
MEETING EAST ASIA : FOREWORD

The area of what is politically Slovenia today, has a long and complex history of meeting cultures and traditions from East Asia. At least since the time when the Jesuits established a mission in Beijing and a Carniolan Jesuit, Augustine Hallerstein, served as an official in the Qing imperial court we recognize continuous contact with East Asian cultures, religions and traditions. The religious practices Jesuits had to “accommodate” to be able to spread the Gospel among the Chinese and the classical books they translated into European languages brought the first systematic knowledge of Asian traditions of thought to Europe. As for the Carniola of that time, however, Hallerstein’s letters home did not include much of those topics, focusing mostly on the issues of astronomy and the practical realities of the Jesuits’ lives in Beijing. The nineteenth century was marked by Sino-European conflict, the two opium wars and the Sino-French war and a series of other politically turbulent events, while all through that time, the image of China in the eyes of European intellectuals was not of something to be admired, but rather of a decaying corrupt empire, unable to modernize itself. On the other hand, Japan after the Meiji restoration became a source of European fascination. Its prints, porcelain, lacquerware and aesthetics in general were admired by experts, artists and fashionable crowds alike. The interest in China was revived after the First World War, which roughly coincided with the end of the Qing imperial rule and the May Fourth movement for national sovereignty and the revival of Chinese culture. Due to many historical circumstances, Slovenia received more information about East Asian cultures, religions and traditions of thought only after the First World War. Several adventurous and fascinating life histories helped: the fact that Ivan Skušek Jr., a China-imprisoned Austro-Hungarian naval officer had a passion for collecting antiques, the decision of a young woman from Celje, Alma Karlin, to travel the world on her own, and a spreading into Slovenia of the all-European trend in studying and opening to the inspiration of the religions of Asia – Vedic, Confucianism or Buddhism. The col-

lections Skušek and Karlin brought back home and the availability of other East Asian objects and antiques on the market matched well with the growing interest in East Asian traditions of thought to result in one of the most remarkable periods of intercultural and interreligious intellectual climates in Slovenian history.

The current issue of *Poligrafi* focuses on this historical period and explores different aspects of the contact with East Asian religions at that time. The text by Chikako Shigemori Bučar focuses on the visits Alma Karlin made to the temples and shrines in Japan and the traces that remain of those visits in her work and her collection. Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik focuses on how Alma Karlin met with Chinese funerary rituals and mourning practices and how she interpreted them. In the third paper Byoung Yoong Kang provides a detailed reconstruction of the events behind an image in Alma Karlin's collection that depicts a Korean funeral. In the fourth paper, Klara Hrvatin analyses Japanese musical instruments from the collection of Alma Karlin and their relation to religious music. The last paper, by Helena Motoh, talks about the many ways in which Confucian tradition was understood and interpreted in pre-WWII Slovenia.

Although Slovenia was by many standards at the periphery of great historical entities and changed its political affiliations several times in the past century, the analyses presented in this volume paint an interesting picture of a perhaps surprisingly open intellectual climate in the interwar period. Even beyond the intellectual circles of the time, religions of East Asia were met with, reflected and reinterpreted, while the heritage of this fruitful exchange – in the shape of debates, books, articles or collections – continues to the present day.

Helena Motoh