

Tales from the Silk Road – a snapshot of trade with China in the Polish press during the second half of the 19th century

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Key words: history of trade, Silk Road, Polish press, 19th century, China, colonialism

Abstract

This paper presents trade between China and Europe along the historical Silk Road, based on the materials from the Warsaw press published in the second half of the 19th century. The 19th century was a period of intense military actions led by the European empires in the Far East. The defeat of the Qing Dynasty during the Opium Wars marked the so-called cutting of the “Chinese cake” and the gradual fall of the empire. The events of this period caused an increased interest in the subject of the Middle Kingdom among Europeans and also in the Polish press.

Introduction

The world paid little attention to the events in the Far East until the 19th century, and although Europe had observed these areas with interest since the Middle Ages, only the Opium Wars involving Great Britain and France caused the Chinese Empire to attract the attention of the rest of the world. During the period of geographical discoveries, a sea route to Asia was sought to shorten trade times, while expeditions in the 19th century were motivated by profits from military operations and land exploitation. For centuries, the isolation of China from the international arena was a key element of the colonial policy of European powers.

The Middle Kingdom in the 19th century was seen as a backward empire ruled by the Qing dynasty and Chinese officials. Compared with the Western European countries that went through the Industrial Revolution, China could only boast of a vast territory and an impressive population. It was the technological, economic, and social changes in the West that caused it to exceed the Middle Kingdom in a civilizational way (Frankopan, 2015). Even in 1820, China as a lone giant ranked first in terms of gross

domestic product. The empire accounted for 32% of global production, and 36% of the world's total population. In 1911, the ratio of the above values was only 9-to-25, and it was rapidly decreasing (Weggel, 2006). The press noted that the size of China's territory and its population ceased to dazzle Europeans, and the country remained merely a “colossus with feet of clay” (N.T., 1895, p. 89).

The noticeable interest of European countries in the Far East caused China to become one of the most popular topics of discussion in the European press. The Opium Wars from 1839–1842 and 1856–1860 and the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion in 1898 attracted the greatest interest. With the development of political events, the number of articles describing armed operations increased, as did the number of texts on Chinese culture, history, and economy.

This work will present an image of trade relations between China and Europe, with a particular emphasis on the popularity of Chinese goods such as tea, porcelain, or silk in Polish lands. The aim is to broaden the reader's knowledge about earlier inaccessible areas and contribute to the growing interest in the Far East at the end of the 19th century among Polish readers.

The methodology used in this work was based on a critical review of English and Polish historical literature devoted to the Silk Road and materials from the Warsaw press from the second half of the 19th century. These valuable sources included reviews of political events, geographical descriptions, and travel relations.

Due to the limited volume of the paper, articles from two Warsaw periodicals from the second half of the 19th century were used. These were chosen based on the number of issues and the status of readership in the Congress Poland (The Kingdom of Poland, Congress Poland, a country created in 1815 by the decision of the Congress of Vienna from the lands of the Duchy of Warsaw – excluding Poznań – as a monarchy connected by a personal union with Russia). “Wędrowiec”, which was the first source, was a weekly periodical on travel and geography, and then socio-cultural issues, published in the capital from 1863 to 1906. It was one of the longest-running titles from that period. The second source material was “Ateneum – a scientific and literary magazine,” issued monthly from 1876–1901. Its editorial office was recognized as the center of academic life in Warsaw (Kmiciek, 1970).

The historical Silk Road

China isolated itself during the period of antiquity and the Middle Ages and was not widely known to the rest of the world. The lack of official diplomatic contacts, geographic distance, and ignorance of the language meant that the ignorance of the West about the East and vice versa was maintained for many years. It should be emphasized, however, that the Middle Kingdom did not express excessive interest in the culture and political situation in Europe. The same cannot be said about the countries of the Old Continent, which from the 13th century regularly sent priests to China in an attempt to spread Christianity into unknown areas.

Another form of contact between Europe and the Chinese Empire was trade exchange, which occurred through the historical Silk Road. Goods had been transported by land transport since the 3rd century BC, until the period of geographical discoveries in the 15th century, after which they were replaced by sea transport. When examining its route, it should be noted that it never played the role of a single trade route with several arms, and was rather a network of land connections between East and West.

Researchers emphasize that despite the complexity of the system, the operation of the Silk Road is

one of the longest-functioning international mechanisms in history (Hübner, 2016). Historical studies indicate that the route originated in the former capitals of China, Xi’an, or Luoyang. The passage then diverged into the northern part which ran through Pamir to the Black Sea and a southern route through Central Asia, northern India, into the Middle East. From there, the goods reached the areas of the Mediterranean Sea.

New research suggests that the Silk Road should be perceived as “a complex arrangement of longer and shorter land roads, thanks to which goods, ideas, and people participated in the broadly understood commodity exchange and exchange of intangible assets between European, Asian and African countries” (Christian, 2000). In turn, Christopher Beckwith (Beckwith, 2009) goes a step further and compares the trail to a holistic system encompassing the culture, policy, and economy of Central Eurasia, in which local and international trade was an important element of civilization.

The name of the route was attributed to the German geographer and traveler Ferdinand von Richthofen, who tried to prove the existence of an international trade route connecting East and West in antiquity and the Middle Ages. Richthofen named the route *Seidenstrasse* (English Silk Road) in 1877, after the most valuable object of trade with China, i.e. silk (Wood, 2002).

The land route was covered with caravans using camels, mules, and horses (Boulnois, 1968). Silk, ceramic products, leather, furs, decorative bronze weapons, mirrors, tea, spices, and cosmetics were mainly transported towards Europe, while merchants returned to the Far East with gold and silver, textiles, precious stones, and amber. The proportions of the commodities varied depending on the period and demand. It should be noted, however, that the Chinese market was much more attractive to Europeans throughout the duration of the exchange.

The previously-mentioned geographic discoveries and the development of the maritime commercial fleet made water transport from around the 15th century more economical and safer. The sea route from the Persian Gulf to China took about 150 days, while the land road from Tana (present Azov) to Beijing lasted twice as long. In favor of shipping, it is worth mentioning that one ship could carry the same cargo as a caravan with a thousand pack animals (Latow, 2010).

Another breakthrough was the introduction of rail connections between Europe and Asia. In an extraordinarily extensive article in the *Ateneum*, Polish

readers can acquaint themselves with the plans of European powers regarding the routes of the iron railway, for example through Siberia to China or from Paris via Central Asia to India (Warnke, 1876; 1877a). The part about the planned Siberian railway, which was supposed to shorten commercial road to 18–20 days, should be particularly interesting for Polish customers. Its shorter duration was why it became more attractive than transport through the Suez Canal, although it was more expensive (P. St., 1893).

Wars for trade

Despite the change in the nature of trade between East and West, the trade balance with China continued to be negative for Europe, especially for the United Kingdom, which was looking for ways to stop the outflow of silver from the country to balance its interests. The solution was the illegal opium trade, whose scale grew rapidly at the beginning of the 18th century. In one of the articles introducing the problem of drug addiction, the author emphasized that “a Chinese without opium would not be a Chinese man” (Plain Truth, 1901a, p. 494). The illegal opium trade and an aggressive colonial policy led by Western powers (in particular Portugal and Spain) meant that in 1757, Emperor Qianlong issued a writ against foreign trade in China, excluding the port of Guangzhou.

The exception was the turnover of goods with Russia, which due to the political situation in Congress Poland, was the most widely reported in the Warsaw press. The exchange between the two empires had already been settled at the beginning of the 17th century. As a result of disputes over the border over the river Amur, the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) and the Treaty of Kyakhta (1727) were signed to regulate the territories and maintain trade relations. Under their terms, all trade and travels were to be conducted through Kyakhta, the last Russian city near the border with China. In the Middle Kingdom, it was the city of Maimaicheng, where a representative of the government in Beijing resided (Timkowskij, 1928).

Until the end of the 18th century, China pursued an isolationist policy, defending itself against foreign influences and Western goods. Unofficially, however, the opium trade was growing rapidly thanks to Chinese officials and traders living off regular bribes from foreign merchants. It was mentioned several times in the Warsaw press that “the sickness of bribes in China, because a Chinese man who considers something to deal with, strongly believes to take

advantage of his situation” (T. J-Ch., 1900). In 1800 alone, 200 tons of the drug were imported into the Empire, which increased 7 times over the next three decades (Greenberg, 1970).

The vision of reducing profits and limiting the activities of European buyers in China caused the powers to adopt a more aggressive policy. The primary British position in economic relations with the Chinese Empire resulted in concentrating two-thirds of the market. When the United Kingdom took the initiative to break the Qing state isolation, the rest of the Western countries quickly stepped in. The activities of foreign powers in China were perceived in the press as “a modern economic and political invasion” or “the desire for expansion, a feverish search for a capital investment” (Marchlewski, 1900, p. 454). The commentators also doubted that visions of profits due to the opening of ports would not be more attractive to Chinese officials than an open armed conflict. Perhaps “the buyers will be recommended to do what soldiers could not do – conquest of China and winning them for industry and European trade” (Plain Truth, 1900f, p. 1034).

In addition, attempts to limit imperial edicts concerning the opium trade, the most valuable commodity imported to the Empire, led to two armed conflicts in 1839–1842 and 1856–1860. During the Opium Wars, modern armies of the Western powers defeated the Chinese troops, leading to the signing of unequal treaties. The agreements guaranteed the opening of other Chinese ports to international trade, extraterritoriality of selected lands, and payment of high war contributions (Fairbank, 1996). Although only the British and French troops participated in the military operations, thanks to the most favored nation clauses, all benefits were also given to Russia and the United States, which had the largest shares in trade with China. This is a definition of the treaty obligation that is used in international trade relations. A country granting this clause to another country provides it with the same powers and facilities as any other country it trades with (Budnikowski, 2006). The provisions of the Beijing Convention ending the Second Opium War constituted the next step to transforming the Empire into a joint semi-circle of powers (Rodziński, 1974). In the Warsaw press, the following words began to appear: “Europe is digging deeper into Chinese estates and looking for goods there” (Plain Truth, 1900a, p. 110) or “Chinese expedition was undertaken not for ideas, but for interests” (Plain Truth, 1900e, p. 773).

The next step to the loss of independence of the Middle Kingdom was the Boxers Rebellion, referred

to in the Polish press as “the rebellion of the Great Kulak sect” (Wędrowiec, 1900, p. 435). The armed intervention of peasants in secret groups took place in 1899–1901 and was directed mainly against foreigners, which were gaining increasing influence in China. The actions of “white devils” (Plain Truth, 1900d, p. 713), as foreign citizens were labeled in China, were perceived as the cause of universal poverty and numerous natural disasters. The culmination of the uprising was the capture of Beijing and the siege of the diplomatic quarter in August 1900. Chinese forces were broken up by the united intervention of 8 countries (the intervention troops included soldiers from Great Britain, Germany, Japan, Russia, France, the United States, Italy, and Austria-Hungary), which resulted in the signing of the final agreement known as “The Boxer Protocol.” The agreement was signed with 8 countries participating in military operations as well as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain. According to this, China had to pay a compensation of 333 million dollars with interest within 40 years and could not import arms, ammunition, or materials used to produce them for two years (Boxer Protocol, 1901). The provisions of the protocol were widely commented in the press. The statement of British diplomat Robert Hart, who was the second Inspector-General of China’s Imperial Maritime Custom Service, regarding the insolvency of the Empire in the context of repayment of war damages was quoted (Marchlewski, 1901, p. 145).

As a result of the Opium Wars, unequal peace treaties, the weakening position of the Qing dynasty, and many internal rebellions allowed Western powers to gain considerable political influence in China (Schell & Delury, 2013). In Polish historiography, the process of dividing the Empire into areas of influence is referred to as “cutting a Chinese pie or watermelon” (Marchlewski, 1900, p. 455). The countries which mainly involved in this action were Great Britain, France, Germany, Japan, and Russia. Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, Austria-Hungary as well as Italy also made other, less successful attempts.

The Manchurian Qing dynasty, which ruled the country for over two hundred years, had to deal with an economic crisis and strong social tensions. However, it soon turned out that the remains of an inept old regime were deeply rooted in society (Fenby, 2009). The press often emphasized the reasons why China did not keep up with the modernization of the Western world: “deep in stagnation, they allow themselves to waste, to decay the economic wealth in which they abound. The government and national

character seems to exclude any similarity of transubstantiation” (N.T., 1895, p. 90).

In 1912, the world witnessed the actual fall of the empire and the dethronement of the last Chinese dynasty. Over the next few decades, the country became a place of civil wars and Japanese occupation. In the 20th century, China was to undergo a rapid historical change, while similar processes in the West lasted for centuries. In one generation, the Chinese were faced with a transition that they had not experienced in the two thousand years of the duration of the Empire.

Poles in China

The tense political situation and the establishment of official diplomatic contacts with Far East countries made the Chinese culture, considered so far exotic and inaccessible, a topic of interest to politicians, travelers, researchers, and journalists around the world. Due to the involvement of Polish invaders in events in the Far East, the growing interest was also visible in Congress Poland. A journalist writing for *Ateneum* in the article “In the East Asia” highlighted the importance of the situation: “[...] in this state of affairs, first-hand information about the Asian East is very desirable for us, and a person who disregards them cannot consider themselves as educated. It was never more needed.” (N.T., 1895 p. 79).

However, this was not the beginning of Polish-Chinese meetings which extended knowledge about this Asian country. Polish exploration of the Middle Kingdom (also called Kitaj Kitaj (Russian) – from the name of one of the nations (10th–11th century) – Kitans (Liao country)) was a long-term process, and its beginnings date back to the 13th century (Konior, 2013). The Battle of Legnica in 1241 marked the first time that it was possible to watch the Chinese war inventions used by the Tatars. A few years later, the Franciscan Benedykt Polak set off with a papal mission to the capital of the Mongol Empire, Karakorum, to form an alliance in the fight against Islam. He is considered by historians the first Pole to reach East Asia (Kadulska & Włodarski, 2008). Many researchers emphasize that this was also the first European long-distance journey into Asia (Kałuski, 2001). His travel report, entitled “History of Tartarorum”, describes customs and foreign policy as one of the most valuable historical sources discovered in the 20th century (Kajdański, 2005). In the following centuries, other Polish missionaries set out into unfamiliar areas, the most famous of which

was Michał Boym, a Jesuit from Lviv, who reached China around 1646. He is called the Polish “Marco Polo” (Kajdański, 2005) and the author of many works on the Empire in the fields of geography, ethnography history, and medicine.

Among Poles who involved in the history of Polish-Chinese relations, it is worth mentioning the prisoners sent to the Russian Empire for illegal activities during the partitions, because their escape routes often led to China. The Polish engineers and builders of the Chinese Eastern Railway in Manchuria also marked their presence in the Far East. In China, there were also officials and diplomats serving in Russian diplomatic missions, clerics, and scientific expeditions. There were also soldiers appointed to German or Russian military service conducting military operations within Asia, many of which left valuable diaries, scientific works, or works devoted to the culture, nature, or history of China. More information about Poles who contributed to the popularization of knowledge about China from the 13th to the 20th century may be found in the literature (Kajdański, 2005). Some were published as articles in the Polish press. Nikolai Przewalski, conducted extensive natural studies in Asia beginning in the 1870s (Warnke, 1877b) or Maurycy Beniowski, whose memoirs describe his escape from captivity in Kamchatka (Jaroszewska, 1894), should also be mentioned.

Chinese products in Poland

Until the 16th century, Chinese products entered Polish territory by land, but after the popularization of commercial shipping, their transport routes changed. However, the method of acquiring goods, which intermediaries of many nationalities – Persian, Armenian, or Italian (Odyniec & Włodarski, 2001) – participated for centuries, did not change. The complexity of the trade process and the lack of direct contact with Chinese buyers caused products from China to not always be perceived as typically Chinese, e.g. as Turkish or Persian. Among the most popular available in Polish territory were luxury products such as silk, porcelain, tea, and fine art crafts. Their recipients were, therefore, only wealthy noblemen or collectors. During this period, it was not profitable for merchants to import cheap consumer goods from such distant regions.

The advantageous, but not used, geographical location of Warsaw in the context of international trade was noticed by Leon Iwanicki (Iwanicki, 1894) in an article on the importance of Siberian

railways. The capital of the Congress Kingdom was to become a link connecting the West with the Far East thanks to the construction of the Warsaw–Terespol and Brest–Moscow railways. The dependence of domestic trade on Russia and the overcrowding of the market with foreign commodities meant that Warsaw held a weak position and was described as “a vole pole looking at the great route” (Iwanicki, 1894).

Among the imported luxury goods, the exception was tea, which gained popularity even among middle-class townspeople and peasants. From the middle of the 18th century, the number of mentions of herbal decoction increased significantly. In Polish literature, it initially appeared under the name of “thee” or “herba” from the Latin coat of arms – herb (Tarasiewicz, 2009). As for the properties of the exotic drink, the researchers were divided. Benedykt Chmielowski in the first Polish encyclopedia of the popular “Nowe Ateny” mentioned that the drink is a great way to relieve pain, heal ulcers, and even to brighten someone’s mood. Less enthusiastic was the botanist Krzysztof Kluk in “Dykcyonarz Roślinny”, in which he emphasizes the negative impact of tea on the nervous and digestive systems. In his opinion, if China sent all poisons to Europe, they could not harm more than drinking tea (Kluk, 1805). Interestingly, the decoction was originally treated as a medicine, then as a refreshing drink (Odyniec & Włodarski, 2001). It seems that the reluctance to brew tea arose from the inability to prepare and store it (Tarasiewicz, 2009).

Estimating the amount of imported tea to Polish lands during the 19th century is not an easy task due to the lack of reliable numerical data. Its presence was closely related to the Russian trade and the great popularity of the drink in those lands. The process of intensively importing tea to the Kingdom of Poland dates back to the 1830s. Historical studies show that in 1825, around 10.2 pounds of Chinese tea was brought to Warsaw, and in 1838, it was 52.1 pounds. In general, throughout the quarter-century until 1850, there was an 815% increase in tea imports (Tarasiewicz, 2009). English-type tea was also imported to Polish territory. The British, after establishing their colony in India, introduced popular varieties from the Assam region into the market. However, its cultivation outside the territories, which depended on the Empire, significantly reduced the quality of the plant leaves (Iwanicki 1894). In many sources, we can find information about its bitter taste and popularity among the poorer sections of society (Glisczyński, 1859).

There are also data on tea consumption in Polish lands which shows an increase of 54.5% from 1894 to 1911 (Tarasiewicz, 2009). Despite growing interest in this drink, the population of Congress Poland consumed two-times less tea than the population of Russia, and four times less than the Netherlands during the same period. Although the press did not provide accurate data on consumption or transport of tea on national lands, it thoroughly analyzed statistics on international drink trade. Tea was included in the list of the most important export products from China in 1899 in one of the *Ateneum* issues, the exported value of which amounted to 1174 tons of silver (Marchlewski, 1900, p. 445).

The most widely discussed product in the Warsaw press imported from the Middle Kingdom was silk, often called the noblest fiber in the world. Archaeological research dates its production in China in 3600 BC (Wood, 2002). In the article, there are descriptions of the fate of silkworms' arrival to Europe "only in the 6th century after the birth of Christ, Greek monks brought eggs of these insects from China, hidden with the greatest foresight in the hollows of their clubs, because the jealous Chinese did not want to release silkworms from their homeland" (Wędrowiec, 1863, p. 255). The studies show that silk production was already known in the 6th century AD in Persia, Syria, and Greece, and it was brought to Italy in the 12th century.

One of the largest centers of the silk industry in the Old Continent was the Lyons Factory in France. In spite of the dynamic manufactories and improvements in weaving technology, the Chinese production methods far exceeded the European ones. The problem was mainly the cultivation of silkworms, which was a very complex and tedious process. While China lost only one silkworm per one hundred, in France their mortality exceeded fifty percent (Boulnois, 1968).

The Poles undoubtedly knew about the Chinese origin of the material, since silk fabrics were also called "kitajka". The first manufacture of silk fabrics on Polish territory occurred in 1643 in Brody (Kajdański & Kajdańska, 2007) (Brdo is currently located in the Lviv region in Ukraine). However, most of the goods were imported from France or Italy. Due to high silk prices, materials with an admixture of silk threads, such as damask, velvet, or satin, were often imported. Extremely fashionable in Polish lands in the 18th century were chiné fabrics decorated with delicate floral motifs (Gutowska-Rychlewska, 1968). In those days, silk was highly desired by the sophisticated ladies living by the Vistula River,

and the author of an article emphasized that taking out millions of money abroad in exchange for silk matrices could significantly increase the country's prosperity (Wędrowiec, 1863b, p. 255).

Despite the advanced silk industry in Europe, China was exporting larger quantities of the material to the West. Due to its small volume and lightweight nature, it was extremely easy to transport. Land transport of silk was more economical, despite higher tariffs for railways (Iwanicki 1894).

Even before 1838, the East India Company which had the largest share of trade with the Middle Kingdom was unable to purchase more than 5,400 rolls of silk per year. In 1900, the global export of raw silk from China reached 4,800 tons (Boulnois, 1968). Along with tea, silk accounted for as much as 3/5 of all exported goods at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Iwanicki, 1894, p. 247).

Chinese porcelain entered Europe through Palestine because crusades were organized in the 12th and 13th centuries, but it was rather rare in Polish lands. Sources contain few references to the presence of pledges or individual items, e.g., a pitcher lined with porcelain, found on a list of wedding gifts of Zygmunt August from 1543, or porcelain dishes in the residence of Jan Zamoyski (Kałuski, 2001). It is difficult for researchers to name dishes in Polish sources, since faience products, mainly from the Netherlands, are not always distinguished from porcelain.

Elegant dishes inspired by Asian designs were found in many affluent Polish homes. The widespread production of ceramics in Europe also meant that many articles in the Warsaw press were devoted to it. In one of them, it was emphasized that for centuries, the secret to the production of the material was closely guarded by the Chinese and only the German alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger, in the 1710s, broke this monopoly (today it is believed that Böttger's master, Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, was a European porcelain inventor). Despite the rapid development of factories in Europe, the quality of porcelain (in particular, lightness and hardness) did not match Chinese products (Wędrowiec, 1863a). The growing demand for "authentic" ceramics is also apparent in the statistics of imported goods from China. The "other" category in statistics (Kański, 1979), which included porcelain, constituted 4% of items in 1864 and 34% in 1894.

The popularity of porcelain initiated an interest in Asian art. The passion for Chinese design found its expression in the 17th century. The style inspired by the art of the Far East, called chinoiserie, was visible in gardens, functional interiors, and porcelain.

The intensification of these tendencies, especially in the second half of the 18th century, was associated with the intensification of trade relations and an increase in missionary activity in Asia (Kąkol & Reglińska-Jemioł, 2008).

Inspirations by Chinese landscape art influenced garden designs in Congress Poland and architecture of the Łazienki Park in Warsaw as well as elements of the palace park in Wilanów (Zasławska, 2009). Separate Chinese rooms referred to as oriental cabinets were arranged in many castles, e.g., in Łańcut and Białystok. Chinese calligraphy instruments, porcelain tableware, and valuable travel manuscripts were found in the collections of many wealthy Polish collectors. In the inventory of the Zhovkva treasury of Jan III Sobieski from the 1640s, a set of Mahjong (Chinese social game) tiles was even found (Gębarowicz, 1973). Sobieski is often mentioned as an expert on Chinese affairs in Poland, as well as one of the most zealous lovers of oriental products among Polish kings (Zasławska, 2009).

Conclusions

History has shown that events from the turn of the century in China heralded the process of regaining its full sovereignty. In this context, the contemporary recipient will be interested in another aspect mentioned by the European and Polish press. Many articles devoted to the situation in the Far East have a vision of the Middle Kingdom, in which it will be strong enough to resist its former oppressors. It was written: "If one day the wake of China from eternal lethargy results in a struggle between Asia and Europe, it will probably be in the economic and mental field" (Plain Truth, 1901b, p. 733). There were also more poetic phrases: "China is like a dormant volcano: Who can predict the moment of the explosion?" (Plain Truth, 1900b, p. 469) Or "[war] is an irritation of a hundred-armed dragon. It will lose a few arms, close itself in to ease the momentary pain, but with time, regaining strength, it will attack the enemy and smother it inevitably!" (Plain Truth, 1900c, p. 510). The considerable anxiety over the growing power of the Far East appears extremely interesting in the context of the current political and economic situation in which China remains the main focus.

Searching for traces of knowledge of Chinese civilization in the history of Polish lands is an extremely labor-intensive task. Despite significant difficulties in dealing with the Far East, resulting from distance as well as cultural and language barriers, the desire

to learn about oriental subjects was assessed. The importance of Far East issues for Poles is demonstrated by the multitude and quality of historical sources, including the wide variety of subjects related to the Empire in Warsaw newspapers. It is worth noting that this is only a fragment of content, based on two titles, which reached readers in the second half of the 19th century in Congress Poland.

The notable interest in economic topics was due to three factors. The first is the background to the political conflict in China, which, as the article has shown, was due to the colonial powers looking for a market and war profit. The European audience was perfectly aware that the war was being waged in the name of economic benefits. In view of a similar political situation, the partitioning of China and the actions of Western powers in foreign territories were particularly noted in the Polish press.

The second factor is the slow development of capitalism and the view of Polish lands as an important link connecting the West with the Far East. The future of international trade was shown as a profitable and private state activity. One of the suggestions to stimulate the Polish economy was the creation of a joint-stock company in Warsaw for trade with China, which would have agents in Kyakhta, Shanghai, and Canton, as well as warehouses in Irkutsk, Tomsk, and Kyakhta (Iwanicki, 1894).

The last factor is the development of economics as a scientific field. A breakthrough in the approach to "economic affairs" was the publication of the work "Research on the nature and causes of the wealth of nations" by Adam Smith in 1776. Its bold theories concerning the development of the free market formed the basis of modern economic theories and were an attempt to systemize knowledge of the history of industrial and commercial development in Europe. The Scottish philosopher's activities also contributed to an increase in the number of press titles devoted to economic issues (Bizon & Lubińska, 2018).

It would seem that in the second half of the 19th century, the Polish press did not discuss topics devoted to political events on the other side of the world; however, studies showed that this was a particularly popular topic. The published texts often referred to the travels of diplomats or missionaries, and the economic news included information about the condition of the Chinese economy, and articles wholly devoted to the description of society or customs were also published. Topics related to trade between Europe and the Empire, referring to the tradition of the historic Silk Road, were readily discussed.

Most texts published in the Warsaw press from this period are reprints from foreign magazines or were based on foreign language articles. However, there were works that were not reproducible that presented a Polish view on the social or political situation in the 19th century in China and are the most valuable for the conducted research. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the publication of articles, both reprints and original, devoted to the subject of the Far East demonstrates the need for a change in the perception of the Middle Kingdom as merely an exotic destination.

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