hall covers an area of 80 thousand square meters and has more than 300 outlets and storage rooms. The Presidents of the companies estimate that the Centre, in which spots have over 200 companies, is visited approximately by 3,000 clients daily. The investment company „Silesia Chinese Center” plans to create in Jeleń, within next few years, the largest wholesale center in southern Poland. There are plans to build an additional 3 halls, which will have a total space of 1000 commercial stalls and storage facilities with total area of 28 hectares. Also, in the area there will be other firms, including banks, restaurants, coffee shops and exchange offices (SCC). Mayor of Jaworzno – Mr. Paweł Silbert sees contact with the company "Silesia Chinese Center" as an opportunity to promote the city and to create new jobs for residents.

In the two halls there were employed about 200 people from Jaworzno. It is expected that in next few years, after the construction of additional 3 halls, the company "Silesia Chinese Center" will become a major employer in the area, providing approximately 2 thousand new jobs. In response to the new market employment, Labour Office of Jaworzno organized a course that includes training in vending, connected with a course of the Chinese language at a basic level. Its knowledge is not obligatory while applying for a job, but gives a chance for better employment and getting promotion. Within further cooperation and strengthening of the Polish-Chinese contacts, local authorities of Jaworzno, a month after the opening of the first hall "Silesia Chinese Center", established a partnership with the Chinese city of Yiwu, known as the largest distribution center for small commodities. The United Nations, the World Bank and other international organizations have recognized the center of Yiwu as the biggest of its kind in the world. The result of that action was official invitation of the President of Jaworzno to the Chinese International Tourism Trade Fair, which was hosted by Yiwu. After his return the President emphasized in the local press that the visit to China helped deepen the understanding of Chinese politics, economic, legal, and cultural. A major goal, according to the President, is to create mutual respect and recognition of further fruitful communication and collaboration (*Prezydent i radną jadą do Chin*).

The next step was to invite representatives of the city Yiwu to Poland and sign the partnership agreement during the visit. The meeting was to exchange views on educational solutions. However, the most important issue was to determine the rules of student exchange between schools in the two cities, which is an opportunity for the students from Polish and Chinese schools to get to know different cultures (*Goście z Chin w Jaworznie*). Also, efforts have been taken to extend the

integration of these two nations. Among them should be mentioned a concert of a Chinese soprano singer, organized by the Society of Friends of Jaworzno. This concert, as a sign of a choice for a place to live and do business by the Chinese, was not without response from the residents of the city for whom it was a whole new experience. The emergence of a group of the representatives of the Chinese have its impact on the entire city, but in varying degrees. Directly it affects the Jeleń area and its population. The construction of the complex of halls significantly changed the appearance of the neighborhood and its former character. The location of the Chinese companies in Jaworzno-Jeleń resulted in greater awareness of the district, not only by the other inhabitants of the city, but also by the visitors who uses the services of "Silesia Chinese Center".

In my research I have used the information from the local press and web portals. I noted that the whole situation is assessed both positively and negatively. The president of the city assures the residents of the Polish-Chinese friendship. However, the comments on the websites are different from the assurances of the president. For me, it was the starting point for further research. I talked to the residents of the district who had direct contact with the Chinese.

The first Chinese neighbors began to come down to the district before the construction of the hall. The first contact of the Chinese with the local community started from searching house to rent. At the beginning, only a few Chinese families settled in the Jeleń district. Currently, the Chinese community is about 500 people. The appearance of the representatives of different culture in the area, initially provoked astonishment among the people. For them it was a new and unknown experience. For the first time, the local community came into contact with people beyond their well-known social group. Relying on Ryszard Kapuscinski, it can be said that it was a bilateral meeting with radically different Other. Kapuscinski says in his lectures that the term Other is used in different contexts and different meanings. To illustrate the differences in gender, religion, nationality (Kapuściński 2006: 9).

In a colloquial language, the inhabitants of Jeleń define newly arrived immigrants as "the others, different", highlighting both physical appearance and mental differences. The contact of these two such distinct groups did not remain neutral. The fact that the Chinese community have moved in to the district caused resident's extreme reactions. Both negative and positive. Among them the inhabitants mention: the desire to get to know the representatives of a new culture with which people have not had direct contact. However, these were isolated incidents. In the comments of the inhabitants mainly dominated: anxiety and fear of the new people influx. One of the consequences of the emergence of the new neighbors was the disturbance of the existing harmony and order in the district. To the Chinese moving to Jaworzno meant adapting to a different social system.

The new situation carried with the visible consequences. The beginnings of the two communities living together in one area were not easy. The first barrier that limited contact of the two groups was the language. At the beginning no one among the Chinese group knew the Polish language, even at a very basic level.

The Chinese housing tenants mentioned that they appeared with the cardboard plates saying "look flat". Translators were rather rare and only appeared at official meetings. After the police inspection in a local store, the information written in Chinese appeared indicating a ban for alcohol and cigarettes sale to juvenile. But after a short time, the signs were taken down because the date of birth in the Chinese identity card was written in Chinese, making it impossible to read for the Polish shop employees. Lack of knowledge of the Chinese language was one of the elements that had an impact on the quality of neighborhood. The communication between the Polish and the Chinese was limited only to formal issues such as: work, the use of a medical clinic, shopping. In such situations, the Chinese were accompanied by a person who knew the Polish language. Misunderstanding also led to frequent conflicts.

After two years from the appearance of the first Chinese immigrants, the language is no longer a significant obstacles for both sides, at least at a basic level, and the people can communicate with each other. Opinions of the Jeleń inhabitants about the Chinese, since their move in 2010, have changed radically. At first, the Polish were afraid of contact with a new social group, but in these mutual relations they saw opportunities for economic benefit like jobs and profits from renting flats.

The interviews I carried out have shown that for the local community the encounter with a different culture was most difficult. The same situation applies to the Chinese. However, not only was the language a problem. After some time it turned out to be the least significant difficulty. The cultural differences concern matters which make the mutual contact difficult, but not significantly affect the nature of the relationship between the Polish and Chinese such as lack of the food products known to the Chinese in local shops. The differences appear in situations which can lead to astonishment, opposition, the violation of the prevailing order or even to conflict. The difficulty for the Polish workers is a 7 day working week. In the first hall, which is now the warehouse common, working week was 6-day long, with a free Tuesday.

Approval of a different system of values and norms also have influenced the Polish-Chinese relationships. Chinese employers are reluctant to employ women who smoke, because in China a smoking woman loses men's respect and is associated with a prostitute. Unacceptable to the Chinese is violating the taboo of flesh in the form of kisses and hugs in public, which the Polish do not socially stigmatized. The residents who choose to rent flats to the Chinese are now retreating from their earlier offers accusing the Chinese people of neglect and the destruction of homes, also loud behavior at night. The complaints made by the residents of Jeleń about their new neighbors included objections that they do not respect the social norms accepted by the Polish. According to them, the Chinese, not the Polish, should adopt to the prevailing rules.

An interesting phenomenon that arose at the time of contact between the two communities, was the emergence of rumors taking the character of urban legends. Which was the result of ignorance of Chinese culture and draw on their knowledge of the stereotypes, which are not always truthful. The most frequently

repeated stereotype was a belief that Chinese eat pets. Among the inhabitants jokes about the disappearance of homeless dogs and cats began to circulate. As well as warning against eating in a Chinese restaurant. As noted by Dionisiusz Czubala, urban legends are short messages about attractive events that force you to react immediately. They are related to quasi-authentic cases but have no author, they are popular, have many versions and are focused on oral transmission (Czubala 2005: 5). But most of all, inhabitants of Jaworzno are worried that the Chinese culture supersede their own culture. A frequently repeated rumor concerns plans to purchase another land by the Chinese. This would mean that they plan to stay longer in Poland. There is also a rumor of building a block of flats by the Chinese who do not want to rent flats from the Polish. Residents did not like the idea because they fear of the Chinese ghetto in which illegal trade and crime will rise. This information was not confirmed. Representative of the Chinese community denied the rumors. In an interview for the local television it was said that the Chinese do not plan to build their homes because for the time being they are renting them from Polish families. The people who come to Chinese stores from other cities joke that the district will change into *Chinatown*. President of city emphasizes that the Chinese are the residents of the city, they only have Chinese nationality, and their assimilation goes well. The inhabitants often repeat a rumor about illegal businesses in the Chinese stores. The statement of one of the residents: *not enough people come to the store so they can't make money*. From the time when Chinese arrived, every bad situation is considered to be their fault. The Chinese are being accused of beating and theft, although there is no evidence. Soon after arriving the Chinese two night clubs were closed. The residents believe that loud behavior of the Chinese immigrants is the reason why the Polish do not want to go to discos. Notation in city strategy has caused the most controversy. The cultural center built by the inhabitants in the 1960s has become a meeting place for both Polish and Chinese. The local community has interpreted this note as a desire to sell the House of Culture. This sparked protests among the residents and resulted in official, written protest. The petition was read by a priest in the local church of the Holy Cross. You could hear that *one should not transform the native Polish cultural center "into the heart of Chinese culture"*. Persons interested in buying the cultural center knew nothing about the incident. The persons signing the petition argued their action as a result of fear of losing Polish culture to the benefit of Chinese. The aim of the petition was to stress their local and national identity. The whole situation sparked a discussion about integration of the Chinese and Polish community.

The parish priest, who read petition, explains that he has nothing against the new neighbors and evaluates the situation neither positive nor negative. However, he believes that the city council is to blame because for past two years have done nothing for integration of the two nations. The residents share the point of view of their priest, adding that they do not defend the Chinese people access to the culture. However, in their opinion, the Chinese should take integration initiative since they moved in to the Polish town and that requires them to get to know Polish culture. The officials of Jaworzno ensure that the residents should not be

afraid of the closure of the facility or narrowing its work. Nonetheless, the cultural center should be open to all residents, including the Chinese, because they are staying in the city legally. The representative of “Silesia Chinese Center” company Tingting Liu persuades that the Chinese are willing to cooperate. However, for possible cross-cultural exchange between the residents of Jaworzno and the Chinese group, first there must be a plan of some interaction (*Spór o dom kultury w Jaworznie*). After the whole situation, the people shared opinions but negative ones are much stronger. The opinion most frequently repeated by the people is that the Chinese came from a poor country where they had nothing. That is why they should be grateful to the Polish.

During the research I wondered if the community concerns are justified or not. This is undoubtedly a new situation which awoke fear. You cannot, however, be judgemental about it because fault lays neither with inhabitants nor the Chinese. It is difficult for everyone, but not without hope. Emerging stereotypes and allegations result from contact with something different and they represent a kind of defensive action. I also wonder whether it is possible for the city authorities to take an initiative which would bring the Polish and Chinese closer. Would such proposals not meet with protest, because they would be imposed, and integration itself would not be natural? Among the ideas to alleviate such a mutual concern was a project of cultural meetings which should bring closer the people as well as the customs and traditions of both cultures, or arranging a day of Polish and Chinese cuisine. So far, the projects have not been accomplished. It is worth mentioning that the children of Chinese origin who attend Polish kindergartens and schools are the easiest to assimilate, and the young people who are eager to learn the Polish language and uses the cultural offer of city, such as concerts, exhibitions, film screenings.

Meeting with Other is not only about confrontation with our own views, value systems, but is also an opportunity to reflect on our own culture. It is a possibility to self-determination. Kapuscinski wrote that Other is a mirror in which one can reflect and realize who he is (Kapuściński 2006: 36). Socializing with the Other can take different forms. From positive, recognized as a mutual exchange, understood as an opportunity to broaden views of the world, deepening knowledge, making new contacts; to negative symptoms, such as conflicts, aggression, intolerance. However, it never remains neutral. After analyzing residents opinions and press releases, it seems to me that at present we cannot determine how the Polish-Chinese neighborhood will develop and which form it would have taken. We can only speculate.

Recently, the local press informed about the sale of one of the halls planned by the Chinese investors. The press also claim that the investors are going to suspend the constructions planned for the following years. The Chinese explain their decision with market stagnation and the failure of the city to redeem the conditions of the contract. A company representative did not officially confirm that news. As with any information about the Chinese neighbors, the opinions of the Jaworzno residents were again divided. Some of them see it as a chance to leave Jeleń by the

Chinese, while others see it as the prospect of losing their jobs. During the conversations with the people I asked them how they imagine the future of the further Polish-Chinese relations. According to them, the Chinese need to sell their production facilities to the Polish companies and move out from the city. At the beginning of this year, more and more Chinese people leave the city. One of the reasons for that is a low sale of their products and lack of highways. For those who are employed in the Chinese stores, this means losing their jobs.

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