

Mgr. Matúš Mura

Institute of Oriental Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava

The Taste of the Unknown. The Image of Japanese Merchants Formed by Travelers from Bohemia and Upper Hungary

The Habsburg Empire held its place among the great powers of the late 19th-century Europe. Even though its colonial gains were minimal, this fact alone does not equate to its being isolated from the events playing out on the world stage. The people of this Central European power were active in their efforts to involve themselves in both gathering and deepening knowledge of the world, thus creating a switchboard for the circulation of ideas, practices, and objects across the globe. Even though formally called Austria-Hungary, the state was not formed only of two nations. It was home to a multiplicity of ethnic groups each with distinct characteristics such as language, cultural habits, and identity. Through the rapid spread of nationalism in the 19th century, these groups created their own national identities, which affected their understanding of the world. Individuals of these ethnic backgrounds had their share both in travelling and in the gathering of knowledge. For the purpose of this paper, I have chosen to look closer specifically at the representatives from Bohemia and Upper Hungary, as their contributions are looked upon to a far lesser extent.

One of the greatest opportunities in the 19th century to explore and document the unknown came with the gradual opening of Japanese borders. There were multiple journeys undertaken by agents with various backgrounds, goals, and statuses, who are at the center of this research, such as Jozef Zichy, August Zichy, Erwin Dubský, Václav Stejskal, and Josef Kořenský. The paper examines their works as ego-documents and as testimonies of cultural contact, focusing on the creation of the image of Japanese merchants and their socioeconomic change. Merchants were subject to dynamic socioeconomic change, and they were a class with which the travelers were acquainted to a great extent through the art of trade and collecting. It was also they who, to some degree, influenced the choices of purchases made by travelers and thus had influence on the representation of Japan in the Habsburg

Empire. Furthermore, what we can follow in their works is outsider's perspective on the transformation of a merchant into a modern entrepreneur. With the broadening of what it means to be a merchant, we can include both medium and large businesses and companies from a variety of fields such as the travel industry and the textile industry.

The experiences, descriptions, and evaluations of the 19th-century travelers teach us not only about their cognitive pathways, but also about the way people of the 19th century experienced the unknown, how well they understood foreign realities, and the ways in which they simplified or stereotyped them. Through comparison, we can discern similarities in their description, which we can categorize to reveal the paradigms of their taxonomy. Thus we can better understand not only the formation of the image of the merchant, or the socioeconomic transformation, but the creation of the image of the other as such.

Contact:

Mgr. Matúš Mura

Institute of Oriental Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava

mura3@uniba.sk