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## SPOTLIGHT

# Jaroslav Průšek (1906–1980): A Man of His Time and Place

Olga LOMOVÁ

Charles University, Czech Republic

[Olga.Lomova@ff.cuni.cz](mailto:Olga.Lomova@ff.cuni.cz)

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Czechoslovak sinologist Jaroslav Průšek (1906–1980) is recognised as the founder of the Prague School of Sinology and one of the great figures of twentieth-century European scholarship on China. He held the first chair for Chinese and Japanese languages and literature established at Charles University in Prague in 1945. Later he became director of the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, but after the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 he was purged and his work was suppressed, while at the same time interest in his pioneering work on modern Chinese literature started to grow internationally. This article will contextualise Průšek's research on Chinese literary modernity within his broader interest in history and the early vernacular story, and in his general approach to Chinese culture. This will enable us to see Průšek's 1961–1962 polemics with another great scholar of modern Chinese literature, C. T. Hsia, in broader perspective.

捷克斯洛伐克漢學家雅羅斯拉夫·普實克（Jaroslav Průšek）被公認為布拉格漢學派的奠基人，是二十世紀中國研究領域卓有成就的歐洲學者之一。1945年他成為布拉格查理大學中國和日本語言文學專業第一任教授，之後擔任捷克斯洛伐克科學院東方研究所所長。1968年蘇聯和其它四個華沙條約組織國家派軍隊入侵捷克斯洛伐克後他受到清洗，工作上遭到排擠。而與此同時，普實克對中國現代文學獨創性的研究卻越來越受到國際上的關注。本文將從普實克與中國歷史和早期白話小說的淵源及其對中國文化的整體認知來分析他對中國文學現代性的研究，以期構建一個解讀普實克與另一位偉大的中國現代文學學者夏志清（C. T. Hsia）於1961-1962年間論戰的新視角。

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**Keywords:** Jaroslav Průšek; Prague School of Sinology; Chinese literature studies; C.T. Hsia

**關鍵詞：**雅羅斯拉夫·普實克，布拉格漢學派，中國文學研究，夏志清

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Much has been written about Průšek<sup>1</sup> by his students and friends, mostly in the spirit of homage to a great master.<sup>2</sup> Recently, there has been an upsurge of interest in his work among younger scholars, particularly in China and Taiwan, driven mainly by his ground-breaking research into the origins of modern Chinese literature, and his questioning of the May Fourth paradigm of imported modernity and the complete break away from domestic tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Průšek is remembered primarily as a scholar of modern Chinese literature, but he was a historian by training and in his broader scholarly outlook. In his work, he also touched on diverse fields and topics, such as linguistics, art history, Confucianism, the invention of gunpowder, and contemporary politics. Besides modern literature, he mainly researched the vernacular literature of the Song and Yuan dynasties, and early Chinese history. In his native Czech environment, he is also remembered as a fine translator of Chinese literature who attracted a broad readership.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank my teacher Zlata Černá, a former student of Jaroslav Průšek and later his collaborator at the Oriental Institute, for sharing her memories and insight into Průšek's scholarship. Research for this article was supported by the European Regional Development Fund Project "Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World" (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16\_019/0000734) and by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation International Sinological Centre at Charles University.

<sup>2</sup> For example Gálik 1998, Gálik 2010, Doleželová-Velingerová 2006. There were two decisive voices shaping the distinct face of the Prague school, that of Leo Ou-fan Lee and of Milena Doleželová-Velingerová. Průšek's lasting impact on Chinese literature studies internationally was made possible by Leo Lee, who edited an anthology of articles about modern literature published in the year of Průšek's death (Lee 1980). It is to the credit of Leo Lee's congenial spirit that he prepared an excellent selection, which displayed the best and most inspiring of Průšek's scholarship. See also his informative foreword (Lee 1980), in which he summarises Průšek's unique contribution to the field. Průšek's student Milena Doleželová-Velingerová (1932–2012), who after 1968 emigrated, first to the United States and then to Canada, carried on the work of her teacher and further contributed to its visibility (Doleželová-Velingerová 1980; see also Doleželová-Velingerová, Král, & Sanders 2001).

<sup>3</sup> However, it should be mentioned that some of Průšek's lesser-known publications about the origins of Chinese literary modernity offer somewhat contradictory arguments, and he sometimes also used the conventional May Fourth narrative. He did this most often in the introductions to larger synthetic works, such as Průšek 1967b, 113–121. Průšek mostly presents the standard May Fourth narrative also in his introduction to the ground-breaking collection of articles about modern Chinese literature written by his students and published in Berlin in 1964, despite individual observations to the contrary scattered throughout the text (Průšek 1964a). (The Introduction had in fact already been written in 1961.)

<sup>4</sup> For full a bibliography, see Šíma & Palát 1994. The denomination of the "Prague School of Sinology" started to be used in modern Chinese literature studies from the late 1970s, and was adopted also by scholars in other fields such as early vernacular fiction and drama (e.g. Mair 1989). Prague sinologists themselves were hardly aware of it until after 1989, when regular communication between the former Eastern Bloc and the West was re-established. With the explosion of modern Chinese literature studies during the 1990s, new theories and methodologies gradually came to dominate the field, and the younger generation of scholars does not necessarily refer directly to Průšek and the "Prague school". On the other hand it is essential for scholars elaborating on the "lyrical tradition" (Chen &

## Studies of modern literature

Průšek belonged to what Leo Ou-fan Lee called “the era of giants”.<sup>5</sup> He started his sinological explorations in the late 1930s, at a time when research about China was still largely an exclusive discipline that attracted only a few original, unconventional minds. After 1945, when he became professor at Charles University in Prague, the broad area of China-related studies was only beginning to diversify, and many scholars of Průšek’s generation, himself included, did research in several disciplines simultaneously.

Průšek is best known as a scholar who pioneered scholarship on modern Chinese literature, a field that until then had hardly been worked on in academic sinology. His early translations<sup>6</sup> and articles for non-specialist readers aside, he presented his first research paper dealing with modern Chinese literature in 1956 at the Ninth Junior Sinologues Conference held in Paris. It was his still well-known “Subjectivism and Individualism in Modern Chinese Literature”, in which he elevated research on modern Chinese literature to an unprecedented theoretical level, brought a radically new perspective on understanding Chinese literary modernity, and began to theorise about the “lyrical tradition” of Chinese culture (Průšek 1957).

The originality of Průšek’s approach, which helped pave the way for a new perspective on Chinese literary modernity beyond the prevailing paradigm of modernisation and Westernisation, was anchored in the structuralist (functionalist) theories of the Prague Linguistic Circle, namely the literary theory of Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975). Průšek joined this group during the early years of the Nazi occupation and in June 1939 presented there his research on early vernacular stories.<sup>7</sup> Through the Prague Linguistic Circle, Průšek also embraced the ideas of Russian formalism as interpreted by Viktor

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Wang 2014, Wang 2015), and it is becoming increasingly well-known in the Chinese speaking world (e.g. Yuan Zhe forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> In an interview with the former Czech underground literary journal *Revolver Revue* (Hála 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Together with his first wife, Vlasta Novotná, who later became professor of Japanology at Charles University, he produced a collection of eight of Lu Xun’s stories in Czech translation in 1937 (Lu Hsün 1937).

<sup>7</sup> In December 1948 Průšek gave another talk for the Prague Linguistic Circle, this time on verb aspect in Chinese. On Průšek in the Prague Linguistic Circle see records in Vachek 1999, 108.

Shklovsky (1893–1984) in his book *Theory of Prose*.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Průšek acquired an interest in the “artistic methods and devices” of modern writers, and on this basis contemplated the affinities between the writings of Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), Yu Dafu 郁達夫 (1896–1945), the young Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986), and others blending narration with lyrical elements, and contemporary avant-garde experiments breaking with the classical nineteenth-century literary forms. As a result, Průšek placed lyrical elements at the centre of his theorising on Chinese literary modernity (mainly Průšek 1957, 1964b, 1969a, 1969b).<sup>9</sup> “Chinese lyricism” is without a doubt Průšek’s most productive idea: it has inspired original scholarship about modern Chinese literature (most recently Wang 2015) and resonates within the broader discussion held in the Chinese-speaking world about the Chinese lyrical tradition (*shuqing chuantong* 抒情傳統), starting with articles by Ch’en Shih-hsiang 陳世驥 (1912–1971) and Kao Yu-kung 高友工 (1929–2016) in the early 1970s.<sup>10</sup> However, I wish to dedicate this article to other, less known but equally important aspects of Průšek’s scholarship.

## History of the ancient world

Despite his contribution to literary studies, Průšek did not originally study literature, but history. He initially considered writing his dissertation on Byzantine contacts with the East, particularly with the nomads on the steppes of Eurasia. This focus sparked his interest in relevant Chinese-language sources. As there was no way to study Chinese language in Prague, he applied for a scholarship to study abroad, and by coincidence eventually travelled to Sweden to study with Bernhard Karlgren (1879–1978). The

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<sup>8</sup> The book was first published in Russian in 1925. It was translated into Czech and published in 1933 (Šklovskij 1933) by Bohumil Mathesius, with whom Průšek later collaborated on translations of Chinese poetry into Czech.

<sup>9</sup> Also collected in Průšek 1980a. For good summaries of Průšek’s theory of Chinese lyricism, see Chan 2008, Chen & Wang 2014, and Wang 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Chen & Wang 2014 collect the most important Chinese-language contributions to this discussion and also include a Chinese translation of the individualism and subjectivism article. On the lyrical tradition as formulated by Ch’en Shih-hsiang, see Ch’en 1971 and Chan 2011. David Wang in his latest monograph (2015) brings new perspectives on ideas about Chinese lyricism, including Průšek’s. For a critical evaluation of discussions about the Chinese lyrical tradition, see *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Literature* 2009.

thorough philological training he received from the Swedish scholar would form the core of his own future scholarship. Studying under Karlgren also prompted Průšek to embrace Sinology as his future research topic. (Besides Karlgren, Průšek also briefly studied classical Chinese language and history under Sinologists Gustav Haloun [1898–1951], Eduard Erkes [1891–1958], and Erich Hänisch [1880–1966] in Halle and Leipzig.)<sup>11</sup>

In 1932, after Průšek had defended his dissertation about the role of the Di tribes in early Chinese history (Průšek 1932), he travelled to China with the aim of collecting sources for further research about Chinese history, to improve his reading skills of ancient texts, and to seek advice from Chinese scholars. His nearly two-year-long sojourn in Beijing proved to be a transformative experience for him and stimulated his future research interests and general approach to Chinese literature.<sup>12</sup>

This change notwithstanding, Průšek remained a historian at heart, and also in his teaching. After he started to teach at Charles University in 1945,<sup>13</sup> he taught classes on Chinese and East Asian history offered to students of Sinology, Korean Studies, and Japanology, as well as to students of world history. In addition he taught seminars which included exegesis of texts “in the written language”. His students remember reading masterpieces of fiction in classical Chinese (see below), but the archival material reveals the primary preoccupation of these seminars with “historical texts”, including *Zuozhuan* 左傳. In the academic year 1948/49 *Zhuangzi* 莊子 is announced as the text to be read in the seminar. Only once, in the academic year 1950/51, Průšek

<sup>11</sup> He also took classes on Japanese language with André Wedemeyer (1875–1958), used Japanese in his research, and can also be regarded as the co-founder of Japanology in Czechoslovakia after 1945.

<sup>12</sup> Průšek describes his experience in Beijing in his memoir, the poetically titled *My Sister China* (first Czech edition Průšek 1940). See also Lomová forthcoming 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Průšek held a position at Charles University for only eight years (1945–1953), when due to health reasons he withdrew from the university and concentrated his efforts on building up the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences. However, he still continued teaching Chinese history and seminars for advanced students (including reading classical texts “for alumni”) as an external teacher. It is little known that Průšek was also a pioneering figure in Japanology and taught reading courses on Japanese literature comprising Ihara Saikaku’s (1642–1693) *Koshoku gonin onna*, fiction by modern Japanese authors Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892–1927) and Jun’ichirō Tanizaki (1886–1965), as well as traditional drama, both the Noh, and the comic *kyōgen*. In the first years after East Asian studies were set up at Charles University, Průšek also taught courses on Chinese and Japanese language. Later these were taught by his former students. (Information according to *Seznam přednášek [Book of Courses]* published for individual academic years and held in the Charles University Archive.)

announced that *Shuihu Zhuan* 水滸傳 would be read as part of his “linguistic seminar”.<sup>14</sup>

Students who took history classes with Průšek remember how he provided them with a detailed overview of the political, economic, social, and cultural history of China, painting a single complex, vivid picture of the Chinese past. During his first year at the university, he started to lecture on the beginnings of ancient Chinese civilisation, progressing chronologically, to arrive after eight years at the Ten Kingdoms, when he abruptly stopped teaching due to health reasons. His examinations (conducted orally) were the stuff of legend. He demanded from his students such detailed knowledge about Chinese history that it would take several hours, sometimes even a whole day, before he was satisfied with the answers.<sup>15</sup>

In preparation for his lectures, Průšek worked on his own teaching material, partly preserved in the form of manuscript notes taken in preparation for the classes.<sup>16</sup> Only one slim volume of his *History of China* was published in the Czech language as course material intended for his students (Průšek 1963a). Some of his lecture notes may also have been used for a book on the Song and Yuan dynasties prepared by Průšek’s former student and collaborator Augustin Palát (1923–2016) and first published in Italian translation only after Průšek’s death (Prusek & Palat 1983).<sup>17</sup>

Průšek never abandoned his original interest in the role of nomadic tribes in early Chinese history. He continuously followed developments in this small field within Sinology, published review articles about relevant research, and eventually dedicated to this topic the last monograph published during his life, based on his 1932 dissertation (Průšek 1971). In the book titled *Chinese Statelets and the Northern Barbarians 1400-*

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<sup>14</sup> See *Seznam přednášek (Book of Courses)* published for individual academic years and held in the Charles University Archive.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication, Zlata Černá. Průšek’s other students remember this as well (Slupski 2006, Šejnohová 2006).

<sup>16</sup> The manuscripts (dated 1963) are preserved in the Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences. See Mádlová & Palát 2011, 55.

<sup>17</sup> A Czech edition of the book appeared in 2001 thanks to generous support from the Taiwan-based Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation (Palát & Průšek 2001).

300 *B.C.*, links to the work of his teachers Karlgren and Haloun are visible, but Průšek also includes a comprehensive overview of the findings of Chinese and Soviet scholars. As in other areas of his research, Průšek provides here detailed analyses of textual evidence, asks general theoretical questions, polemicalises with the existing scholarship, and formulates his own hypothesis.

The book was published shortly after Průšek's forced retirement from the Oriental Institute and was pulled from circulation in Czechoslovakia soon afterwards. Průšek was accused by the authorities of launching a veiled attack on the people of the Soviet Union by calling the ancient nomads who inhabited Central Asia "barbarians". As such the book had to be banned.<sup>18</sup>

Průšek's monograph received an enthusiastic review from Jacques Gernet (1973). Owen Lattimore (1974) welcomed the book because it "carries us to a point beyond which it is difficult to progress further by the searching of texts" (p. 562), and Herbert Franke (1973) praised it as "an exemplary work how to exploit maximum what can be gained from the laconic sources with the help of strong philological method" (p. 506). Wolfgang Eberhard (1975), however, did not approve of Průšek's hypothesis and criticised the lack of unity in the book, its overreliance on PRC scholarship, and its overlooking of some other research. Despite his criticism, Eberhard also admitted the importance of the book: "Yet, everybody who is working on problems of Shang and Chou times will have to read this book, and I am sure it will provoke much discussion. And discussion ultimately will lead to clarity" (p. 525). This discussion is still on-going, and Victor Mair today regards Průšek's book as "a great work for its time and still relevant" and points out that "recent findings in archaeology, genetics, linguistics, and other fields have all served to support his fundamental positions."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Personal communication, Zlata Černá, June 12, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> E-mail communication, June 11, 2021. I further quote V. Mair from the e-mail: "In my estimation, I believe that this prescient volume has been unfairly neglected because the field of Sinology simply didn't have scholars of sufficient breadth of learning to comprehend what Průšek was doing in his book: explicating in a deeply meaningful way the nature of the interaction between the settled, Sinitic people of the Yellow River Valley and the nomadic groups of the steppe. Průšek's philology is sound and his historical investigations are thorough."

As a historian of ancient China, Průšek also produced a pioneering comparative study of Chinese and Western historiography. In 1961 he presented a paper at the International Council for Philosophy and Humanities Studies conference in Tokyo, later published in *Diogenes* (Průšek 1963b),<sup>20</sup> in which he compares Sima Qian's 司馬遷 *Shiji* 史記 and Herodotus' *History*. This is to my knowledge the first attempt to consider the nature of Chinese historiography through the specific formal features of its narration. Průšek explores the different narrative structures and epistemic claims of ancient Chinese and Greek historiography, which he further confronts with the narration and understanding of the values and nature of truth in Chinese belles-lettres, both traditional and modern. As he writes at the beginning of the study, his interest goes beyond different ways of writing history; through his analysis of this specific case he intends to arrive at a more general conclusion about the nature of Chinese culture, namely, to show that "the specific thought pattern, specific perception of reality, intrinsic to a specific cultural category – that which is the predominant one in the given cultural complex – influences all other categories and determines their nature" (Průšek 1970, 17).

As in his literary studies, here Průšek borrows ideas from Shklovsky and Russian avant-garde literature, and through contextualised formalistic analysis of the *Shiji* eventually arrives at a specific understanding of the individual and the community in China and in the West. Průšek frames his generalisation about Chinese collectivism in the concept of Oriental despotism much discussed in Marxist historiography of the time. He claims that this socio-economic formation was preserved in China until modern times, and raises a highly speculative opinion about some kind of natural relationship between the pre-modern social structure of "primitive communities" in the sense of Marx's description of Oriental despotism, and the easy adoption of Marxism-Leninism in the country (Průšek 1970, 34).

The article testifies to its author's spirit of theory-driven research and methodological innovation, as well as his predilection for formalist text analysis and sensitivity to philological details. Important questions are asked, including ones about methodology,

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<sup>20</sup> Reprinted in Průšek 1970, pp. 17–34.



and original insights provided, for which the article is worth re-visiting, despite the speculative conclusions that no longer hold water in light of our current knowledge of early Chinese history, as well as of modern Chinese society and the application of Marxism-Leninism in the PRC.

### “Medieval” vernacular literature

Before Průšek arrived in Beijing in late 1932, his interest in China was shaped by European imaginings of its ancient, exotic, and ageless civilisation. This is apparent in his memoir, *My Sister China*, but also in his prefaces to books of translations of Chinese poetry popular among Czech readers during World War II and afterwards.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, during his stay in Beijing, Průšek witnessed with fascination the process of modernisation of ancient culture and admired what he understood as the fruitful co-existence of domestic tradition and Westernisation. In Beijing he also began to share the intellectual preoccupations of contemporary Chinese scholars, with some of whom he established personal contacts, most notably Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958).<sup>22</sup>

Průšek’s most exciting new discovery in Beijing was early vernacular literature, which he referred to as “medieval”.<sup>23</sup> Considering the long period Průšek spent researching this one topic and the number of publications he dedicated to it over a long period of time, this must have been the most important area of inquiry for him.<sup>24</sup> Průšek de-

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<sup>21</sup> In *My Sister China*, first published in 1940, Průšek records his sojourn in Beijing (at that time Beiping) in 1932–1934 (for English translation see Průšek 2002; in Chinese, Pu Shike 2005). On Průšek’s fascination with ancient and ageless Chinese culture see also Lomová & Zádrapová 2016a and 2016b.

<sup>22</sup> On Průšek and Zheng Zhenduo, see Lomová forthcoming 2022.

<sup>23</sup> In his choice of the term *medieval* Průšek follows the Marxist historical materialism model of a sequence of socio-economic formations in which the medieval (i.e., “feudal”) period precedes the modern (bourgeois, eventually followed by socialist) period. Průšek uses such terminology throughout his writings.

<sup>24</sup> Průšek wrote his two first research articles published in 1938 on the vernacular story (Průšek 1938a, 1938b), as well as his last article, which appeared in the year of his death (Černá 1980).

scribes how early vernacular literature attracted him with its dramatic plots, its portrayals of ordinary people and their everyday lives, and its skilful narration, all of which paint a vivid picture of the past. Průšek also witnessed performances by professional storytellers in Beijing, which reinforced his conviction about the living tradition of ancient Chinese culture.

Beginning with his first two substantial research articles published in 1938, Průšek throughout his life explored various aspects of mostly Song and Yuan *huaben* 話本 stories and some later *baihua* literature as well. At the beginning, he followed his Chinese and Japanese mentors, and used methods of source criticism to identify the genealogies of the earliest existing stories and suggest their dating. However, he soon broadened his approach, also examining the social environment in which the early vernacular stories were created and consumed, as well as their narrative structure and the stylistic devices they employed. It is important to note that Průšek understood all these aspects as interconnected and their research as mutually supporting each other in the quest to answer general questions about the genre and its place in Chinese and world literature or in the processes governing genre development over long periods of time in the most general sense.<sup>25</sup>

As a literary and cultural historian, Průšek emphasised objective “scientific” knowledge about large historical processes. His theoretical framework was Marxist, and he understood new literary phenomena as resulting from social developments: in the case of *huaben*, from the rise of cities during the Song and Yuan dynasties as sources of economic production, the formation of an urban class of merchants and artisans, and the creation of a related urban culture. He also emphasised the progressive nature of the urban class and its democratising potential, and spoke about vernacular genres as bringing into full flowering the creativity of underprivileged classes and being a driving force in the history of Chinese literature.

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<sup>25</sup> See Průšek 1939, Průšek 1967a. Průšek’s other research on the topic is conveniently gathered in Průšek 1970. For a full bibliography, see Šíma & Palát 1994, which includes also his literary translations and essays on the topic in the Czech language.

In his research on early vernacular stories Průšek embraced the May Fourth paradigm of their popular (Průšek uses the word *folk*, which may sometimes be misleading) origins and interpreted them as expressions of a new literary vitality coming from the people, who in their literary production invigorated the petrified literati tradition. At the same time, he did not just copy the historical narratives of Chinese scholars, whom he very much respected. In his research on the social history of the vernacular story, he combined the study of the socio-economic environment and artistic production with his interest in narrative structures, “artistic methods”, and “artistic devices”. Průšek understood both aspects of the stories – social and artistic – as mutually interdependent, and explored through these their epistemic value and specific relationship to reality. In this approach he was following the theories of Prague structuralism and Russian formalism.

In 1942 Průšek published a short Czech monograph on the vernacular story in which he provided a holistic, comparative view of the Chinese “medieval” story (Průšek 1942). He developed here a complex, sophisticated view of the genre, taking into account the whole variety of both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects. He would later develop the same ideas in some of his English-language research published after the war.

After the Communist takeovers in Czechoslovakia (1948) and in China (1949) and with the start of the Cold War, Průšek took his previous research about the early vernacular story in a new, and today mostly forgotten, direction (which still resonates in his harsh 1963 review of C.T. Hsia’s book). He dedicated a book-length monograph to “new literature” from the “Liberated Areas” written in accordance with Mao’s Yan’an Forum dogma (Průšek 1953).<sup>26</sup> Here Průšek presents stories, novels, plays, and poetry written for “workers, peasants, and soldiers” and devotes particular attention to literature based on folk storytelling, that is, employing what Mao called “old forms” (*jiu xingshi* 舊形式) favoured by the masses to spread Communist propaganda.<sup>27</sup> In terms of fiction, Průšek extols peasant stories by Zhao Shuli 趙樹理 (1906–

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<sup>26</sup> For a German version, see Průšek 1955.

<sup>27</sup> Mao Zedong’s Yan’an Forum speeches were translated into Czech (for the first Czech edition, see Mao Ce-tung 1950), and so was Zhou Yang’s 1949 elaboration on Mao’s theory from the First Congress of Workers in Literature

1970) and novels about the Anti-Japanese War such as *Lǚliang yingxiong zhuan* 呂梁英雄傳 (Story of the Lü-liang heroes) and *Xin er nü yingxiong zhuan* 新兒女英雄傳 (A New Tale of Heroic Sons and Daughters) and enthusiastically presents them as direct continuations of Song and Yuan stories and novels.<sup>28</sup> Průšek also presents novels written in a Westernised manner, like Ding Ling's *Taiyang zhao zai Sangganhe shang* 太陽照在桑干河上 (The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River) and Zhou Libo's 周立波 *Baofeng zhouyu* 暴風驟雨 (The Hurricane).<sup>29</sup> However, his main interest is in literature modelled after folk storytelling, which he presents as the creative development of a superior Chinese tradition, “a direct continuation of such masterpieces as the *Shuihu Zhuan* 水滸傳”. Surprisingly, for a scholar who three years later would emphasise “subjectivism and individualism” as the driving forces in Chinese literary modernity, Průšek in this book fully approved Mao's Yan'an dogma, interpreting it as a ground-breaking theory that would bring unprecedented progress in modern Chinese literature.

It would be easy to explain away this book (among other clichés of the time, Průšek also dedicated the monograph to Stalin) as a product of what I would call early-Cold War “confusion of minds”, or perhaps as the result of oppressive ideology forcing Průšek to adapt his writing to the prescribed theory of socialist realism. I believe it is not as simple as that; rather, I would suggest Průšek fell victim to his liking of grand theories, respect for Chinese literary historians' evolutionary concept of the role of popular genres in the progress toward literary modernity, belief in the continuity of ancient Chinese culture, and purely aesthetic enthusiasm for early vernacular literature as a specific type of artistic expression. Průšek supports his interpretation of the vitality

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and Art (Čou Jang 1950). Zhou Yang actually stressed the importance of the “old” (also “national”) forms beyond Mao's original idea (Luo Siliang 2019). The early Czech translations prepared by Průšek's students (see below) illustrate the keen interest among Czechoslovak intellectuals in new China.

<sup>28</sup> Zhao Shuli's stories were used as reading materials in Chinese-language courses taught at Charles University in Prague in the late 1940s, and a selection of translations by students was published, accompanied by Průšek's extensive study of the author (Džao Šu-li 1951). One of Průšek's students translated *A New Tale of Heroic Sons and Daughters*, and the book was published with Průšek's essay about the book and its literary merit (Jūan Tīng & Kchung Tūe 1953).

<sup>29</sup> Both novels were translated into Czech; Průšek wrote an Introduction for Zhou Lipo's novel (Ting Ling 1951; Džou Li-pcho 1951).

and artistic maturity of the new revolutionary literature in “national forms” (*minzu xingshi* 民族形式) with a formalistic analysis in which he demonstrates the presence of ancient narrative techniques. Continuity of tradition and its affinity to modernist forms of literary expression, which Průšek observes in the case of this literature for the masses, are on a more general level also the focus of his most cutting-edge research about Chinese literary modernity.

The study of early vernacular literature has evolved substantially since the 1960s, and newer research has departed from many of Průšek’s hypotheses and conclusions.<sup>30</sup> In addition, I would note that modern Chinese literature developed differently from what Průšek expected from the promotion of “national forms”. Glen Dudbridge in his review of a 1970 collection of Průšek’s research articles, in which studies of early vernacular literature form a substantial part, perceptively observes that these are “pioneering contributions to a new field in western sinology; reread now, they belong unmistakably to a generation of research whose assumptions and procedures have more recently been tested, questioned and often found wanting” (Dudbridge 1972, p. 100). Nevertheless, Průšek’s perceptive reading and his formal analysis (as much as his masterly translations into Czech) remain a lasting contribution to the study of this genre, even if his dating has been proven mistaken, the relationship between literati and “folk” authorship much more complicated, this genre’s role in Chinese literary modernity not very relevant, and the whole idea of “world literature” and teleological progress in literary history abandoned.

## Philology and literary translation

As mentioned, Průšek was primarily a historian, both by training and in his approach to a variety of research topics. But he was also a philologist, a man of literature, and a connoisseur of modernist literary experiments who understood language not only as a

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<sup>30</sup> For evaluation of Průšek’s pioneering yet dated contribution, see Hegel 1994, or the review of Průšek’s collected studies by Goodrich 1975. Particularly critical about Průšek is Ma 1974.

medium of communication but also as a message itself. Průšek's explorations of Chinese history and his broad generalisations were at the same time inseparable from his meticulous research in primary sources involving philological work as he learnt it from the older generation of sinologists. He practiced this approach as a teacher as well. His students remember classes dedicated to reading tales in classical Chinese (Tang *chuanqi* 傳奇 and Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 *Liaozhai* 聊齋 stories), in which Průšek paid attention to very minor linguistic details, at the same time contextualising them within his detailed knowledge about material culture and providing additional historical data, and through this seemingly dry philological exercise bringing out the richness of the literary art (Ślupski 2006, p. 84).<sup>31</sup>

Průšek's philological training and appreciation of literary qualities led him to the translation of Chinese literature. His first published translation was a selection of Lu Xun's short stories (Lu Hsün 1937), but later, with the exception of Mao Dun's 茅盾 *Ziye* 子夜 (Mao Tun 1950), he translated only traditional genres. Besides Confucius' *Lunyu* 論語 (Konfucius 1940),<sup>32</sup> *Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法 (Sun-c' 1949), and several volumes of Tang poetry prepared in collaboration with Bohumil Mathesius (all translations most probably commissioned by the publishers), Průšek translated four books of his own choosing: the already-mentioned anthology of *huaben* stories (*Po-divuhodné příběhy* 1947 [1954, 1964, 1991]), Shen Fu's *Fu sheng liu ji* 浮生六記 (Šen Fu 1944 [1956]), a selection from Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhi yi* 聊齋誌異 (Pchu Sung-ling 1955 [1963, 2004]), and Liu E's 劉鶚 novel *Lao Can youji* 老殘遊記 (Liu O 1947 [1960]). Second and sometimes third and fourth editions testify to the popularity of these books.

Průšek's translation work reveals philological exactness and at the same time his indisputable literary talent. He provides his translations with copious annotations in the endnotes and explanatory essays, and each translation can also be read as an original

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<sup>31</sup> Zbigniew Ślupski later became professor at the University of Warsaw. Taking classes with Průšek had a lasting impact on his own research. In commemoration of his teacher, he eventually published Polish translations of selections from Pu Songling (Pu Songling 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Průšek was not content with this translation and bemoaned the lack of secondary sources available when working on it during the war. New editions appeared long after his death (1995, 2010).

exploration of Chinese history and culture. Yet at the same time the translator pays maximum attention to the literary qualities of the work he is translating, that is, its specific narrative structure, language, and style, even the sentence cadence, and makes all possible effort to convey the unique flavour of the Chinese original. This approach is informed by his formalistic interest in meaningful “artistic devices”. As a result, he never adapts his translations to the narrative conventions of European literature. While preserving all these formal features, he succeeds in writing in a captivating manner, offering his readers enjoyment of both the story and the form. Much in the spirit of the theory of his younger contemporary Jiří Levý (1969), who formulated a new theory of translation,<sup>33</sup> Průšek’s translations are both exact and well written, in other words, a pleasure to read.

For Průšek, translation was not just a matter of providing the general public with works of Chinese literature. Translation was an integral part of Průšek’s research work: it enabled him to gain a deeper understanding of the literary work he translated and simultaneously researched into. As he admitted in the foreword to his 1970 collected studies: “I also discovered that one can only say something of substance about a foreign literary work when one has translated it and so made intimate and tangible contact with its artistic structure and style” (Průšek 1970, 6). Because translation and research were inseparable, work on translations eventually led to research articles published as introductions or postfaces to his translations that were sometimes later developed into research articles published internationally.<sup>34</sup>

## **Defence of China, scientific study of literature, and polemics with C. T. Hsia**

When studying Chinese literature, both early vernacular and May Fourth period modern belles-lettres, one of the questions Průšek repeatedly asked was comparative in

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<sup>33</sup> Levý 1963 (in Czech). In German Levý 1969, in English Levý 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Some of these are gathered in Průšek 1970.

nature: what are the differences and commonalities between Chinese and European material? This question is already present in his 1942 Czech monograph about the vernacular story, where Průšek writes: “The study of Chinese culture is of special interest to the European. In this we can not only discover an utterly alien and distinctive culture that has developed on a different basis, generally without closer contacts with our culture, but mainly we gain here the opportunity [to acquire] new perspectives on various aspects of European culture” (Průšek 1942, 5).

Part and parcel of his comparisons and discoveries of differences to better understand ourselves was Průšek’s passionate insistence on the equality of cultures and his defence of Chinese culture against Western bias that might diminish its achievements. Průšek was in principle a universalist; he subscribed to the Marxist concept of universal historical development evolving through basically the same sequence of socio-economic formations and in this process achieving the gradual (and in times of revolutions sudden) emancipation of human beings. But Průšek simultaneously insisted on the uniqueness of Chinese culture and passionately rejected any idea of Western primacy. His personal attachment to China is visible already in the title of his 1940 memoir, *My Sister China*, and his efforts to secure China a dignified position vis-à-vis the West are also present in his early popular articles about Chinese culture published in Czech magazines and newspapers in the 1930s. His innovative approach to modern Chinese literature mentioned above also involved a strong conviction about the maturity of modern Chinese literature as compared to Western modernism. And in the last article he prepared for publication and dedicated to the comparative study of the vernacular story in the Song and Yuan eras and Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (Černá 1980) he even asserts in some respects the superiority of the Chinese stories over Boccaccio’s anecdotes.<sup>35</sup>

This last article deserves attention as a well-argued case in which all Průšek’s sinological concerns and his methodology are present. Průšek bases this comparative study

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<sup>35</sup> The article was published under the name of his student Zlata Černá because Průšek was prohibited from publishing after 1970. An English version was originally published in *New Orient Bimonthly* in 1968 and republished in Průšek 1970. Citations from the article follow Průšek 1970.



on a close reading of selected Chinese and Italian stories to demonstrate that the Chinese stories were in some sense more advanced than Boccaccio's "mere anecdotes", despite their unique position in European literary history as foundational texts of the Italian Renaissance. Behind this argument we can perceive a challenge to notions of European progress and Chinese backwardness. Průšek applies the Marxist evolutionary and emancipatory perspective, together with the yardstick of "realism" as a "progressive" artistic form, to point to the more thorough, sophisticated description of everyday life in Chinese stories, including the skilful handling of the psychology of the main protagonists coming from low strata of society, unlike Boccaccio's lack of concrete settings and use of largely stock figures characterised "in the manner of *commedia de l'arte*" (Průšek 1970, 453).<sup>36</sup> This detailed, thoughtful analysis with many interesting insights serves his point that Chinese fiction from Song and Yuan dynasty cities "was in no way behind similar literary genres produced in comparable conditions in the west" (Průšek 1970, 466). He even claims that the Chinese writers of this period "seem to have foreshadowed the principles of European literary realism evolved by the nineteenth century" (Průšek 1970, 459) and speaks about the uniqueness of Chinese stories in world literature of the time. These remarks reveal the general contours of Průšek's exploration of Chinese literature, aimed at challenging the unequal position of Chinese literature in the area of "world literature", which in his time was almost exclusively occupied by masterpieces of European origin.

The article also illustrates well Průšek's "scientific approach" based on the analysis of literary devices, which eventually led to epistemological issues. His analysis simultaneously takes into account the socio-economic dimension of the production and consumption of literary work. On this basis, Průšek asks general questions and aims at formulating general laws of literary development. In the introduction to a 1961 collection of pioneering articles about mostly Republican literature, he presents the same

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<sup>36</sup> Průšek's argument about realism in relation to the position of ordinary people in literature is strikingly similar to the core argument developed by Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) in *Mimesis*. Průšek does not mention this book among his sources, but he most certainly knew it, as the Czech translation was published in 1968, and the book was widely discussed among Czech literary historians.

complex understanding of the “scientific research of literature”, starting with a close reading and aspiring to discover general laws.<sup>37</sup>

The same thoughts about the scientific study of literary history and the achievements of Chinese culture are reflected in Průšek’s notoriously critical review of *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* by C. T. Hsia published one year later (Průšek 1962). Reading this review today, one cannot help sympathising with C. T. Hsia, as Průšek attacks him indiscriminately as “dogmatic”, “intolerant”, and even “offensive to human dignity”.<sup>38</sup> I understand this review as a product of the Cold War and perhaps also of Průšek’s personal frustration given the political situation in China and the world at that time. He reproaches the Chinese-American scholar for the “satisfying of extrinsic political standards” and criticises his anti-Communist bias (while Průšek believed that his own Communist persuasion was in accordance with the objective laws of history and conformed to “scientific truth”). Průšek claims that Hsia is wrong in his evaluation of modern Chinese literature, because due to his “ideological prejudice” he does not understand the role of literature in the revolutionary process.

Průšek directs most of his criticism at Hsia for lacking objectivity and a “scientific basis for evaluation of literature”. This, in Průšek’s view, means the absence of a historical perspective informed by the Marxist understanding of the historical process in which “literature in its content reflects the period when it was created”, which means that in time of revolution the most appropriate literature is dedicated to revolution. Due to this lack of the “correct” understanding of the historical position and role of literature, claims Průšek, Hsia “wrongly” insists that disinterested moral exploration is the true measure of literary greatness, and dismisses the work of some of the Communist writers as mere propaganda. At the same time Průšek reproaches Hsia for not paying enough attention to the “creative methods” shared by authors of a certain period in order to grasp what Průšek calls “the period style”. This criticism also involves lack of admiration in C. T. Hsia’s book for Průšek’s favourite fiction in “national forms”.

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<sup>37</sup> The book was published later, but the introduction is dated 1961 (Průšek 1964a).

<sup>38</sup> This refers to C. T. Hsia’s remark about Ding Ling’s personal relations.

Průšek is convinced about the relationships between the social role and artistic form of literature and the social and historical conditions in which it was created. An exploration of these connections and “objectively” describing them are things that Průšek finds missing in Hsia’s work, and this, according to Průšek, prevents Hsia from seeing the “originality and maturity” of modern Chinese literature and makes him “incapable of justly evaluating the function and mission of literature in a given period, of correctly grasping and showing its historical role” (Průšek 1962, quoted from Lee 1980, p. 198). Průšek combines his criticism of Hsia’s lack of understanding of the historical situatedness of literature with a personal micro-analysis of the works of several authors about whom in his opinion Hsia presents a “purely subjective” opinion. Instead, Průšek proposes what he believes is a more objective description and also presents his methodology for how to achieve such objectivity based on contextualised formal analysis.

Another source of Průšek’s ire is Hsia’s judgements of the literary qualities of individual Chinese authors based on comparisons with Western literary achievements. In these evaluations Hsia often finds Chinese literature to lack maturity as compared to the great works of the Western literary canon. Here Průšek’s passion for historical justice for Chinese authors comes to the forefront.

Altogether Průšek’s attack is not fair, and his own evaluations of modern Chinese literature include claims that are hard to justify in terms of “objectivity”. The most striking examples would be his highly positive assessment of Zhao Shuli’s stories or of Ding Ling’s novel *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River*, which contrast with his dismissal of the literary qualities of works by authors such as Shen Congwen 沈從文 (1902–1988) or Eileen Chang 張愛玲 (1920–1995). It is possible that due to the Cold War Průšek did not have access to Eileen Chang’s work. However, the case of Shen Congwen is a riddle. Shen was Průšek’s close friend during his stay in Beijing, and Průšek, as a literary connoisseur who admired modernism, must have appreciated the qualities of Shen Congwen’s fiction, especially when compared to socialist realism.

This scathing review is not without merit. Průšek is in a sense right in that Hsia’s book reflects his personal tastes and does not attempt to explore the history of modern Chinese fiction in its complexity. However, Průšek betrays his own claim of “objectivity”

when he does not question the simplified Marxist “scientific outlook” on the laws of history. As a result, Průšek’s effort is devalued by his failure to discriminate between ideology and theoretical thinking about literature as both social practice and art in the historical process.

Hsia wrote an eloquent reply to Průšek’s militant review (Hsia 1963; reprinted in Lee 1980).<sup>39</sup> Later, both men met during Průšek’s visit to the United States and mutually acknowledged each other’s genuine insight into Chinese literature.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, after the failed attempt to create democratic socialism in Czechoslovakia in 1968, Průšek no longer had the opportunity to be in direct personal contact with those conducting modern literature research in the West.

## Conclusion

Jaroslav Průšek was a scholar bridging two traditions: that of his training in classical philology and rigorous positivist history, and new progressive-theory-based scholarship blending Marxism and formalism. The second approach stimulated him to ask big questions about the topics of his interest, explore them in comparative perspective, and formulate broad generalisations. His positivist training and later Marxist persuasion made him believe in “scientific truth”, while exposure to Prague structuralism and Russian formalism cultivated different kinds of scientific inquiry within him.

His search for truth was universalist, but at the same time he was aware of the limits of universalism if it does not also embrace the special experience of Chinese culture. There is a certain contradiction in Průšek’s universalism – while he defended the distinctness of Chinese culture and insisted on its equal position side by side with Western achievements, at the same time he unwittingly preserved Western literary values

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<sup>39</sup> For reflection on the polemic between Průšek and Hsia in the broader perspective of modern Chinese literature research see Lee 2017b.

<sup>40</sup> I heard about the meeting and reconciliation between Průšek and Hsia from C. T. Hsia himself during a conference at Columbia University in spring 2000. For C. T. Hsia’s recollections of Průšek in correspondence with his brother, see Ji 2019.

as the yardstick of literary maturity. He did so in the cases of both modern Chinese literature and Song and Yuan vernacular stories. As a result, by pointing to the domestic Chinese roots of literary modernity, or to sources of more perfect realism in the early vernacular story, Průšek was not only hailing China's distinctiveness but also presenting it as the winner of an imagined race between cultures. Průšek's need to defend Chinese culture shows how his research was shaped both by serious "scientific" inquiry, as he claimed, and by his truly personal, emotional attachments. It should be emphasised that in Průšek's time China was not in the position it is today, and there is a substantial difference between Průšek's extolling of Chinese tradition against Eurocentric prejudice and today's government-sponsored propaganda touting China's greatness.

As Průšek emphasised in his studies of modern Chinese writers, one cannot escape the social and historical context of one's time. The same is true about researchers. In Průšek's case, the context he lived in and which shaped his ideas shifted from the left-leaning avant-garde in central Europe, partly inspired by Soviet Russia, to the Cold War reality of socialist Czechoslovakia and China, tempered by the harsh experiences of Nazi occupation and the war. Průšek was certainly a man of his time and place, as is revealed by his enthusiasm for literary experimentation, his admiration for exotic China, and his ideological prejudices, including his blindness to the realities of socialist China.

But despite all these limiting factors, thanks to his genius, the humanistic values he believed in, and his artistic sensitivity, Průšek attained new and lasting insights and formulated ideas that continue to play an important role in global Sinology. He did so with passion and in such a way as to open new perspectives on research in Chinese history and literature and inspire future generations of scholars. In some areas, his research is of interest only for those studying the early history of the discipline. In others, though, his innovative approach and unique perspective paved the way for further inquiry. This mainly applies to the study of the transformations Chinese literature underwent in the first half of the twentieth century, and how to deal with tradition in

the process of radical transformation, which Průšek calls “a sudden leap, when a completely new artistic structure springs into being” (Průšek 1964, quoted from Lee 1980, 77). The legacy of Jaroslav Průšek’s scholarship lives on, reconfigured after the tremendous development in modern literary studies, which Průšek initiated when he published his first fundamental article on the topic in 1957. To paraphrase Leo Ou-fan Lee, Průšek’s “ground plan” has become a spring-board to achieve a better understanding of Chinese literary modernity (Lee 2017a, 154).

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